

Assessing the Predictive Influences of Symbols in Femvertising on Consumption Behavior

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Abstract. Femvertising has been a novel strategy of brand communication in recent years, while few studies have efforts on its functions on consumption behavior. This study contributes to the functions of femvertising symbols by exploring the relation with self-concept and group identity. Findings indicate that symbols in femvertising serve to reinforce self-concept consistency, substantiate social identity, and convey group cohesion, which leads to positive effects on female consumer behavior, while it may ignite skepticism and suspicion among emerging adults aged 18 to 20s. Obstacles for brands during the process of femvertising symbols marketing are labeling in text expression and cultural differences among consumer groups. This article hopes to provide insights that brands can appropriate femvertising positively according to the idea of self-concept of females. Additionally, to build genuine connections to consumers' concepts, both brands and the global market are expected to portray women in a diverse and non-stereotypical roles, and use inclusive language with universal respect.

1 Introduction

The reduction of feminist education has led to a booming number of female workers [1]. The rising status of the economy in the society has further fueled the growth of the "Her Economy". What's more, women's psychological focus has shifted towards seeking characteristic and individualistic content, which is presented in their consumption choices. In this particular environment, commercial advertising appropriates symbols of "Female empowerment" and corporate feminist values into their messages. Femvertising has become a novel approach to brand communication. The word "Femvertising" is a coinage, which is the combination of the words "feminism" and "advertising". It is defined as a category of advertising that empowers women and girls through expressing the talents of women and supporting their message and image [1].

From "Real Beauty" issued by Dove in 2013 to the advertising "Like a Girl" made by Always in 2014, the market has ignited the development wave of overseas femvertising. Following this global trend, the Chinese market began its localization, that SK-II targeted

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the Chinese market with the advertisement called "She ended up at a dating corner" in 2016. In addition, brands such as Tianmao and Chredo actively initiate communication [2]. Combining female empowerment and brand communication, and balancing both commercial functions and public welfare, femvertising enhances the effect of brand communication in the field of international female empowerment [2]. It is essential for both advertising and consumers to examine whether such symbols in femvertising can influence women's consumption behavior.

Femvertising has been a novel strategy of brand communication in recent years. However, even though there is research discussing the shift of feminist consciousness in the context of "Her Economy", studies focusing on the influences of femvertising symbols on consumption behavior are still limited [3]. In addition, previous researchers tend to apply Feminism as a paradigm of media criticism rather than an approach to studying the symbol's effect [2]. The existing paper on femvertising lacks the perspective of symbolic research and consumer behavior.

To address the gap that lacks an association between the use of "Feminist symbols" in femvertising and consumption behavior, this paper attempts to explore how the use of "Feminist symbols" in femvertising influences consumer behavior, and also examines current risks and barriers of its appropriation. Based on previous studies of symbolic behavior identification and brand consumer consistency, this paper will apply self-concept congruity theory and social identity theory within the lens of the planned behavior model. Therefore, following the definition and symbols of demvertising, this paper will analyze femvertising symbols on self-concept and the sense of feminist group identity. The second half of the article will explore obstacles and risks encountered by femvertising symbols in the "Her Economy". The goal of this article is to help brands and the market understand and be able to appropriate femvertising symbols positively in a long-term cycle.

2 The influence of feminine symbols in advertising

2.1 The definition and symbols of femvertising

Femvertising, or "Women Empowerment advertisements," refers to a kind of commercial advertisement with the concept of female empowerment. The precise concept of it is still evolving in academic circles. Scholars abroad have different comprehensions of femvertising than Rowell. R claims that femvertising should focus on both adults and girls, believing brands can express female empowerment during the process of selling products [1]. Abitbol & Sternadori consider that most femvertising still pays attention to appearance and motherhood. The expression of women in these advertisements is still related to beauty, yet strength and decisions. What's more, Jalakas D. L. points out that the image of women in femvertising is positive, courageous, and capable [1].

Based on the understanding of the definition, this essay will conclude that femvertising, as a result that challenges traditional female stereotypes, respects and empowers women to create an image of authenticity and independence. The advertisements should project and encourage "Self-value" and "Self-worth" [1].

In an era where gender consciousness and feminist discourse are increasingly mainstream, femvertising can signal a brand's alignment with progressive values. This alignment can foster brand authenticity and social credibility, particularly among audiences who prioritize inclusivity and gender equality [2].

Beyond the association between feminine symbols and advertising, the semiotic power has constructed and reconstructed media narratives for decades. As a result, consumers bring their pre-existing beliefs, values, and emotional associations to these symbols. For many

female consumers, seeing representations that align with their gender identity or aspirations can create a sense of recognition and validation, reinforcing the relevance of the brand [2].

