



REDEFINING WOMEN IN ADVERTISING: MAPPING THE EVOLUTION AND THEMES OF FEMVERTISING

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Abstract: Advertising plays a significant role in capturing consumers' attention in this intense rivalry business environment. There are various ways to capture consumers' attention and one of the popular ways is to focus on social issues and gain their attention. In recent years, feminism and gender equality have been increasingly used as brands' advertising strategy and this is termed as "Femvertising". In recent years, discussions around femvertising have garnered substantial academic and commercial interest. Due to its high application by brands as their marketing tactics it is essential to know the femvertising concept more deeply. This review paper aims to deliver an in-depth review of how women's representation in advertising has evolved, mapping the transition from conventional stereotypes to more empowering stories and the origin of femvertising. Core themes such as the celebration of diversity, body positivity, and women's independence etc. are examined, along with critical concepts like femwashing, which points out the potential exploitation of feminist ideals for superficial branding. By incorporating insights on the themes of femvertising and pillars of authentic fevertising, this paper seeks to provide a nuanced perspective on how advertising mirrors societal views about women, offering implications for both scholars and practitioners in the field.

Keywords: Advertising, Femvertising, Femwashing, Pro-female advertising, Women Empowerment

INTRODUCTION

Advertising is crucial for grabbing consumers' attention and changing their brand-related behavior in the fiercely competitive modern world. It is viewed as a cultural artifact, a social actor, and a marketing tool (Frith, 1995; Leiss et al., 1990). Gender role depictions in advertising have been the subject of several research (An & Kim, 2007; Belkaoui & Belkaoui, 1976; Debevec & Iyer, 1988; Hogg & Garrow, 2003; Jaffe, 1994; Orth &

Holancova, 2003; Theodoridis et al., 2013) conducted over the past three decades in the fields of communication, marketing, psychology, and gender studies (Kapoor & Munjal, 2019).

A major shift in the dynamic fields of marketing and communication within the always changing advertising landscape has resulted from the growing recognition of the significance and power of feminism and gender equality in recent years. This shift has led to the emergence of the intriguing and provocative field of "femvertising". Femvertising is a powerful strategy that incorporates gender inclusion and feminist ideals into advertising campaigns. There has been debate over this novel advertising strategy (Sánchez-Labela Martín et al., 2024). Feminists created femvertising to support women's empowerment in advertising around the world against preconceptions and social standards (Teng et al., 2021). The word "femvertising" was coined in 2014, despite the fact that female freedom has been used in advertising campaigns since the 1960s, When Virginia Slims sold cigarettes by using the subject of women's independence with the tagline "you've come a long way, baby" (Åkestam et al., 2017). The term "femvertising" made its first appearance at the Adweek event in New York by the lifestyle site "SheKnows"(Åkestam et al., 2017). Femvertising is defined as "advertising that challenges traditional female advertising stereotypes"(Åkestam et al., 2017) uses pro-female imagery, messages, and talent to empower girls and women and abolish gender-based inequalities(Tsichla, 2020).These advertisements aim to celebrate women's liberalism, strength, independence and confidence rather than objectify and sexualize them (Teng et al., 2021). Prior studies have demonstrated that using female empowerment in advertisements results in female audiences having more positive sentiments towards the advertisement and less resistance to the message it conveys (Åkestam et al., 2017). Additionally, femvertising can lead to a stronger desire to buy, a more positive brand opinion, and a better emotional bond with the company (Drake, 2017). In recent decades, companies have employed femvertising to market anything from designer clothing and t-shirts to soap and shampoo (Mendes, 2011; Sternadori & Hagseth, 2014).

Femvertising is an activism movement that aims to improve public image of women's roles in society (Patel et al., 2017). This trend is exemplified by campaigns like Sunilk "a women can balance between their work and beauty," which has garnered widespread recognition for effectively integrating empowerment messages into their marketing strategies. Other fantastic femvertising campaigns have been executed recently, including "Nissan #SheDrives", "Always #Like a Girl", and "Lane Bryant #I'm No Angel" (Champlin et al., 2019). Brands which targeted to women, such as Dove, Always, and Pantene, were the first to employ femvertising because it seemed to fit in well with their causes. However, as the ads gained traction, more companies—some associated with man-oriented products (like RAM trucks) and others with gender-neutral products (like Google and Verizon)—joined the trend and began incorporating feminist advertising into their marketing campaigns (Abitbol & Sternadori, 2019). Femvertising helps companies not only overcome the preconceptions and stereotypes associated with women, but also enables them in attracting and retaining customers by increasing their sense of affirmation and accomplishment (Sobande, 2019; Sterbenk et al., 2022). In recent years, discussions around femvertising have garnered substantial academic and commercial interest. Due to its high application by brands as their marketing tactics it is essential to know the femvertising concept more deeply i.e., it is essential to know the concept of femvertising in detail. Thus, the study aims to deliver an in-depth review

