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## **Embodying your fight: an examination of the public opinion on naked feminist protests.**

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**Universiteit  
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Bachelor Thesis

**Embodying your fight: an examination of the public opinion on naked  
feminist protests.**

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## 1. Introduction

The body is a powerful site of resistance. It has been used as such through common practices like body modification, hairstyle, makeup, and many others (Kuumba, 1998; Pitts, 2003). Some of these practices have also been adopted by social movements in collective protests. Particularly interesting to explore in the contemporary context is the use of nakedness as a protest tactic. Only recently these forms of protest have started gaining attention from scholars but the first documented instances of naked protests date back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The story of the noblewoman Lady Godiva is considered as one of the first times when the naked body was used to make a political claim (Britannica, 2024). She is known for her naked horse ride to protest the high taxes her husband had set on the citizens of their realm.

It is now debated whether this story took place or is a myth, but despite this, Lady Godiva is still viewed as a pioneer of naked protests and a source of inspiration for contemporary social movements. Nowadays, this mode of protest is gaining popularity and is being used by social movements advocating for different goals highlighting the relevance of studying this tactic. Diverse groups like climate activists, animal rights defenders, and decolonization movements have used stripping in public spaces to advance for their objectives (Williams, 2021). Most commonly, this type of tactic has been implemented by feminist social movements as women's bodies are often at the centre of their discourse. In Western societies several controversial feminist movements using the display of the naked or semi-naked body in public as part of their tactical repertoire have emerged in the past decades. In these cases, the display of the naked body is generally used as a symbolic act intended to empower women and subvert patterns of the dominant patriarchal power.

While a handful of scholars have researched the topic of naked protests with a focus on women-led movements, no consensus has been reached regarding the validity of this tactic. What emerges from the literature is a dilemma about the type of reaction the use of nudity in protests produces in third parties (Baraidotti, 2010; Barcan, 2002; Kershaw, 1997; Mandana, 2023; Tamale, 2017; Wolff, 1990). Because of the variation in responses to this tactic, it is contested whether this practice is beneficial in drawing attention to the movement's cause and sympathize with the activists or if it has detrimental effects. This calls for the need to conduct in-depth, empirical research to disclose how people react to the use of disrobing as a form of protest. This paper engages in this task by pursuing the following research question:

**“How does the use of nakedness as a protest tactic by Western feminist activists shape the public perception around them?”**

This question will be answered by first conducting a literature review on naked protests and other relevant concepts. What will follow is a qualitative content analysis mainly consisting of online comments to naked protests staged by the feminist group FEMEN which will be retrieved from social media. This will be done to gain a nuanced understanding of where the public opinion stands for protests involving the tactic of undressing and through this draw conclusions about its effectiveness.

## **2. Literature review**

### 2.1 Body politics

The body, clothed or unclothed, is a key element in protests. Marches, performances, sit-ins and direct confrontation are all forms of social mobilisation which involve the active use of the body. A field of literature examining the role of the body in politics is that of body politics. This field stresses the importance of interpreting the body as a site where power is contested and negotiated (Brown & Gershon, 2017). Given these dynamics, the human body is subject to oppression via the imposition of socially constructed norms, but it can also be used as a tool of resistance. Social analysis has moved from looking at the body as an object fulfilling social rules to an active subject which shapes meaning and can perform actions (Butler, 1988, 1990). The latter role is referred to as performative action. Within this discipline, the body is used as a way to express dissidence and as a tool for self-empowerment (Davis, 1995). Following this logic, the body can be strategically used in protests as a way to challenge the different meanings which are socially, culturally and historically constructed upon it.

The feminist scholar Judith Butler (1988) applied this understanding to the gender debate. In her gender performative theory, she formulates that gender is enacted through performance rather than being biologically determined (Butler, 1988). This creates an opportunity for women to use their bodies to challenge socially and culturally constructed characterizations of their gender. Adding on to this, according to Braidotti (2010a, pp. 10-13) to generate conditions for change benefitting women, rebellious acts are required. As such, women are required to take the role of defamiliarizing, rebellious figures to shed light on what they deem unjust. The topic of naked body protests explored next is rooted within the logic presented by Butler and Braidotti (1988; 2010) because this tactic intentionally breaks social norms and expectations as a form of rebellion.

### 2.3 Naked protests

Stripping off clothes in public is considered by some scholars as an act of resistance which is commonly used by women to reclaim agency over their bodies and achieve social change. Tamale (2017, p. 63) writes that naked protests aim to transform the negative and sexual connotations of women's nudity into positive power to achieve their goals. Moreover, in those societies where being dressed is the norm, the use of the naked body is guaranteed to draw attention. This is an important aspect of these protests as in today's increasingly mediatized world, gaining public and media attention are core objectives when staging a protest (Kershaw, 1997, p. 255).

Several studies of women's naked body protests exist in the literature today. The majority of them seek to explore the meanings and effects of nakedness to protest within a patriarchal society. These works try to disclose why the choice of using nakedness is made in different contexts by referring to historical, religious and cultural examinations (Barcan, 2002). Other authors like Sylvia Tamale (2017), Jessica Mandana (2023) and Deepti Misiri (2011) look at naked protests in specific cases like that of Africa and India. These studies are useful to shed light on the culturally derived meaning of these protests. For instance, some scholars explain that stripping off your clothes in an African society can be used as a decolonization practice as Victorian clothes were brought in by colonists (Tamale, 2017, p. 56).

### 2.4 The power in the body

One overarching theme covered in the literature about the use of the naked body in protest is that of power. This is relevant as power dynamics are central to the act of protesting. People go on the streets because of the awareness that power is not static and, as such, it can be resisted and challenged (Foucault, 1977). By looking at the body as an inherent deposit of power, scholars can explore how it is used to confront existing patterns of power based on established classifications of privilege and marginalisation. In line with this view Tamale, (2017, p.79) claims that naked bodies can turn what is defenceless and vulnerable into a disruptive force. She states that naked protests turn vulnerability into power to subvert patriarchal and capitalist dynamics. This builds on the understanding of power as something which is formed via diverse practices (Foucault, 1977). Naked protests in this case are a form of practice for women to assert power, especially in contexts where they would otherwise be perceived as powerless.

