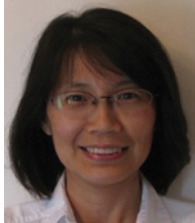


# Femvertising: State of the art

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## Abstract

*This paper aims to enhance consumer brand managers' understanding of the growing practice of femvertising, discussing factors that have contributed to its rise, how it differs from traditional portrayals of women and girls in advertising, potential benefits and criticisms of this advertising approach, and a list of ten themes that brands have recently used in femvertising. To femvertise effectively, marketers are recommended to build pro-female messages on their brand purpose and research insight, depict realistic images and lifestyles of women and girls, transcend gender divisions in representing females' expanding roles and aspirations, and be authentic in practising what they preach in femvertising.*

## Keywords

*femvertising, women empowerment, pro-female advertising, brand purpose, consumer brands*

## INTRODUCTION

Femvertising, defined as 'advertising that employs pro-female talent, messages and imagery to empower women and girls', has been on the rise as advertisers recognise women's increasing buying power and respond to their demand for more respectful and empowering portrayals of females in advertising.<sup>1</sup> In 2016, SheKnows Media reported that 53 per cent of the 4,000 women and men whom they surveyed buy a brand because they like how women are depicted in the brand's ad. Also, 92 per cent of women and 80 per cent of men agree that how females are portrayed in ads directly impacts girls' self-esteem. Moreover, the top reason why people like femvertising is that they feel that pro-female ads are important for the young generation to see.<sup>2</sup> It is noteworthy that femvertising is described as 'soft' feminism, focusing on individual, internal empowerment that is inclusive of all

females. Brands and their messages avoid the feminist label, which is often associated with external institutional action or government legislation and creates negative connotations in consumers' minds.<sup>3,4</sup>

While Dove, which started the Campaign for Real Beauty in 2004, has been credited with pioneering the contemporary movement of female empowerment advertising and has become the most recognised brand of femvertising,<sup>5</sup> multiple brands had created pro-women messages in their ads before Dove did. One of the examples is Apple's '1984' ad, which launched the Macintosh personal computer during the 1984 Super Bowl game. This ad features a powerful female athlete who throws a sledgehammer onto the screen with a Big Brother figure. The ad's choice of a female as the protagonist amidst all the male drones and the Big Brother figure conveys Apple's vision of empowering all users to utilise Macintosh

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as a tool for fighting conformity and affirming individuality.<sup>6</sup> This 'implicit feminist' approach associated Apple with declaring women's equal access to computing and differentiated Apple from all other male-identified computers.<sup>7</sup>

Also, Nike started to feature women athletes in advertising with the launch of Nike Women in 1978.<sup>8</sup> In the 1990s, while sports continued to be male dominated, Nike launched a series of ads with three female creatives at Wieden + Kennedy and extended this highly successful men's brand to women.<sup>9</sup> For the creative team, women empowerment meant departing from the traditional beauty-equals-success portrayals and instead using real women who were healthy and fit.<sup>10</sup> One of the best-known Nike ads is the 'If You Let Me Play' spot in 1995. This pro-girl ad came 23 years after the passage of Title IX (in 1972), which prohibits sex-based discrimination in federally funded education programmes and activities and further protects females' equal rights in sports participation at the national level based on a policy interpretation added in 1975.<sup>11</sup> In this ad, girl after girl speaks about the benefits to her well-being of playing sports while repeatedly pleading, 'if you let me play' or 'if you let me play sports'. These girls declare: 'If you let me play sports, I will like myself more', 'I will have more self-confidence', 'I will be 60% less likely to get breast cancer', 'I will suffer less depression', 'I will be more likely to leave a man who beats me', 'I will be less likely to get pregnant before I want to' and 'I will learn what it means to be strong'. This ad's permissive tone of 'if you let me play' ironically contradicts Nike's 'Just Do It' spirit.<sup>12</sup> It reminds the audience that girls cannot play sports simply because they want to, but they have to gain permission to do so. This Nike ad juxtaposes the benefits of girls playing

sports and the injustice and inequity that society has imposed on girls.<sup>13</sup>

This paper aims to draw marketers' attention to this growing practice of femvertising in contrast to traditional ways of advertising to and about women and girls, identify themes and show examples of femvertising, and provide practical recommendations for managers of consumer brands to femvertise effectively.

## THE RISE OF FEMVERTISING

Multiple factors have contributed to the rise of femvertising in recent years, including the increase of female leaders in charge of brands and female creatives called upon to advertise to women in advertising agencies, Facebook chief operating officer Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* book and movement to encourage women to pursue their ambitions, tech heavyweights' (eg, Google, Facebook and Twitter) public commitment to gender diversity in their workforces, social expectation of brands to stand for a bigger purpose beyond sales nowadays, and availability of platforms such as YouTube that allow brands to tell longer stories about gender issues.<sup>14-16</sup> Above all, consumers may be the major driving force that pressures companies to change their marketing practices as people share word-of-mouth information through blogging, tweeting and e-mailing about negative and positive behaviours of companies in this value-driven Marketing 3.0 era.<sup>17</sup> Social media has enabled consumers, both women and men, to voice their opposition to ads that they deem sexist or tasteless.<sup>18</sup> Companies that adopt the inadequacy advertising strategy contradict the supportive, empowering culture of social media and run the risk of getting called out or even boycotted in this digitally connected, increasingly transparent world.<sup>19,20</sup>



In contrast, female empowerment advertising delights audiences, inspires actions and, most importantly, creates deep affinity and resonance.<sup>21</sup>

According to YouTube chief executive officer Susan Wojcicki, people choose to watch women empowerment ads: the top ten empowering ads on YouTube were '2.5 times less likely to be skipped than their peers'. Moreover, 18- to 34-year-old women are 'twice as likely to think highly of a brand that made an empowering ad and nearly 80 per cent more likely to like, share, comment and subscribe after watching one'.<sup>22</sup> Female empowerment advertising also helps brands sell. For instance, Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty since 2004 has not only resonated with women, who shared Dove's videos in peer-to-peer communications, but also increased Dove's sales from US\$2.5bn to US\$4bn in the campaign's inaugural year. Moreover, it has inspired multiple women-targeted brands to follow in Dove's footsteps by doing femvertising.<sup>23</sup>