of how women's representation in advertising has evolved, mapping the transition from conventional stereotypes to more empowering stories and the origin of femvertising. Core themes such as the celebration of diversity, body positivity, and women's independence etc. are examined, along with critical concepts like femwashing, which points out the potential exploitation of feminist ideals for superficial branding. By incorporating insights on the themes of femvertising and pillars of authentic fevertising, this paper seeks to provide a nuanced perspective on how advertising mirrors societal views about women, offering implications for both scholars and practitioners in the field.

The following research questions are raised in light of the aforementioned:

- (1) How portrayal of women in advertising changed and reason for the evolution of femvertising?
- (2) What are the main themes covered under femvertising?
- (3) What are the pillars of femvertising which leads to either authentic femvertising or femwashing?

PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN ADVERTISEMENT AND EVOLUTION OF FEMVERTISING

Advertising is often seen as a mirror of contemporary cultural trends, providing information about brands, products, services, and concepts (Pollay, 1986). Initially designed to showcase a variety of goods to consumers, the influence of advertising gradually grew to manipulate societal values and attitude (Dyer, 2008). Consequently, how women are depicted in ads becomes crucial, as it not only mirrors but also signals the roles society expects them to play (Kordrostami & Laczniak, 2022). Few areas in advertising have garnered as much scholarly interest as gender representation. Women's roles and representations in advertising have evolved over time. It is feasible to observe a progression and pertinent shifts in the way that corporations have portrayed women in all types of media and advertising from the 1950s to the present.

The pre-feminist era, which spans the years 1950–the early 1960s, Representation of female was stereotypical. There were established stereotypes because women could only play explicit domestic roles as moms and happy housewives. Additionally, women were probably portrayed as being in need of men's protection. On the other hand, it was implied that men were only interested in women as “sexual objects” (Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971). Additionally, women were consistently depicted as passive in the advertisements, while males were always shown as active (Mager & Helgeson, 2011).

Beginning in the middle of the 1960s, cultural tensions persisted throughout the 1970s. The Feminist Revolution took place during that time. The feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s brought about significant social and cultural transformations. Women started to seek equal rights and opportunities, challenging their conventional positions in the home and at work. The depiction of women in advertising started to gradually shift throughout this time. In recognition of women's growing influence and presence in the workplace and in public life, brands began to show them in a wider variety of roles (*The Evolution of Female*

Representation in Advertising, 2024). Also, Research into gender stereotypes began in the 1960s, inspired by feminist movements, and has remained pertinent due to shifting gender roles that challenge conventional hierarchies and raise ethical questions regarding the portrayal of women in media (Tsiehla, 2020).

Advertising started to reflect these shifts as more women joined the job, advanced in education, and gained professional position. The "power woman"—self-assured, prosperous, and independent—rose to prominence in advertising during the 1980s and 1990s. But this period also saw a persistence of conflicting messages, with women being presented as professionals while still being expected to adhere to conventional ideals of femininity and beauty (*The Evolution of Female Representation in Advertising*, 2024). It had two aspects. The feminist movement paved the way for advertisements to portray women as liberated and for the "happy housewife" stereotype to start to fade. Conversely, advertisers' reinterpretation of sexual liberation as a way to take advantage of female bodies led to the perpetuation of the sexual object stereotype. Also, during the post feminism period, advertisers seemed to be endorsing feminist ideas while also making the most of them when promoting their products to consumers. This is known as "Commodity feminism". The redefining of feminism through consumerism and purchasing behavior is indeed one way to characterize feminism. Independence, freedom, and sexual agency are feminist concepts that have been "rehabilitated" for the advertising industry by being stripped of their social component and depoliticized.(Goldman et al., 1991).