What was said above is illustrated by the case of Draupadi, an Indian woman who participated in the peasant Naxalite revolt against feudal landowners in the 1960s (Misiri, 2011). Draupadi used her unclothed body to protest against the sexual torture that a group of policemen committed against her. What she did was strip naked in front of the officer who had authorised her rape refusing to put her clothes on when ordered so while saying: “What is the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man?” (pp. 606-607). Despite having more power than her, the officer stood in front of the scene with terrorized expression. This reaction is provoked as Draupadi’s behavior goes against what is commonly expected. By boldly exposing her naked, wounded body, in front of her violators she resists the patriarchal script according to which rape produces in the subjects feelings of shame and fear (Marcus, 1992, pp. 391-393). What is unsettling about this is that Draupadi is a victim of sexual violence, and looks as such, but she acts like an agent using her body as a weapon.

This example demonstrates that the body possesses power which is not determined by someone’s placement within the societal hierarchy but is constructed via action. Women who engage in naked protests resort to a form of power that Foucault (1977) claims is present in everyone’s body. Butler’s gender identity theory (1990) is also useful to comprehend the essence of such naked protests. According to her, people can rewrite the dominant gender identities which are subject to power relations in society. This can be exploited by women and oppressed groups via resistance or by directly challenging the norms imposed by society upon them like in the case of naked protests.

## 2.5 Counterargument

While the papers cited above promote the use of the female body in protests others deem it risky and counterproductive. This is because in some cases this tactic could end up reinforcing those societal norms which are trying to be dismantled. Indeed, in modern Western society the act of undressing, especially by females, has been proven to sparks eroticized interpretations of the female body (Wolff, 1990, p. 120; Barcan, 2002, p. 73). Consequently, this phenomenon hinders the power of the protestors and raises questions over the subversive possibilities of naked protests. Furthermore, because of the sensationalism of nudity in public and its connotation of taboo, these protests are criticized as are claimed to draws away the attention of the audience from the cause promoted towards the mere act of undressing (O’Keefe, 2014, p. 15).

Even though these considerations are recurring in the literature about nudity as a strategy to protest, to the author's knowledge, no empirical investigation has been conducted to understand the way audiences respond to these increasingly pervasive movement tactics. Therefore, it becomes important to understand not only what the theoretical, cultural, and ideological foundations of naked protests are but also how they are perceived by those who view them.

The presence of a point of contention in the literature regarding the ability of naked protests to provoke positive reactions in the audience to advance their goals makes it relevant to explore this topic empirically. To bridge this gap, this research seeks to examine public opinion regarding the use of nudity in protests via a qualitative assessment of the discourse elicited in response to these demonstrations. The goal of this research is to examine people's perceptions and interpretations of naked protests and through these draw conclusions about their effectiveness. The following research question was formulated to guide this research:

*“How does the use of nakedness as a protest tactic by Western feminist activists shape the public perception around them?”*

### **3. Conceptualization**

This section of the paper is intended to define the key concepts of this study which are: nakedness, nudity, feminist movements and public perception. First, it must be pointed out how the terms nakedness and nudity are used throughout the text and what is their meaning. According to Berger (1972), nakedness and nudity have to be differentiated. I employ his definition of nakedness as the body without clothes where the act of taking clothes off is a person's voluntary choice. This is different from nudity which entails a degree of sexual connotation attached to getting naked (p. 52). As such nudity is seen as a passive act painting the body as sexual while nakedness is agential and because of this empowering. Both terms are repeatedly used in this research and have to be interpreted based on Berger's (1972) definitions. The terms undressing, stripping, and unrobing are used interchangeably to indicate the act of getting naked.

Secondly, contemporary feminist movements are conceptualized. The definitions of feminist movements provided by McBride and Mazur's (2008) will be used in this paper. According to them, feminist movements are those that strive to end patriarchy and with it any form of women subjugation (p. 235). To fully understand the scope of feminist movements patriarchy also has to be defined. Seen through a feminist perspective, patriarchy is a male-dominated social system with a bias against women (Walby, 1989, p. 214). Patriarchy does not

only concern direct subordination of women, but it is manifested through cultural, religious, and economic power dynamics (p. 214). This indicates that the causes feminist movements advocate for extend to all of these realms.

Finally, this research aims to understand what is the public perception around the use of nakedness as a protest tactic therefore, defining public perception is fundamental. This term can be defined as a way to measure the type and strength of sentiments held by a relevant group of people about a specific issue (Glynn & Huge, 2008, p. 12). Building on this definition public opinion is used to refer to views that ordinary people have about an issue and that they are willingly expressing. Other terms like public view and perspective will be used throughout the text to indicate the same concept to facilitate argumentation.

#### **4. Theory and hypothesis formulation**

Recently scholars have attempted to move away from the dichotomous view of peaceful and violent forms of protests used by social movements and have developed a new categorization which is particularly relevant for this study. Given the emergence of new forms of tactics which do not exactly fit within the traditional categorization, the concepts of conventional and unconventional tactics have been introduced in the literature. The latter distinction is key to acknowledge in the case of naked protests and it plays an important role in determining the success of a demonstration.

To begin, it is important to say that within the traditional works about social movements, there is consensus that radical forms of collective action are perceived more negatively than conventional forms of mobilisation (Simpson et al., 2018; Feinberg et al., 2020). Researchers found a decrease in public approval for protests as movements moved from nonviolent direct actions to more violent tactics (Stephan & Chenoweth, 2008, pp. 11-13). Similarly, a study comparing different protest tactics concluded that protests which use moderate or peaceful tactics attract greater popular support (Feinberg et al., 2020). The authors posit that the main reason for this is that the public better resonates with peaceful protests while they feel distant from those using violence or acting in a way which is perceived as not being legitimate. These perspectives suggest that getting naked in public, because of its non-violent character, is expected to generate positive public responses.

