YOU ACT LKE A GIRL: AN EXAMINATION OF CONSUMER PERCEPTIONS OF FEMVERTISING

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ABSTRACT

The amount companies invest in social causes has grown extraordinarily in recent decades. One social cause that has gained momentum with companies is "femvertising"—the celebration of women empowerment through advertisements. Examples include Dove's "real beauty" campaign and the "like a girl" challenge by Always.

High levels of perceived company-cause fit are known to enhance consumer attitude. In the case of femvertising, however, such a link is not always evident. Companies as diverse as Verizon, Dodge, and Under Armour have released commercials encouraging women to acquire or proudly display traditionally masculine traits, such as athleticism, ambition, decisiveness, and courage. Most femvertising campaigns also reference feminine traits, including a focus on appearance and nurturing and the construction of the ideal androgynous woman: pretty, yet strong; decisive, yet gentle. While androgynous-woman scripts have been used in advertising as early as the 1970s and 1980s, this is the first time large corporations have taken an essentially activist (feminist) stance.

This exploratory study investigates the effects of femvertising on consumer attitude and purchase intention based on company-cause fit. Through focus groups, it examines the knowledge and attitudes of men and women toward femvertising and companies that engage in it. The results offer both theoretical implications for CRM scholars and practical ones for corporations and advertisers considering gender welfare causes within a marketing strategy.

Keywords: Femvertising, CRM, gender, corporate social responsibility, company-cause fit

INTRODUCTION

In today's ever-competitive business environment, the support of social causes by companies has experienced extraordinary growth during the past two decades. This evolution is expected as a result of the positive outcomes corporations experience in their cause-related marketing (CRM) initiatives (Brown & Dacin, 1997; Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). CRM is a corporate social responsibility (CSR) strategy aimed to persuade consumers to engage in prosocial behaviors in areas such as environmental efforts, community involvement, and public and gender welfare (Kotler & Zaltman, 1971).

One CRM cause that has recently regained momentum but has not been examined extensively is the promoting and advocating of woman empowerment. For almost a century now, companies have occasionally used advertising to promote and celebrate women. The first widely known

instance is the 1929 Torches of Freedom march staged by Edward Bernays. To promote smoking among women, he hired 10 women to publicly light cigarettes at the Easter Sunday Parade (Gladwell, 1998). Bernays, who was paid to promote the products of the American Tobacco Company, was astute enough to realize that women were an untapped consumer base. A similar approach was used by Philip Morris several decades later in its ads containing messages such as "We make Virginia Slims especially for women because they are biologically superior to men" and "There's a little Eve in every woman" (Shirk, 2014).

Currently known as "femvertising," this revamped approach to advertising features storylines of women empowerment and has proven to have positive influences on sales (Castillo, 2014). Dan (2016) reports that, of the women polled in a recent industry survey, 51% said they liked femvertising messages and 52% had purchased a brand's product specifically because of the positive portrayal of women in the brand's advertising. One of the best-known examples of femvertising is Dove's 2004 "real beauty" campaign designed to broaden the definition of true beauty for women (Molitor, 2008). The original campaign featured non-models wearing only their underwear publicizing Dove products. The idea behind the campaign was to show that women of all shapes and sizes should feel comfortable in their own skin. This approach was followed by a 2013 campaign to boost women's self-esteem through a video where a sketch artist drew sketches of women based on how they described themselves and compared those sketches to ones based on how others described the women. The results showed that the sketches based on the description from others were more flattering than the ones based on how the women described themselves; showing that the women are more beautiful than what they thought. Within a month of its release, the sketches video became "the most viral ad video of all time" (Stampler, 2013). In 2014, in the same vein, Always launched its "like a girl" campaign to provide a positive message that challenges what it means to be "like a girl."

These pro-women, female-empowerment CRM campaigns are distinctive because they attempt to build a relationship with a specific consumer base (females) through depictions of "real" and "ordinary" girls by highlighting their unique and personal experiences.

Because femvertising messages promote gender equality, definitionally speaking and in principle, they can be considered feminist. However, they also explicitly encourage consumption of advertised products, which contradicts feminist scholars' belief that women's empowerment is not simply a matter of money and purchasing choices, but also of the existence and enforcement of social policies and practices (Ramazanoglu, 1989). Thus, femvertising messages contain an inherent conflict between its function as carriers of individual consumption and feminism's intrinsically political and social causes. Could this intrinsic conflict undermine the messages' persuasiveness?

Only limited research has been done on the effectiveness of these campaigns and the degree to which its success depends on the company's business and its specific product lines. Little is also known about what topics evoke the most public attention or dialogue. Scholars believe that consumers will have a more positive reaction to a company's CRM campaign if the CRM issue aligns with the company's mission or business model (Menon & Kenon, 2003). The fit between company and cause is important because it influences how much thought people put into their relationship with a brand, the specific types of thoughts generated, and consumers' evaluation of

both the company and its chosen social cause (Becker-Olsen, Cudmore, & Hill, 2006). Research has shown that high levels of perceived company-cause fit enhance consumer attitudes toward the company because consumers view the company's actions as appropriate (Aaker, 1990; Keller & Aaker, 1992; Till & Busler, 2000).