2.2 Functions of femvertising: self-concept, social identity, and group entitativity

From the perspective of the self-concept consistency theory, to enhance the expression of personal image, consumers tend to choose the product or brand that has a strong connection and a high level of similarity with their concepts [4]. A product's attributes may correspond with a person's pursuit of ideal self-concept, such as being confident, independent, and an important figure. What's more, when combined with the social identity theory, consumer behavior can be further understood through the lens of group affiliation. Individuals compare their self-concepts with products and select those that evoke the sense of identity [5]. Through consumption, people can transform abstract images into tangible social expressions.

In addition, femvertising applied can be interpreted as a collective symbol that stands for actual or ideal feminine traits. Callahan and Ledgerwood found that when group members are striving toward an expected image or status, they are more likely to demonstrate and share a collective symbol [6]. This observation is particularly relevant to the ongoing movement for female empowerment. The result of their study showed that group identity symbols, which play a psychological role, increase the perceived entitativity of women, emphasizing the threatening and unite expression [6]. Because feminist symbols in femvertising are visible and acoustical, they are capable of enhancing the perception of entitativity. For instance, imagery associated with the intense shouts and swings of a female athlete can heighten a sense of physical similarity. Participants in Callahan and Lederwood's studies recognized that the basic prediction of actual group symbols would increase perceptions of homogeneity and perceptions, the two distinct sources of entitativity [6]. Therefore, the function of "Female symbols" serves to reinforce self-concept consistency, substantiate social identity, and convey group cohesion, often perceived as threatening or empowering.

2.3 Long-term effects of femvertising on brand trust and behavioral intention

However, the following question is, even though "Female symbols" applied in Femvertising can influence consumers' preference, will they generate persistent impacts on female consumers' brand trust and behavioral intention? Kumagai's research reviewed the arguments of Sirgy and argues that brand evaluation affects the perception of both brand personality and brand-user imagery [7]. This congruence, termed as personality congruence, is central to consumers' long-term attachment to brands.

During the process of evaluating, personality congruence is a key value that he invented BSI (brand-related sustainability initiatives) and BSSC (brand-sustainability-self-congruence) to measure the predictive validity of personality congruence [7]. In this context, if femvertising is not only recognized as a psychological trigger, brand advertising cannot only utilize it to construct the relation among the personal congruence, but also be integrated into a brand's consistent identity. Such symbols may help consumers feel psychologically aligned with the brand's projected values and give positive feedback when the brand's projected values reflect empowerment, resistance to gender norms, or solidarity among women [7]. This perceived alignment could strengthen BSSC, reinforcing the belief that the brand is supporting female empowerment.

Furthermore, repeated brand interaction may facilitate the internalization of the brand as part of one's extended self and have more validity to influence brand trust, since persistent exposure comprises self-congruence with sustainability initiatives [7,8]. As a result,

commercial advertising continuously tends to apply "Female symbols" to release the message that the brand holds a friendly and reliable attitude towards female empowerment.

The research conducted by Taylor also suggests that those who hold moderate or even strong beliefs of female empowerment would receive a larger impact of "Female symbols" that they are more likely to contact with similar message [8]. Female consumers will be appealed to by the symbols that are highly consistent with their concepts, which leads to a high purchase intention. Moreover, in order to present the sense of cohesion and increase the entitativity of the feminist group, it will show a higher recommendation intention.

However, a critical factor in the above research is that compared with prior age, emerging adults aged 18 to 20 present the skepticism and suspicion of femvertising. They believe less the honesty of marketers and the friendliness of commercial advertising [8]. Similarly, some emerging adults develop their own definitions or beliefs rather than negatively accept the message from media [2]. It is unlikely that the skepticism and suspicion of advertising and "Female symbols" to produce long-term purchase intention and willingness to pay a premium. Moreover, Those who insist unique clarify of female empowerment cannot adjust the conflict between personality congruence and the use of femvertising, which may lead to psychological reactance, distrust, or even backlash.

3 Research on the obstacles and risks encountered by female symbols in marketing in the digital age

3.1 Stereotypes and tagging

In the digital age, the marketing landscape has undergone tremendous changes, and women, as an important force in the consumer market, have become a key battlefield for brand competition through the use of related symbols in marketing. However, behind the seemingly colorful marketing, the use of female symbols faces many obstacles. Li Lahua pointed out that the media places too much emphasis on the aesthetic value of women, and even in the context of diverse evaluations of women, media reports often describe women as objects of visual sensory satisfaction [9]. Liu Liquan pointed out more clearly that the media has stereotyped the personalities, images, intelligence, social division of labor, family roles, and other aspects of men and women.

