

Exploring the influence of femvertising on brand resonance

By Mikayla Erasmus & Joe Mwase



Mikayla Erasmus graduated from the University of Pretoria with a Bachelor of Commerce degree in Communication Management. She then went on to complete her Honours in Strategic Brand Communication at the IIE's Vega Pretoria campus. A self-proclaimed feminist, Mikayla is passionate about disrupting the advertising industry by challenging the stereotype norms in the industry and bringing about change for the better.

Research for this article was conducted in the authors' capacity as Honours in Strategic Brand Communication students and supervisors at Vega School, a brand of The Independent Institute of Education.

Femvertising is defined as advertising that employs pro-female talent, messages, and imagery to empower women and girls. The concept was coined by SheKnows Media to challenge the established practice of negative stereotyping and objectification of women by the advertising industry over many years.

The aim of femvertising is welcomed by some and seen as a brand communication that has a potential for positive social change by contributing to gender parity. Other people view femvertising as a new form of exploitation by companies who are motivated to use female empowerment to sell products rather than advocate for social change.

This research paper reports on a qualitative explorative study into the influence of femvertising on South African female consumers' brand resonance.

In today's current climate, the need for brands to add value to the lives of people goes beyond product attributes or user benefits, it is becoming increasingly important to consumers globally. It is the job of communicators to initiate conversations in society by identifying and debating societal issues, thus connecting with customers on a deeper level.

Brands are being held accountable and should therefore make use of tactics such as femvertising to show their accountability. The rise of femvertising in modern media serves as a catalyst into understanding the

phenomenon in a branding context. There is evidence that the majority of women think society's perception of them is impacted by advertisements, and 90 percent of women believe advertisements portraying women as sex symbols are harmful. SheKnows Media has concluded that women purchase products because they like how the brand portrays women in its advertising and messaging. One way brands can play a part in social change is to create communication and messaging that does not follow the stereotyping of women, but rather portrays them in ways which can be empowering to female consumers. Consumers are increasingly taking note of underlying themes and visual cues in advertising and are voicing their condemnations of brands' messages; therefore, it is important for brands to become aware of how certain messages affect consumer perceptions and ultimately the relationship consumers have with brands.

Brands should be responsible for how they depict women and recognise that any brand can be pro-female. Brands are frequently using female empowering messaging and leverage on this emotional tactic. Brand resonance can play a crucial role in the brand building and equity of a brand, consumers build strong relationships with brands that connect with them emotionally. Taking into account the modern woman who is a strong advocate for female empowerment and gender equality, the ability of a brand to emotionally resonate with



Joe Mwase is the founder and Managing Director of Ikageng Advisory which specialises in general management and strategy consulting. He holds a Master in Business Administration (MBA) and a Master of Commerce, in Development Finance. His work experience includes over 20 years in both the private and public sectors in various fields that include general management, economic development, strategy development, corporate & regulatory affairs, stakeholder relations and sustainability.

its female target market can result in achieving the ultimate level of brand-building – brand resonance. The ability of a brand to be ‘in sync’ with its consumer is evident in the degree of a brand’s resonance. It is therefore important for the brand to maintain its authentic status; this is especially true when brands use social messaging tactics such as femvertising. The brand must ensure that any messaging is seen as authentic and aligns with the core values of the brand. The factor of authenticity is of paramount importance when using femvertising as a communication strategy. It pushes transparency and truth beyond advertising and towards an alignment of the brand with its messaging, where consumers want brands to support female business practices within its corporate context as well.

A brand study showed that 50 percent of purchase decisions are based on beliefs. The new normal for belief-driven consumers is that they will buy, switch or even shun brands based on the brand’s view on controversial and social issues, showing that 30 percent of consumers are buying or boycotting more than they were three years ago. Evidently brands that ignore social change run the risk of becoming redundant in the minds of the consumer, as they become trapped in a ‘no brands land’ where they become indifferent towards the brand.

This explorative qualitative study sought to gain insight into how, if at all, femvertising influences the brand resonance of female South African consumers. The study was conducted via a focus group which consisted of seven female South Africans between the ages of 25 and 35 who drive an Audi, or similar car, and are exposed to advertising. The car industry using femvertising as an advertising tool challenges the norms of femvertising, which is highly prevalent in beauty brands. Car brands need to make use

of the concept of social currency in order to remain relevant. Females want to resonate with a car brand that they can identify with, and this is where femvertising plays a role. One of the most discussed advertisements during the 2017 Super Bowl was Audi’s ad about the gender pay gap, called ‘Daughter’. It received critical acclaim for identifying and acknowledging a current social issue as it pushed back on gender stereotypes.

CONNOTATIONS WITH THE WORD FEMVERTISING

The researcher first provided a description of the concept of femvertising to the focus group for their general understanding of the term. The first impression was that the messaging was aimed at promoting feminism. However, after engaging with advertisements that make use of femvertising, participants had a better grasp of the concept and its meaning. They noted that femvertising is a form of female empowerment where they believe they are being heard and understood as women, who finally have a voice. Not all consumers who are exposed to advertisements that employ femvertising tactics necessarily encounter the term ‘femvertising’. Connotations with the term and its root word ‘feminism’ give insight into how consumers currently view approaches to gender roles, and it is evident that those who are unaware of the concept have predetermined notions.

LACK OF SOCIAL MESSAGING IN A SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

After being exposed to adverts with social messaging at its core, in the form of femvertising, many participants argued that brands in South Africa should start using social messaging in their advertising efforts. Social messaging that creates conversation, pushes boundaries and highlights

important social issues is lacking in a South African context. Participants said they were more likely to relate to a brand that dives into addressing these issues, as it provokes emotional connections and feelings.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FEMVERTISING AND AUDI’S BRAND RESONANCE

After watching the ‘Daughter’ advertisement, respondents agreed that they appreciated the fact that a brand like Audi, which is usually synonymous with terms such as ‘sporty’ and ‘elegant’, acknowledged an important issue for women, namely the gender pay gap. As females, they appreciated being heard and respected the brand for dispelling the stigma that girls will never grow up to be equal to boys. Audi was respected more as a brand because they were bold enough to start a conversation. The focus group concluded that they felt proud to be female and more empowered, when big brands such as Audi are backing them, and that social change is imminent. The use of femvertising in the advertisement was seen as positive, and showed an increase in brand resonance because the women felt connected to the brand on an emotional level.

In conclusion, femvertising that shows women breaking stereotypes is empowering and can be an agent for social change. In a broader context it is a social messaging tactic, and brands that employ social messaging influence consumers’ resonance with the brand. Female South African consumers believe that femvertising can have a positive influence on gender equality. Consumers deem brands as having the social responsibility to be advocates for social change. They believe that brands have a platform to start conversations regarding social change and have the ability to use their voices for good.

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