



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

***The Commodification of Empowerment:***  
*Confusing the power of consumption with the power of equality-*  
*An exploration of Femvertising.*

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## **Abstract**

Feminism is fashionable. From celebrity endorsements to widely successful femvertising campaigns, the insurgence of ‘feminist’ attitudes within popular culture has not gone unnoticed by media and communications scholars. Indeed, Rottenberg argues ‘no form of feminism has ever been as welcomed and championed by iconic, mainstream, and highly visible figures as this current form’ (2014, p11). Following this, the question for me is not whether feminism has been commodified, because we know it has (Cole and Hribar, 1995. Johnston and Taylor, 2008. Groeneveld, 2009. Keller and Ringrose, 2015. Rottenberg, 2018). Rather, the question is what do we make of it? How do individuals react to this form of advertising and how can this shape and impact the wider feminist rhetoric? This study explores the complexities of this new ‘trendy feminism’ through focus group investigations and feminist discourse analysis of four femvertisements. The results were mixed with some participants arguing that femvertising simply sells an inadequate form of feminism whilst others argued femvertising could be a step in the right direction, becoming a gateway for feminist ideologies. Above all, many participants wrestle their desire for the media to endorse feminist values whilst actively resenting the brands that commodify this very rhetoric. As a young feminist, exploring feminism has been a passion project and this study has truly opened my eyes to the diverse understandings of feminism amongst my peers.

*Key words:* Advertising, Feminism, Femvertising, Commodification,

## **Table of Contents:**

<b>ABSTRACT.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>LITERATURE REVIEW.....</b>	<b>8</b>
FEMVERTISING AND POST-FEMINIST IDEOLOGIES CELEBRITY FEMINISM AND POPULAR CULTURE REPRESENTATION OF FEMININITY AND MASCULINITY IN ADVERTISING	
<b>METHODOLOGY.....</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>FINDINGS.....</b>	<b>20</b>
CONFIDENCE AS A COMMODITY BRAND INSINCERITY: IS EMPOWERMENT SOLELY FOR THE ‘BEAUTIFUL’? NEW WAY TO ‘BE A MAN’? A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION? SUMMARY OF FINDINGS	
<b>CONCLUSION.....</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>REFERENCES.....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>APPENDIX.....</b>	<b>47</b>
APPENDIX FIGURE 14: ETHICAL REVIEW FORM APPENDIX FIGURE 15: PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM APPENDIX FIGURE 16: ADVERTISEMENT OVERVIEW APPENDIX FIGURE 17: WORK PLAN FLOWCHART APPENDIX FIGURE 18: INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS APPENDIX FIGURE 19: QUESTION PROMPTS FOR PARTICIPANTS APPENDIX FIGURE 20: PARTICIPANT PROFILES APPENDIX FIGURE 21: PARTICIPANT’S THEMED QUOTES	

## **Introduction**

The recent rise in ‘popular feminism’ is mirrored within the advertising world, with ‘femvertising’ becoming a new ‘sexy’ buzz word (Rottenberg, 2018). This dissertation examines the ways in which femvertising is perceived amongst young adults and how this commodified form of ‘popular feminism’ is represented in advertising. Following this, I ask whether femvertising helps or hinders feminism. To address these questions, three focus groups were held with twenty-three University of Leeds students. The adverts shown to the groups and later explored through feminist discourse analysis included: Google’s *International Women’s Day: A Moment in Search* (2018); Gillette’s *We Believe: The Best Men Can Be* (2019); Always #LikeAGirl – *Keep Playing* (2016); and finally H&M’s *New Autumn Collection* advertisement (2016).