The shadow of stereotypes and labeling has always shrouded the symbol. In the virtual world constructed by digital media, women are often simply and roughly classified into several fixed images, with labels such as "goddess", "cute girl", and "spicy mom" everywhere. This simplified classification approach, although seemingly capturing certain characteristics of women, is actually a great erasure of women's diverse values. Brands habitually use these labels to attract specific groups in marketing, while ignoring the complexity of individual women. For example, women are generally defined as emotionally impulsive consumers, with excessive emphasis on emotional induction and low-priced promotions in marketing copy and strategy, while neglecting the potential of women in rational consumption, high-end product demand, and other aspects. This stereotype not only limits the brand's deep exploration of the female market but also easily makes female consumers feel objectified and undervalued, which can lead to resistance towards the brand.

3.2 Challenges in the era of information explosion

The characteristics of information dissemination in the digital age also pose challenges to femvertising symbols. On the one hand, the information explosion has turned consumers' attention into a scarce resource. Various marketing messages flood in like a tide, and

marketing content related to female symbols is easily lost in the vast amount of information. The carefully crafted advertising and promotional copy of a brand may have been overwhelmed by new hot topics before the target audience could even notice it. Data shows that as of December 2020, China has 989 million Internet users, with an Internet penetration rate of 70.4%. Among them, 986 million netizens use mobile phones to access the internet, of which 99.7% use mobile phones to access the internet [10]. In today's society, information constantly emerges, spreads, and accumulates at an extremely fast speed and in large quantities, far exceeding people's ability to effectively process and digest it.

On the other hand, the rapid iteration of social media has made communication channels increasingly dispersed. Women of different ages, professions, and interests are active on various social platforms and online communities, making it difficult for brands to find a universal way of communication to reach all target groups. To fully launch marketing activities on numerous platforms, not only does it require a huge investment of funds and manpower costs, but the results are often unsatisfactory, which makes many brands feel powerless when spreading femvertising symbols.

3.3 Cultural differences and diversity

In the wave of global digital marketing, brands need to face female consumers from different cultural backgrounds. The cultural roles and values of women vary greatly across different countries and regions. Some seemingly ordinary female symbols in local culture may cause misunderstandings or even resentment in other cultural environments. For example, Western culture emphasizes women's independence and self-expression, while in some Eastern cultures, women's humility and introversion are more highly respected by society. Taking the differences between Chinese and Western women in science fiction movies as an example, firstly, in terms of clothing portrayal, the women in Chinese science fiction movies almost completely conform to the traditional Chinese values of introversion and humility. On the contrary, Western science fiction movies showcase the boldness and beauty of women's bodies through clothing [11]. Secondly, in terms of character development, women in Chinese science fiction movies do not have extreme or unrestrained personalities. In other words, they do not have a rebellious personality. Compared to the direct portrayal of love between men and women in Western science fiction movies, Chinese science fiction movies tend to create a vague atmosphere [11]. If a brand does not fully consider these cultural differences and blindly promotes a unified female symbol marketing plan globally, it is likely to trigger cultural conflicts and damage the brand image. Even within the same country, there are significant differences in the understanding and acceptance of female symbols among women of different regions, social classes, and ages, which further increases the difficulty of marketing.

In this digital age full of opportunities and challenges, although female symbol marketing is fraught with obstacles, it is not without its path. Only by facing these obstacles, deeply understanding the real needs and diverse values of female consumers, breaking free from stereotypes, accurately grasping the laws of information dissemination, and respecting cultural differences, can brands open up their path to success in the vast world of the female consumer market.

4 Suggestions

The main force in the consumer market is women. In terms of quantity, there are nearly 400 million female consumers aged 20 to 60 in China, accounting for nearly 10 trillion yuan of the country's annual consumption expenditure. It can be affirmed that women's consumption

choices directly affect the changes and development trends of the consumer market structure [12].