Building on this initial assumption it is interesting to reflect on the unconventional nature of this form of protest and what role this aspect has on people's reactions. A relevant theory related to this which this study is going to focus on was formulated by Shuman et al

(2021). The authors apply the concept of normative and nonnormative protests to the initial violent and nonviolent categorization. Normative refers to some actions which are commonly accepted and perceived as legitimate (p. 2). On the contrary, nonnormative refers to acts which go against widely accepted behaviors and try to challenge the legitimacy of the current social system (p. 2). Most nonviolent protests are also always normative, meaning that they are in line with what people think protests should entail. Some examples of these are marches, boycotts, and peaceful mass assemblments. On the other side of the spectrum, there are violent protests which coincide with what is perceived as non-normative. This is because the use of violence is automatically interpreted by most people as violating what is socially accepted. Most of the existing research on this topic considers these dimensions as separate or as overlapping, which is, normative corresponds to peaceful and non-normative to violent (Saab et al., 2016). Shuman (2021) considers it oversimplistic because of the existence of actions that do not fit these characteristics such as civil disobedience. The authors address this shortcoming in the theoretical literature by formulating a third separate category for nonnormative nonviolent tactics.

Understanding this category is particularly relevant for this study as it is the one that naked protests belong to. Indeed, the tactic of nudity is intentionally used to violate some established rules of society and go beyond what is considered acceptable and/or allowed by law while remaining nonviolent.

What is particularly interesting about this study are the results obtained regarding the effectiveness of the three categories in receiving concessions from those in power and gaining public support. The findings show that for both variables nonnormative nonviolent tactics are the most successful. Normative peaceful tactics do not achieve the same results as they do not manage to gain sufficient attention to generate change while the use of violent tactics has an alienating effect on the audience. Similarly, Anna Zlobina and Alejandro Gonzalez (2018) found that the public perceived nonviolent nonnormative tactics as most useful for social movements to achieve their goals. Moreover, when it comes to public support and how the protests are perceived by the public it is shown that people tend to generally form supportive views of nonnormative peaceful forms of collective action. The reason for this is that observers perceive a balance between the level of disruption to the normal social order that these protests create because of their unconventionality and the constructive intentions behind it leading to favorable perceptions of the movement's objectives (Shuman, 2021, p. 3).

Because nude protests align with the characteristics of nonnormative nonviolent tactics, the results obtained by Shuman's (2021) study can be used to derive expectations about

the possible outcomes obtained with this tactic. While the study does not directly address nude protests, its findings regarding public support for nonnormative actions can provide insight into how disrobing as a sign of protest might be perceived. Because naked protests do not use violence and are unconventional, I formulate the following hypothesis based on Shuman's logic concerning the effectiveness of nonnormative nonviolent protests:

*The use of nakedness by contemporary Western feminist movements will generate a positive, supportive response by the public towards the movement therefore enhancing its effectiveness.*

## **5. Methodology**

This research was conducted using a qualitative content analysis (QCA) approach. This methodology was used because it allows for a detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of written text (Berg, 2007, pp. 311-312). Furthermore, it enables to identify common themes, sentiments and patterns within the comments making it well-suited for this study. This suits the scope of this research as public perception is best understood by engaging with textual material where people express their opinions or what is transcribed from spoken language. Indeed, opinion polls, interviews and surveys would have been ideal data sources to use for this study (Dowler & Gasperoni, 2006, p. 52). However, conducting them would have been too time-consuming for this research. Therefore, to meet the objective of this study, which is to understand how people perceive naked protests, it was established that the most informative and easily accessible data to use were online comments in response to videos and pictures showing naked protests. Social media comment analysis is expected to give a nuanced insight into the topic examined as social media have become a place for people to express their opinions and attitudes on many issues (Zaleski et al., 2016). This development in the online space has brought scholars to analyse public opinion by engaging with online comments (Colliver & Coyle, 2020; De Guzman, et al., 2021).

Following the methodology developed in previous studies, this research engages in QCA using social media comments as a unit of examination. This allows to investigate how individuals view the use of nakedness as a form of protest by analyzing both the manifest and the latent content of the comments. This methodology is used to unravel meaning from the text covered and interpret it using various theoretical perspectives rather than simply describing what people's opinions are.

## 5.1 Case selection

To maximize the utility of the findings of this research purposeful case selection was done (Flyvbjerg, 2011). More specifically, to allow for better generalization of the results critical case selection was performed. A critical case represents an important example of the phenomenon of what is being studied (Palinkas et al. 2015). FEMEN, a female lead movement founded in 2008 in Ukraine (FEMEN, n.d), was found to be the case best matching this definition. This movement is a critical case as it is an emblematic when it comes to the use of nudity in protest especially in the European and American context making it the most suitable case to generalize the findings to Western feminist groups using the tactic of nakedness. On their official site, they write that their “weapon are bare breasts” and they believe that “female nudity [...] is a gravedigger of the system, militant manifesto and sacral symbol of women’s liberation”. Their objective is to achieve “complete victory over patriarchy” which they deem is expressed in our society via a “male economic, cultural and ideological occupation” (FEMEN, n.d). Therefore, the scope of their protests extends over several issues which are directly related to women’s rights but also concerning war, dictatorship, and religion.

Additionally, the tactic of “sextremism” they use to protest aligns with the non-violent non-normative categorization by Shuman (2021). “Sextremism”, a term FEMEN have coined, is defined as a revolutionary form of feminist activism, which is non-violent, unexpected, and highly disruptive to the patriarchal power system (FEMEN, n.d). This highlights the non-violent and non-normative nature of this tactic making FEMEN’s protest’s a suitable case to test the hypothesis of this study.

## 5.2 Data selection

The units of analysis of this study are comments under videos or pictures of naked protests staged by FEMEN. YouTube and Instagram were chosen as the platforms for data collection because of their policy allowing people to express opinions freely through comments (Alafwan et al, 2023, p. 6). Moreover, these comments can be considered public domain (Colliver & Coyle, 2020, p. 9), therefore they can be analyzed without infringing on privacy rights. Additionally, these social media were selected because of their intergenerational and international user base (Thelwall, 2017, p. 304). This diversity allows to collect a comprehensive and representative sample of comments, providing insights into public opinion on the topic of naked protests that are independent of contextual and culture-specific beliefs.

