

The Impact of Female Empowerment in Advertising (Femvertising)

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Abstract- *In recent years, there has been an influx of marketing campaigns that feature female empowerment messaging (a.k.a. “Femvertising”), such as Dove’s “Real Beauty” campaign. While these advertisements are commonly discussed in the media, there is little research evaluating the effectiveness of Femvertising from a marketing perspective. In an online study using a between-subjects experimental design, female participants were randomly exposed to either a traditional television advertisement or Femvertising advertisement for the same brand, and then completed a questionnaire. The analysis found that Femvertising has a positive impact on ad and brand opinions, purchase intentions, and emotional connection to brands.*

Keywords - advertising; femvertising; gender; ad effectiveness; emotional advertising

1. INTRODUCTION

Female empowerment has become an increasingly prevalent theme in advertising, challenging stereotypical gender roles and promoting body positivity as seen in campaigns such as Dove’s “Real Beauty,” which has been widely recognized for incorporating empowerment messaging into marketing efforts. While such ads have been discussed in depth and applauded for communicating positive messages to women, there has been little research that evaluates if and why these campaigns are effective, as well as the effects they have on female consumers. It is plausible that due to the emotions evoked from these ads, they have succeeded in creating positive brand attitudes and purchase intentions. This study seeks to assess the various ways in which empowering ads influence consumers’ perceptions of females in advertising and their effects on key marketing performance indicators such as brand attitudes, purchase intentions, and emotional responses.

2. FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN ADVERTISING

The media industry has contributed to the maintenance of certain depictions of women, including the representation of women using idealized model images and stereotypical roles (Jalees & Majid, 2009)[12]. Analyses such as Erving Goffman’s *Gender Advertisements* demonstrate that women are more likely than men to be shown as subordinates in print advertisements (Goffman, 1979)[9], and research indicates that television commercials tend to be more sexist than television content itself (Crawford & Unger, 2004)[4].

Women are critical of the portrayal of their gender roles in advertising; both younger females and those who are more educated on feminist issues tend to be especially sensitive to how companies depict their gender and put

greater emphasis on contemporary role portrayals (Ford et al., 1991)[6]. These depictions can have a direct impact on business outcomes for a company; significant correlations have been found between perceived female role portrayal offensiveness and purchase intentions for a product, with women reporting that they are less likely to purchase a new product that uses offensive depictions in advertisements (Ford et al., 1991)[6]. Together, these results indicate that stereotypical and offensive role portrayals can have a negative impact on a brand’s profitability.

Modern women who have grown accustomed to offensive or stereotypical advertisements do not think that the portrayal of their gender is realistic (Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008)[29]. In fact, while college women are largely accepting of how they are depicted, they do not agree that advertisements present women accurately in terms of their daily activities. This signifies that even brands who are not directly offending women are failing to properly relate to their target audience. The findings from the reviewed literature suggest that marketers should seek to use accurate imagery and messaging in female-targeted strategies to promote self-esteem, strengthen relationships with consumers, and increase positive evaluations of the product and brand.

3. EMPOWERMENT IN ADVERTISING: DEFINING “FEMVERTISING”

Research suggests that the progress women have made both in their careers and society has made them more receptive to marketing that represents their desires (Sivulka, 2009)[23]. While there is still a multitude of media that exhibits women in a stereotypical fashion, there has been an influx of positive messages targeted to females. Modern women have more economic and political power than those in previous decades, so advertising has adjusted its messaging to resonate with

this changing demographic. Thus, we have seen a shift in advertising portraying domesticated and/or objectified females to those who are independent, confident, and liberated, thus empowered. While a seemingly emotionally complex idea, empowerment can exist on a smaller scale, such as purchasing a specific product or brand that promotes pro-female messaging, a concept that been taken as far as being spoofed in satirical publications such as *The Onion* (Gill, 2008)[7].

