Female on the Rise: An Examination of Perception of Indian Young Adults Towards Femvertising

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Abstract

Advertising plays a strong role in the economy and has brought in an advanced manner of building awareness about any product or a service in the society. The consumers are enabled to have knowledge about the service or the product before making any purchase with its help. Impact-based advertising is a form of advertising designed to have a lasting psychological effect on viewers. The paper lays emphasis on the nuances of advertising, stereotypes, and feminism along with their interactions and conflicts historically and in the digital sphere today. It further intends to explore the advertising phenomenon "femvertising" and add to the body of knowledge around the subject specifically in the Indian context. The idea is to understand the perception of young adults about femvertising messages and to analyse the impact of femvertising on the perception of women in society and women empowerment through a focus group study of young individuals. The results of the study offer practical suggestions for advertisers and corporations on how to better incorporate gender welfare causes within their marketing strategy to influence viewer intent both from the male and female perspective.

Keywords: Femvertising, consumer attitude, women empowerment, brand attitude, gender

Introduction

It's not a hidden fact that the advertisements and the media have always had a great impact on our society. Advertising, as a media, plays a powerful role in helping to shape social norms. It helps set the bar for what constitutes acceptable attitudes or behaviour for men and women, and influences how men and women are valued in our society Ads produced these days with attractive tactics influence minds of people.

Impact of Advertisements

Advertisements are the source to fulfilling the human needs. . Almost every product is advertised to reach a rather larger group of people. The also have a monumental impact on

the economic stability of the society. Ads influence society's desire to purchase, thereby boosting the profits of the company. Increasing sales benefit the country's economic stature. It has made people think beyond their grasp. It has made society to change their way of living. The marketers try to influence or persuade consumers to buy the particular product. It is also a medium serving many businesses. However, the earlier advertisements majorly lacked a sense of women empathy. For a greater part of the decade, advertisements have objectified and sexualized women. These traditional magazines portray women in decorative roles much more often, in turn suggesting that advertisements did not render a realistic depiction of the female gender role.

Women and girls are underrepresented in advertisements. Boys and men provide more voiceovers and appear more often than women and girls. Adult women continue to be portrayed in stereotypical roles such as housewives, mothers, wives and girlfriends, and the products they are associated with are appliances, furniture and products related to health, cleaning, beauty and fashion. In many ways, the powerful and independent male image affects gender equality and women's health and wellbeing. This image is frequently used in advertising for products like electronics, automobiles, and financial products.

Female empowerment through socially focused marketing

As a response to this cultural tension, a new form of authentic and female-empowering advertising, namely Femvertising emerged and quickly gained approval by the audience and throughout the marketing industry. The social marketing industry in India has become increasingly focused on gender roles, family hierarchies, and traditional marriage practices.

Different forms of "femvertising" – female empowerment through socially-focused marketing – has taken hold here in unexpected ways. Advertising representations that challenge gender stereotypes are positively received, particularly by women. The depiction of non stereotypical gender role portrayals generates more positive reactions than traditional advertising campaigns and leads to positive attitudes towards the brand.

Femvertising in the Indian Context

In recent years, femvertising has been setting new records with creative and empowering ads featuring women across the globe. Objectification and sexism have been replaced by girl power and strength. In India also, we have seen several femvertising ads, notably DeepikaPadukone's 'My Choice' video for Vogue, Radhika Apte's 'Share the Load' campaign, etc.– have set in motion the debate on the true spirit of femvertising (Samad & Chowdhary,

2017). Always' #LikeAGirl campaign captures the epic battle to stop the loss of confidence girls experience during puberty; this video sheds light on self-esteem among young girls. Jalakas (2016) has investigated the activities produced because of femvertising; by investigating femvertising from a crowd of people's point of view and investigating which responses and activities these battles create, and how these can be contextualized.

Literature Review

Åkestam, Rosengren and Dahlen (2017) state that femvertising has grown in popularity to reflect increasing pressures to abolish gender roles in advertising. More brands are recognising the importance of portraying women as empowered individuals; some, however, have faced severe backlash (Åkestam et al. 2017).

According to a study conducted by SheKnows Media (Skey 2016), Generation Y women are more likely to recall a brand with an empowering advertisement, and more than half of the women switched brands when advertisements depict women as strong and empowered. In addition, femvertising is 80 percent more likely to be shared, liked, and commented on in social media, especially among Generation Y and Generation Z women (Sylvendhal 2017).