The popularisation of feminist ideologies goes beyond simply becoming mainstream. The feminist rhetoric arguably shifts to fit our commercially centred society: an act that causes great worry for many scholars (Riley, 2001. Catterall et al, 2005. Scharff, 2013. Adamson, 2016. Feasey, 2017). Indeed, the legitimacy and incentive of popular feminism and femvertising is a topic of contemporary debate (Gengler, 2011. Lazar, 2014. Tennent and Jackson, 2017. Holmes and Clayton, 2018). Abitbol defends femvertising’s validity, suggesting ‘because femvertising messages promote gender equality, definitionally speaking and in principle, they can be considered feminist’ (2016, p118). However, he recommends not to consider femvertising as wholly ‘feminist’ as femvertising encourages gendered consumption, contradicting the feminist values of championing equal social policies over purchasing decisions (2016:118). Rottenberg notes these contradictions, suggesting whilst the media’s involvement in the popularisation of feminism brings key issues to the forefront of our cultural and political spheres, the new ‘popular’ form of feminism is troubling. She argues it is ‘increasingly compatible with neoliberal and neoconservative political and economic agendas’ (2014, p8), indicating the shift away from traditional feminism. The question here involves the new relationship between individualism and feminism: whether individualisation is beneficial or detrimental to the feminist cause. As detailed through my findings, the answers to these questions are dependent on one’s own feminist ideologies which too is both fluid and transformative, ever shifting to fit with the modern challenges facing women.

The overwhelming consensus amongst feminist scholars is that popular culture should seek more ‘authentic’ feminist representations that secede the commodified form of feminism (Holmes and Clayton, 2018, p1). This implies whilst inauthentic femvertising has the potential to underwrite the core message of feminism, authentic femvertising could truly help the feminist rhetoric prosper. Considering these understandings, this study works to provide an insight into the complex debates surrounding contemporary feminism.

### Research Questions:

To fully explore the femvertising rhetoric, I have devised three key research questions:

1. What does the reaction to contemporary advertising by the young people tell us about the commodification of contemporary feminism in the age of femvertising?
2. Can the commodification of feminism still be empowering?
3. Does femvertising help or hinder the core values of today’s contemporary feminism?

As global brands use female ‘empowerment’ initiatives in their marketing, products and brand image, we must ask whether the growth of feminism within media rhetoric is simply commercially driven or a wider symbol of change; especially as it is important not to confuse the power of consumption with the power of equality. It is argued brands are capitalising on the progressive shifts in wider society (Gengler, 2011). However, this doesn’t have to be viewed in a negative light. Femvertising can be considered a positive response to decades of sexist advertising, whilst others suggest it is merely a reimagining of old stereotypes (Johnston and Taylor, 2008). Are advertisers reclaiming feminism for the good of the public or simply hijacking the movement? These are Riley’s questions, as she suggests this new ‘trend’ within popular culture supports and incorporates feminist values into mainstream rhetoric whilst simultaneously rejecting those who champion political goals of the feminist movement itself (2001, p57). It is this ambivalence towards feminism that makes this study so enlightening.

Femvertising is complex: there are many ways a brand can represent female ‘empowerment’, albeit some more successfully than others. Whilst this form of feminism can have a negative impact upon the wider feminist movement, it is important to acknowledge that for some individuals this new form of ‘feminism’ will continue to be a form of ‘self-empowerment’. Indeed, Rottenberg argues it would be wrong to ‘simply dismiss neoliberal feminism as “faux

feminism” (2014, p171). Upon reflection, if female ‘empowerment’ is the goal, surely we should celebrate individuals who feel as though they have achieved ‘empowerment’- even if we do not view their form of ‘empowerment’ as within our own understandings of feminism. The study itself revealed these widely diverse perceptions of feminist ideologies. Further still, through using these feminist ideologies as a stand point for discussion, one is able to identify the value structures within feminist rhetoric and thus analyse how men and women use feminist ideologies to negotiate not only gender equality but their wider concepts of society (Johnston and Taylor, 2008, p944). Therefore, the analysis of feminist ideologies is a key focus for this project to not only understand feminism’s place within our media landscape, but as a tool to understand society.