### **NEGATIVE, STEREOTYPICAL AND UNREALISTIC PORTRAYALS OF WOMEN IN ADVERTISING**

Femvertising focuses on empowering women and girls and represents a sharp contrast with and a significant progression from the long-standing strategy of inadequacy advertising and other stereotypical portrayals of females. Pollay describes advertising as a distorted mirror, which selectively reflects and shapes certain values, behaviours and attitudes and creates some unintended cultural consequences, including instilling a sense of inadequacy in women's self-concept.<sup>24</sup> The so-called inadequacy advertising exploits women's insecurity and anxiety about body images or other feminine stereotypes and portrays women as being insufficient, weak and in

need of a magic cure by the advertised product to solve their problem.<sup>25</sup>

Jean Kilbourne, who has examined how women are portrayed in American print ads since the 1960s, created the *Killing Us Softly* documentary series. She has reported that marketers permeate ads with Photoshop-manipulated, unrealistic and even poisonous images of thin, young, beautiful and sexualised women. Kilbourne warns of 'how ads insult, dismember and objectify women's bodies, and how these advertisements affect ideas of female beauty, expectations for female physical perfection and reinforce the nefarious idea that women are mere objects for male sexual desire and use'.<sup>26</sup>

Also, O'Barr has sampled ads in magazines published in 2006 and observed that representations of masculinity and femininity in advertising imagery and words repeatedly present gender stereotypes and divisions throughout the life cycle. For instance, the colour scheme of blue and pink is distinctly coded for boys versus girls. Ads depict girls wearing tutus and accessories and playing inside versus boys playing soldiers and airplanes. In addition, O'Barr has found that girls are portrayed as inactive and obsessed with beauty and physical appearance in ads but boys as being active and athletic. Even when the female is shown as a businesswoman or an athlete, her highlighted femininity, expressed in make-up, fashion style and hair, often undermines her assertiveness and athleticism. Moreover, mature women are portrayed as sexual creatures, displaying submissive postures, sexually suggestive poses, provocative dress styles and exaggerated smiles to attract the male gaze and to model for female spectators. In contrast, ads feature men's strong, muscular bodies and their activeness in sports to signify power. Another common depiction of the woman is her maternal role as



a nurturing caregiver and housekeeper. O'Barr has also reported that in the advertising world, part of the definition of femininity is being young, and it has been uncommon to show middle-aged or older women in ads for attractiveness-related products such as cosmetics and clothing.<sup>27</sup> A decade later, Timke and O'Barr, surveying a sample of ads in magazines published in 2016, conclude that gender divisions and females' subordination still largely linger in ads, despite a few exceptions of breakthrough.<sup>28</sup>

In a separate category, menstruation has been treated as a taboo topic in advertising since Kotex launched disposable menstrual products in the 1920s. The ban on tampons and pads in television advertising was not lifted until 1972.<sup>29</sup> Advertisers of menstrual products have faced 'misogynistic insistence of those who control the media. . . ' and 'must confront a thicket of rules, taboos, censorship, and required euphemisms when constructing their messages'.<sup>30</sup> Common depictions in print and television ads have included imagery of elegant women and aspirational lifestyles, signs of femininity such as light colours and flowers, and contexts of beaches and swimming.<sup>31</sup> Prevalent have been confusing metaphor, vague language, and unrealistic portrayals of women dressed all in white during their menstrual period, cheerfully dancing, practising yoga, biking, twirling, horseback riding along the beach and so on.<sup>32,33</sup> The word 'period' first appeared in a commercial in 1985. Still, language in menstrual product ads, censored by three major television networks, has continued to prohibit words like 'vagina' and 'down there'.<sup>34</sup> Elissa Stein, co-author (with Susan Kim) of the book *Flow: The Cultural Story of Menstruation*, comments, 'Fem-care advertising is so sterilized and

so removed from what a period is. . . ', 'You never see a bathroom, you never see a woman using a product. They never show someone having cramps or her face breaking out or tearful — it's always happy, playful, sporty women.'<sup>35</sup>

## CRITICISM OF FEMVERTISING

Whereas femvertising has received support and praise from women and men alike for abandoning the decades-old stereotypes and adopting empowering depictions of females,<sup>36</sup> it has also attracted scepticism about marketers' motivation for employing this advertising approach. One criticism is that brands often simply attempt to tap into the viral potential of pro-women messages to sell products and make money, reducing female power to a mere commodity.<sup>37–39</sup> In the historical context, Virginia Slim portrayed women's professional success in ads to promote its 'female-friendly' cigarettes to women as early as 1968, selling women empowerment with the tagline: 'you've come a long way, baby'.<sup>40,41</sup>

Beauty brands doing femvertising are especially prone to reproach for hypocrisy and exploitation, since the beauty industry has long promoted unrealistic beauty standards to women in advertising, and their pro-female ads often oversimplify women's or girls' confidence as beauty-centred and lack a real empowering element.<sup>42,43</sup> The 'Whip It' (2013, in Philippines) and 'Sorry Not Sorry' (2014, in USA) spots of Pantene shampoo's global campaign Shine Strong have generated divided views. On the one hand, some have credited Pantene with inspiring and supporting women to let their talents and ambitions shine in the face of gender inequality and sexism against women.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, opponents have questioned the relevance of having



shinier hair to combating gender stereotypes and claimed that Pantene does not genuinely care for feminism but merely tries to sell shampoos.<sup>45,46</sup> Even Dove's acclaimed Campaign for Real Beauty ads have been criticised as singling out beauty as a more important measurement of girls' confidence than qualities such as being smart, talented and fierce.<sup>47</sup> Seemingly empowering ads for beauty products often send messages to women and girls that they can achieve provided they are beautiful or that their worth or ability to achieve comes from the product they consume.<sup>48</sup>

## THEMES OF FEMVERTISING

This following section highlights ten advertising themes that consumer brands have employed in recent years to convey pro-female messages and confront negative or unrealistic portrayals and stereotypes of women and girls.