Empowerment has been a fundamental element of feminist ideologies that aim to achieve gender equality, a definition that is recognized by both feminists and non-feminists (SheKnows Media, 2016)[22]. Feminist empowerment is the idea of inspiring women to confidently take control and responsibility for their identity and choices (Alcoff, 1988)[1]. “Femvertising” has been defined as “advertising that employs pro-female talent, messages, and imagery to empower women and girls” (SheKnows Media, 2015). Google’s “Think Insights” marketing research group refers to empowering ads as those that spread messages of gender equality, love, and body positivity (Wojcicki, 2016)[26]. Additionally, they stated that empowering ads on the YouTube Ads Leaderboard have more than doubled in the past year, and millennial women are more than twice as likely to think of a brand that made an empowering ad. Another study found that nearly all (92%) of the women surveyed could recall at least one campaign that had a positive portrayal of women, and over half (52%) had even purchased a specific product because they appreciated how the ads represented women (SheKnows Media, 2016)[22]. Furthermore, the majority agreed that brands should be accountable for how they use marketing to depict women, and that any brand can be pro-women.

Female empowerment in marketing is not only becoming increasingly prevalent, but the messages are well received by women. Examples such as Dove’s viral “Real Women” campaign are highly regarded as positive portrayals of women in advertising (Byrne, 2004). Whereas many female-targeted ads still use stereotypical representations of women, Dove has succeeded in connecting with “real” women in their “real” lives. Although common contemporary stereotypes attempt more positive imagery (e.g., super moms and alpha females), they have been criticized for not being relatable to most women, including college females who generally feel that they are incorrectly portrayed in advertising (Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008). These findings highlight the need for marketers to more accurately depict their target audiences to better relate to their consumers and improve brand attitudes.

Ads with female empowerment themes have been applauded for challenging gender stereotypes in the media and raising awareness about issues facing females of all ages while empowering women and young girls (Wallace, 2014)[24]. From a business perspective, Dove has reported multi-billion dollar profits since launching femvertising branding initiatives such as the “Real

Beauty” campaign (Wallace, 2015)[25], which aligns with survey data indicating that most women claim to have purchased a product because the ad featured a favorable portrayal of women (SheKnows, 2016)[22]. However, without a direct evaluation of the effectiveness of these types of ads, it is difficult to extrapolate firm business benefits from these findings, indicating a need for the present study.

4. EMOTION-BASED APPEALS

With the increase in female-targeted ads with empowerment themes, it is evident that many brands have pivoted their marketing strategies to leverage this emotional tactic, which is an effective strategy given that females are in higher need of affect when evaluating advertisements (McMahan, et al., 2005)[18]. While there are a variety of marketing strategies that have proven to produce effective advertisements, emotional messaging is commonly used in hopes of strengthening the relationship between the brand and consumer (Rossiter & Bellman, 2012)[21]. The Excitement Transfer Theory states that arousal from one stimulus can be transferred to another, thus allowing an emotional experience aroused from an advertisement to transfer to a second stimulus (e.g., the advertised product), leading to intensified feelings towards an ad or product (Kardes, 2002)[13]. Related research shows that emotional tactics that evoke affective states (e.g., excitement) are influential to consumers and can increase behavioral responses such as purchasing (Bulbul & Menon, 2010)[2]. Case studies such as P&G’s Tide laundry detergent have successfully built rapport with customers through engaging and emotional narratives. While laundry detergent is not a particularly emotion-inducing product, these tactics have made the act of laundry an emotional experience for consumers, increasing their connection to the brand.

Further analysis suggests that not only are emotional ads successful in building brand relationships, but the feelings evoked by an advertisement are a predictor of effectiveness (Wood, 2012)[27]. Additionally, studies of physiological responses to advertising suggest that emotional reactions are strong influencers of behavior (Martinez-Fiestas et al., 2015)[17]. These findings emphasize how categories with typically less emotional involvement can leverage these naturally occurring responses with sentimental advertising to help increase brand affection and move customers through the purchase funnel.

One way that consumers form attitudes is through the emotional reactions that occur from experiences with a product or advertising communications (Fennis & Stroebe, 2010)[5]. As discussed, emotional appeals in ads can lead to increased attitude and engagement (Bulbul & Menon, 2010)[2] and there is a strong positive correlation between attitudes towards an advertisement and attitudes towards a brand (Mackenzie et al., 1986)[15], which can also serve as a predictor of buying decisions (Fennis &

Stroebe, 2010)[5]. For this reason, it is vital for marketers to leverage advertising as an attempt to create positive brand perceptions, which can ultimately lead to an increase in positive attitudes and purchase intentions. Furthermore, consumers with an emotional attachment to brands are not only more likely to purchase the product, but are likely to continue buying regardless of price or promotions (Rossiter & Bellman, 2012)[21].