## **Literature Review**

As addressed, feminist ideologies are complex and so are the understandings surrounding advertising within our digital society. For this reason, it is essential I unpack these two elements to truly understand the commodification of feminist ideology.

### **Theme One: Femvertising and Post-Feminist Ideologies**

Scholars argue we have reached an era of ‘post feminism’ in which feminist perspectives have become ‘common sense and form a part of young women’s narratives of gender issues’ (Scharff, 2013, p1). In agreement, Gill suggests that the ‘ordinariness and everydayness’ of feminism today can result in the feminist ideology being taken for granted (2007, p609). Whether this makes the feminist cause obsolete is debatable. On the one hand, the ‘common sense’ narrative suggests feminist ideas are widely accepted. On the other hand, and arguably more worryingly, the fact feminist ideologies are ‘common sense’ amongst young women hints to a passive ambivalence in fighting for gender equality. This ‘normalisation’ of feminism is evidenced within femvertising as the media move towards celebrating feminism rather than disavowing it (Adamson, 2016). This has changed the ways brands interact with new ‘liberated’ consumers as the arguable ‘pr-isation’ of the feminist ideology is increasingly harnessed by advertisers globally (Gengler, 2011)- an element this study shall explore.

On reflection, femvertising contains a well-crafted rhetoric that values consumption based (post-feminist) ideologies. Arthurs (2003) is widely heralded as a first to explore the popular post-feminist discourse of women ‘having it all’- linking the post-feminist ideology closely with representations of consumerism in *Sex and the City*. She argues the program uses the feminist discourse as a means to explain and respond to the changes in women’s social and economic status, providing women with the opportunity to view themselves within the characters (2003, p95). Through this, she argues, *Sex and the City* ‘establishes a space in popular culture for interrogation of our own complicity in the processes of commodification’ (2003, p96). As such, this form of feminism is still very much present and contributes to the analysis of the gendered consumption present within feminist ideology today (Catterall et al, 2005, p489). Further still, such perceptions shall be considered within the discourse analysis of the selected femvertisements.

Abitbol argues femvertising represents ‘real’ women in order to build relationships with consumers (2016, p118). However, whether this is a genuine attempt to break troubling beauty ideals or a calculated marketing ploy demands exploration; as damaging beauty ideals continue, instead we are just asked to believe they are normal. The *Dove* Real Beauty Campaign was one of the first forms of femvertising to achieve notable widespread success (Johnston and Taylor, 2008). Launching in 2004, it attempted to break stereotypical beauty ideals through portraying women of all ages, sizes and ethnicity (Johnston and Taylor, 2008, p941). However, as with many of the femvertising ads, the campaign featured undeniable contradictions through reducing feminist ideologies around ‘empowerment’ into a mere body lotion. This reflects Abitbol’s argument surrounding the clear tensions between feminism’s overall political message and individualistic consumer focus as the two are inertly conflicted (2016, p118). However, Abitbol argues to appear genuine, brands can implement practices that fund female ‘empowerment’ and ‘begin practicing what they preach’ (2016, p129). This fits with Johnston and Taylor’s suggestion that *Dove*’s contributions to charities supporting women and girls such as eating disorder organizations and Girl Scouts programs is an attempt to brand the company as a ‘progressive force for women’, making it difficult to entirely dismiss *Dove*’s ‘feminist’ narrative as a marketing ploy (2008, p943). However, *Dove*’s products are all about transforming your body to be smoother, shinier and firmer: it is still a product that emphasises the importance of soft skin over equal rights.