4.1 Creating a multi-dimensional female image

Creating diverse and three-dimensional female images is the key to breaking stereotypes. With the changes in Chinese family structure and the increase in women's consumption power, female consumption has undergone more diverse and segmented changes. The "She Economy" insight report released by QuestMobile in 2024 divides the female consumer group into 42.9 million, 71.72 million, 53.35 million, and 65.71 million, namely urban white-collar workers, young mothers, small-town middle class, and urban silver-haired women. Different consumer groups also have significant differences in consumption preferences [13]. Brands should actively showcase the outstanding style of women in various fields and break free from the constraints of traditional professional roles. In addition to common images, it is also necessary to vigorously present the professional image of women in traditional male-dominated fields such as technology, finance, and sports. For example, Intel showcased scenes of female engineers participating in chip development in its promotion, showcasing the intelligence and creativity of women in the technology field. In depicting the state of life, it should also abandon the single setting of beauty and elegance, and truly present the full picture of women's lives. It can showcase the vitality of women sweating on the sports field, as well as depict their relaxed and carefree appearance after busy work, making the image of women more realistic and perceptible.

4.2 Emphasizing intrinsic qualities and abilities

Brands should also shift their focus from external image to the inner qualities and abilities of women. When promoting products, cleverly connect product features with excellent qualities such as women's intelligence, resilience, and courage. For example, when promoting hiking shoes, a certain outdoor brand tells the story of female explorers wearing these shoes to overcome difficulties and conquer mountains, highlighting the product's ability to help women challenge themselves and push their limits. In addition, telling real and touching stories of women's growth is also an effective way. By showcasing the process of women persevering and realizing their self-worth in difficult situations, this article aims to convey positive energy and evoke emotional resonance among female consumers, allowing them to find spiritual support in the brand. In the classic novel *Jane Eyre*, the public deeply experiences the growth of women's self-awareness. The awakening of women's self-awareness is closely related to feminist trends. This process not only had a significant impact on the social structure but also represented the aspirations of countless women for freedom, independence, and self-expression. The growth of women's self-awareness reflects the process of civilization, and if society is controlled by male power for a long time, it will be distorted and suppressed. The emergence of feminism can balance social pressure, save women from fire and water, demonstrate fairness and justice in human civilization, guide women to think and improve themselves, and dare to resist the injustice brought by fate [14]. So brands can focus on the growth, progress, and achievements of women, telling real and touching stories, conveying positive values, and inspiring consumers, rather than just focusing on appearance or external identity.

4.3 Using inclusive language and expression

Whether it is team building in business operations or marketing copywriting, using inclusive language and adhering to the concept of inclusivity is crucial. This can help improve business

performance, create a good workplace environment, and earn the respect of consumers for the brand.

Language is an important carrier of marketing, and using inclusive language and expression can make brands more approachable. In copywriting, it is important to avoid using vocabulary with obvious gender restrictions. Expressions such as "women only" and "essential for goddesses" often give people a rigid sense of labels. Instead, using more universal and open language, such as 'you who are suitable for pursuing a quality life', can make consumers feel the brand's respect for everyone. At the same time, brands should respect every life choice made by women, whether they choose to be single, married, stay at home, or become full-time mothers. They should give equal treatment and not make unfounded praise or criticism, so that women can feel equality and respect in the brand's discourse system.

5 Conclusion

In contemporary business, 'femvertising' has become an important force at the intersection of brand communication and women's empowerment. With the continuous growth of the influence of "her economy" and the continuous evolution of women's self-awareness and consumption preferences, more and more brands are incorporating "feminist symbols" into their advertising strategies.

By displaying symbols that resonate with consumers' ideal self-concept and group identity, 'women's empowerment advertising' can enhance brand preference. Products associated with positive symbols of women's empowerment are seen as an extension of consumer identity, which enhances brand trust and purchase intention, particularly among those who firmly believe in women's empowerment.

However, "women's empowerment advertising" also faces many challenges in the digital age. Stereotypes and labeling are prevalent, simplifying the complex traits of women into a single image. This not only limits brands' deep exploration of the female market but may also cause consumer aversion. In the digital environment, information saturation and fragmented communication channels make it difficult for brand information to effectively reach the target audience. In addition, there are significant cultural differences among female consumers worldwide, which require brands to be particularly cautious when formulating marketing strategies to avoid cultural misunderstandings.

To overcome these obstacles, brands need to take proactive measures. Creating diverse and three-dimensional female images can break stereotypes and meet the diverse needs of different female consumer groups. Shifting focus from external image to internal quality and ability can help brands establish deeper emotional connections with consumers. Using inclusive language and expression can make a brand more approachable and respectful, enhancing its overall appeal.

In summary, although "women's empowerment advertising" has great potential for brands to connect female consumers and promote women's empowerment, its successful implementation requires a comprehensive understanding of consumers, adherence to authenticity principles, and willingness to adapt to complex and changing digital and cultural environments. Only in this way can brands truly unleash the power of "women's empowerment advertising" and thrive in the fiercely competitive female-dominated consumer market.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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