There are many common emotional themes that tend to resonate with consumers, including aspirational messaging (Henard & Rossetti, 2014)[10]. It is beneficial for brands to identify which emotions are most effective with their primary target to generate advertisements that will build rapport. Aspirational advertisements are particularly influential among Millennials and GenZ consumers (Nielsen Global Trust in Advertising, 2015)[8] and have become increasingly popular. In 2015, the top viral emotive ads all included related messaging terms described as “empowering,” “positive,” and “inspirational,” indicating that contemporary marketing is trending towards these themes (Zazzi, 2015)[28]. These ads were successful in evoking feelings and increasing favorability, as well as changing consumer perceptions of the advertised brands. Since femvertising advertisements typically use these emotional themes, it can be inferred that they are effective among female millennial consumers, but there is a lack of existing research that determines if this is the case.

5. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

While female empowerment seems to be increasingly prevalent in advertising, there is little research assessing its efficacy from a marketing perspective in terms of ad attitudes, brand attitudes, and purchase intentions. Due to the emotional nature of empowering ads, it is expected that such ads would elicit strong feelings in female consumers. The current study seeks to evaluate the influence of female empowerment messaging in advertising targeted to women by measuring the differences in self-reported ad opinions, brand favorability, and purchase intentions that result from exposure to a femvertising ad compared to a traditional, non-femvertising advertisement for the same brand. Furthermore, this study will examine the strength of the emotional connection to the brand resulting from femvertising, and how exposure impacts millennial women’s perceptions of how their gender is portrayed in advertising.

6. HYPOTHESES

1. **Femvertising ads improve attitudes towards an advertisement and brand:** female respondents who are exposed to a femvertising (Fem) ad will rate the ad and the brand more favorably than those who saw a non-femvertising (NonFem) ad.
2. **Fem ads have a positive impact on purchase intentions:** female respondents who are exposed to a

Fem ad will be more likely to indicate willingness to purchase a brand than those who saw a NonFem ad.

3. **Fem ads increase emotional connection with a brand:** female respondents who are exposed to a Fem ad will report a stronger emotional connection with the advertised brand than those who saw a NonFem ad.
4. **Fem ads improve perceptions of how females are represented in advertising:** female respondents who are exposed to a Fem ad will report improved perceptions of how females are represented in advertising compared to those who saw a NonFem ad.
5. **Fem ads will be considered more empowering than NonFem ads:** female respondents who are exposed to a Fem ad will consider it more empowering to women compared to those who saw a NonFem ad.

7. METHODS

7.1 Research Design

The study used a 2x2 between-subjects factorial experimental design that randomly assigned participants to one of four conditions based on the advertisement they were provided to watch: Always Fem, Always NonFem, Brawny Fem, or Brawny NonFem. The two femvertising conditions (Always Fem, Brawny Fem) served as the test groups to evaluate the impact of femvertising as it compared to the two non-femvertising conditions (Always NonFem, Brawny NonFem) which served as the control groups. In January 2017, respondents were recruited via social media posts and email invitations, asking for women between the ages of 18-34 to take part in an online study regarding advertising perceptions. The online survey was built and distributed using Qualtrics survey software. After reading and agreeing to the informed consent statement and passing the age and gender screener, subjects were asked to watch an advertisement based on the condition to which they were randomly assigned. After exposure to the advertisement, participants completed several multi-item measurement scales regarding brand attitudes, emotional connection with the brand, evaluation of sex role portrayals, and a manipulation check. Data was analyzed both at the individual video level to determine brand-specific performance, as well as aggregated for the two femvertising/non-femvertising videos. A series of t-tests were run through the Qualtrics analysis platform to determine statistically significant differences between the groups.

7.2 Sampling

The participants were 181 millennial females between the ages of 18 and 34. They were recruited by online invitations to participate in the survey. Invitations were distributed via social media platforms and email. Participants were screened for age and gender, and any incomplete surveys were removed from analysis.

7.3 Materials

7.3.1 Advertisements

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions exposing them to one of the four tested video advertisements, two of which exhibited messaging with femvertising/female empowerment themes while the other two were advertisements for the same brands/products with traditional, non-empowerment messaging. The two femvertising ads were selected from campaigns that were recognized by AdWeek and SheKnows Media's "Femvertising Awards" for "challenging gender norms by building stereotype-busting, pro-female messages and images into ads that target women" (Monllos, 2015; Monllos, 2016). The first femvertising advertisement was from the Always "#LikeAGirl" campaign advertising feminine care products, and the other from Brawny's "Strength Has No Gender" campaign advertising paper towels. Ads were selected from campaigns that were nominated for this award by industry experts to avoid any potential researcher-bias. To serve as the control, two neutral, non-empowering advertisements were selected for the same brands (one Always, one Brawny) to control for any brand or product partiality. All advertisements were thirty second video spots.