Femvertising and Attitude towards the Ad

The aim of creating favourable attitudes towards the ad is to leave consumers with a positive feeling after seeing the ad, focusing on emotions instead of rationales (Shimp, 1981). Åkestam, Rosengren, and Dahlen (2017), Kapoor and Munjal as well as Drake (2017) investigated the effects of femvertising on attitude towards the ad. All studies discovered a positive change in attitude towards the ad for femvertising in comparison to traditional advertising. To be more concrete, the studies focused on stimuli from the FMCG sector and addressed female students from the European business school (Åkestam, Rosengren, & Dahlen, 2017), Indian women living in Delhi (Kapoor & Munjal, 2017) or female Millennials from the United States (Drake, 2017). Moreover, all authors have found similar explanations for their findings. For instance, Drake (2017) suggested that a stronger emotional and positive response towards the ad can be explained by the fact that women can identify themselves better with the shown femvertising than with traditional advertising.

Femvertising and Attitude towards the Brand

Positive attitudes towards ads, in turn, are confirmed to positively impact consumer behaviours such as buying intentions, resulting in increased sales (Biel and Bridgwater, 1990;

Fishbein and Middlestadt, 1995; MacKenzie et al., 1986). This has been confirmed by Drake (2017) in the context of Femvertising, showing that the ad attitude directly impacts the purchase intentions – which complements previous findings claiming that most women have purchased a product because of favourable female portrayals in the ad (SheKnows Media, 2014). Consequently, it should be assumed that the attitude toward the ad further impacts the consumer's attitudes toward that particular brand. This is confirmed by the results of Åkestam et al. (2017) which indicate that lower levels of ad reactance caused by Femvertising lead to higher attitudes towards the presented brand and product. Keller (1993) further claims that attitudes towards the brand can also be altered by pointing out a brand's relationships to particular social groups or causes. In the context of Femvertising this may result in an improved attitude toward the ad due to female empowering messages in the advertising.

Femvertising and Purchase Intention

Throughout the literature, many scholars have proven the positive effect of femvertising on purchase intention within the FMCG sector as already stated earlier (Abitbol & Sternadori, 2019; Drake, 2017; Karulkar et al. n.d.; Kapoor & Munjal, 2017; Åkestam, Rosengren, & Dahlen, 2017). Similarly to 2.3.1 Femvertising and Attitude towards the Ad, researchers suggested that by displaying the image of a modern woman without the usage of any stereotypes and thereby actively supporting gender equality, women are more willing to buy the brand. In addition, Kapoor and Munjal (2017) studied not only the effect of femvertising on purchase intention but also on forwarding intention of ad. Yet, it was found that a positive attitude towards femvertising does influence women's forwarding intention but does not lead to purchase intent. This is explained by the author's suggestion that women are more educated and rational within their decision-making nowadays and therefore can generally be less influenced through advertisement of any type.

Objectives

- To understand the perception of young adults about femvertising messages
- To analyse the impact of femvertising on the perception of women in society and women empowerment
- To examine the effect of femvertising on consumer attitude towards brand attitude and purchasing intentions

Research Questions

In concurrence with the objectives and the aim of the research, the authors have developed three major research questions based on pre-existing social theories and the review of literature.

Research Question 1: How do young adults analyse femvertising messages displayed in advertisements?

Research Question 2: What are young adults' perceptions of the effectiveness of femvertising messages in changing their attitudes toward women, women's empowerment, and gender equality?

Research Question 3: What are young adults' perceptions of the effectiveness of femvertising messages in changing their attitudes toward the advertisements, brand attitudes and purchasing intentions?

Research Design

Sampling

For this research, the responses were collected through purposive sampling. In this research study, the participants were purposefully selected from the target population to ensure that they represented the target population of this study. Purposive sampling was selected due to the nature of this study, which required a specific group of participants who met the inclusion criteria. The inclusion criterion was that the participants had to be between the age groups of 18 – 23 years and Indian nationality.

The sample was divided into 4 focus group discussions. Each focus group consisted of 5 members (N = 20 of whom 10 were female and 10 were male). Two focus groups consisted of all female participants and the rest two focus groups consisted of all male-participants. The use of two female only groups and two male-only groups reflected our expectations that femvertising messages, which often target female consumers, are likely to elicit more reflection and personal reactions from women.