### 1. Promoting body confidence with realistic images of women

This type of femvertising embraces a wide range of body shapes and sizes, defying stereotypical, narrow-minded, unattainable beauty standards that stress thinness, youth or even sexualisation of women. According to SheKnows Media's 2016 survey, 90 per cent of women think that ads showing women as sex symbols are harmful, and 82 per cent of women want to see real women in ads.<sup>49</sup> A prominent example is Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty, which started a new trend of featuring real women's real body figures and curves. Dove is purposed to 'help women everywhere develop a positive relationship with the way they look, helping them raise their self-esteem and realise their full potential'.<sup>50</sup> In 2004, Dove's The Real Truth about

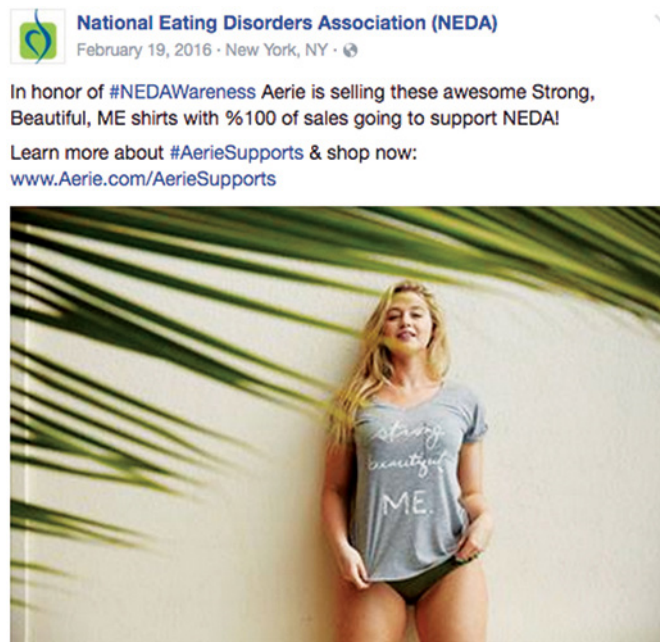
Beauty: A Global Report revealed that merely 13 per cent of women were very satisfied with their beauty and that only 2 per cent chose 'beautiful' to describe their own looks among the 3,200 18- to 64-year-old women they surveyed across ten countries.<sup>51</sup> Consequently, Dove launched the Campaign for Real Beauty and the Dove Self-Esteem Project. Since 2004, Dove's ads ('Evolution', 'Onslaught', 'Beauty Sketches', etc.) have exposed the beauty industry's lie of inadequacy and affirmed the sufficiency of all women — they are beautiful regardless of their age, size and shape. In April 2017, Dove UK and ad agency Ogilvy London launched a limited-edition set of Dove Body Wash bottles in six shapes and sizes, embodying the brand's ongoing celebration of women's diverse bodies.<sup>52</sup>

In addition to Dove, American Eagle's Aerie lingerie brand positions itself around 'real' women of varying body sizes and often a curvier shape to promote a positive body image. Moreover, it has abandoned the practice of retouching photos of its models.<sup>53,54</sup> During the National Eating Disorders Awareness Week in 2016, Aerie partnered with the National Eating Disorder Association (NEDA) and launched the 'Strong, Beautiful, Me' social media campaign to increase 15- to 25-year-old females' awareness of the risks of bulimia and other eating disorders. This campaign featured an average-size female, and Aerie donated 100 per cent of sales from the limited-edition 'Strong, Beautiful, Me' t-shirt to NEDA<sup>55</sup> (Figure 1).

### 2. Championing females' self-confidence beyond a beauty focus

Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty has been criticised as confining females' self-worth to the single dimension of beauty.<sup>56</sup> In contrast, multiple brands





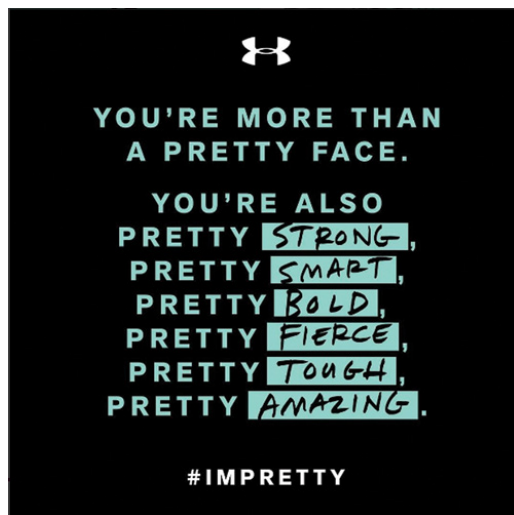
**Figure 1** Aerie's 2016 'Strong, Beautiful, Me' campaign partners with the National Eating Disorders Association  
Source: <https://www.facebook.com/NationalEatingDisordersAssociation>

have identified personal strengths as the essence of confidence, recognising that girls and women care about more than physical beauty. This approach steps away from stereotyping females as weak, submissive and obsessed with beauty and moves towards representing women's strength, confidence and achievements, long considered male-dominated traits. Most noteworthy is Always' Like A Girl campaign by Leo Burnett. This campaign shifts the brand's focus from functional confidence in product performance and protection to emotional empowerment in self-confidence.<sup>57</sup> Always' brand purpose promises that 'We want all girls to live life to its fullest potential and we're right here to back all of you.'<sup>58</sup> Its research has shown that girls' confidence drops twice as much as that of boys when they hit puberty. Also, gender stereotypes are so ingrained in our culture that language such as the expression 'like a girl'

becomes an insult to downplay someone, and this creates a negative impact on young females' self-esteem.<sup>59</sup> As a result, Always started the #LikeAGirl movement in 2014, endeavouring to destroy stereotypes about girls and to empower young females. The campaign's first video shows that when instructed to run, throw or fight, the young women, men and boys respond in a weak, self-deprecating manner, whereas girls react as best as they can in a confident, proud way. This ad and following spots ('Unstoppable', 'Girl Emojis' and 'Keep Playing') have effectively transformed 'like a girl' from a degrading expression to an empowering call to action to defy gender rules and have confidence in who girls are and what amazing things they can do.<sup>60</sup>