Among companies that have implemented advertising campaigns centered on women empowerment, the level of fit between company and cause has varied. On the surface, at least, brands that target mostly women, such as Dove, Always, and Pantene, have a somewhat natural fit with such campaigns because their female customers presumably would like to feel more accepted and comfortable in the social world they inhabit. However, companies associated with gender-neutral products (used by both men and women), such as Verizon, Dodge, Sears, Nike, Under Armour, and even Sport England (a public body in the United Kingdom) have also launched campaigns depicting and endorsing women empowerment. By launching these campaigns, do gender-neutral companies run the risk of alienating male customers or being perceived insincere by audiences across gender lines? In attempting to answer these questions, this exploratory study aims to investigate femvertising messages' effect, if any, on purchase intentions and consumer attitudes toward both the brand and feminism as a social cause. The main potential moderating variable that will be considered is company-cause fit.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To pose specific research questions, we begin by examining the literature on (a) corporate social responsibility, including cause-related marketing and company-cause fit; and (b) the reception of women-empowerment advertising messages, including through the perspective of framing social reality (Goffman, 1974).

Corporate Social Responsibility

CSR is the socially or ecologically activity of a company that ultimately benefits society. It is defined as a company's "obligation to take action to protect and improve both the welfare of society as a whole and the interest of organizations" (Davis & Blomstrom, 1975, p. 6). Company involvement in social causes began in the form of early philanthropic efforts, voluntarily undertaken by public-spirited corporations (Strop & Neubert, 1987). However, the motivations varied. Keim (1978) points out that some corporate philanthropic efforts have aimed to improve profits. Others have been done for purely altruistic reasons. For decades, corporate philanthropy was limited by law to donations justifiable as being in the direct interest of stockholders (Morris & Biederman, 1985). In other words, CSR was only a business strategy to maximize returns to shareholders (Friedman, 1970). However, more recently, companies' support of social causes has begun to reflect an "enlightened self-interest" (Stroup & Neubert, 1987), viewing social responsibility as a path to gaining a competitive advantage and investment to improve long-term organizational performance. Within this perspective, CSR is seen as part of a proactive social response articulating a company's continuing role in a dynamic social system (McGee, 1998; Brown & Dacin, 1997).

Socially responsible initiatives can take many forms. These include: (a) philanthropy (i.e., corporate donations); (b) corporate social marketing (CSM), which comprises a company's

initiatives that aim to persuade people in order to engage in socially beneficial behaviors (Bloom, Hussein, & Szykman, 1997); and (c) cause-related marketing (CRM), defined as the alignment of corporate philanthropy and business interest (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). CRM, which is the most commonly studied form of CSR (Peloza & Shang, 2011) and also the one most relevant to this study, is reviewed in detail in the following subsection.

Cause-related marketing. CRM's objective is to improve a company's performance while helping worthy causes. Typically, it involves a company promising to donate money to a social cause or to a nonprofit organization when a consumer purchases its products or services (Nan & Heo, 2007). Although companies routinely tie CRM efforts with sale-promotional tactics (i.e., discounts and refunds), this is not the defining characteristic of this practice. Rather, "the distinctive feature of CRM is the firm's contribution to a designated cause being linked to customers engaging in revenue-producing transactions with the firm" (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988, p. 60).

Companies have long attempted to enhance their corporate image as well as consumer attitudes toward their brands through CRM, which can influence consumer perceptions of the company and even their willingness to purchase its products. Smith and Alcorn (1991) found that 56% of consumers think it is important for a company to contribute to a charitable cause. Customers tend to view CRM efforts as positive (Webb & Mohr, 1998), assuming they understand the factors behind the company's social investment. What is communicated about a company's socially responsible behavior can impact consumers' support for a company. For example, when a CRM message showcases an obvious fit between the brand/company and its chosen social cause, consumer attitudes toward the brand are more favorable, but this positive effect is evident only among customers with high-brand consciousness (Nan & Heo, 2007). High-brand consciousness is commonly defined as the trait that characterizes a consumer oriented in buying well-known branded products (Shim & Gehrt, 1996). In other words, the more someone is brand-conscious, the more that brand is seen as a reflection of one's own personality.

Company-cause fit. In highlighting a specific service or product, a company must pay close attention to its messages, which can impact consumers' understanding of the content and the ways they associate it with the company itself. One approach is to emphasize an appropriate topic, one of which is logically tied to a company's mission or values (Chandler & Werther, 2014). Company-cause fit is the link between a company's brand or product and the cause it supports (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). Company-cause fit "is important because it influences: (1) how much thought people give to a relationship (e.g., increased elaboration about the firm, the social initiative, and/or the relationship itself when perceived inconsistencies with prior expectations and information, (2) the specific types of thoughts generated, and (3) evaluations of the two objects" (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006, p. 47).

Company-cause fit can be accomplished in different ways. For example, fit can exist if the company's consumer base overlaps with the target audience supporting a specific social cause (Nan & Heo, 2007). Fit can also be high if a company and a social cause share similar values (e.g., the American Red Cross and first-aid products from Johnson & Johnson). The enhancement in consumer attitude toward the company resulting from a good company-cause fit (Menon & Kahn, 2003) likely reflects public perceptions of the company's motives in undertaking a social cause (Elving, 2013; Kim & Lee, 2012).