Research Methodology

The authors chose to seek answers to the research questions through focus groups. Each interview was conducted until no new information was found and the previous contents were repeated and ran for around 90 minutes. The recordings of the focus groups were later

transcribed verbatim to used for coding and date analysis purposes.

Tools Used for Data Collection

Given the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, the focus groups were conducted in an online environment. Each focus group was conducted on a virtual video conferencing platform, in this case, Google Meet. This was done by means of preparing a question guide for the interview beforehand. The question guide included open-ended questions.

Design and Content of the Question Guide

The question guide was designed to be as interactive in its tone with free-range response area provided for opinions. The use of an open-ended questionnaire structure made it possible for us to gain varied and detailed consumers insights as it conferred more freedom for the respondents to answer in their own words.

The aim and agenda of the focus group was discussed in the beginning followed up by the introduction of the moderator and participants to bring them at ease and to break the ice. This was followed up by a couple of questions post which the participants were shown Indian advertisements by popular brands like Dove “Stop the beauty test”, Ariel “Share the Load”, Titan Raga “Break the Bias” and Volkswagen “My Favourite Things”.

The question guide was divided into five distinct sections. The questions were framed with respect to the research questions and existing literature on the subject.

1. Personal Information and Introduction
2. Questions on Key Concepts
3. Questions on Femvertising and the Perception of Women
4. Questions on Attitude towards the Brand and Purchasing Intentions
5. Questions on Outcome of Femvertising

Data Coding and Analysis Method

Due to the freely expressed answers that characterize open-ended questions the transcripts were coded in accordance with the thematic coding and analysis are the most suitable approach in the analysis process.

Thematic coding and analysis are a data reduction and analysis strategy which helps in segmenting, categorizing and reconstructing the qualitative data into important themes or concepts defined within research (Given, 2008).

The open-ended questions were examined to map-out and find plausible patterns (or themes) within the audience's responses. The responses were mapped out within the parameters of the research question (as explained under design and content of the questionnaire) under the following themes:

- **Theme 1:** Evaluation of messages in femvertisements
- **Theme 2:** Effect of Femvertising on Perception of Women
- **Theme 3:** Impact of Femvertising (on brand attitude and purchasing intention)

Findings of the Research

Analysis

Table 1: Summary of the Findings

Research Question	**Findings in Female Focus Groups**	**Findings in Male Focus Groups**
RQ1: Evaluations of femvertising messages displayed in advertisements	Inspiring to majority participants; sense of introspection with special focus on internalised prejudices; preference for multidimensional representations with real models; subtle hints of progression with societal holdback; emotional tangent; hedonic purpose of ads (exoticizing movement)	Thought-provoking to some; contrived to others; perceived as trying to capitalise on a movement; drawing a parallel with mothers for household products; product-orientedness
RQ2: Perceived effectiveness of femvertising messages in changing attitudes toward women and gender equality	Increased awareness of stereotypes and conversation starter; third-person effect in women with brothers; cross-generational difference in perception towards women wrt age criterion; positive belief in changing perception towards	Increased concern among participants towards their mothers; reported belief to be minute impact on behavioural change with increased awareness of stereotypes

	women; third person effect	
RQ3: Perceived effectiveness of femvertisements in changing attitudes towards brands and purchasing intentions	Increased positive association with brands with little purchase intent for self (same price-comparison); product-specifications conscious; concerns regarding brands capitalising on the feminist movement	Little reported change towards brands; concerns regarding brand duplicity and imbibing gender equality ethos within company policy; clearer brand positioning attracts favour; no purchase intent for self; price consciousness

Evaluation of Femvertising Messages

The first research question placed specific focus on how young adults perceive femvertising messages displayed by different companies and brands. Overall, the participants had a mixed opinion regarding their feelings on the use of gender as a spectrum in advertising messages. Some participants were deeply moved by the use of pro-social messaging in femvertisements and felt utterly emotional. One female participant (age 21) aptly captured this emotion:

The Dove and Ariel ad, I feel like the way that they were made was very sort of emotional and sentimental, the music, and how they filmed it.

Other female participants showed appreciation towards the making of the commercials and mentioned that they felt immediately "empowered and powerful" after viewing the ads. They associated feelings of "upliftment" and evoking of emotions. An 18-year-old female showcased her approval of the approach like:

It's uplifting when you see a positive ending that, you know, things are changing the way and people's minds are changing and people are talking about it. The Volkswagen one though was really empowering because the music gave a Rockstar feel.