The videos from which the comments were obtained were found by searching the keywords FEMEN protests and #FEMEN on YouTube and Instagram respectively. This produced many posts which had to be filtered to obtain the material most relevant for answering the research question. This was done by excluding all the unrelated posts from the population which were those not directly showing a naked protest or on a different topic. This resulted in a list of 16 posts featuring FEMEN activists from which the final sample was selected. All the posts which had more than 10 comments and were sourced by a European online news outlet were chosen for the analysis. The threshold of 10 comments was chosen as according to Lijadi (2015, p. 3) posts with more than 10 comments are suitable to grasp people's perception on a topic online. Ultimately, the final sample comprised 8 posts consisting of videos and pictures of FEMEN protestors demonstrating naked within a Western context.

As a following step, all the comments under the sample of posts were downloaded with the use of two software called YouTube Comments Downloader and Exportgram. A number of 1042 comments written in English, German, Russian, French, and Italian were collected. Comments which were posted as replies to other user's statements are not part of this sample. Moreover, the emoticons present were disregarded to maintain the focus on textual analysis and avoid introducing bias due to their subjective meaning. Furthermore, to ensure the relevance of the findings, all comments which were not pertinent to the content of the posts for instance those containing advertising material and those which were written incomprehensibly were excluded from the initial sample. After the data were cleaned, on a total of 1042 comments initially collected 538 were analyzed. Before starting the analysis, all the comments were translated to English using the author's knowledge of four of the languages and with the support of a translating platform to maximize the accuracy of the translation.

### 5.3 Coding

A primarily inductive coding was established to be the most suitable technique for this research. Inductive content analysis consists in developing the codes used to label the information found in the text based on the content which is identified in the data set. This way the different categories of the coding frame are said to be emerging from the data analyzed (Vers & Gillam, 2022, pp. 112-113). To make sure that the categories created covered all the themes present in the data, a reiterative approach was taken. This consisted in repeating the coding process two times and refining the categories according to what emerged from the data at each stage.

Inductive coding is used in this research because of two reasons. First, in order to deductively formulate exhaustive categories covering all the possible themes found in the text a solid theoretical foundation should exist on the topic explored. This is not the case for what this paper is aiming to examine. Not enough theoretical perspectives on people's reactions to protest tactics, and especially unconventional feminist protest tactics, exist to formulate accurate and encompassing categories allowing to capture the many nuances relative to people's perception of naked protests. Second, inductive content analysis is most suitable for understanding what people think on a topic which is the aim of this research (Berg, 2007, pp. 3011-3012).

While this type of coding does not heavily rely on existing theories and concepts external to the data analyzed, some information derived from the academic literature was used to help the framing to emerge and enrich the interpretation of the results. Indeed, based on the theoretical assumption that the type of protests examined should trigger a positive response from the public given their non-normative non-violent characteristics (Shuman, 2021) an initial category named positive perception was created. To maximize the utility of these codes a standard polarity categorization covering positive, negative, and neutral perceptions on a topic was used (Pang et al. 2002). This categorization ensured that the entire spectrum of attitudes towards naked protests could be properly identified and grouped.

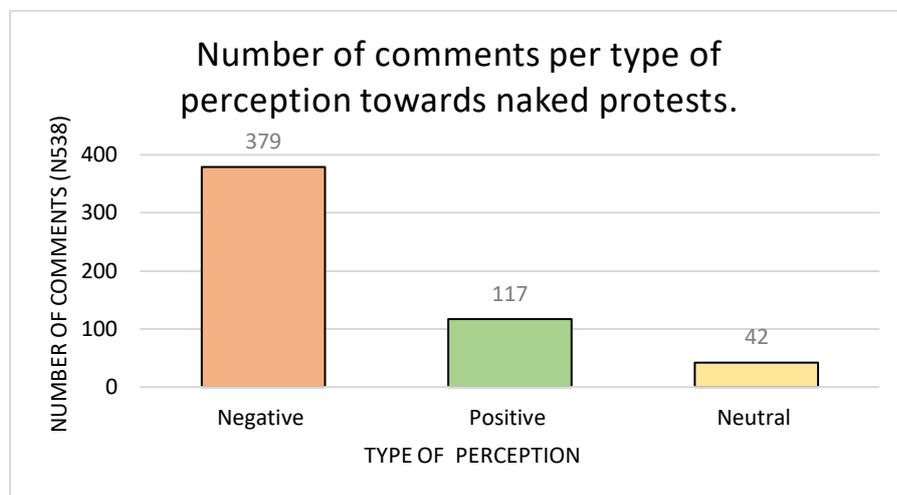
In phase two, open coding was conducted for the sample of comments to identify further common themes. This allowed to formulate a more selective coding framework comprising all the major themes and subthemes that emerged from the textual analysis. All the subcategories which were identified will be explained in detail in the following sections of this thesis.

## **6. Results and analysis**

This section aims to present the findings from the content analysis and reflect on these while attempting to formulate an answer to the research question. First, some trends and data are identified from the data collected which offer valuable information to identify the dominant perspectives about nakedness used in protest. Second, the main themes identified in the data are introduced and the common patterns across them are highlighted. Next, is an in-depth analysis of the content of the comments through which their meaning is unravelled. In essence, the following sub-sections will reveal what emerged from the inductive analytical approach and elaborate on this to formulate an answer to the research question.

## 6.1 Occurrence of positive, negative, and neutral comments.

After having coded all the data into the three main categories of positive, neutral, and negative perception used to establish the dominant sentiment regarding naked protests some insightful results emerged. As can be visualized from the bar chart displayed below, the initial coding resulted in a disproportionate number of comments being identified as conveying a negative attitude towards the use of nakedness as a form of protest. On a total number of 538 comments coded, approximately 70% of them were classified as indicating a negative perception towards the FEMEN naked protest the posts were about. Surprisingly, only 22% of the comments were interpreted as being positive while 8% were considered to reflect the neutral attitude of viewers.



Graph 1. Occurrence of positive, negative, and neutral comments.

This distribution indicates that the hypothesis derived from the theory regarding the efficacy of non-normative, non-violent types of protests which naked protests are part of, is not supported when applied to the case examined in this research. Based on the argument formulated by Shuman (2021) it was predicted that the use of nakedness as a tactic to protest would have positive results for the movement in the form of a supportive perception from third parties because of its non-violent and non-normative characteristics. However, this is not reflected empirically as despite some positive responses being present, negative comments were the most common ones. These findings lead to the formulation of a preliminary conclusion that naked protests, carried out by Western feminist groups are generally perceived negatively by the public. Furthermore, this is evidence that the non-normative, non-violent characteristics of the tactics used by social movements are not always effective in generating public support as in the case of the use of nakedness.