In essence, the spread of arguable feminist messaging within advertising can be regarded as ‘the spread of corporate messages that take an activist stance’ (Abitbol, 2016, p123). The debate lies in whether this ‘activist stance’ is a refreshing shift within advertising or whether it has harnessed the politics simply for promotion. Nonetheless, it is still a *corporate* message; evidence that feminism has become commodified. To analyse the positive perspective of femvertising, many female participants within Abitbol’s study suggested femvertising adverts may lead to positive attitude changes in men’s view towards women, as ‘they believed (or possibly hoped) that ads celebrating women’s ‘empowerment’ would make men respect women more’ (2016, p129). Therefore, femvertising messages could play a crucial role in today’s media environment, helping to improve and promote positive ideologies towards women. This idea will be explored within this study, especially as ‘only limited research has been done on the effectiveness of these campaigns’ (Abitbol, 2016, p118).



By contrast, other scholars argue the depoliticising of feminist ideals within femvertising is a strong recurring theme (Gengler, 2011. Lazar, 2014. Groeneveld, 2009). Gengler argues a true feminist rhetoric is centred around ‘demands for political and economic equality’ (2011, p68). Yet, today’s new femvertising landscape has transformed these ideas into a consumerist sensibility, suggesting ‘the refusal to settle for low-wages, violence, and second-class citizenship—morph into a refusal to settle for less than silky skin’ (2011, p68). Here, we can understand the feminist message is lost within the desire to become the ‘ideal woman’ - a further issue cemented by patriarchal demands over women’s bodies. For Gengler, femvertising is a form of ‘pseudo-feminism’ (2011, p68), drawing focus away from politics to elide with harmful beauty ideals. In this regard, the study will consider whether these same understandings around the de-politicisation of feminist ideals shape young peoples’ understandings of contemporary feminism today.

Gengler argues companies utilise femvertising to reconstruct old sexist messages as ‘brand new’. In doing so, the femvertising rhetoric ‘provides marketers an appealing way to sell even independent-minded girls old-fashioned deference and subordination as ‘empowerment’ (2011, p69). This rebranding of patriarchal ideals to ‘independent-minded women’ is particularly worrying as companies cynically promote these messages as ‘empowering’ whilst masking the true patriarchal structures. Lazar concurs, suggesting ‘under the guise of being pro-women, and represented as embraced by women unapologetically, advertisers have found a way to maintain traditional gendered stereotypes’ (2014, p208). Indeed, these ‘traditional gendered stereotypes’ juxtapose core feminist values, leading to this project’s question of whether femvertising helps or hinders contemporary feminism.

Taken together, and from the above scholarship, we can discern a rise in femvertising rhetoric: women’s fashion magazines are producing headlines such as ‘be a feminist or just dress like one’ (Groeneveld, 2009, p187). This individualises the feminist rhetoric, calling women to embody a form of ‘feminism’ fuelled by capitalist incentives- implying dressing like a feminist is the same as *being* feminist. Groeneveld explores the difficulties surrounding the commodification and individualisation of feminism, suggesting magazine headlines ‘seem to advocate the possibility of claiming a feminism that is almost devoid of politics’ (2009, p187). This leads to the question- has the popularisation of feminism left the movement depoliticised within the media sphere? Moreover, could the feminist movement still benefit from publicity despite its new de-politicisation? Groeneveld notes this type of messaging may be an ‘entry

point into feminism' (2009, p180). However, whilst the growth of 'lifestyle feminism' may help feminism appear more accessible, it arguably does so at the cost of the plight for true activism. Accordingly, 'lifestyle feminism' appears to support rather than challenge the harmful rhetoric of consumer orientated feminism and thus goes against central feminist values.

This ambivalence towards the feminist rhetoric is enough to make any feminist wary, especially as second wave feminists thrived from community and rallied against institutions that dictated who can be 'sexy' (Catterall et al, 2005). Cole and Hribar suggest key feminist critiques of the 60's and 70's mostly centred around 'anti-marketing and anti-consumerism' and as a result post-feminism juxtaposes the core values of fighting the manipulation of female consumers (2000, p495). Here lies the debate: can feminism prevail despite the modern-day commodification of not only the feminist ideology but also feminist identification? The reimagining of outdated oppressive ideas is deeply troubling and is arguable evidence as to why this study is necessary; are these reimagined notions well received or are young people starting to question this form of advertising? Considering these ideas, this study looks into whether the arguments for and against femvertising are applicable amongst University of Leeds students.