On the contrary, when asked about the messaging and the content of the advertisements from the male participants, they showed little affinity towards the idea, calling it "thought-provoking" and believed that besides highlighting an important issue in the society, it might be an attempt by companies to ride the feminist bandwagon and capitalise on this movement. The 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. A 22-year-old male

reflected on issue by expressing his opinion on the same:

This definitely makes people question and it's thought provoking. That being said, I also feel that it's an easy, low hanging fruit for companies to make themselves forward thinking and supporting like, that they have these advertisements and then three days later you'd see that all of their board would be like males.

Majority of the males showed a particular affinity towards Ariel as a product, particularly because of its positioning towards showcasing a mother as the sole-working lady within the house performing all the chores. This seemed to have touched upon the emotional sentiment of the male respondents and they drew a lot of parallels between the messaging in the commercial and their mothers. As a direct inference, the ad also had the maximum response from the male counterparts towards breaking of stereotypes and these femvertisements. Also, they showed a particular proclivity towards advertisements catering to FMCG household products owing to the motherly association and thereby attracting sympathy. Here is how a 19-year-old male participant explained his approach for the same:

I personally feel that's pretty sad that we have to even make these kinds of advertisements. But on the other hand, I feel that we even see this at our homes, with our mothers. [Ariel ad reference]

By contrast, a couple of the participants referred to the lacking of a strong message within the Dove advertisement because of its limiting presentation of women, in which the stereotypes being pointed out weren't shown as particularly strong or outspoken whilst they were being touted for their gender traits and physical attributes. Such limiting positions of women hinted at the strategy of the brands to play it safe with the audience belonging to senior age group who might object at these ideals. These subtle shades of progression while appreciated weren't accepted by a couple of female participants who were not okay with the femvertisements putting their content out there mildly and promoting the idea of a "pause". Here are the accounts of a 22-year-old female and an 18-year-old female participant.

Dove ad should've been more of stopping those taunts and not just about self-love.

Even these ads which are mildly Progressive, they aren't like out there or bold or anything and get backlash. They can't be too progressive. Otherwise, they feel that they will completely alienate their existing older audience. But I also appreciate the effort that they're doing that slowly they're trying to change the mindset.

Whilst majority of the women did feel a sense of lingering empowerment after viewing the femvertisements, some felt contrived because of the hedonic purpose of the Volkswagen ad. As advertisements take on a more hedonic approach, there is more focus on visual elements

of the advertisement or brands rather than the message (Orth and Holancova, 2003). Consistent with the theory, respondents focused more on the fast visual and glamorisation of the character and how they were portrayed within the Volkswagen advertisements, rather than the message. One female respondent thought the use of femvertising messages was doing more harm to women than good. Consistent with this, Ariel, Titan and Dove with narrative, storytelling approach had more responses focused on the message and content of the advertisement rather than the brand or the visual elements of the advertisement. A 21-year-old female and an 18-year-old male aptly summarises their opinions:

Such ads (Volkswagen) exoticize the image of a woman, whose driving crazy and everything. So, it's like she sexualized instead of being normalized.

I think it's a strong name, strong definition with great visuals but the concept is somehow hollow because they won't be able to complete their objective.

Femvertising and Perception of Women

The second research question asked how participants perceived and self-reported the effect of femvertising messages on their attitudes toward women in society and the women empowerment initiative. Most participants claimed that the advertisements made them think and that there was a minute difference in their overall attitude toward women in general.

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 22-year-old male participant delineated his views drawing from this sentiment:

Because of these 45 second videos, there might be minute new changes in the society. I am not jumping into the commercial thinking I need to tackle these social issues. I am just watching TV.

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 the participants seemed to be in agreement that these messages tend to have some sort of a positive influence whilst changing the perception of women in society. Majority of women seemed to display visible traces of the third person effect as they overwhelming believed that these advertisements would help in changing the perception of people, and men towards the female strata of the society. For example, a 20-year-old female, referencing the ad by Titan said:

I think they can because the ad by Titan, it kind of changes the image in the way that people constantly portray women. Even if it is for 30 seconds that we get towards this. But at least we get this idea.