To substantiate the results obtained and understand how the use of nakedness triggers such a disproportional negative public perception, a more thorough interpretation of the results is required. This is done in the following paragraphs where the nuances behind the different sentiments people displayed are explained in detail and are interpreted drawing upon the literature previously introduced and some feminist theoretical perspectives.

## 6.2 Diverting the attention

To start, it must be noted that the onlookers rarely commented on the issues raised by the activists. Indeed, the public discourse identified surrounding FEMEN's protests tends to revolve around the controversial opinions regarding the use of nakedness rather than the substantive issues underlying their protests. This observation is relevant as it shows that in the case of the FEMEN protests the use of nakedness directed the focus of people away from the claims being made by the activists. This suggests that nakedness may detract from the seriousness of the cause being advocated for, instead drawing attention primarily to the performative aspect of the protests. This became evident from the second round of coding where most comments were used to express an opinion about the use of nakedness in public or to label the activists to either show support or discredit them. In detail, on the one hand, the critics were interested in highlighting the inappropriateness and inefficiency of the use of nakedness and posted comments whose intent was to sexualize and shame the activists. On the other hand, the positive comments were prevalently used to show approval of the use of nakedness and to praise the activists because of their courage. Those comments that were categorized as conveying a neutral attitude consisted of text used to express confusion about the purpose of the use of nakedness. These contrasting perspectives were captured in the form of subcategories under negative, neutral, and positive attitudes (see Appendix n. 1).

What follows sheds light on the nature of these controversial opinions and determines what are the reactions of the online public viewers to the use of nakedness as a form of protest. This analysis will be structured following the division into positive and negative attitudes constituting the coding framework. Despite neutral attitudes being part of the coding, they will not be covered in detail as they constituted an insignificant portion of the sample of comments. Therefore, the content of this category is irrelevant to the understanding of how naked protests are perceived by the public.

### 6.3 Positive attitudes

What surfaced from the content coded under the category of positive perceptions is covered in this section. This content constitutes only a minimal percentage of the sample analyzed as shown in Graph 1. Consequently, despite it is crucial to acknowledge the positive comments directed towards FEMEN protests what is said in this section must be intercepted with caution. This is because it must be kept in mind that the general sentiment emerging from these comments is not representative of the broad public sentiment formed around all the protests analyzed.

To begin with, some comments were found to be showing support and admiration for the acts committed by the protestors which are seen as “remarkable” (Posts, 8). These terms indicate approval and appreciation for how the protests are carried out. Similarly, positive perception regarding FEMEN’s tactics often highlighted its perceived effectiveness. What emerged from the comments is that some individuals found that “we need more of these protests” because they are “impactful and needed to achieve social change” (Post. 2). These people argue that disrobing is an effective approach to express dissidence and challenge the power structures engrained in our society which is in line with what is said to be the main intent of body politics as formulated by Davis (1995).

Moreover, it emerged that people perceived nakedness as a significant tactic because of two main reasons: its shock value and its non-violence. This aligns with the theoretical expectations formulated Stephan & Chenoweth (2008) and Shuman (2021) regarding nonviolent and nonnormative tactics. However, being this limited evidence from this study it cannot be regarded as corroborating evidence. Despite this, it is still insightful to mention that viewers justified their supportive attitudes towards the tactic employed by FEMEN because of its peacefulness but provocative and shocking effects. One viewer commented that “sometimes to shake society we need some of these acts” while another wrote that “creating discomfort in the people watching is the only way to achieve something!” (Posts. 3, 7). These remarks can be explained by referring to the unconventional aspect of the use of the naked body as a form of protest. By going against cultural norms surrounding public behavior and by diverging from what is commonly understood as activism, a surprise and shock reaction is triggered in the public. Additionally, other individuals were found to hold a positive outlook towards FEMEN’s demonstrations because they do not inflict harm. For example, one comment stated that “More women need to practise this kind of peaceful protesting! Nobody gets hurt and really gets the point across especially for male leaders and viewers” (Posts. 2). Similarly, another person

commented that the activists “do not cause any harm [...] they don't loot, destroy or hurt anybody so they should be respected and supported” (Post. 3). These opinions were echoed in other comments found in the dataset (see Appendix. 1).

Another interesting aspect is that viewers emphasized FEMEN activists' courage. The activists were several times referred to as using adjectives such as “unstoppable”, “powerful and strong”, and “brave and beautiful” (Posts. 1, 3, 6). Such language is indicative of a supportive attitude towards the protests because it recognizes and celebrates the women's willingness to take bold actions in pursuit of their cause. By praising their bravery onlookers signal their admiration for the activists as they challenge societal norms and stand up to established power dynamics. These reactions can be linked back to the argument that the strength of the use of nakedness lies within the vulnerability of the naked body (Tamale, 2016). According to this perspective the defenselessness inherent to a naked body, when used to protest, is transformed into a disruptive force with subversive power. By labelling the activists as brave the public acknowledges the fact that by baring their bodies in protest women endure personal discomfort and vulnerability. This in turn highlights their deep commitment to their cause and emphasizes the purposefulness of getting naked as a display of resistance. Overall, these comments indicate that a segment of the public shows solidarity with the activists and perceives the use of nakedness as empowering.

To conclude a small percentage of the comments analyzed was found to be displaying a positive perception of the naked protests by the viewers. From the analyses it became clear that people showed support for the FEMEN activists because of their courage and empowering attitude. Moreover, supportive comments often referred to the perceived effectiveness of FEMEN's actions. In these cases, nakedness is seen as a powerful tactic because of its shock value and its non-violence. Therefore, some individuals admire these protests because of their ability to shake the public without causing any harm.

#### 6.4 Negative attitudes

The subsequent paragraphs delve into a detailed examination of comments categorized as expressing negative sentiments towards FEMEN's naked protests. This analysis has the goal of extracting nuanced insight from the text selected and formulating a deeper understanding of the prevailing attitudes among people who view these types of demonstrations. What emerges from these sections is key to comprehending public perception regarding the utilization of nudity in protest given that negative remarks were found to make up approximately 70% of the data set.