## **Theme Two: Celebrity Feminism and Popular Culture**

Key to understanding the complexity of this new 'popular' form of feminism is the exploration into how celebrity culture and feminist rhetoric have become deeply intertwined. Looking to the role of the media, many scholars suggest celebrities are bringing feminist issues into the forefront of the public's mind (Brady, 2016. Feasy, 2017. Evans and Riley, 2013), offering an interesting point of analysis for this study.

Tennent and Jackson explore celebrity involvement within the feminist agenda, suggesting whilst some scholars view celebrity contributions as 'evidence of a global feminist resurgence', others critique celebrity feminism as 'empty and devoid of political traction' (2017, p2). To unpack whether celebrity involvement is evidence of a 'a global feminist resurgence', Evans and Riley (2013) analyse the impact celebrity feminism has on of societal gender norms. The pair argue the public learn and reproduce gendered norms reflected in the media and images of

celebrities form a considerable part of such media imagery. Therefore, celebrities largely impact gender expectations and representations (2013, p268). Consequently, celebrities' representation of gender and feminism impacts audiences and thus can insight a resurgence of feminism amongst the public. Contemplating this, the later discourse analysis shall unpack these gendered representations and evaluate scholarly arguments through a femvertising lens.

However, the suggestion that celebrity feminism is 'empty and devoid of political traction' invites debate (Tennent and Jackson, 2017, p2). Keller and Ringrose (2015) suggest the new forms of 'popular feminism' acknowledge the fundamental gender inequalities present in society, however they argue it also 'disavows the social, cultural, and economic roots of these inequalities in favour of the neoliberal ethos of individual action' (2015 p132). Ergo, feminism becomes diluted, individualised and lessened through lack of group incentive for change. This arguably betrays traditional feminism as the collective and social elements are merely replaced with individualised consumerist sensibilities. Taking this forward in the study, it is important to analyse whether these understandings are felt within the focus groups and what this can tell us about how these representations contribute to 'empowerment'.

Hopkin's (2018) study of the United Nations Women's Goodwill Ambassadors examines the feminist ideologies that have become interwoven with activism and celebrity images, exploring whether the political ties of feminism are severed by celebrity involvement. She concluded that whilst celebrities may be well intentioned, their involvement is 'contradictory' as the ambassadors disavow global gender inequalities whilst owing their success to the stereotypical notions of femininity they embody. Indeed, the beauty ideals celebrated and commodified by the West undercuts the sincerity of their 'feminism' (2018, p274). Hopkins argues that celebrity involvement within the feminist rhetoric only leads to the public being sold a 'PR-ised version of feminist activism' (2018, p274), a version that is fundamentally 'privileged, white and a Western interpretation of ideal femininity and heteronormativity' (2018, p274). This exposure not only criticises the celebrities, it critiques the wider systemic misogynistic issues at the heart of media representations. And so, it is important for this study to analyse the celebrity involvement of femvertising and whether it is really a mere 'PR-ised version of feminist activism' (Hopkins, 2018, p274).

Although, it is important to ask whether it is the celebrity's role to explain the nuanced debates surrounding the systemic gender inequalities within our society? Surely celebrities can be used

simply as a gateway to get engage people with the cause and shouldn't be demanded to be anything more? Shouldn't we value our own autonomy and make our own decisions about feminism? To shed light on this, Keller and Ringrose conducted an effective study in which they interviewed a number of teenage girls about feminism within popular culture to gain an insight into young people's negotiation with popular feminism. The scholars discovered a negotiated response to the glossy celebrity feminism, suggesting 'girls are intent on shaping their own debates, producing their own media, and negotiating the contradictions presented by celebrity feminism with a great deal of wit and sensitivity' (2015 P134). Such findings indicate why it is so important to speak directly with audiences as to gain a wider understanding of social issues, validating the need to conduct focus groups as part of the study. Keller and Ringrose's findings can be considered as a positive response to how women and girls negotiate the new landscape of feminism. It indicates there is arguably hope for the future of feminism if young women are able to see through the potential charade of celebrity feminism and form their own feminist identities. Indeed, this study will consider similar avenues of exploration.