Ahead of International Women's Day of 2017, Under Armour started a digital campaign on Twitter and Instagram: 'You're more than a pretty face. You are pretty





**Figure 2** Under Armour's 2017 'I'm Pretty' digital campaign aims to inspire the strong female spirit  
 Source: <https://www.instagram.com/underarmourwomen/?hl=en>  
 Image credit: Under Armour/@UnderArmourWomen.

\_\_\_\_\_. #Impretty.' Also, it created a fill-in-the-blank style image generator website (<https://impretty.me/>). All these digital tools invited users to create their own 'I'm Pretty \_\_\_\_\_' content to share on social media. This campaign aims to challenge the notion that some people think 'You're so pretty' is the highest compliment a woman can receive and aims to inspire the strong female spirit, celebrating women's achievements in every part of their lives<sup>61</sup> (Figure 2).

### 3. Calling females to overcome societal barriers to get active and play sports

This advertising theme breaks free from gender stereotypes of girls being inactive versus boys being active and athletic. Although plenty of sport or fitness brands in the past have featured females, either celebrity athletes or ordinary women, exercising or playing sports in ads, a few brands have gone a step further in identifying and addressing causes that keep some women and girls from participating in sports. For example, Sport England,

the UK's sport council, holds the vision that 'everyone in England feels able to take part in sport or activity, regardless of age, background or ability'.<sup>62</sup> According to its research, two million fewer women than men in the 14- to 40-year-old age group play sports regularly, although 75 per cent overall say that they want to stay active. One of the strongest reasons that account for the huge gender disparity in playing sports is females' fear of judgment on their appearance, their ability or how they choose to spend time on themselves (Figure 3). These findings drove the creation of the 'This Girl Can' nationwide campaign, which aims to liberate females aged 14–40 from the fear of not being 'good enough' to get active. In 2015, Sport England launched the first ad, which stars real women and girls of different sizes, shapes and levels of ability exercising and playing sports.<sup>63</sup> The second ad was aired in 2017, featuring the voiceover of Maya Angelou reading excerpts from her 'Phenomenal Women' poem alongside images of real women and girls engaged in a wealth of physical activity, which does not focus heavily on mainstream sports, based on feedback to the first ad.<sup>64</sup> Also, this ad expands the target audience to include women who are older than 40, new and expectant mothers, and women who take a break from sport and are put off from returning.<sup>65</sup> Unlike many sport ads, the spirit channelled in this ad is more about communal support and shared accomplishment than about individual discipline.<sup>66</sup> 'This Girl Can' also uses a branded website and social media platforms to share real stories of real females as role models and inspire and support other women and girls to get active. It has also created a 'mantra app' that enables users to create their own 'This Girl Can' poster<sup>67</sup> (Figure 4).





Marketing Society Awards  
2016

## A unifying barrier

Every remaining barrier could be traced back to something truly unique, fresh and emotionally powerful...

### THE FEAR OF JUDGEMENT

Fear was stopping women from exercising.

If you haven't experienced this fear it can be hard to comprehend, but it was a powerful force over our audience, and one they didn't fully recognise themselves.

Women worried about being judged on their appearance, during and after exercise; on their ability, whether they were a beginner or 'too good'; or for spending time exercising instead of prioritising their children or studying. Every barrier we'd encountered fitted neatly into one of these three areas.

FCB Inferno

Judgement - Three Core Areas

Sport England

#### Appearance

Being judged for:

- Being sweaty
- Having a red face
- Not looking like i usually do (made up)
- Changing in front of others
- Wearing tight clothing
- Wearing sports clothing
- Wearing the wrong clothing/kit
- Showing their body
- How their body looks during exercise (jiggling)
- Not appearing feminine
- Developing too many muscles

#### Ability

Being judged for:

- Not being fit enough
- Not being good enough
- Not being competitive/serious enough
- Not knowing the rules
- Not knowing what equipment to bring
- Bringing the wrong equipment
- Holding back the group
- Being too good
- Being seen as too competitive/serious

#### Time

Being judged for:

- Spending time exercising when time with family should be more important
- Spending time exercising when time with friends should be more important
- Spending time exercising when time studying/working should be more important
- Spending time exercising when there are other things i should be doing that are more important

**Figure 3** Sport England's research insight about women's fear of judgment drives the creation of the 'This Girl Can' campaign  
Source: <https://www.marketingsociety.com/sites/default/files/thelibrary/Sport%20England%20-%20This%20Girl%20Can.pdf>