First, it appears that people view this type of tactic as hypocritical and counterproductive for the causes brought forward by feminist activists. In the case of posts showcasing FEMEN demonstrations striving for female rights people repeatedly criticized the contradictory nature of these protests. For instance, a user commented, “I don't get it, if you fight against male power how does exposing yourself help to stop the objectification of women?” (Post. 1). Comments of this nature were frequent under the post featuring FEMEN activists demonstrating against sexual violence. For instance, someone asked “how is exposing yourself in public going to stop rape? It seems like they are asking to be raped” (Post. 6) . More of these were present under the rest of the posts where FEMEN were making more political claims. In these cases, individuals criticized the use of nakedness by referring to it as a “non-sense behaviors” which “does nothing but attract the male gaze” (Posts. 2, 8). Many more responses included views that claimed that the act of nudity detracted from the message of the protests and distracted the onlookers. The content of these comments indicates that onlookers are sceptical about the usefulness of the use of the female naked bodies as a way for the FEMEN social movement to achieve their goals.

These observations reflect the strand of literature sustaining that disrobing has a counterproductive effect on the claims made by the protestors discussed in section 2.5. These expectations are confirmed by the rest of the comments under the same posts. Indeed, it was found that most viewers tended to develop a sexualizing attitude towards the activists. What emerged from the coding was that the naked breasts of the protestors were the main subject of the comments. Notably, under all the posts were found explicit comments about the physical characteristics of the activists which referred to them as “sexy”, “fat” or which jokingly thanked them for the “nice view”.

A second recurring reason why viewers were seen to form a negative attitude around FEMEN protests was because of their inappropriateness. Individuals were found to perceive the use of nakedness as a “vulgar” and “unacceptable” behavior in public spaces (Post. 7). To highlight the inappropriateness of this act some comments referred to the fact that “there might be young innocent teenage boys watching this” and proceeded by exclaiming that their viewing the naked protestors would be “just terrible” (Post. 6). Along the same lines, people were found to order to FEMEN protestors to “cover up” as what they are doing is “just outrageous” (Posts. 7, 8).

Furthermore, another trend which was identified was that of labelling the activists as lacking intellect and being insane. Many people were found to perceive the act of unclathing by the protestors as a sign of madness and stupidity. For instance, someone commented,

referring to the activists, that it “looks like they are just going nuts” while another viewer suggested that they “should get cheked” (Posts. 5, 1). These and several other comments have a shaming and ridiculing effect over the FEMEN members protesting. Consequently, this shows the unwillingness of the public to sympathise with the activists because they are seen as deviant. This is not only detrimental to the personal dignity of the women, but it also has a degrading effect on the relevance of the overall protest. From these comments, it can be deduced that the onlookers are not able to grasp the meaning behind the tactic of nakedness, and because of this, end up ascribing the cause for protesting entirely out of the ignorance and insanity of women.

## **7. Discussion**

The empirical evidence presented above goes against what was expected to be people’s perception of naked protests given their non-violent and non-conventional nature. Despite some viewers showing a supportive perception towards the use of nakedness, the majority of them were found to criticize it and form derogatory opinions.

Results demonstrate that naked protests can be easily misconstrued by the public and be simplistically interpreted as solely something sexual which becomes primarily for male enjoyment. This trend reflects the widespread tendency to objectify women’s bodies in the popular culture of movies, advertisements, and social media (Cummings & Glesing, 2017). The reaction of users to naked protests provides a primary example of the phenomena of sexual objectification. This consists in perceiving an individual as a sexualized body which has the purpose of satisfying the desires of other people (Bartky, 1990). This is detrimental to the potential benefits of this tactic as these reactions have the effect of decontextualizing the use of nakedness to convey a message and, because of dominant Western social norms, results in subjecting the female body to further sexualization.

Moreover, the fact that naked protests are interpreted as inappropriate is rooted within the Western cultural understanding that nakedness, especially that of women, is a private matter. Because of this, the display of the undressed body in public becomes publicly perceived as a seductive, indecent, and shameful act (Merchant, 1980, p. 132). This sentiment is evident in the comments as people displayed feelings of disgust towards FEMEN’s protests which some described as being “gross” (Post, 8). Overall, the ideologically constructed inappropriateness associated with women’s naked bodies results in many people forming an adverse attitude towards naked protests.

The fact that naked activists are perceived as being insane and stupid can also be understood by referring to dominant gender perspectives. Because, stereotypically, strong emotions like anger are considered naturally masculine (Burn, 2019) the frustration and anger expressed by the FEMEN protestors is perceived as going against what women can feel and thus is interpreted as irrational behavior. Moreover, some people have been conditioned by the belief that, given the fragility of women's sex, they are unable to control their emotions and thus are likely to engage in senseless behaviors (Merchant, 1980, p. 130).

All the above are plausible explanations why women's naked protests result in such critical and overall negative responses from the viewers. What becomes evident is that the core problem is deeply rooted in societal norms and beliefs which are still dominant in many cultures. The empirical evidence underscores that naked protests are often misconstrued by the audience as vulgar displays of women's sexuality catered for a male audience. These misinterpretations detract from the intended message of the protests and reinforce the sexualization of the female naked body as well as the perception of women's nakedness as indecent. Furthermore, the ideological perspectives presented foster derogatory attitudes towards the naked protestors who are deemed stupid and irrational. These perspectives reduce the credibility of the protests and undermine their intent of conveying critical messages. Given this, it can be concluded that the use of nakedness sparks reactions which ultimately exacerbate harmful gender stereotypes and the objectification of women. As such something which is planned with the intention to achieve positive and emancipatory effects ends up sparking reactions which discredit women and reduce their social influence.

## **8. Conclusion**

This thesis empirically investigates what is the public perception which forms around the use of nakedness as a tactic used by Western social movements. Specifically, it focuses on naked protests carried out by the feminist movement FEMEN and what people think of them after viewing their demonstrations online. The content analysis revealed that, despite some people positively reacted to it as initially predicted given its non-normative and peaceful characteristics, most viewers formed a negative perception of this kind of activism.