These perceptions have been explained by attribution theory (Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1967, 1972), which posits that people draw conclusions based on how they perceive a subject's motives. Forehand and Grier (2003), when examining the attribution theory in marketing research, found that consumers attribute two primary types of motives to companies: public-serving (benefitting elements external to the company) and company-serving (benefiting the company itself). Consumers will view a company's actions as public-serving if the potential benefit for the company is not salient, but will react negatively if they perceive company actions as company-serving. In the context of CSR, the level of sincerity perceived by consumers plays an important role in a program's success (Kim, 2011). But what is likely to be perceived as sincere? Forehand and Grier (2003) found that consumers perceive a company's motives to be sincere when the social cause highlighted in corporate messaging is closely related to the company's business. Further, Nan and Heo (2007) discovered that consumers favored a company when a company's social responsible efforts were congruent with the company's mission. What does this mean for messages that endorse women's empowerment? This question is the subject of the following section.

(Re)Constructing Gender in Ads

Berger and Luckmann's theory of social construction of reality (1966) posits that people should be viewed as social actors who are constantly performing on a socioculturally constructed stage. Their performances are shaped by their mental images of reality and of each other. These images stem from cultural narratives that may be uniquely determined by one's geographic and chronological location. However, they are also unified across space and time by a tendency to disadvantage less powerful groups, including women and racial or religious minorities. These social "constructions" of reality are in constant interplay with mediated narratives, by being not only reflected in mediated content, but also shaped and reinforced by it.

Scripted gender communication was not systematically analyzed until the 1970s. Erving Goffman's (1979) book *Gender Advertisements* was one of the first to offer an elaborate analysis of men's and women's idealized social performances, arguing that advertisements serve to translate confusing social occurrences and expectations into comprehensible and obvious messages. Arguing that advertisements often showcase gendered "celebrations … performed either by persons acting to one another or acting in concert before a congregation" (p. 1), Goffman enumerated and pointed to the visual and textual cues that routinely depict women as childlike, submissive, daydreamers, and needing instruction from men.

Although comprehensive, Goffman's categorizations may not have included the full range of variations in ads depicting women. There were also plenty of "women empowerment" ads in the 1970s, but Gornick (1979) argues that they failed to be perceived as credible or realistic by the public. She writes:

> One has to only look at an advertisement showing a woman carrying an attache case, or reading '*The Wall Street Journal*', or wearing a white coat in a laboratory setting—the words "For the woman with a mind of her own" scrawled across the ad—and then consult one's own instinctive incredulity, to know the truth … There comes suddenly to mind the memory of old-time vaudevillians in black-face—powerless people "playing" even more

powerless people—and it occurs that these images in advertising of women playing at being serious people are a true mock-up of life… (p. ix)

To recognize the importance of how women are depicted in ads, we must first establish that these portrayals have social implications beyond a company's bottom line. Advertisements are considered one example of mediated representations of reality, which have been shown to influence audiences' mental images (Scheufele, 1999). But if that is the case, why would images of supposedly empowered women fail to change people's existing mental images, as Gornick (1979) suggests in the above quote?

Theoretically speaking, portraying women as men-like citizen-consumers is indeed not enough to end misogyny or change the gendered status quo. In part, this is because attitudes (a term used here as roughly synonymous with mental images) are extremely difficult to change. Presenting evidence that contradicts one's beliefs about a product or an issue is not likely to result in an immediate (or any) attitude change (O'Keefe, 2015). In some cases, as Gawronski and Strack (2004) report, the cognitive dissonance that arises from the pondering of arguments that contradict one's own beliefs may change explicit attitudes (i.e.,"I believe men and women should be equal") but not implicit attitudes ("I spontaneously and unconsciously associate women with the home and men with the office.")

Consumer reception of feminist ads. Femvertising messages have long lacked credibility not simply because they represent staged performances of women's power. Because few companies' have a business or a mission explicitly related to gender equality (used in this paper as synonymous with feminism), corporate social efforts related to women's empowerment have been and continue to be viewed as insincere by many. Goldman, Heath, and Smith (1991) referred to the trend as "commodity feminism," and Baxter (2015) labels the latest wave of women-empowerment advertisements "faux activism." Scholars have observed a long history of feminist messages being appropriated for marketing purposes.

This appropriation is especially evident in the marketing of beauty products, as illustrated by an analysis of *Seventeen* ads with feminist subtext over four decades (Budgeon & Currie, 1995) and a study of women's magazines ads explicitly supporting the goals of feminism's Second Wave (Busby & Leichty, 1993). In the same vein, Goffman's (1979) collection of gendered advertisements include one for Bulova featuring a male and a female wrist, both adorned with expensive watches, with the message "Equal Pay. Equal Time" (p. 29).

The use of women's empowerment messages to sell merchandise and encourage consumption continues in the 21st century, thanks to the neoliberal ideology of the consumer-citizen (Mol, 2009). For example, Nickelodeon's productions forge an implicit connection between consumer brands and individual (feminist) empowerment through depictions of strong girls who are also avid consumers (Banet-Weiser, 2004). Consumption of specific products—including elite and mostly unaffordable items designed by self-identified feminist designers like Prada and Diane von Furstenberg—has frequently been cast as a path to empowerment, in both ads and news articles (Mendes, 2011; Sternadori & Hagseth, 2014). Such "'feminist' purchases are simply forms of consumer self-therapy in a modern political climate of systemic gender discrimination," (Marcus Reker, 2016, p. 2).