7.4 Measures

Women's Responses to Sex Role Portrayal, Company Image, and Purchase Intention (Lundstrom & Sciglimpaglia, 1977)[14]. The scale consisted of items such as "ads which I see show women as they really are" and "overall I believe that the portrayal of women in advertising is changing for the better." Participants rated their agreement on a 7-point Likert scale (1=*strongly disagree*, 7=*strongly agree*).

Emotional Connection Scale (modified from Rossiter & Bellman, 2012)[21]. The scale consisted of items such as "I trust this brand" and "This brand fits my self-image." Participants answered on a 7-point Likert scale (1=*strongly disagree*, 7=*strongly agree*).

Ad Attitudes Scale (Hoffmann et al., 2012)[11]. The Ad Attitudes scale consisted of items such as "how do you feel about the brand that was advertised?" and "how likely are you to purchase the product/brand you saw advertised?" Participants answered on a 5-point Likert scale modified for each item (1=*bottom box*, 5=*top box*).

Manipulation check. A single item scale asking "Based on the advertisement you just watched, to what extent do you agree that the advertisement empowers women?" Participants answered on a 7-point Likert scale (1=*strongly disagree*, 7=*strongly agree*).

8. RESULTS

8.1 Analysis

For analytical purposes, respondents were grouped into one of two conditions: "Fem" (n=91) based on exposure to either of the two tested femvertising ads (Always Fem or Brawny Fem), or "NonFem" (n=90) based on exposure to either of the two tested non-empowering ads (Always

NonFem, Brawny NonFem). To assess the core hypotheses, a series of independent t-tests were conducted to establish significant differences between Fem and NonFem ads for each variable. All t-tests were evaluated at 95% confidence.

8.2 Attitudes (Hypothesis 1).

Fem ads ($M=4.45$; $SD=0.76$) reported higher ad opinions than NonFem ads ($M=3.52$; $SD=0.90$), significant at 95% confidence $t(181) = 7.45$, $p=.000$. Additionally, brands were reported as more favorable when exposed to Fem ads ($M=4.04$; $SD=0.82$) compared to NonFem ads ($M=3.62$; $SD=0.82$), significant at $t(181) = 3.42$, $p=.000$. Fem ads ($M=3.88$; $SD=0.75$) also had a greater positive influence on brand opinions than NonFem ads ($M=3.20$; $SD=0.81$), significant at $t(181) = 5.82$, $p=.000$. Together these results show that exposure to an ad with female empowerment messaging has positive impact on attitudes towards ads and brands.

8.3 Purchase Intention (Hypothesis 2).

Respondents who were exposed to Fem ads ($M=3.64$; $SD=0.91$) were more likely to report intent to purchase the advertised brand/product than those who were exposed to NonFem ads ($M=3.09$; $SD=0.98$), significant at $t(181) = 3.87$, $p=.002$. This indicates that female empowerment in advertising has a positive impact on purchase intentions.

8.4 Emotional Connection (Hypothesis 3).

Fem ad viewers ($M=4.63$; $SD=1.32$) were more likely to say that the brand fits their self-image than those in the NonFem group ($M=3.60$; $SD=1.47$), significant at $t(181) = 4.91$, $p=.000$; and Fem ad viewers ($M=3.34$; $SD=1.29$) were also more likely to consider the brand like a companion to them than NonFem ad viewers ($M=2.82$; $SD=1.42$), significant at $t(181) = 2.56$, $p=.049$. This analysis shows that female empowerment elicits a stronger emotional connection to brands than traditional, non-empowering advertisements.

