

Femvertising Strategies in Contemporary Advertising: an Analysis of the Commodification of Feminism and Its Impact on Gender Representation in Mass Media

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Abstract

This study explores the use of femvertising as a contemporary advertising strategy, focusing on the commodification of feminism and its impact on gender representation in mass media. By employing qualitative research with critical discourse analysis (CDA), the study examines campaigns such as *Like a Girl* by Always and *Real Beauty* by Dove. The findings reveal that while femvertising promotes narratives of empowerment by portraying women as strong and independent, these narratives often remain superficial, constrained by capitalist logic emphasizing individualism and hegemonic aesthetics. The study also highlights the limited inclusivity of gender representation, where campaigns predominantly prioritize women conforming to Western beauty standards. Moreover, the commodification of feminism reduces its essence to a marketing tool, overshadowing its potential as a social transformation movement. Although femvertising has raised awareness about gender equality, its effectiveness as an agent of change depends on transcending commodification and fostering inclusive, substantial empowerment narratives. The study underscores the importance of critically examining media's role in shaping gender representations to ensure equitable and transformative outcomes.

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Introduction

In the digital and globalized era, mass media play a crucial role in shaping social perceptions, including gender representation. One increasingly prevalent approach is femvertising—a strategy that incorporates female empowerment themes into advertising narratives. This phenomenon is rooted in social changes influenced by the third and fourth waves of feminism, which emphasize individual empowerment, self-expression, and diversity (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Gill, 2007).

Despite its appeal and progressive messages, femvertising presents complex paradoxes. A primary criticism of this strategy is the commodification of feminism, where feminist values are repackaged as marketing tools, blurring the line between social advocacy and commercial motives. Many femvertising campaigns use empowerment narratives, yet they simultaneously uphold traditional beauty standards that restrict women's freedom (Gill, 2007). This creates an illusion of empowerment that, in reality, maintains the status quo, where women are valued primarily in consumerist contexts (Bordo, 1993; Kahf, 2024).

Mass media, as a primary advertising platform, significantly influence gender discourse. Historically, media have constructed women's representation through specific stereotypes, depicting women as either victims of patriarchy or threats to social order (Mulvey, 1975; Kahf, 2024). This is evident in portrayals of Muslim women post-9/11, where veiled women were often reduced to symbols of oppression or modernity's antagonists (Kahf, 2024). Similar patterns emerge in femvertising, where feminist ideals are simplified into aesthetic elements or slogans without genuine efforts to empower women substantively (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Gill, 2007).

Additionally, femvertising is deeply influenced by neoliberalism, which prioritizes individualism and personal choice. This approach often suggests that women's success is solely dependent on individual effort, ignoring the broader structural barriers to gender equality (Gill, 2007). For example, beauty product advertisements often promote physical transformation as a form of empowerment while reinforcing hegemonic beauty standards (Bordo, 1993; Suwastini, 2013). As such, femvertising serves not only as a communication medium but also as a reflection of the contradictions between feminism and capitalism.

While femvertising has the potential to drive social change, its impact is often limited by commercial interests. Some advertising campaigns have successfully highlighted gender issues that were previously overlooked. For instance, the *Like a Girl* campaign by Always redefined a once-negative phrase into a symbol of strength and resilience (Always, 2014). Similarly, the *This Girl Can* campaign by Sport England promoted women's participation in physical activities without emphasizing conventional beauty standards (Gill, 2007). These campaigns illustrate how femvertising can serve as an educational tool, fostering discussions on gender equality (Banet-Weiser, 2012).

This research aims to explore the dynamics between femvertising and gender representation in mass media. Specifically, it examines:

1. How feminism is commodified in femvertising to meet market demands.
2. The impact of femvertising on gender construction, particularly in reinforcing or challenging stereotypes.
3. The potential of femvertising as a genuine agent of social change versus its role as a capitalist tool.

To achieve these objectives, the study employs critical discourse analysis (CDA) of contemporary advertisements that adopt femvertising strategies. This approach enables an understanding of the relationship between advertising texts, social contexts, and power structures. The findings contribute to gender and media studies, enriching discussions on how advertising functions as both a platform for social struggle and an instrument of ideological reproduction.

Literature Review

The term *femvertising* refers to a marketing strategy that integrates female empowerment narratives into advertising content to attract female consumers (Banet-Weiser, 2012). This strategy reflects the phenomenon of *commodity feminism*, where feminist values are treated as commodities that can be sold and consumed, without

prioritizing substantial social transformation (Gill, 2007). In this context, feminism is reduced to a mere aesthetic symbol, stripping it of its political essence.

A major criticism of femvertising is its role in reinforcing neoliberal capitalism. Neoliberalism places individualism and personal freedom at the center of female empowerment but often neglects the structural inequalities that sustain gender disparities (Gill, 2007). For example, beauty product advertisements frequently promote physical transformation as a form of empowerment while simultaneously upholding hegemonic beauty standards (Bordo, 1993; Suwastini, 2013). As a result, femvertising not only functions as a communication medium but also as a mirror reflecting the contradictions between feminism and capitalism.