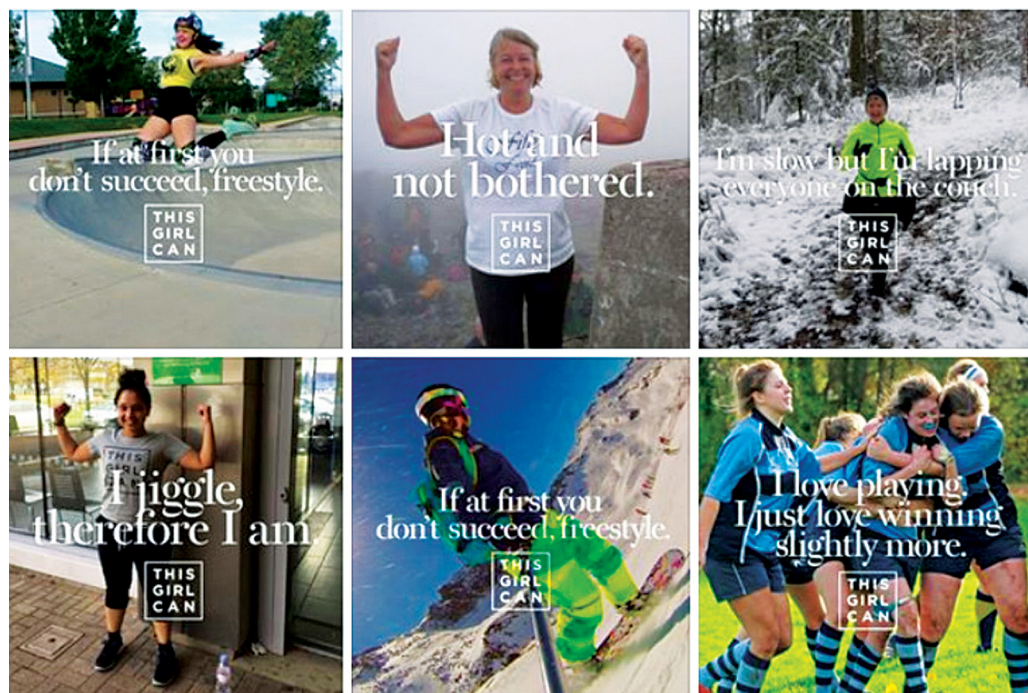
Similarly, Always Confidence & Puberty Survey has revealed that 51 per cent of girls have quit sports by the end of puberty and that only one-third of girls feel that society encourages girls to play sports. Based on the findings discussed, Always launched the 'Keep Playing' ad right before the Rio 2016 Olympic Games, starring Olympics gold medallist Alex Morgan among other girl athletes, and urges girls everywhere to keep playing sports #LikeAGirl.<sup>68</sup> 'Keep Playing', in a more positive tone, continues the mission of Nike's 'If You Let Me Play'

ad in connecting playing sports to the benefit of enhancing girls' self-confidence.

## 4. Acknowledging women's athletic prowess and inner strengths

This advertising approach features a woman's strong, muscular body and her activeness in sports to signify power, traditionally monopolised by her male counterpart. Also, while the old-fashioned approach has emphasised a female athlete's sexual appeal, this type of





**Figure 4** Sport England's 'mantra app' enables users to create their own 'This Girl Can' poster

Source: <https://www.marketingsociety.com/sites/default/files/thelibrary/Sport%20England%20-%20This%20Girl%20Can.pdf>

femvertising highlights her assertiveness, discipline and athleticism. For example, in 2014 Under Armour launched 'I Will What I Want' campaign by Droga5, transforming their ultra-masculine sportswear brand into a symbol of aspiration for female athletes. The brand's research has led to a consumer insight that 'the Under Armour woman has the will to impress only herself'. Droga5 then developed the creative strategy to present her 'as a woman who does not need permission because she has will'.<sup>69</sup> This campaign has enlisted top ballerina Misty Copeland, supermodel Gisele Bündchen and Olympic skier Lindsey Vonn, depicting how these women's willpower enables them to defy expectations and prejudices, pursue their dreams and achieve their goals in athletics. It shows women's athletic performance as

an act of inner strength and hard work.<sup>70</sup>

In September 2016, Nike launched an ad featuring Serena Williams, taking its #UnlimitedGreatness advertising campaign by Wieden + Kennedy to a new height. This ad was inspired by Serena Williams' reaction to a press conference question concerning how she felt about making history as one of the greatest female athletes of all time when she had just won her 22nd Grand Slam singles title at Wimbledon in July 2016. She responded: 'I prefer the words "one of the greatest athletes of all time"'.<sup>71</sup> The ad's onscreen words capture her triumphant traits behind her journey of winning: 'Compton, sister, outsider, #304, winner, top 10, Paris, London, New York, Melbourne, #1, injured, struggling, #169, done, comeback, focused, #1, legend, greatest female athlete ever (deleting the word female from



the copy), greatest athlete ever, Just do it'. The ad conveys that what makes Serena Williams the greatest is not only her career victories but also, hugely, how much she has overcome.<sup>72</sup>

### 5. Depicting females in a new multiplicity of roles beyond stereotypes

Females have traditionally been associated with stereotypical roles in advertising such as homemakers, mothers, buyers of domestic items and sex objects, later evolving to include career women, business executives and supermoms.<sup>73</sup> While truck ads typically appeal to men and ignore women, Ram Trucks' 2015 ad 'The Courage Is Already Inside' from the Richards Group focuses on women, portraying them in a refreshing array of roles and showing their tenacity and toughness in pursuing their aspirations. In the visuals, one female after another bravely overcomes challenges and accomplishes her goals, such as climbing a tall mountain, surfing a huge wave, triathlon swimming, practising pirouettes, snowboarding down a tough slope, aiming an arrow, competing in horse racing and performing on stage. Featured in the spot are outdoorsman Eva Shockey, who became the first woman in 30 years to appear on the cover of *Field and Stream* magazine, horse racing jockey Rosie Napravnik, who won the Kentucky Oaks twice, country music singer Miranda Lambert, who is the Academy of Country Music Awards' most awarded female vocalist, and professional arenacross/motorcross racer Tiana Falls.<sup>74</sup> The ad conveys that women own the courage to break gender stereotypes and to succeed in the roles they are committed to, including those that are traditionally male dominated or thought impossible for women to accomplish.<sup>75</sup>