8.5 Representation in Advertising (Hypothesis 4).

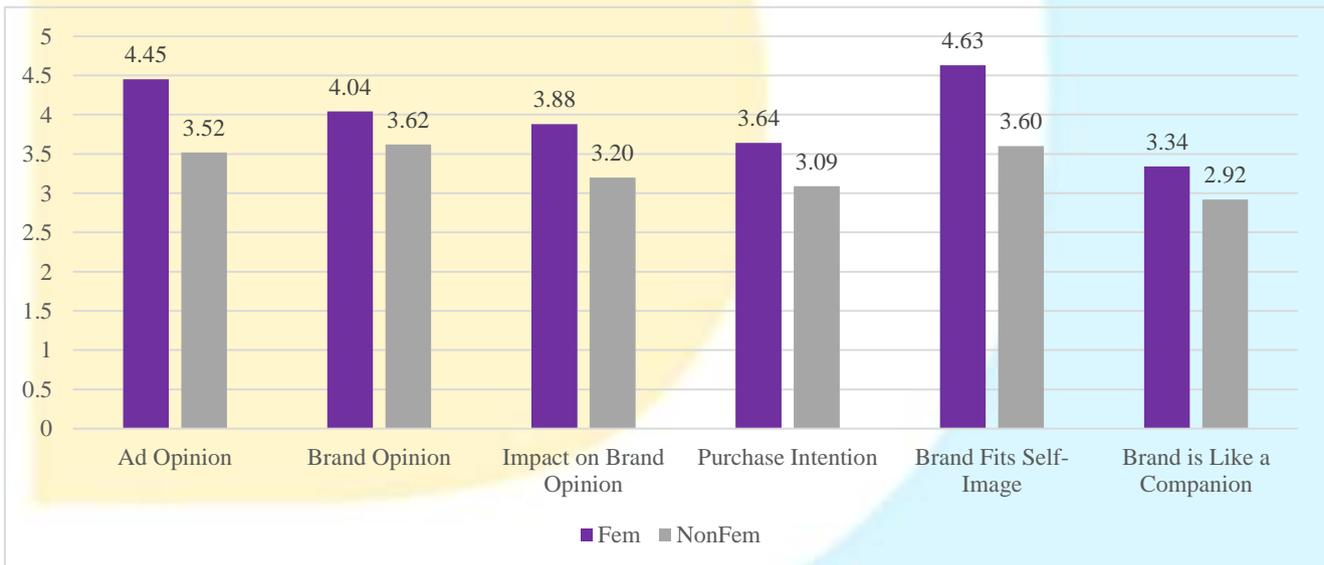
A number of items in the Sex Role Portrayal scale (Lundstrom and Sciglimpaglia, 1977)[14] did show any significant differences between groups including agreement that ads "accurately portray women in most of their daily activities" Fem ($M=4.00$; $SD=1.64$)/NonFem ($M=3.59$; $SD=1.58$), "ads suggest that women make important decisions" Fem ($M=4.25$; $SD=1.69$)/NonFem ($M=3.98$; $SD=1.47$), "ads suggest that women don't do important things" Fem ($M=3.69$; $SD=1.62$)/NonFem ($M=3.91$; $SD=1.60$), "ads suggest that a woman's place is in the home" Fem ($M=4.14$; $SD=1.74$)/NonFem ($M=4.31$; $SD=1.70$), "I'm more sensitive to the portrayal of women in advertising than I used to be" Fem ($M=5.11$; $SD=1.49$)/NonFem ($M=4.74$; $SD=1.60$), and "I find the portrayal of women in advertising to be offensive" Fem ($M=4.19$; $SD=1.58$)/NonFem ($M=4.29$; $SD=1.49$). Those in the Fem condition ($M=4.16$; $SD=1.55$) were slightly more likely to agree that ads "show women as they really

are” than those in the NonFem condition ($M=3.50$; $SD=1.51$), and saw directionally increased agreement that “the portrayal of women in advertising is changing for the better,” which was higher among those in the Fem video condition ($M=5.18$; $SD=1.03$) than the NonFem condition ($M=4.81$; $SD=1.02$), but results for these items did not reach significance. Overall, these results do not support that female empowerment ads have a strong influence on perceived perceptions of gender representation in advertising, highlighting the need for additional research on this subject.

8.6 Empowerment (Hypothesis 5/Manipulation check)

Respondents who were exposed to Fem ads ($M=6.16$; $SD=0.96$) were more likely to agree that the advertisement empowers women than those in the NonFem condition ($M=3.93$; $SD=1.66$), significant at $t(181) = 10.99, p=.000$. These strong results indicate that the manipulation was successful and those in the Fem condition recognized the ads as empowering to women.