Overall, from the elaboration of the central themes in this paper, it emerged that the use of nakedness as a protest tactic is not as effective in dismantling dominant patriarchal power dynamics and challenge preconceived views about women's bodies as assumed by FEMEN and as formulated by several scholars (Barcan, 2002; Misiri, 2011; Sultana, 2013; Tamale, 2017). On the contrary, the analysis revealed that the use of nakedness sparks reactions which

perpetuate harmful stereotypes such as the understanding of the female body serving the male gaze. This sheds light on the challenges of using the female nakedness as a tool of political resistance and calls for the need to explore alternative protest tactics for feminist social movements like FEMEN. Moreover, these results stress the persistence of traditional gender perspectives and how these act as obstacles for women to actively participate in the public and political sphere. This indicates that a broader ideological shift is needed to challenge those views engrained in society which shape how women's naked protests are perceived but also impact women in their everyday life.

However, it must be noted that this thesis presents limitations. Firstly, the online anonymity of social media users prevented collecting information about the gender, age and sociocultural background of the individuals expressing an opinion regarding naked protests. This information would have allowed to provide a richer interpretation of the data and identify how differences in these traits shape people's perception around feminist naked protests. Additionally, it must be considered that online comments are inherently interactive, meaning that the content of comments is influenced by previously posted reactions. Thus, the disproportionate majority of negative comments might have been due to the tendency of users to systematically adhere to the dominant opinion expressed by other users and not entirely derived from their own perception. Finally, even though a substantial number of comments were analyzed the prevailing sentiment derived from them cannot be said to be perfectly representative of the public. Indeed, the opinion of those who did not post a comment as well as that of people who viewed the protests in person is unknown. This means that the results obtained should be interpreted as a tendency of people to perceive naked protests rather than an incontestable truth.

To conclude, this thesis contributes to the study of feminist naked protests and sets the stage for new research regarding the use of the body as a site of protests. However, given the above-mentioned limitations further research, potentially using methodological triangulation comprising interviews and opinion pools, is required to formulate a more comprehensive answer to the research question. Furthermore, to enrich this field of research, it would be interesting to investigate how nakedness is used by social movements which are not feminist and do not operate within the Western context. For instance, insightful results could be derived from a comparison of the perception of naked protests staged by feminist movement and those carried out by animal rights activists such as the PETA group. Furthermore, the theoretical base of this thesis encourages more research about the effectiveness of non-violent unconventional types of protests like the different forms of civil disobedience which are growing in popularity.

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## 10. Appendix

### Appendix. 1: Short versions of the coding framework

The version of the framework below includes only the most representative codes for each section. A full version of the coding is not hereby provided as it is too lengthy.

All the comments coded in this framework were found in the comment section under the 8 posts featuring FEMEN naked protests. The comments are not cited individually as the total initial amount of comments selected from the posts (1042 comments) were considered as one body of data and analyzed as such without referring back to the post they belonged to.

A list of all the posts the comments were derived from can be found under the bibliography section of this thesis.