During 2000s, there was an increasing call for more varied and genuine portrayals of women in advertising and the media at the start of the millennium. Ad campaigns began to challenge the limited definitions of beauty that had dominated for decades by showcasing women of various ages, body shapes, nationalities, and backgrounds. During this time, advertising that celebrated women's accomplishments, strengths, and uniqueness also gained traction (*The Evolution of Female Representation in Advertising*, 2024). The perfect example of the same is The 2004 Dove Real Beauty campaign sought to encourage self-acceptance and question conventional notions of beauty. The commercial, which featured actual women of various ages, sizes, shapes, and nationalities, went viral very fast. Women began to hold numerous important roles in advertising around the turn of the twenty-first century, giving them significant influence over advertising campaigns. A new advertising movement called "Femvertising" started to emerge as the idea of female empowerment spread throughout communication. Femvertising is a potent tactic that integrates feminist principles and gender inclusivity into marketing initiatives. Feminists developed femvertising to promote women's empowerment in global advertising by challenging social norms and stereotypes (Teng et al., 2021). The word "femvertising" was coined in 2014. The term "femvertising" was coined at the Adweek event in New York by the lifestyle site "SheKnows" (Åkestam et al., 2017). Femvertising is defined as "advertising that challenges traditional female advertising stereotypes"(Åkestam et al., 2017) uses pro-female imagery, messages, and talent to empower girls and women and abolish gender-based inequalities(Tsiehla, 2020).These advertisements aim to celebrate women's liberalism, independence, strength, and confidence rather than objectify and sexualize them (Teng et al., 2021). The companies that have been successful in advancing women's empowerment includes "Verizon" ("Inspire her mind", 2014), "CoverGirl" ("Girls can", 2014), "Under Armour" ("I will what I want", 2014), "Gillette Venus" ("Use your and", 2015), "Microsoft" ("#Makewhatsnext", 2016), "Lane Bryant"

(“ImNoAngel”, 2017), “Bumble” (“The ball in is her court”, 2019), “Nike” (“Dream Crazier”, 2019) and many others.

Table 1: Women in advertisement and origin of femvertising

Time Period	Portrayal of Women	Description
The Early Days: Stereotypes (1950s - Early 1960s)	Stereotypical Domestic Roles	Women portrayed as happy housewives and mothers, dependent on men’s protection and males were exclusively interested in women as “sexual objects” (Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971).
The Feminist Movements: A Call for Change (1960s - 1970s)	Gradual Shift Due to Feminist Movements	In recognition of women's growing influence and presence in the workplace and in public life, brands began to show them in a wider variety of roles (<i>The Evolution of Female Representation in Advertising</i> , 2024).
Power and Professionalism (The 1980s and 1990s)	Emergence of the "Power Woman"	The "power woman"—self-assured, prosperous, and independent—rose to prominence in advertising. Conversely, advertisers' reinterpretation of sexual liberation as a way to take advantage of female bodies led to the perpetuation of the sexual object stereotype (<i>The Evolution of Female Representation in Advertising</i> , 2024).
Diversity and Realism (The 2000s)	Diverse and Genuine Representations of women	Ad campaigns began to challenge the limited definitions of beauty that had dominated for decades by showcasing women of various ages, body shapes, nationalities, and backgrounds (<i>The Evolution of Female Representation in Advertising</i> , 2024).
Emergence of the intriguing and provocative field of "femvertising" (2014)	Pro-female imagery, messages, and talent to empower girls and women and abolish gender-based inequalities	Advertisers uses pro-female imagery, messages, and talent to empower girls and women and abolish gender-based inequalities (Tsiehla, 2020). Instead of objectifying and sexualizing women, these ads seek to promote their liberalism, independence, strength, and confidence (Teng et al., 2021).