Figure 1: Means for Attitudes, Purchase Intention, and Emotional Connection Metrics.



9. DISCUSSION

As predicted, female respondents who were exposed to female empowerment advertisements indicated significantly higher positive attitudes towards the ads and brands as well as higher purchase intentions, which aligns with previous research findings showing that most women have purchased a product because the ad featured a favorable portrayal of women (SheKnows, 2016)[22]. Femvertising ads also elicited a stronger emotional response to the brands among millennial females, likely due to the empowering messaging that resonates with this audience, supported by several previous studies (Henard & Rossetti, 2014[10]; McMahan, et al., 2005[18]; Nielsen Global Trust in Advertising, 2005)[8]. Additionally, most of the women in the Fem ads condition successfully recognized the theme of empowerment in the advertisements they viewed.

Contrary to hypothesis four, most responses to female sex role portrayal were stable regardless of condition. A potential explanation for this phenomenon is that since this scale originated in 1977, there have since been improvements in gender equality and representation of women in the media, rendering certain scale items less

relevant than they may have been decades ago (e.g., “ads suggest that a woman’s place is in the home”). Additionally, research indicates that contemporary women have grown up accustomed to how their gender is portrayed in advertising and are thus less offended by it than found in previous generations (Zimmerman & Dahlberg, 2008)[29]. For this reason, it may be worth reinvestigating this variable using a more contemporary measure that focuses less on the negative, offensive aspects of advertising and more on the awareness of positive, empowering traits featured in femvertising.

10. STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

As with all studies, the current study had some limitations. First, due to the nature of online research, it is impossible to control for external variables such as environmental distractions that may have impacted respondents’ experience while participating. It is also difficult to say whether the findings can be extrapolated to the general population, as not enough information was collected to determine how nationally representative the current sample is.

Despite the mentioned limitations, the study had some notable strengths as well. While there are imperfections

with online research studies, they also have clear advantages such as the ability to control for any researcher bias or human error during data collection and entry. Additionally, not only were the tested campaigns identified as strong examples of femvertising by industry experts, but the results of the manipulation check indicate that the empowering themes were highly evident to respondents and resonated well with this group, proving the manipulation and study to be successful. Further, by utilizing multiple examples of femvertising campaigns, the data shows that these results hold true across different product verticals including feminine care and household goods, and through different messaging techniques.

11. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

To expand on the present study, future researchers may want to run this study on a larger sample for a greater effect or to determine differences between demographic segments such as age, income, or employment status. It would also be worth investigating how men react to these types of advertisements, or evaluate different types of empowering ads targeted towards males (Monllos, 2016)[20].

Additionally, future research could explore how the effects of female empowerment in advertising vary by industry, especially for higher involvement purchases such as luxury brands or cars. Recent ads such as Audi's "Daughter" spot in the 2017 Super Bowl are evidence that increasingly more non-female targeted brands are embracing empowering themes (Madu, 2017)[16], and would be a fascinating next step in evaluating femvertising. Lastly, future research should explore which empowering themes are most impactful (e.g., equality in the workplace vs. body positivity), and whether this differs by industry or product vertical.

12. CONCLUSION

The present study sought to investigate the efficacy of femvertising from a marketing standpoint by evaluating differences in ad opinions, brand favorability, and purchase intentions, as well as through a psychological lens by examining emotional connections and perceived gender role portrayal among those who had been exposed to a traditional advertisement versus an advertisement that empowers women. Four out of the five hypotheses were supported: millennial females who viewed a femvertising ad reported higher ad opinions as well as increased brand favorability, purchase intent, and emotional connection to the brand, compared to those who saw a traditional ad for the same brand. Additionally, those who saw a femvertising ad were more likely to agree that the ad empowers women. The hypothesis that femvertising would have a positive impact on female consumer's gender role portrayal perceptions was not supported, though directionally positive movement in respondent perceptions indicates an opportunity for additional exploration in future studies.

While there has been much discussion in the media about the recent prevalence of advertising that empowers women, this is among the first pieces of investigatory research to evaluate the effectiveness of these ads. This study should be educational for brands and marketers who are seeking to leverage their platforms to empower women, spread positive messages, or form emotional connections with millennial female consumers. The results of this research should encourage marketers to utilize empowering narratives in their female-targeted advertisements knowing that femvertising has a positive impact on key marketing metrics such as brand favorability, ad opinions, and purchase intentions.

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