It is difficult to know whether this is indeed the case. In the male focus group, majority of the participants who had mothers self-reported that femvertising messages affected their attitudes towards domesticated product placement in ads. They admitted to reflecting on how they treated their mothers and considered possible changes in their attitudes and actions as a way to show more respect for the obstacles they may face in life. This concern for mothers was a motivator to consider the plight of women. The importance of empathy stemming from personal experiences was illustrated in the statement by a 23-year-old male adult:

My first thought on seeing the Ariel ad was how we take our mothers for granted and our mothers are one such person that we often fail to see managing everything. That is a very big issue and so as a person, I will try to do all that I can to help her with all this stuff.

Besides this, the idea of change in attitude towards women wasn't accepted so steadily by the male respondents. There was an underlying belief that these femvertisements acted as great conversation starters. However, the group acknowledged that the change is on a somewhat minute scale with an increased awareness of stereotypes.

One female driver won't change the general thinking of the males around and this society. It's a start but I don't think has a major impact.

In corporate world we see that people have misconceptions that if a woman is moving up the ranks. If she's going through it, there is something behind it. Maybe she is getting all cosy with the boss or and nobody acknowledges her hard work. It doesn't change a lot but makes me more aware of such things.

Attitudes Towards Brands and Purchase Intent

For both women and men participating in the study, femvertising had a somewhat positive effect on attitude towards the brands. Attitude is a term that is often misrepresented. However, some participants mentioned that the femvertisements influenced their emotions towards the brands. Emotions of the participants fluctuated while viewing the femvertisements as opposed to the change in the long-term attitude. When discussed among the female focus groups, it was noted that the female respondents showed a positive association with the brands by giving the benefit to companies who choose to associate themselves with a cause like gender equality as opposed to ones who remain neutral. This

was best summarised by a 23-year-old female respondent who said:

I read this quote that I really like – it's about comparing imperfect feminism with systemic misogyny. I feel like that's the case here. Like even though this video showcases imperfect feminism, it's still better than the systematic misogyny that might be shown in other ads. So, for me, for all those ads, regardless of how the ad played out or what the target audience was, I had a positive association.

Another important element with reference to the capitalisation on these movements was expressed while producing such feminist advertisements on or near Women's Day. A 22-year-old male and a 19-year-old female expressed their concerns regarding the same:

I consider two Brands a b and they have exact same offerings. Exact same perception. Everything same and if let's say B company has these advertisements, I won't change my opinion instantly. But if let's say, I see two that they are running a long campaign and imbibing this ethos within their company, I think I would start leaning more towards the b one.

I think it was more about capitalist organizations trying to capitalize out of any and every social thing that's coming up. So, they felt that Women's Day is coming up and there's women empowerment and it's just like things which are happening right now. There will be ad campaigns run by all the brands at the same time about women's day.

An essential criterion 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 for most of the participants, although a 21-year-old woman said:

The first thing I would probably do is compare costs, and if I feel like, there's not a huge difference in like, oh, this is exceptionally cheap or anything or this is economically. Putting that aside if I see two laundry detergents, I'll go with Ariel just because I saw that advertisement and the cause, you know, it made that positive association at least they're doing something. It's better than this generic brand which is not doing anything.

Conclusion

Femvertising as a concept has been long used in marketing strategies by an array of advertising and marketing corporations. 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. The research explores the consumers' opinion on how they feel about femvertising and the effect it has on the perception of women in society.

The findings show in general that femvertising garnered positive responses from the male and female respondents. These femvertisements saw minute impact on the behavioural change amongst men as compared to women who believed that this social strategy might bring upon change in the attitude towards men but pointed out that this change is inversely proportional to age. Female and male young adults who participated in the focus group voiced a positive influence on advertising attitudes and brand attitudes. However, femvertising has no effect on purchase intention, which is a measure of behavioral attitude change. The group showed considerable concerns on brands trying to capitalise on the feminist movement and garner support towards themselves which might not be reflective in their policies.

Implications and Recommendations

The practical implications for companies pursuing 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.

One of the major insights via the focus group study is to use femvertising as a social theme beyond women-centric days like "Women's Day". It is observed that this tends to limit the impact of their messaging on the target consumer base rather than raising an important issue because of the bombardment of such social themes around these days. In order to create a lasting impact, it was observed that companies should go beyond just using femvertisements as a social theme and reflect the same in real life changes to make the consumers correctly understand and relate with their brand positioning.

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