Some femvertising messages appear to have had success in targeting at least some consumers. After all, the perceived sincerity of women's empowerment messages from corporations depends on consumers' definition of women's empowerment. Does a woman's power lie in her youthful good looks? Or does her empowerment lie in gaining actual political and financial power, comparable to that of men? And, most importantly, is women's empowerment about personal gain and individual progression, or is it about sweeping changes to the gendered status quo?

It would be in the interest of most companies producing inexpensive beauty products for women (i.e., mainstream cosmetic brands) to embrace the former and limited view of women's empowerment. It would also make sense for companies producing inexpensive hygiene products for the female body to focus on women's physical power and positive body image (i.e., Dove and Always). Little wonder, then, that Pantene's "not sorry" campaign, which had nothing to do with women's body image, was perceived by consumers less positively than Dove's "real beauty" and Always's "like a girl" campaigns.

What complicates the literature on how consumers perceive femvertising is the fact that these messages represent a radical departure from the typical representation of women in advertising as mere objects and luxurious items of pleasure for men (Sirr, 2015). The stark contrast between the usual objectifying messages and the more empowering ones may explain femvertising's positive influences on sales mentioned earlier. A 2014 SheKnows survey indicated that polled women tended to remember pro-women ad campaigns compared to ads that do not feature women-empowerment themes; 92% were aware of at least one campaign that portrays women positively (Castillo, 2014). Not only individual product sales but companies themselves have also benefited from femvertisements. After Dove's initial Real Beauty campaign, its parent company Unilever reported a 3% overall growth in sales.

Many have attributed the success of femvertising to its focus on the female consumer. This strategic rationale has led other companies, such as Google, Chevrolet, Verizon, and Procter & Gamble to champion women's empowerment in marketing campaigns targeting female consumers (Davidson, 2014). Others suggest it is the grassroots nature of social media that helps boost the spread of corporate messages that take an activist stance. For example, according to Wood (2014), "advertising often reflects the concerns, anxieties, dreams and aspirations of society. Right now in society, social media is laying bare the extent of hidden misogyny that affects women all round the world" (para. 7).

Others believe that femvertising's success lies in the product that is being sold. Although ads championing women may positively impact a company's bottom line in the short term, sustained growth is possible only by creating products and services espousing the principles of gender equality, which may be easier for companies that make female-centered rather than male-centered or gender-neutral products (Davidson, 2015).

Based on the literature reviewed so far here, the following research questions emerged:

> RQ1: How do young adults verbalize their evaluations of femvertising messages?

RQ2: How do young adults' self-reported perceptions of fit between the message and the advertised product affect their evaluations of femvertising commercials?

RQ3: What are young adults' perceptions of the effectiveness of femvertising messages in changing their attitudes toward the advertised product and/or brand?

RQ4: What are young adults' perceptions of the effectiveness of femvertising messages in changing their attitudes toward women, women's empowerment, and gender equality?

METHOD

Because this study's aim is to gauge perception and evaluation of femvertising rather than to predict behavior as a result of exposure to femvertising messages, qualitative inquiry appeared to be the most appropriate approach (McCracken, 1988). We chose to seek answers to the research questions through focus groups because they provide significant flexibility in question design and follow-up, and allow participants to clarify their thoughts and opinions (Stewart, Sharndasani, & Rook, 2006; Wimmer & Dominick, 2010).

Discovering and understanding the meaning of participants' positions regarding a particular subject is imperative in exploratory research. Specifically, focus groups "properly seeks answers to questions by examining various social settings and the individuals who inhabit these settings" (Berg, 2009, p. 8). Furthermore, focus groups can stimulate thinking in an attempt to generate or operationalize second-degree constructs and scientific hypotheses (Calder, 1977). This expected result was something we considered to be useful in a future survey on consumers' perceptions of femvertising messages, for which this exploratory study is intended to serve as a stepping stone.

Participants and Procedure

Three focus-group discussions, with seven to 10 participants each, were conducted in search of reliable result patterns (Wimmer & Dominick, 2010). It is recommended that focus groups should be between six and 12 participants as a group this size allows for simultaneous discussion without losing focus and control (Wimmer & Dominick, 2010). Two focus groups consisted of all female participants, and one was made up of all male participants. The choice to employ gender-homogenous groups intended to increase the comfort levels of participants in discussing a subject that has some potential to elicit negative comments about members of the opposite sex. Research has shown that focus-group participants who are surrounded by others who are similar to them are more likely to share their opinions openly (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). The use of two female-only groups and one male-only group reflected our expectations that femvertising messages, which often target female consumers, are likely to elicit more reflection and personal reactions from women.

The university's Institutional Review Board approved the study's protocol, data collection procedure, and participant selection before data collection began. The research participants ($N = 25$, of whom 17 were female) were recruited through the SONA research participation system from a population of undergraduate students enrolled at a large university in the U.S. Southwest. Participants' age ranged from 18 to 23 years. The recruitment script for each group included the

scheduled date and time as well as whether the focus group was for men or women only. Upon signing up, participants saw an information sheet explaining the study's purpose, benefits, and risks.