### 6. Honouring mothers beyond their nurturing role

Moms, working or not, have commonly been portrayed as nurturing caregivers of their children. Proctor & Gamble's 'Thank You, Mom' campaign from Wieden + Kennedy salutes mothers as the unsung heroes behind the success of their Olympian kids. The 'Best Job' (2012), 'Pick Them Back Up' (2014) and 'Strong' (2016) spots of this campaign have won numerous praises, shares and advertising awards for their emotional storytelling about moms' unwavering sacrifices and support for their children. Still, the campaign focuses on the nurturing role that perpetuates maternal portrayals in advertising. Even working moms in ads tend to fall into the 'tired motherly tropes'.<sup>76</sup> Refreshingly, General Electric's (GE)'s 2014 'Childlike Imagination: What My Mom Does at GE' ad by BBDO departs from this traditional motherly depiction. Although the mom remains invisible in the ad, the voice of a young girl proudly envisions all the amazing things, such as underwater fans, talking airplanes, miniature hospitals and so on, that her mom makes as an employee at GE. This ad pitches GE's 'Imagination at Work' via various operations and products in energy, aviation, healthcare and so on. Meanwhile, GE intentionally showcases her mom, instead of her dad, doing great work in technology that inspires the little girl.<sup>77</sup>

### 7. Encouraging young females to pursue science, technology, maths and engineering (STEM)

This type of pro-girl advertising confronts gender stereotypes of dividing girls and boys into distinct interests and traits; it inspires girls to pursue areas dominated by boys. One such uplifting message is delivered by Verizon, in conjunction with



Makers. They launched the 'Inspire Her Mind' campaign by AKQA in television as well as social and digital media in 2014. The television commercial, following a girl's journey from toddlerhood to adolescence, shows how parents' words and tendencies in prioritising girls' neatness, quietness and safety over risk-taking and confidence can unintentionally stifle their budding interest in STEM and withdraw them from pursuits believed to be for boys.<sup>78,79</sup> The ad ends with alarming statistics that contrast 66 per cent of fourth-grade girls interested in math and science with only 18 per cent of all college engineering majors being females. The campaign also includes a website that features stories and advice from real women who work in the STEM field. In addition, the website offers Choose Your Own Adventure engagement: by swiping right or left on the pictures of the young girls, one can see choices that inspire them to

initiate and continue their pursuits versus choices that pressure them to yield to gender norms and abandon their pursuits.<sup>80</sup> 'Inspire Her Mind' reminds viewers that girls are not to be blamed for not pursuing STEM; rather, it draws attention to the role of parents in supporting and encouraging girls' interest in STEM.<sup>81</sup> A similar message came from Microsoft's video for 2017 International Women's Day. The video shows four teenage girls' aspirations to change the world in the areas of cancer, climate change, fresh water and so on and then presents the girls a striking statistic that only 6.7 per cent of women graduate with STEM degrees. The video ends with a call to action, urging girls to change the world and stay in STEM (Figure 5). It does not, however, explain the reasons behind the significant drop between girlhood and adulthood.

GoldieBlox, which was founded in 2012 and makes construction toys and



**Figure 5** Microsoft 2017 International Women's Day social media campaign calls women to pursue STEM  
Source: <https://twitter.com/Microsoft>





**"THERE'S NOTHING WRONG WITH  
BEING A PRINCESS, WE JUST  
THINK GIRLS CAN BUILD THEIR  
OWN CASTLES TOO."**

-Debbie Sterling, Founder and CEO of GoldieBlox

**Figure 6** GoldieBlox aims to inspire the next generation of female engineers  
Source: <https://www.facebook.com/GoldieBlox/>

STEM-themed chapter books for 4- to 9-year-old girls, holds a vision of stimulating young girls' interest in STEM and inspiring a future generation of female engineers<sup>82</sup> (Figure 6). GoldieBlox's videos ('Princess Machine', 'This is Your Brain on Engineering' and 'Big Sister Machine') defy the stereotypical beauty focus of 'pink aisle' toys like Barbie and other princess-themed toys and encourage girls to use their minds to imagine and create things. In addition, GoldieBlox uses social media platforms including YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, and Instagram to reach young girls and their parents and to share inspiring female role models, books, articles, videos, quotes and events in STEM.

## 8. Advocating equal opportunity and equal pay for women

Gender equality in the workplace is 'one of the most significant social issues of today, and of the era'.<sup>83</sup> Secret deodorant made a point about the wage gap in the 'Raise #StressTest' spot by Wieden + Kennedy in 2016. This ad depicts a young Millennial woman nervously practising asking her male boss for a raise in front of a bathroom mirror and being encouraged by an older female co-worker to go for it. Then the onscreen text displays: 'Stress Test #4528: At 3 o'clock Lucy does her

part to close the wage gap.' It is commendable that Secret intends to support women who face stress in challenging cultural norms and redefining their roles in society;<sup>84</sup> however, the ad has been criticised as subtly blaming wage inequity on women's confidence gap in negotiating for what they deserve, while failing to address the top reasons why the wage gap exists within the system.<sup>85</sup>

One of the most recent and prominent femvertising works was launched on International Women's Day in 2017, when advertising agency McCann New York debuted the Fearless Girl statue, defiantly staring down Wall Street's iconic Charging Bull statue. This statue was part of asset manager State Street Global Advisors' campaign to encourage more companies to increase female leadership. The statue has drawn worldwide attention to the important issue of gender equality, and the Fearless Girl has won top honours of advertising awards. Consumer brands can learn from State Street's unconventional way of femvertising.