Reflecting upon these parallels, it is important to understand how celebrity's involvement within the contemporary dialect around feminism is impacting femvertising and people's understanding of the feminist rhetoric.

### **Theme Three: Representation of Femininity and Masculinity in Advertising**

The media's representations of femininity and masculinity enables scholars and audiences alike to recognise, understand and critique representational normative practices within both advertising and wider society (Gengler, 2011). To this end, it is necessary that this project considered these normative representations, and outlines why femvertising uses such ideologies. Furthermore, it can evidence how such representations consequentially impact notions of "empowerment" and whether it helps or hinders the core values of contemporary feminism.

Johnston and Taylor argue corporations play an important role when constructing and reproducing restrictive notions of beauty, suggesting advertisements present unattainable aesthetic of beauty standards. The media arguably institutionalise gender inequality through perpetuating misogynistic notions of women and their bodies (2008, p946). Here, the 'perpetuation' of such imagery is important as these misogynistic ideas are recirculated and

‘re- presented’ within the media and wider society, arguably hindering the core values of feminism. However, Johnston and Taylor argue the recent problematizing of restrictive beauty ideals within the media has led to corrective and progressive changes towards gender inequality- thus helping support the core values of feminism (2008, p946). Therefore, for this project, it is important to understand whether femvertising mimics or rejects this new trend and how this is understood amongst contemporary audiences.

Moreover, Johnston and Taylor suggest the representation of women has shifted from being simply appearance focused. Instead, women now also need to be confident within themselves as women in the media are represented as ‘feeling’ beautiful whilst embodying superficial beauty. The scholars explore this idea, arguing:

‘women are penalized for not being beautiful and at the same time are stigmatized, even pathologized, for not feeling beautiful, for having low self-esteem, for engaging in behaviours like dieting and excessive exercising, or for having eating disorders’ (2008, p954)

To this end, women’s confidence and arguably, their subsequent ‘empowerment’, has become a commodified entity. Women have involuntarily become part of a damaging wider ideology that demands impossible standards of beauty whilst also implying one must feel confident in their own skin no matter what. This is not only hypocritical; it is arguably unattainable on a wide scale. These messages seek to profit from women’s insecurities, making women doubly insecure if they are not embodying ‘self-love’. For this project, what this literature directs us to think about is how femvertising sits within this rhetoric of inner and outer beauty and whether these image-focused consumerist sensibilities help or hinder the core values of feminism.

Focussing on representations of masculinity, Connell and Messerschmitt (2005) provide insightful understandings of hegemonic masculinity and the media. The pair explain masculinity is ‘criticized for being framed within a heteronormative conception of gender that essentializes male-female difference and ignores difference and exclusion within the gender categories’ (2005, p836). This simplification of the nuances of masculinity and the binary opposition of male-female are what ultimately contributes to societies patriarchal structure. Additionally, the focus of ‘male-female difference’ is most notable in advertisements as men are normally the subjects of advertisements whilst women instead are routinely objectified

(Lazar, 2014). Furthermore, Connell and Messerschmitt explain these portrayals of masculinity become culturally accepted and consequently the ‘marginalization or delegitimation of alternatives are widely documented features of socially dominant masculinities’ (2005, p846). In this scenario, representations become supported by wider media and society and become ideals of masculinity: ‘symbols that have authority despite the fact that most men and boys do not fully live up to them’ (2005, p846). Considering this, men are arguably facing similar unattainable struggles as women. Therefore, for this project, it is important to consider these understandings when negotiating men’s reaction to the advertisements in the focus groups and their nuanced understandings of femvertising.