The focus groups were held at a university facility in the afternoon, and lasted approximately 60 minutes each. One female moderator managed the discussion during the female-only focus groups, and one male moderator managed the discussion during the male-only focus group. The choice to have moderators of the same sex as the participants reflected previous research indicating that this arrangement typically leads to more open and honest conversation (Morgan, 1996). Participants received extra credit and refreshments for participation. Each group was videotaped, and the discussions were transcribed verbatim.

Each focus group began with participants picking a seat around a conference room table. To keep confidentiality, as each participant entered the room, he or she was assigned a number. This number is what was used to identify the participant. Once all participants were in their seats, the moderator welcomed them and explained the purpose of the study. As the focus groups were semi-structured, the moderator encouraged participants to build off of, respond to, or question the responses of others in the discussion.

During each focus group, participants watched advertisements utilizing the femvertising strategy. Specifically, the following commercials were shown: Always' "like a girl," Ram Trucks' "courage inside," and Verizon's "inspire her mind." These commercials were chosen due to the differences in company-cause fit, style, and message. Following the showing of these ads, participants were asked what their attitudes/opinions were toward each of the ads and whether they believed the use of female-empowerment messaging was appropriate and effective in each specific case. In addition to questions centered on the commercials, the moderators also asked questions about what the participants like in ads in general, their thoughts on feminism, messaging, and willingness to buy products highlighted in ads.

Transcripts were coded in accordance with the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Statements were first coded for subject matter; then re-coded as needed to identify new concepts. The coded statements represented the range of possible responses within conceptual themes. These themes were later reviewed and reduced through the narrowing and combining of concepts (Glaser, 1965).

FINDINGS

The findings of this study are summarized in Table 1. They are also outlined in more detailed in the subsections that follow.

Table 1. Summary of Findings

Research Question	Findings in Female Focus Groups	Findings in Male Focus Groups
RQ1: Evaluations of femvertising messages	Inspiring to some participants; patronizing and contrived to others; third-person effect; preference for "multidimensional" representations	Perceived as trendy; trying to start a "movement"; third-person effect; preference for "multidimensional" representations
RQ2: Effects of perceived company-cause fit on evaluation	Clear preference for fit; message must coalesce with the company's already proven style and image	Clear preference for fit; message must coalesce with the company's already proven style and image
RQ3: Perceived effectiveness of femvertising in changing attitudes toward product/ brand	Increased positive attitude toward some brands; no purchase intent for self; third-person effect	No reported change; not applicable for some gender-specific products
RQ4: Perceived effectiveness of femvertising in changing attitudes toward women's empowerment	Across-gender third-person effect (expectations of change in how men treat women); increased awareness of stereotypes	Increased concern for women among participants with younger sisters

Perception of Femvertising Messages

The first research question asked how young adults perceive femvertising messages. Overall, participants were split on how they felt about a company's use of pro-social messaging. Some participants loved the women-empowerment message, but did not necessarily show support for the product or the company itself. For example, one female participant believed the women-empowerment commercials that were shown were encouraging and impactful: "The Always commercial made me more aware of how easily we accept everything and just go with it. The RAM commercial is more encouraging to do something and be different."

Some participants believed that the impact of the commercials lay within others. One female participant stated that the "like a girl" commercial would have a strong impact on her parents: "I think if my parents saw it, it would be inspiring for them to encourage their little ones to be who they are and to run as fast as they could, to hit hard."

Both male and female participants praised messages that presented women as multidimensional beings (i.e. the RAM truck commercial, which showed diverse identities—athlete, mother, ballerina). "It shows different types of girls; like, if you are just a dancer or just a hunter, it reaches everyone, all the different types of girls," said an 18-year-old woman. By contrast, several participants said they disliked messages with limiting presentations of women, in which the presence of one trait or identity was depicted as inhibiting another trait or identity. For example, the Verizon commercial showing a girl encouraged to look pretty and discouraged from

exploration and discovery implies that the two identities are incompatible. Here is how a 20-year-old female participant explained her dislike of this approach:

> Yeah, like it emphasized that she wore nail polish and put down the drill. Like, as she got older and older she was seen doing more girly things; like, she was being more restricted. Okay, why? I know that was the whole point of the ad, but it doesn't have to happen that way.

Similarly, a 22-year-old male said the Verizon commercial failed to refute stereotypes about girls and women:

> They made it seem like she just was okay to doll herself up; like, you can choose to be sort of glamorous, or you can go and do the education and science route. They could have made it easily into one, but they made it that she had to choose or that her parents led up that decision at first, splitting between the glamorous and the science.

Other participants thought some of the femvertising messages were contrived, but not in the direction that we had assumed to be the most logical (i.e., the commonplace use of feel-good statements to sell things). For instance, most of the male participants saw femvertising as a veiled attempt to start a movement—rather than the much more likely possibility that companies are engaging in such advertising to solidify their brands and thus increase their sales and profits. For instance, a 20-year-old male participant, after seeing the Always "like a girl" campaign, said: "I think like every brand is doing it, but this one is trying to make it a movement. It is trying to open it much more and push things through much deeper and serious."