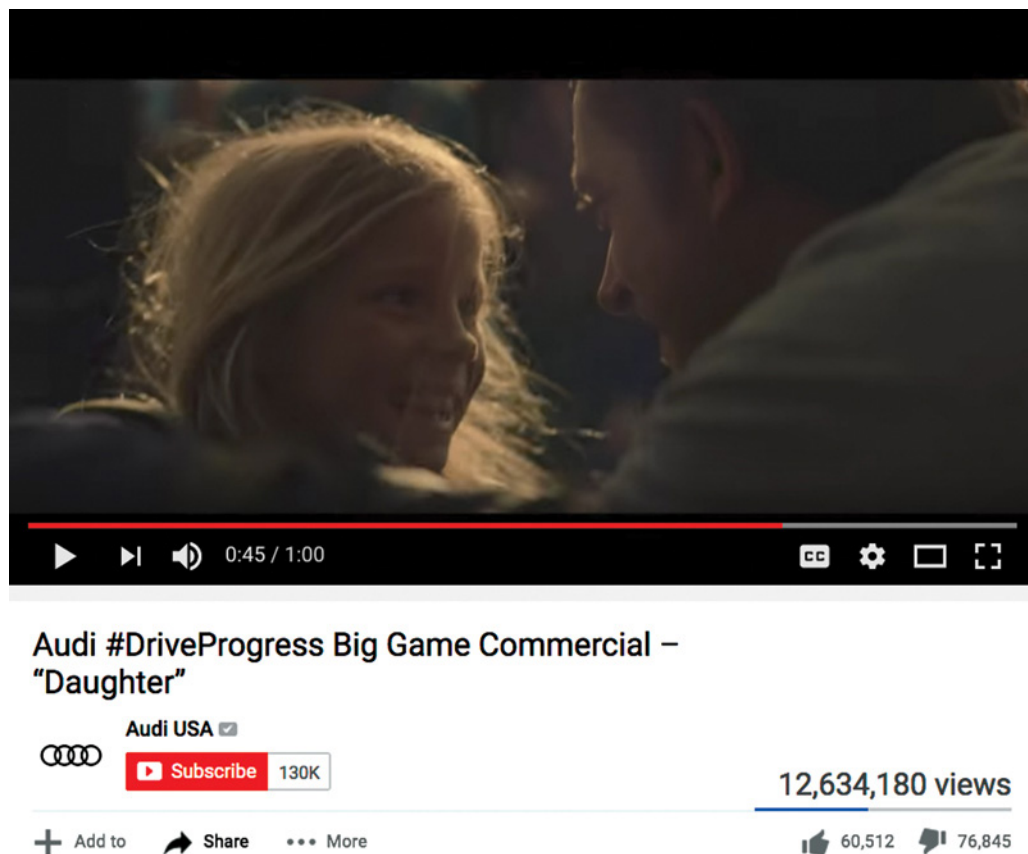
## 9. Men advocating for positive female roles and equality

While this appeal is similar to No. 8 in addressing the pressing issue of gender equality, it delivers a male's voice in



support of his female counterpart. During the Super Bowl in 2017, Audi of America and its agency Venables Bell & Partners aired 'Daughter', which chooses a social value statement, away from humour, in the big game. This ad appeals to the value-minded Millennial generation as well as women consumers, who currently make up 40 per cent of Audi's buyer base.<sup>86</sup> The ad's narrative is built on Audi's brand purpose of 'progress' and the research finding of a 2016 report by the US Congress Joint Economic Committee that women were paid 21 per cent less than men on average<sup>87</sup> (Figure 7). The ad shows a father reflecting on the challenges his daughter will face at the workplace because of

her gender as he beholds his young daughter fearlessly competing with a group of boys in a downhill soap box car derby and winning at the end of the race. He ponders on several questions, including this one: 'Do I tell her that despite her education, her drive, her skills, her intelligence, she will automatically be valued as less than every man she ever meets?' The ad ends with the message 'Audi of America is committed to equal pay for equal work. Progress is for everyone' and a hashtag of #DriveProgress. This spot has received widespread attention, and has even been considered radical, for multiple reasons. First, the ad adopts a male perspective, from a father contemplating



**Figure 7** Audi USA's 2017 Super Bowl ad 'Daughter' advocates equal pay and equal opportunity for women  
Source: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6u10YPk\\_34](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6u10YPk_34)



women's value and the gender inequality his daughter faces in the culture. This choice of male view proposes that gender inequality is everyone's issue, not just women's. Secondly, this ad was launched in the Super Bowl, an event that epitomises hyper-masculinity. Third, Audi, unlike previous Super Bowl advertisers Dove or Always, is not a 'woman product'. It is a car company that is not typically associated with femininity.<sup>88</sup>

## 10. Normalising and celebrating menstruation

The evasive, euphemistic ads for menstrual products took a turn in 2010 when Kotex introduced the new U by Kotex line, targeted towards 14- to 21-year-old females, with the Break the Cycle advertising campaign from its ad agency J. Walter Thompson (JWT).<sup>89</sup> This campaign is grounded in Kotex's brand purpose of truth, transparency and progressive vaginal care<sup>90</sup> and informed by their research insight that '70% of women believe that it's about time society changes how it talks about vaginal health issues' and that 'the vast majority of women were embarrassed by their bodies and, more specifically, menstruation'.<sup>91</sup> Kotex set out on a mission to break the cycle of shame, embarrassment and outdated beliefs concerning menstruation and make a cultural shift to start open, real conversations about feminine health.<sup>92</sup> The campaign adopts a tone of humour and honesty, mocking Kotex's own reliance in the past on confusing metaphor and vague language, unrealistic depictions of women during their menstrual cycle, and blue liquid demonstrations on the pad).<sup>93</sup> The campaign also includes a branded website and major social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) to deliver education and drive conversations concerning

menstruation and vaginal health. In addition, visitors to the UbyKotex.com website are encouraged to sign a 'Declaration of Real Talk', vowing to speak out about women's bodies and health. Kotex also donates US\$1 to the national nonprofit Girls for A Change for every signer.<sup>94</sup>