Taking together the literature I have engaged with, it draws our attention to the importance of representations which I later explore through my discourse analysis. Of equal importance are the complexities of gender ideologies and notions surrounding ‘empowerment’, explored in my focus groups. The arguments point to whether the commodification of feminism is a sincere desire to promote a feminist rhetoric or instead a misguided attempt to cash in on the feminist movement.

## **Methodology:**

As previously mentioned, the methods used in this project are focus groups followed by feminist discourse analysis. Feminism can be regarded as an ideologically complex and controversial subject (Brady, 2016). In order to capture the complexities of the debates around femvertising, feminism and gender representation, the methodology had to allow for open discussion and debate- something that cannot be captured in a simple questionnaire (for example). Therefore, a focus group was thoroughly appropriate as it enabled a discursive and dialogic response attuned to the sociological statures of gender dynamics and subsequent power related social structures.

Looking to details of the focus group, four specific adverts were shown from *Google*<sup>1</sup>, *Always*<sup>2</sup>, *H&M*<sup>3</sup> and *Gillette*<sup>4</sup>. A careful process was taken to select the advertisements: each had to have been released within the past three years; have a high number of views and most importantly, feature numerous notable ‘femvertising’ elements illustrated within the literature review. Appendix Figure 16 features an overview of the advertisements and explores the numerical data and reasons for selection. The selection of advertisements also had to demonstrate a range of gendered and gender-neutral brands- i.e. *Google* vs *Always*. As it is a western study, western ads were chosen, however this study does appreciate that these ads may have been received very differently if they were shown to individuals from areas with harsher restrictions against women both socially and politically.

Looking to ethics, participants were provided with an information sheet about the study (Appendix Figure 18) before the focus group discussion took place as to help them decide if they wanted to continue. Each participant also signed a consent form Appendix Figure 15).

I decided to provide question prompts (Appendix Figure 19) to offer direction for the participants, although overall I wanted an open and free conversation. I was aware my presence may have altered what was said within discussions, consequently I opted to only make myself available towards the end of the focus groups to answer questions and invite further comments

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkfpqGWzHCE&list=PLvc3dVzGTTvZHjooyYIDcAULwug140WPk&index=2&t=0s>

<sup>2</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Emawq64b0DU&list=PLvc3dVzGTTvZHjooyYIDcAULwug140WPk&index=3>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-RY6fWVrQ0&list=PLvc3dVzGTTvZHjooyYIDcAULwug140WPk&index=2>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koPmuEyP3a0&list=PLvc3dVzGTTvZHjooyYIDcAULwug140WPk&index=4>

or critique. Moreover, I ensured that each member knew at least one other person in each group. Both of these elements helped participants speak unhindered, allowing them to feel comfortable when discussing a potentially political topic. It also enabled a richness of articulation as I wanted to understand how participants expressed their opinions rather than just the opinion itself. The close access to participants provided the opportunity for truly insightful comments and created a glimpse into the multi-layered complexities surrounding the debates of gender, 'empowerment', commercialism and capitalism. It was also a suitable means of making an arguably hard and complex topic accessible to those who may have not engaged in feminist rhetoric previously. Indeed, the qualitative approach allowed close engagement with participants and the learnt cultural norms, behaviour and values expressed within such a personal method (Mertens, 2018, p2).

As the study negotiates numerous subjective opinions, it does not claim to be an objective look on such complex issues. Instead it embraces the subjective nature of the debate by exploring the varied opinions expressed by participants. Justifying this further, Lunt and Livingstone argue 'qualitative methods compensate for their lack of reliability with greater validity' (1996, p92) and upon reflection, the honest and candid conversations within the focus group do truly compensate for a loss of objectivity.