Source: own elaboration

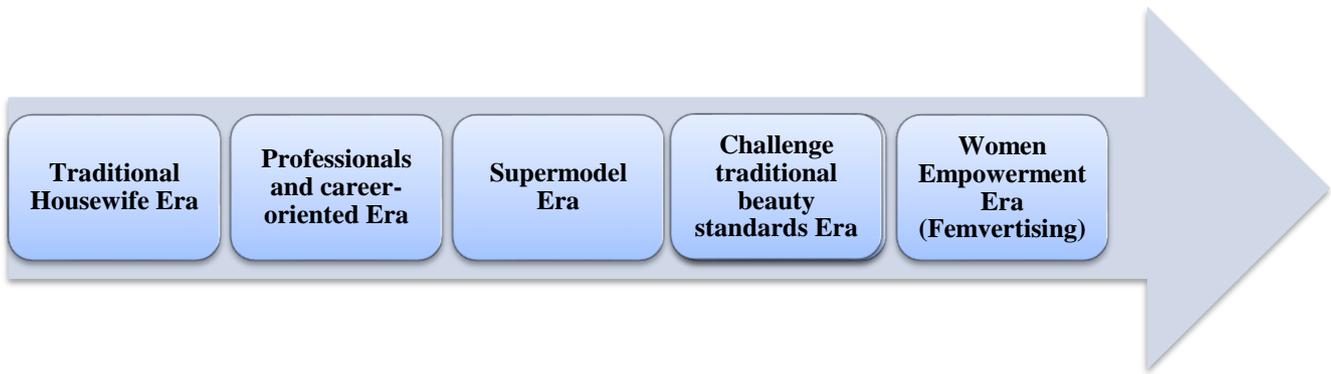


Figure 1: Changing Portrayal of Women in Advertisement

Source: own elaboration

Table 1 and Figure 1 show the changing portrayal of women in advertising and how femvertising emerged. This section illustrates the evolution of how women are depicted in advertisements, shifting from conventional and stereotypical images of domesticity and submission to representations that are more varied and empowering. While earlier ads often mirrored strict social norms, the feminist movements and cultural transformations that occurred in the late 20th and early 21st centuries led to a gradual change. Campaigns that focus on femvertising and authenticity demonstrate how advertising has evolved to honor women's uniqueness, strength, and accomplishments, reflecting wider sociocultural developments.

THEMES OF FEMVERTISING

(Hsu, 2018) very well explained the themes covered under femvertising used by consumer brands. According to Hsu, there are 10 themes explained by her which are as follows (Hsu, 2018):

Table 2: Themes of femvertising

THEME	MEANING
“Promoting body confidence with realistic images of women”	By embracing a diverse range of body types and sizes, this kind of femvertising rejects stereotyped, narrow-minded, unachievable beauty standards that emphasize youth, thinness, or even the sexualization of women.
“Championing females’ self-confidence beyond a beauty focus”	Rather than portraying women as weak, submissive, and beauty-obsessed, this approach emphasizes women's accomplishments, power, and confidence—qualities that have historically been associated with

men.

- “Calling females to overcome societal barriers to get active and play sports”** This advertisement theme challenges the gender prejudice that boys are athletic and energetic while girls are passive.
- “Acknowledging women’s athletic prowess and inner strengths”** The strong, muscular body and athletic activity of the woman are used in this advertising strategy to represent power. Additionally, whereas the traditional method has focused on a female athlete's sexual appeal, this kind of femvertising emphasizes her athleticism, discipline, and assertiveness.
- “Depicting females in a new multiplicity of roles beyond stereotypes”** Women have always been associated with traditional roles in advertising, such as mothers, housewives, consumers of household products, and sexual objects. Since then, these roles have grown to include career women, business leaders, and supermoms.
- “Honoring mothers beyond their nurturing role”** The theme emphasizes transcending conventional images of mothers that focus only on their roles as caregivers, instead honoring their success and wider contributions to society.
- “Encouraging young females to pursue science, technology, maths and engineering (STEM)”** By allowing girls to pursue industries that are traditionally dominated, this style of pro-girl marketing undermines gender stereotypes that divide boys and girls into distinct interests and traits.
- “Advocating equal opportunity and equal pay for women”** Femvertising's emphasis on advancing fair pay and equal opportunities for women highlights how important workplace gender equality is. It encourages women to challenge prevailing cultural norms and aims to solve ongoing wage inequities.
- “Men advocating for positive female roles and equality”** While showing the transforming power of men voices supporting their female colleagues, the theme of femvertising underscores the necessity for gender equality in the workplace.
- “Normalizing and celebrating** This theme demonstrates a transition in advertising from using

menstruation”

euphemisms and negative depictions of menstruation to open, honest, and empowering narratives that acknowledge menstrual health as a normal aspect of life.

Source: (Hsu, 2018)

Table 2's aforementioned themes show that femvertising is not limited to "women products" like “Dove”, “Always”, or “Pantene”. Instead, a variety of goods and companies, such as Apple, Nike, Verizon, Under Armour, Microsoft, and Ram Truck, have successfully spread themes of empowerment for women and girls. Any brand that sincerely wants to engage with female consumers can succeed with femvertising. Given that today's pro-social consumers, especially Millennials, prefer to connect with companies that have a higher purpose than making a profit, marketers should view this as both a moral choice and a smart way to build relationships with customers (Hsu, 2018).

AUTHENTIC FEMVERTISING V/S FEMWASHING

Femwashing is the lack of authenticity that a viewer perceives as not adhering to the fundamentals of a genuine femvertising campaign. Fake activism is another term for femwashing (Alfaro-Ibáñez & Gallardo-Echenique, 2023). There are five pillars of Femvertising identified by (Becker-Herby, 2016) according to marketing professionals' perspectives. These are: 1. the utilization of diverse female talent: It is the diversity of how women are physically portrayed. This entails using women of all ages and races with a range of body types, weights, and sizes in advertising. 2. The presence of pro – female messages: The messages are consistently upbeat and seek to honor women in all their facets. 3. The effort of pushing gender – Show women and girls in contexts that defy the conventional ideals of the female gender. 4. The action of downplaying sexuality: Compared to typical advertising that features women, femvertising employs sexual references and appeals in more subtle ways. The way exposed bodies and skin are portrayed is seen as genuine and pertinent. 5. The use of authentic portrayals: highlights how crucial authenticity is in all facets of advertising, including the product, the talent, the setting, and the styling.