<p><b>Positive attitude</b></p>	<p><u>Attitude showing direct approval and admiration towards the naked protests as well as a discourse which reinforces the intended purpose of the use of nakedness.</u></p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Effective/powerful.</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More women need to practise this kind of peaceful protesting! Nobody gets hurt and really gets the point across. especially for male leaders and viewers.</li> <li>• When no one listens, being more radical is the way to go! Keep it up FEMEN.</li> <li>• Creating discomfort in the people watching is the only way to achieve something!</li> <li>• We need more of these protests! They do not harm but are memorable.</li> <li>• Stripping naked is a powerful deterrent to rape! They are reclaiming agency over their bodies!</li> <li>• I think they made their point! It's thanks to these revolutionary activist that patriarchy will crumble.</li> <li>• These women do not cause any harm, it is their Way.They don't loot, destroy or hurt anybody so they should be respected.</li> <li>• We need more women standing up patriarchy with this courage.</li> <li>• Sometimes to shake society we need some of these acts.</li> <li>• I totally agree with their their activism! They are great.</li> <li>• I think this form of protesting should be considered art and all women should stand behind these brave individuals. They should all form lines behind these women in the same fashion.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They are great! Men are criticising because they feel threatened.</li> <li>• I love them, they are so powerful!</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Support for the activists.</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We support you feminists!</li> <li>• Keep up the good work girls! You are powerful and strong!</li> <li>• All these women deserve all the justice and support!</li> <li>• Love you FEMEN! What you do is remarkable</li> <li>• I admire them.</li> <li>• Courageous and beautiful .</li> <li>• Just respect for what they do. They represent female power!</li> <li>• Just listen to them. Equality for all!</li> <li>• I fully support their cause .</li> <li>• FEMEN are awesome.</li> <li>• They make me proud.</li> <li>• Sooo brave .</li> <li>• I love them. So brave.</li> <li>• They are unstoppable!</li> <li>• super woman of real life</li> <li>• Brave! (x6)</li> <li>• I admire them</li> </ul>
<b>Neutral attitude</b>	<u>Critically questioning the use of naked protests but without directly condemning or approving them.</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Confusion.</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why naked?</li> <li>• Why do they need to bare themselves to protest? Why not protest with dignity? Just asking.</li> <li>• What is this about?</li> <li>• I don't understand why naked...</li> <li>• I dont get why they are to flash their tits</li> <li>• What does nudity have to do with protests?</li> <li>• Ok but why in topless.</li> <li>• Why are they doing this?</li> <li>• I'am confused...</li> <li>• Why are they naked? To send a message ?</li> <li>• What is the purpose of being naked?</li> <li>• Why top less tho.</li> <li>• What are they trying to achieve by this?</li> <li>• What type of protest are these.</li> </ul>
<b>Negative attitude</b>	<u>Attitude showing direct disapproval or aversion towards the naked protests as well as a discourse which detracts from the intended purpose of the use of nakedness.</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Inappropriate.</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Imagine if kids are there. Shame!</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I mean, I'm all for the meaning, but the execution is atrocious. People are trying to view art. There are kids at the louvre. Again, I fully agree with what they are protesting, but please, nobody really wants to see that.</li> <li>• 9 year old: goes to museum hears chatting looks at them moooooom.</li> <li>• How do you explain this to a kid?!</li> <li>• This is such an inappropriate way for protesting.</li> <li>• This is just shameful.</li> <li>• Vulgar and unacceptable behaviour in a public space.</li> <li>• Gross (x2)</li> <li>• This is unacceptable behaviour.</li> <li>• There are little children, this is certainly utter disgrace as a woman.</li> <li>• Yuk this is unacceptable.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Inefficient and counterproductive.</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This is why rape is a problem.</li> <li>• The weird thing about feminists who advocate for this are the same ones who would freak out and call men creepy for staring. So they don't want men staring at them, but pushing a movement that would draw even more sexual attention to themselves. Unbelievable.</li> <li>• Fight for rape?? By getting naked? Fuck logic!</li> <li>• Do these women think people will take them seriously by acting like this...</li> <li>• I don't get it, if you fight against male power how does exposing yourself fight against objectify of women?</li> <li>• This is unnecessary. There are other ways to do this!</li> <li>• Hahahaha lets get naked, boys yea get naked go protest and they all taking pics and staring at boobs and just smirking and smiling at this nonsense behaviour of this girls , there other ways to protest by not showing your private parts.</li> <li>• Definitely the right way to stick it to the patriarchy because men couldn't possibly live with seeing hot naked women, thats every man's nightmare....</li> <li>• Where here to stop rape but we are protesting have naked...hypocrites.</li> <li>• Evil will always exist, you can't stop it. Chanting does not stop rape. The only reason your getting attention is because people are looking at your tits.</li> <li>• White female protesters are something else. Symply theatrical and funny.</li> <li>• Just makes me laugh to see this.</li> <li>• This is just a very wrong way to contest patriarchy. You just do a favour to all men.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You don't need to sexualize women they do it by themselves.</li> <li>• What rubbish honestly.</li> <li>• When in Germany are just looking for excuses to get naked.</li> <li>• Then woman complaining about men watching them out at the gym.</li> <li>• Women complain about being harassed, Also woman in the streets showing their boobs.</li> <li>• This is so freaking sick. Whether women want it or not, female breast has always been attractive and linked to sex. If they don't want to be sexualized, they should keep them covered. They did not achieve a thing.. just made themselves laughable. They looked like those lgbt groups who start screaming as soon as you disagree with them.</li> <li>• They don't know they entertaining male and giving them what they want without making any trouble.</li> <li>• One of the most unoriginal, ineffective, cliché and tiresome forms of protest is the topless women protest.</li> <li>• Is it really an effective form of activism though, or did she just detract from her own cause by drawing all the attention to herself? Opposing Putin might seem obvious within the last two months, but were any of the comments in this video before then actually anti-Putin or is everyone just distracted by her acting like a fool. Activists might often have to act somewhat obnoxious to grab the attention of the public, but there is such a thing as pushing it too far and alienating people who may have otherwise been receptive to their message.</li> <li>• Cringe (X6).</li> <li>• These women are not only fraud, they also prove that feminism is nothing and has no meaning hahaha.</li> <li>• The women objectifies herself and expects for the men to not treat her like an object. A decent woman won't do like her.</li> <li>• Getting half naked in the street and shout the same stupid things over and over while resisting against the police. Splendid idea!</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Sexualization.</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Didn't hear anything they said. Was too busy looking at the titties. I support topless women!</li> <li>• I think only hot blondes should be in women ... they make a better impression.</li> <li>• Boobs! Nice!</li> <li>• So strippers doing some advertising.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They are all really fit...and nice boobs. I get the point of the protests now. It is the opportunity for men who don't have the money to go to a strip club to experience it for free. You have my full support!!! P.S. the black one is cute!</li> <li>• All I see are nice tits and beautiful girl.</li> <li>• Carry out many protests please we men support this!</li> <li>• Each of these women have 2 valid points (referring to the breasts).</li> <li>• They need to Hire a better camera man , too much focus on the face and nothing else.</li> <li>• I would go there daily continue ladies keep the larger ladies covered please.</li> <li>• I don't think I can truly understand their political position unless they are bottomless also.</li> <li>• Oh yeah shake it baby nice boobie.</li> <li>• Nice breasts.</li> <li>• "Bigot Feminists : ""We want to be naked!"" Sus Men : "Sure!".</li> <li>• Looking good girls, looking good.</li> <li>• it would be more convincing if they were totally nude.</li> <li>• They can go topless they don't got any boobs.</li> <li>• Woah their boobs more bigger than mine.</li> <li>• Why do I never encounter these protests?! I really appreciate their little spectacle.</li> <li>• Are these even feminists...to me it seems like they are purposefully reinforcing all the gender stereotypes.</li> <li>• This is just useless and counterproductive. She is just embarrassing all women.</li> <li>• It's good to keep abreast of the issues.</li> <li>• Wait for winter and you won't feel like making this kind of protests in Germany no more.</li> <li>• I thought Germany only had Gas shortage, looks like they are short of Bras too.</li> <li>• Lucky those who see these beauties in real life.</li> <li>• Hotties.</li> <li>• O hell ya, keep showing your assets girls.</li> <li>• Sexi (10).</li> <li>• What a bunch of sluts.</li> <li>• I really encourage females to protest like this yes we need freedom of speech hahahaha.</li> <li>• they NEED TO GO TO.. STRIP CLUB.</li> <li>• She did like the missionary position.</li> <li>• I can watch more videos like these.</li> <li>• Why topless if the camera never records their nice feminine boobs? Come on guys, we need better angles!</li> </ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can somebody translate it? I can't read breast.</li> <li>• Is there anyway to order this protest at home?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Labelling the activists.</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stupid (x 9)</li> <li>• Insane</li> <li>• SI*ts (x 7).</li> <li>• There is no logic.... Sick girls.</li> <li>• These people are retarded... No more that retarded.</li> <li>• Demented morons.</li> <li>• Crazy (x15).</li> <li>• Clows.</li> <li>• Poor idiots.</li> <li>• Looks like they are just going nuts.</li> <li>• Juts clowns with no dignity.</li> <li>• She is just a moron.</li> <li>• Are they completely out of their minds?</li> <li>• I don't think it is normal that people behave this way.</li> <li>• They should get checked.</li> <li>• Hahahah you should get cured.</li> <li>• I don't think she is understanding what she is doing. She is just insane.</li> <li>• She is just stupid and has no dignity left.</li> <li>• I don't like women who act like fools.</li> </ul>