Several participants also brought up the notion of fab-feminism, referring to a popular-culture trend promoting the idea that "anyone can be a feminist" (Gambles, 2016) and the mainstreaming of feminist pride, often expressed through consumerism (FabulouslyFeminist, 2013). These participants stated that companies are only supporting women empowerment because other companies are doing it. They saw it more as a trend than a genuine socially responsible action. To capture this thought process, a 22-year-old male participant said: "It seems as if every brand has to be socially aware besides just what they are selling. So I do feel like it gets saturated a lot because you see it from all sorts of things, and they all have good messages, but there are so many of them."

The majority of participants saw some positives in the women-empowerment messages, even if they deemed the delivery awkward or ineffective. However, some dissenters made valid points. One female respondent thought the use of femvertising messages was doing more harm to women than good. Specifically, she felt that these messages patronize women and reestablish existing stereotypes: "I don't feel like you have to single out a group to be, like, you have to be this way to achieve feeling comfortable in your own skin." A 19-year-old male participant also noted that femvertising messages almost seem to reinforce what they are trying to refute: "You never see self-confidence commercials geared toward males. With Dove, it is usually always females trying to gain self-confidence." Indeed, it is not a secret that men also suffer from plenty of self-doubts.

Fit between Message and Product

The second research question explored participants' perceptions of company-cause fit, asking how their self-reported perceptions of the fit between the message and the advertised product affected their evaluations of femvertising commercials. The majority of participants believed the messages fit the advertised products. As previously mentioned, three commercials that utilized the femvertising strategy were shown to the participants. The first one, Always' "like a girl" commercial, was universally perceived to have strong company-cause fit. One 18-year-old female participant captured this perception by saying, "I thought that was a great way to tie what the girl can do with what their product can offer you." Male participants agreed with this sentiment. A 19-year-old male participant stated, "To me, it is mostly about keeping that message with your company and having that company maintain where it is. That is the whole purpose of this type of campaign."

The other two commercials featured a less obvious fit between message and product. The RAM truck commercial featured only women in an attempt to portray the trucks' ruggedness. In response to the RAM commercial, the consensus was that because the style and feel of the commercial matched the brand, the message itself fit perfectly. A 19-year-old male stated, "RAM trucks, they are built tough, so they are telling girls to be tough. Like they are doing a service by sticking up with this issue, but they are also coming at it with a marketing perspective."

The Verizon commercial took another approach, showing that girls, at a young age, may be into technology, but it is how they are treated by their parents and loved ones through their childhood and teenage years that may dissuade them from pursuing careers in engineering, science, and technology. Regarding Verizon's approach, most participants felt that the style of the commercial detracted from the message and the product. Most participants were confused as to how this commercial was empowering women and how it related to the company. Unlike in the Always and RAM commercials, in Verizon's message, neither the company nor the product was heavily featured. This ommission resulted in a confusing commercial, according to our participants.

Overall, most participants believed femvertising was a wise choice for the companies whose products were advertised unless the commercials failed to establish an immediate and clear connection between the cause and the brand. For companies that make products exclusively for women (i.e., Always), the fit is obvious, making this approach crucial if a company wants its commercials to stand out.

 On the other hand, for companies catering to male or unisex audiences but trying to branch out, such as RAM and Verizon, the choice to use a women-empowerment strategy must coalesce with the company's already proven style and image, thus reaching a new audience without alienating their primary consumer base. Participants understood that straying too far from a company's established style has the potential to hurt the brand. Articulating the risks inherent in any perceived contrast between company and message, one 18-year-old female participant stated:

> Dove and Always are well-established brands in the female community. So you take those, and they have more reason to go and do a lot of different things that empower women.

RAM is trying to advertise to a different audience. Not many women go and buy trucks. So RAM is going out and trying to target females.

Femvertising and Attitude Change

The third and fourth research questions asked how participants perceived and self-reported the effect of femvertising messages on their attitudes toward the advertised product and women's empowerment. Most participants claimed that the advertisements made them think but that their overall attitude toward women and the product or company did not change as a result of their exposure to femvertising messages.

One major limitation appears to be the average commercial's length. To some participants, sparking full attitude change is impossible to happen in seconds. A 20-year-old male participant captured this sentiment: "For a commercial, you are just trying to grab like 10 seconds of someone's attention. I am not jumping into the commercial thinking I need to tackle these social issues. I am just watching TV."

Attitudes toward women. A commercial may be a good vehicle for certain simple pro-social messages (i.e., don't drink and drive), but less so for complex ones, which may require an extensive and elaborative thought process. Furthermore, many of our participants seemed to deny and underestimate the potential effects of such messages on themselves. The so-called third-person effect (Davison, 1983) emerged over and over again. Participants stated that although their attitude did not change when exposed to these messages, they understood and believed others would experience a change in attitude.

Regardless of what may represent a lack of awareness of the effects of advertising, full attitude change may not be possible to accomplish with a single exposure to one commercial. In that sense, making consumers at the very least aware of the common and limiting stereotypes that tend to define women may ultimately be the most feasible goal of such pro-social messages. A statement by a 20-year-old male illustrated this point: "It makes me more aware and maybe reminds me of the commercial if I see it, but I don't think I would change. I am more aware of it, though."