Understanding the consumer's perspective is essential to developing genuine femvertising campaigns. There are six dimensions of authentic femvertising identified by (Hainneville et al., 2023). First dimension is transparency which means the message given by the brand to its consumers need to be transparent. Second dimension is consistency which means a brand's internal coherence in terms of its identity (history, core values, parent company), communications (content/form, campaign congruence), and offer (fit) is referred to as consistency. Third dimension is identification which suggests that there is a connection between the advertisement and the self, either by proximity (i.e., geographical, social) or projection (of oneself or others we know). Fourth dimension is diversity which implies that the advertisement and the self are connected, either through projection (of oneself or those we know) or proximity (i.e., geographical, social). Three categories of diversity can be distinguished: identity (gender, age), physical (race, morphology, personal style), and health-

related. Fifth dimension is respect. The two main components of respect are women's respect for themselves (i.e., fostering acceptance and self-esteem) and companies' respect for women (i.e., minimizing sexualization without making it forbidden). The last dimension, challenging stereotypes, can be broken down into three categories: combating stereotypes about women's roles (e.g., career, household), physical characteristics (e.g., beauty standards), and interests and skills (e.g., taste, personality, physical abilities, and intellectual abilities).

The complementary nature of these six dimensions should be noted. Essentially, consumers use their overall impression of these six factors to evaluate advertisements and decide whether they are genuine (Femvertising) or not (Femwashing or False Feminism). Since they are more appropriate for today's society, advertising managers should design campaigns on the pillars of authentic femvertising, as they frequently unintentionally depict women with traditional stereotypes (Hainneville et al., 2023; Pérez & Gutiérrez, 2017; Tuncay Zayer & Coleman, 2015). Organizations have also started outlawing stereotypes that disparage or fail to advance gender equality (Bell et al., 2019).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The way women are portrayed in advertising has changed over time, reflecting the intricate relationship between marketing tactics, cultural shifts, and social standards. This study highlights the dramatic change in the way women are portrayed in advertising, moving away from long-standing stereotypes and towards the emergence of femvertising, a dynamic strategy for advancing gender inclusion and female empowerment. The transition from portraying women as housewives and passive objects to highlighting their uniqueness, diversity, and strength highlights the significant impact of feminist movements and changing social perceptions. The study highlights the growing significance of authentic representations that celebrate women's variety, freedom, and achievements by carefully examining shifts in advertising strategies.

Further, the themes identified by (Hsu, 2018) demonstrate that "women products" like Dove, Always, or Pantene are not the only examples of femvertising. Instead, a variety of goods and companies, such as Apple, Nike, Verizon, Under Armour, Microsoft, and Ram Truck, have successfully spread themes of empowerment for women and girls. Any brand that sincerely wants to engage with female consumers can succeed with femvertising. Furthermore, there isn't a single secret to femvertising. Along with the ten advertising themes that were previously covered, marketers can exercise creativity and create fresh, positive representation of women and girls in advertising by recognizing the diversity of women's lifestyles, backgrounds, needs, aspirations, fears, and other characteristics and by connecting with their identities in an authentic way (Hsu, 2018).

Now a day, brands use feminism in their advertisement as their marketing strategy trying to make positive image among customers and do fake activism that is known as femwashing. This results in negative impact on the image of brand among customers. So it is necessary to keep in mind the pillars of authentic femvertising from customers' point of view otherwise it may result in femwashing. Ultimately, femvertising transcends

being just a marketing trend; it signifies a wider cultural change towards gender equality and inclusivity. By adopting these principles, brands strengthen their bonds with purpose-driven customers while simultaneously promoting social progress.

The results of the study are highly significant for both academician and advertising industry expert. Femvertising is an interesting topic for researchers to further explore this concept given its long term effects on consumer behavior and social perceptions. Further, researchers can explore the impact of culture on the effectiveness of femvertising campaigns. Advertisers can refer this study in order to create authentic femvertising campaigns that resonate with consumers as the study highlights several pillars of an authentic femvertising, which provide guidance for avoiding femwashing and building consumers' trust on brand.

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