Another remarkable advertising campaign comes from HelloFlo, a subscription service for menstrual products, including a period starter kit for young girls. As a newcomer, HelloFlo has disrupted and demystified feminine hygiene advertising, delivering messages that normalise and celebrate girls starting menstruation. Its first ad, 'The Camp Gyno' in 2013, features a young camper who embraces her role as a period pioneer and counsellor to her peers at a summer camp till she finds out that other girls stop needing her because they have started receiving timed deliveries of tampons, panty liners and candy from HelloFlo. Its 2014 'The Moon Party' ad stars a young girl who lags behind her peers in having periods and fakes having started her menstrual cycle. Her mom then throws a big 'first moon party' celebration to expose her lie and at the end gifts her a HelloFlo period starter kit. The tone of both ads is funny but frank, using straightforward language such as 'period', 'menstruation', 'vadge', 'vagina', 'ovaries' and 'uterus'. The first spot also acknowledges females' physical pain during the menstrual period in real life.<sup>95</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The themes and examples identified in the previous section demonstrate that femvertising is not reserved for 'women products' such as Dove, Always or Pantene. Rather, an array of products and brands, including Apple, Nike, Verizon, Under Armour, Microsoft and Ram Truck, have effectively delivered women's and girls'



empowerment messages. Femvertising is viable for all brands that genuinely aim to connect with female consumers. Also, there is no single magic formula of femvertising. In addition to the ten advertising themes discussed earlier, marketers can be creative and construct new, positive depictions of women and girls in advertising as they acknowledge the diversity of females in terms of their backgrounds, lifestyles, needs, aspirations, fears and so on and connect authentically to their identity.

Even though divided views exist as to whether femvertising actually empowers females, it is undoubtedly positive that such ads can create cultural awareness of and drive conversations about pro-female issues.<sup>96,97</sup> It is most beneficial when brands' femvertising messages can help people change behaviour or impact social change, beyond gaining knowledge and feeling inspired.<sup>98,99</sup> For instance, Sport England's 'This Girl Can' campaign 'has inspired 2.8 million women to do more exercise: of whom 1.6 million have started exercising, and 1.2 million have increased their activity levels' in just one year.<sup>100</sup> Nonetheless, attempts by marketers to take advantage of femvertising without genuine understanding and care about advertised pro-female topics risk inviting repercussions and turning off consumers.<sup>101</sup>

Advertisers should recognise the significant sociocultural impact advertising can create in our culture and remember that as corporate citizens, they have a social responsibility to reflect changes and improve the portrayal of women in advertising.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, the DDB ad agency's co-founder, Bill Bernbach, advocates: 'All of us who professionally use the mass media are the shapers of society. We can vulgarize that society. We can brutalize it. Or we can help lift it onto a higher level.'<sup>103</sup> Both advertisers and advertising agencies,

as influential communicators, can contribute to girls' and women's empowerment in a meaningful way. For marketers, this is not only an ethical choice but also a smart move to build relationships with consumers since today's pro-social consumers, especially the Millennial generation, seek to connect with purpose-driven brands that pursue something bigger than their own profit.<sup>104,105</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

For consumer brands that contemplate implementing femvertising, we offer the following recommendations:

1. Be purposeful, gain insight through research, and address females' real needs in femvertising.  
Brand purpose concerns what a brand stands for and what difference it tries to make in consumers' lives.<sup>106</sup> Also, P&G's chief marketing officer Marc Pritchard states that a purpose lifts a brand's meaning to focus on serving people and addressing human insights with brands.<sup>107</sup> In the previous discussions about various femvertising themes, Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty, Always' Like A Girl movement and U by Kotex's Break the Cycle campaign are all rooted in their brand purpose to touch and improve women's and girls' lives and guided by each brand's specific consumer research insight, which reveals a real need of females. Marketers can learn from these brands to create pro-female messages that truly matter to women and girls.
2. Embrace real, not idealised, images and lifestyles of females in femvertising.  
From Nike's empowerment ads in the 1990s to Dove's ongoing Campaign for Real Beauty and U by Kotex's Break the Cycle campaign, the 'real



women' messaging has resonated with many females. Image idealisation can be manifested in how ads portray females' physical attractiveness and lifestyles. Three characteristics that make up idealised images in advertising are identified as: first, highly desirable circumstances that are attainable only by a select group in a society rather than the masses, including wealth and physical attractiveness; secondly, edited versions of life that exclude mundane, boring or unpleasant aspects of life; and thirdly, digitally manipulated images of perfection, which no human beings can possibly achieve.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, a female's exposure to idealised advertising images of physical attractiveness has been found to lead to social comparison and lower satisfaction with one's own attractiveness.<sup>109</sup> Thus, marketers need to heed these three areas to enhance females' identification with their brands' femvertising messages.

3. Transcend gender divisions in addressing females' roles, aspirations and abilities in femvertising.

Today's marketers need to move with the changing times in capturing women's pursuits in areas that have traditionally been male dominated, whether in sports participation and athletic power (eg, Sport England, Always, Nike and Under Armour), STEM (eg, GE, Verizon, Microsoft and GoldieBlox), pay equality (eg, Secret and Audi) or beyond (eg, Ram Truck). Also, brands can inject a male perspective of supporting and honouring the self-determination and accomplishments of his female counterpart (eg, Audi), be she a daughter, wife, mother, sister, friend, colleague or other.

4. Align the brand's 'do' messages with 'say' messages concerning female empowerment.

To make a real impact, purposeful brands practise what they preach in femvertising so that their consumers and other stakeholders will confirm the authenticity of their purpose.<sup>110</sup> While Nike's pro-women ads in the 1990s stood out and won praise, they created a backlash since Nike's positive advertising message of women equity and justice was deemed inconsistent with its labour practices of operating sweatshops where women and child labourers worked long hours for very low wages.<sup>111</sup> Similarly, Audi of America's 2017 Super Bowl ad 'Daughter' drew negative attention to the brand's lack of women executives and board members in its company despite Audi's advocacy of giving women equal opportunity in the ad.<sup>112</sup> This incident echoes a point made by Kat Gordon, founder of the 3% Conference, an annual event and online community that educates agencies and brands about the gender gap in advertising: 'true change (about empowering women) doesn't happen in ads, it happens in boardrooms and paychecks'.<sup>113</sup> Brands cannot simply jump on the bandwagon of femvertising; rather, they need to deliver action to fulfil their pro-women promise in ads. This may range from designing a product with the principle of gender equality at its heart, to getting involved in causes or outreaches that support girls and women, to providing female employees with benefits of equal pay and parental leave and including more women in the leadership ranks, and more.<sup>114</sup>

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