An interesting finding was that some of the female participants assumed the advertisements would encourage men to change their attitudes toward women. Specifically, they believed (or possibly hoped) that ads celebrating women's empowerment would make men respect women more. For example, after watching the Always commercial, one female participant said: "I think it may lead to boys giving more respect to girls. Not necessarily the brand itself, but you know, not going to school making fun of girls or being a bully."

It is difficult to know whether this is indeed the case. In the male focus group, only participants who had younger sisters self-reported that femvertising messages affected their attitudes. They admitted to reflecting on how they treated their sisters and considered possible changes in their attitudes and actions as a way to show more respect for the obstacles their sisters may face in life. This concern for younger sisters as a motivator to consider the plight of women is consistent with a large body research showing that fathers of daughters are more likely to hold feminist beliefs

(Glynn & Sen, 2015). The importance of empathy stemming from personal experiences was illustrated in this statement by a 22-year-old male participant:

> I know saying you run like a girl is an insult. It's the stupidest thing I have ever heard in my life. It is more like seeing how it affects them … not that I said it but how it affects them will affect what I say.

Attitudes toward brands and products. Another element in understanding attitude change, specifically as a precursor to purchase intent, was the level of commitment participants had to a particular product or their need for information about the product. Femvertising messages did not elicit any self-reported purchase intent in any of the participants, although one woman said: "If I was a mom, I might buy [the product] for my daughter, but I wouldn't necessarily change how I was using it."

In the case of the Verizon commercial, several participants indicated that they did not even realize what the commercial was promoting until they saw the company's logo in the last frame. The lack of brand or product information throughout the narrative of the girl who grows up to choose lip gloss over participation in the science fair was considered confusing and obviously not conducive to any purchase intent.

There was also a concern that the pro-social cause may overshadow the basic information a company owes its customers, as expressed by one 20-year-old female participant during a discussion of the Always commercial:

> I mean I think you will be more likely to support the cause … but you won't go out and buy more tampons because you saw that commercial. Like, it overshadows their product. Like, the PSA of it is amazing, very moving, but it overshadows that it was made by them.

Participants who did not use or buy a product that was highlighted in a specific women-empowerment ad could appreciate the message but were indifferent to the entire commercial because the product was not for them. A 20-year-old female, referencing Dove, said the message gives her greater appreciation for Dove, but she wouldn't change her personal preferences just to support the company:

> [The ads] could make me like Dove as a brand more, but if I don't have anything to do with Dove, I am not going to buy their product more. I could have more respect for Dove after that ad—like, they are doing something good; they are getting the message out. But, if I don't need soap or if I have enough soap, I am not going to buy Dove. Or if I have soap that I really like, I am not going to switch.

DISCUSSION

This study explored young adults' perceptions, evaluations, and self-reported attitude changes resulting from exposure to so-called femvertising messages. The results indicated that participants held conflicting views, in some cases simultaneously. On the one hand, they appeared mildly suspicious of the intent behind femvertising; on the other hand, they were supportive of what

appeared to be pro-social involvement by large corporations. One female participant stated about the effect of femvertising messages: "It won't be something that changes my outlook on life, but that day I may have a little more pep in my step because I am a woman, and I am powerful."

But is she? Femvertising's insistent requirement for individual women to overcome their self-doubts, often with the help of a brand or a product, is not unlike blaming the victim in domestic and sexual violence cases. The messages often fail to recognize that girls' and women's self-doubts are not the result of personal weakness or lack of intelligence. Rather, these doubts reflect long-standing gender hierarchies that praise them not for their brains, wit, work ethic, athleticism, or resilience, but predominantly for their appearance. Encouraging women's individual success, bravery, and progress is laudable, but it also appears hypocritical if the companies behind these messages sport a sizable gender pay gap or fail to give a paid maternity leave to their female employees.

However, none of the participants questioned how the companies using femvertising messages treated their own employees. If they perceived some of the femvertising messages as contrived, it was because they saw them as an attempt at political correctness or covert social activism—as in hiding behind a brand or a product to champion feminism rather than the much more likely scenario of appropriating feminism to sell products.

Among the few participants who knew that Axe and Dove were owned by the same company, there was also an understanding that it was hypocritical for one brand (Axe) to use highly sexualized messages and depictions of unrealistic female bodies while the other (Dove) promotes self-acceptance and positive body image. But there was also the perception that companies are going out of their way to create femvertising campaigns, which encouraged some to hope that profit was not the only goal. For example, an 18-year-old woman said:

> I think some actually want to spark change. I do actually think Dove is trying to make things better, not just make a profit. I mean, that is definitely a goal because you need profit to keep the company afloat. But, I think it actually is more about change because if it wasn't, they wouldn't go and do the sketch campaign if they didn't care. I think they care, but maybe they don't.