Mass media have long played a central role in shaping social norms and gender representation. Historically, women have been portrayed through a limited set of stereotypes, whether as victims of patriarchy or as disruptors of social order (Bordo, 1993). Following the 9/11 attacks, media representations of Muslim women became increasingly problematic, with depictions that erased their agency and autonomy (Kahf, 2024).

In the context of femvertising, there is an attempt to break away from these stereotypes by presenting women as strong and independent. Campaigns such as *This Girl Can* by Sport England demonstrate how advertising can encourage women to transcend social limitations through empowerment narratives (Gill, 2007). However, critiques remain relevant, as many advertisements continue to prioritize aesthetic elements that align with patriarchal views, thus limiting the transformative potential of femvertising.

The concept of the *feminist gaze* is crucial in feminist theory, aiming to liberate women from objectification and the dominance of the *male gaze* (Mulvey, 1975). However, in contemporary media, including femvertising, the feminist gaze often falls into capitalist paradoxes. Many advertisements claiming to empower women still rely on the female body as a primary visual attraction, failing to challenge the underlying social norms (Gill, 2007). Within the *postfeminism* framework, personal choice and self-expression are emphasized. However, these ideals are frequently commodified by media, as seen in television shows like *The Swan*, which promotes cosmetic surgery as a path to female empowerment (Marwick, 2010). In such cases, female empowerment becomes more about consumerism than genuine social transformation.

One of the positive impacts of femvertising is its ability to raise awareness about gender equality. Campaigns such as *Like a Girl* by Always have successfully reshaped public perceptions, transforming previously negative stereotypes into messages of female strength and resilience (Always, 2014). These campaigns demonstrate the potential for femvertising to drive positive change in gender representation (Gill, 2007).

However, criticisms of femvertising's social impact persist. Research on gender representation in advertising indicates that this strategy often lacks inclusivity, particularly in its portrayal of women from minority backgrounds or differing socioeconomic statuses (Suwastini, 2013). The tendency to present a narrow, idealized image of women limits femvertising's effectiveness in representing the diversity of female experiences.

Previous Research

Previous studies have documented the development of femvertising as a response to social changes influenced by third- and fourth-wave feminism. Banet-Weiser (2012) highlights that femvertising is part of *brand culture*, where feminist narratives are used to create emotional connections between consumers and brands. For example, the *Like a Girl* campaign by Always successfully transformed a previously negative phrase into a message of female empowerment (Always, 2014). However, research also indicates that the success of such strategies often does not reflect deep social transformation but instead functions primarily as a means to enhance brand loyalty.

Gill (2007) argues that femvertising is trapped in a contradiction between feminist values and capitalist demands. While these campaigns promote female empowerment, they still exploit women's bodies as marketing tools, creating a paradox that limits their ability to drive real social change. In this sense, femvertising often functions more as a reflection of feminist aspirations within a consumerist framework rather than a challenge to structural gender inequalities.

Studies by Rosalind Gill (2007) and Suwastini (2013) show that feminism in advertising is often reduced to an aesthetic element detached from its political roots. This trend is evident in beauty product advertisements that emphasize physical transformation as a form of empowerment while reinforcing hegemonic beauty ideals. For instance, television programs like *The Swan* utilize empowerment narratives to justify plastic surgery, thereby reinforcing patriarchal notions of female beauty (Marwick, 2010). These findings illustrate how feminist values can be co-opted by marketing strategies, turning them into commodities that dilute the fight for gender equality.

Bordo (1993) analyzes the representation of women's bodies in media, arguing that they are often used as symbols of social control and success within rigid beauty standards. Femvertising frequently falls into this pattern, portraying women as empowered only when they conform to certain aesthetic ideals.

Research by Putri (2021) and Kahf (2024) highlights how mass media frequently depict women through limited stereotypes. While femvertising has expanded portrayals of women by emphasizing strength, courage, and independence, these narratives remain constrained within conventional norms. The lack of diverse representations, particularly of women from marginalized groups, underscores the challenges femvertising faces in achieving genuine inclusivity (Putri, 2021).

Although previous studies have explored the impact of femvertising on gender representation in media, gaps remain in understanding how different audiences interpret these campaigns. Banet-Weiser (2012) notes that much research focuses on textual analysis of advertisements without considering audience reception. Additionally, further exploration is needed on the role of femvertising in fostering substantial social change rather than serving as a temporary marketing tool.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach using critical discourse analysis (CDA) to explore how feminist values are constructed, represented, and commodified in femvertising strategies within contemporary advertisements. CDA allows researchers to analyze the relationship between text, social context, and underlying power structures that shape the discourse of feminism in media (Fairclough, 1995). This approach aligns with the study's objective of examining not only visual and verbal representations but also the ideological forces influencing femvertising.

The study employs a case study method by analyzing global advertising campaigns such as *Like a Girl* by Always, *This Girl Can* by Sport England, and *Real Beauty* by Dove. The analysis includes visual and verbal texts from advertisements, their social and cultural contexts, and audience responses from secondary data sources such as social media discussions.

Data collection follows two primary methods: documentation and literature review. Advertisement materials are sourced from television, print, and digital platforms, selected based on their popularity, campaign longevity, and feminist themes. Additionally, academic literature and industry reports support the analysis, incorporating studies by Banet-Weiser (2012), Gill (2007), and Suwastini (2013).

Data analysis follows Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse framework, which consists of three stages: description, interpretation, and explanation. Triangulation is applied by combining textual analysis, academic literature, and audience reception data to ensure validity and reliability. Peer review discussions with gender and media studies experts further enhance theoretical robustness.

Results And Discussion

The Paradox of Femvertising: Empowerment or Commodification?

Femvertising has introduced innovative portrayals of women in mass media, yet it remains entangled in traditional stereotypes. The *Like a Girl* campaign by Always successfully transformed a phrase with historically negative connotations into a message of empowerment. Through emotional storytelling, this campaign has encouraged young audiences to redefine what it means to "act like a girl" in terms of strength and competence. However, upon deeper analysis, it becomes evident that many femvertising campaigns, despite their progressive facade, still operate within the logic of capitalist consumerism.

A critical example is the *Real Beauty* campaign by Dove, which outwardly promotes body positivity and the celebration of diverse beauty. However, the campaign continues to emphasize physical appearance as a defining characteristic of female worth. While the advertisements claim to challenge conventional beauty standards, they simultaneously reinforce the idea that a woman's self-esteem remains tied to her looks. This contradiction highlights the fundamental issue within femvertising: feminist messaging is often subordinated to commercial interests, prioritizing brand identity over genuine social transformation.

The Commodification of Feminism in Advertising

One of the most significant findings of this study is the commodification of feminism within femvertising. By leveraging feminist values for branding, companies create an emotional connection with consumers, yet they rarely contribute to structural changes that advance gender equality. Instead, femvertising tends to adopt neoliberal ideals, framing empowerment as an individual pursuit rather than a collective struggle for systemic change. This is particularly evident in beauty and fashion advertisements that encourage women to “take control” of their appearance through consumption, rather than addressing broader societal issues such as wage gaps, reproductive rights, or workplace discrimination.

The case of *This Girl Can* by Sport England illustrates this dynamic. The campaign successfully motivated women to engage in sports and physical activities without enforcing rigid beauty standards. However, like many femvertising campaigns, it focuses on self-empowerment through personal effort, ignoring socio-economic and cultural barriers that limit women’s access to such opportunities. This aligns with Gill’s (2007) argument that femvertising often simplifies feminist struggles, reducing them to matters of personal choice rather than structural change.

Femvertising and the Reinforcement of Beauty Norms

While femvertising has contributed to more diverse representations of women, it still falls short in breaking away from beauty-centric narratives. Many advertisements present empowerment as something that can be purchased—whether through beauty products, clothing, or fitness programs. Even campaigns that claim to celebrate natural beauty, such as Dove’s *Real Beauty*, still operate within conventional beauty frameworks, subtly suggesting that self-worth is inseparable from appearance.

Furthermore, inclusivity remains a persistent issue. Many femvertising campaigns predominantly feature women who conform to Western beauty ideals—typically young, slim, and able-bodied. The representation of women from diverse racial, socio-economic, and gender identity backgrounds is still lacking. This selective inclusivity reveals the limitations of femvertising in truly reshaping gender norms.

Another critical aspect is how men and non-binary individuals are positioned in femvertising narratives. While these campaigns focus on women’s empowerment, they often fail to address the role of men in gender equality. Moreover, non-binary and gender-nonconforming individuals remain largely invisible in mainstream femvertising, reflecting a gap in the industry’s commitment to genuine inclusivity.

Conclusion

This study highlights the dual nature of femvertising as both an instrument of empowerment and a tool of capitalist commodification. On the one hand, femvertising has expanded the representation of women in media, promoting narratives of strength, independence, and confidence. Campaigns such as *Like a Girl* and *This Girl Can* have successfully challenged outdated stereotypes and encouraged discussions on gender

equality. On the other hand, femvertising remains constrained by commercial interests, often reducing feminism to a branding strategy rather than a movement for systemic change.

The commodification of feminism in advertising underscores the limitations of femvertising as a vehicle for real gender progress. While these campaigns raise awareness about gender issues, they frequently fail to address structural barriers that prevent meaningful change. Moreover, the persistent focus on beauty and consumption reinforces traditional gender norms rather than dismantling them.

To maximize its potential as a force for positive change, femvertising must go beyond surface-level empowerment and embrace a more inclusive and transformative approach. This includes diversifying representations to include women from all backgrounds, addressing broader societal issues beyond individual empowerment, and ensuring that feminist narratives are not merely aestheticized but lead to real-world action.

Future research should explore audience reception to femvertising across different cultural contexts, examining how diverse groups interpret and respond to these campaigns. Additionally, studies should investigate how companies can integrate feminist values into their corporate practices, ensuring that their advocacy for gender equality extends beyond marketing strategies.

Ultimately, while femvertising has made strides in reshaping media representations of women, its effectiveness as an agent of change will depend on its ability to transcend commodification and contribute to genuine social progress.

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