In sum, Dove-Axe types of contradictions do little to further a corporation's effort to attract and keep female consumers. As previous research has shown, consumers can see through petty attempts to support a trending cause. The cause must, not only make sense for the brand, but the company needs to be transparent in how it reflects this company-cause fit. Femvertising messages seem more likely to be effective if they honestly reflect a company's internal values and culture.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

This study makes a contribution in several ways. First, it expands on the existing CRM literature as well attribution theory (Jones & Davis, 1965). It suggests that novice consumers, such as young adults, intensely question the advertisers' motives and are critical of messages they perceive as self-serving and insincere. None of the young adults participating in our focus groups reported likelihood to engage "in revenue-producing transactions with the firm" (Varadarajan & Menon,

1988, p. 60) as a result of exposure to women-empowerment advertising messages. Although it is impossible to generalize on the basis of this exploratory work, future research should investigate whether young adults might be particularly prone to cynicism—perhaps more so than their parents—in assessing companies' motivations. This line of research could have practical implications for companies targeting young adults by encouraging restraint in the crafting of what may be perceived as insincerely idealistic messages.

Second, this study adds to the literature on "commodity feminism" by suggesting that this long-standing trend persists in the U.S. because the value of individualism remains pervasive in American society. In our observations, young adults who were open to gender equality tended to embrace limiting notions of women's empowerment at the individual level. When they employed critical thinking, it generally followed a path questioning why companies produce femvertising messages. Our participants did not question the merit of the implicitly individualistic advice offered by the ads. For example, they were willing to accept that a manly product, such as a truck, can contribute to the empowerment of an idealized woman, whose individual willpower helps her succeed as a mother and an athlete. Thus, the "faux activisim" (Baxter, 2015) inherent in femvertising seems to encourage women to blame themselves if they fail to display similar willpower in beating social obstacles on their way to success.

The practical implications for companies persuing femvertising are that these messages could and should be used creatively to further the ideas of gender equality. The messages should be in line with what the company is known for or at least what they practice. Additionally, companies should go beyond promoting women empowerment in their messages, and begin practicing what they preach. Companies that embrace changes in its current workplace policies, for example, will be perceived genuine in its corporate messaging.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The findings of this study must be tempered by some limitations. First, the use of three focus groups (two with female and one with male participants) did not allow for saturation of presented opinions on all the questions we asked. We were particularly surprised by the richness and variety of perspectives coming from the male-only group, even though most femvertising messages did not directly target or concern them. For this reason, future research on femvertising should employ more than one male focus group.

The findings are also limited by the fact that we did not ask participants how they defined women's empowerment. It appeared that the majority of them accepted at face value the shallow definition implied in most femvertising messages, based around individual agency and self-confidence in overcoming any and all obstacles rather than around universal empowerment built upon women's social and sexual freedom and guaranteed equal pay. Future research should not only explore young adults' views on what constitutes "women's empowerment" but also seek a connection between their thoughts on feminism and their openness to femvertising messages.

In our focus groups, many participants declared that they support gender equality but did not want to define themselves as "feminists" because of the negative connotations attached to the word (i.e., radicalism, aggression, and unfeminine behavior). Those who said they were feminists generally

embraced the use of consumption goods as a road to empowerment, signaling that they saw themselves as a part of a community of consumers rather than the more old-fashioned notion of sisterhood. Thus, future research should investigate how contemporary views on feminism and gender equality inform the reception of femvertising messages.

CONCLUSION

Femvertising—even though it was only recently labeled as such—has been a successful marketing approach for almost a century, considering its unofficial start with the 1929 Torches of Freedom march aimed at increasing female smokers' consumption of cigarettes. Both this event and the women-empowerment ads of the late 1970s and early 1980s were riding on the coattails of major feminist waves. During these periods, consumers' perceptions and beliefs had already been primed by feminist victories—such as the women's vote, gained in 1921, and the profound legislative changes to expand women's rights in the 1970s.

By contrast, the contemporary explosion of femvertising messages does not follow any major recent legislation aimed at gender equality. Yet, these messages appear to be successfully eliciting and holding consumers' attention. Perhaps this is a result of what scholars have called the "Sex and the City" approach to feminism (Arthurs, 2003), which emerged in the 1990s and 2000s, and in which the consumption of goods is frequently equated with individual empowerment. The celebration of popular culture further contributes to this trend, as individual celebrities such as Emma Watson and Lena Dunham use their podium to proclaim their feminist beliefs. When a major pop star like Beyonce chooses to rock herself at the MTV Video Music Awards in front of the word "feminist" presented in giant glowing letters, it is clear that women's empowerment has become a cultural trend that in many ways deviates from the activist goals of "pure" feminism, according to Winfrey Harris (2016). Such "mainstream popular feminism is flawed, perhaps because of the ways it mirrors the complicated everyday practice of feminism—lived feminism," writes Winfrey Harris.

For advertisers, always on the lookout for fresh messages reflective of the latest cultural trends, these flaws in mainstream feminism are of little consequence. Creative copywriters could, however, have a field day with some of these controversies if they fully embraced their complexity. Considering women's rising incomes (the Institute for Women's Policy Research predicts that the gender pay gap will close nationally in 2058), it makes sense for companies to continue to create uplifting messages targeting ambitious, affluent, and upwardly mobile women of mostly childbearing age. However, in order to truly engage with these consumers, the messages must fit, or at least be parrallel with a company's brand and core values. Further, these messages must transcend their pop-culture roots and elicit not only eyes on screen, but also tangible purchase intent for specific products.

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