It was also essential the study worked to actively and effectively to negotiate the complexities of the gender power dynamics within the focus group setting. Mertens (2018) explains in order to conduct a study that is 'culturally responsive', one has to be aware of the power dynamics between not only the researcher and the participants but also between the participants themselves (2018, p6). This reading partly informs my decision to leave the room for part of the conversation, not least because I considered carefully the impact of my own gender on each focus group dynamic. The three focus groups were split by gender into mixed, all male and all female categories. I was keenly interested in how the social and cultural backgrounds of each group would play into reception of the adverts and how the ideologies are negotiated. The variety of discussion and debates as a result of these splits contributed greatly to the study and were a key strength. For example, the males appeared more open and candid in their discussion of gender within the male only group in comparison to those in the mixed group. Furthermore, it was important to provide women with an equal opportunity of power dynamic within the all-female group and this was evidenced in the findings as women were more forthcoming with criticism and debate in comparison to the mixed group; thereby supporting the suggestion that



some women can feel overwhelmed by the dominant presence of men within a focus group (Mertens, 2018). To explore power dynamics even further, I also found it necessary to ensure my non-binary participant felt comfortable and was not restricted to binary categories and so placed them in the mixed gendered group.

Pointing to the later research, when quoting participants within the dissertation, their pseudonyms, group and age is provided, further information can be found within the participant profiles (Appendix Figure 20). The focus group quotations in the findings are representative of wider ideas expressed in the focus groups, a more complete collection of quotes can be found in Appendix Figure 21. This is to provide wider scope and is an ethical decision to uncover as much of the participant's arguments as possible.

Looking to the discourse analysis, the study of the four adverts provided an opportunity for deeper investigation into how the adverts represent issues within the femvertising rhetoric as well as underpinning or extending the themes emerging from the focus group debates. Indeed, the discourse analysis was framed by feminist perspectives and ethos, looking at the wider argument of feminism and wondering where these ideas are present.

On a further point, organisation was absolutely crucial in order to conduct a successful focus group and I believe my findings were greatly enhanced by meticulous planning. Appendix Figure Fifteen shows a work plan flow chart of the specific decision process taken to create the best possible results.

Moving to critically analyse my study, one obvious outcome of my chosen methods is the prioritisation of depth and richness over scope and breadth. The methods rely on researchers' interpretation and mediation and perhaps my own politics emerge in the analysis later more than they might if I had used other methods. Whilst 24 participants may appear to be small scale, this study does not claim to be entirely representative and has neither the resources nor the funding to include a greater number of participants. It is also important to outline my position as a young, white, degree-educated woman who identifies as a feminist and whilst scholarly research should aim to be objective, there will always be a level of subjectivity within one's own research, especially when the research uses both a critical analysis and a focus group. To expand the research further, it would be interesting to hold focus groups in the exact same

format but with older and younger participants to track how opinions and discussion can change through the generations.

## **Findings**

The first common finding from this project was that most participants showed complex understandings of femvertising. The varied responses hint at the nuanced understandings of this topic and the ways people of different genders and political ideologies navigate representations of feminism. The tensions highlighted within the literature between consumption and equality are evident and participant's reactions certainly made this study relevant within the communications field. I have organised this section around emerging themes and have weaved my own discourse analysis into the focus group findings in order to examine how the focus group comments link to the wider feminist perspectives and the core values of contemporary feminism.

To recap the study's research questions:

- What does the reaction of the young people tell us about the commodification of 'empowerment' and contemporary feminism in the age of femvertising?
- Can femvertising still be an empowering force for young people?
- Does femvertising help or hinder the core values of today's contemporary feminism?

## **Confidence as a Commodity**

The understandings surrounding the commodification of feminism are complicated as 'confidence has become an imperative in contemporary culture' (Gill, 2007, p618). Banet-Weiser (2018) argues femvertising promotes a new form of contemporary popular feminism, through which the representations of the feminist ideologies work to either help or hinder the core values of feminism. She argues 'contemporary popular feminism reimagines and redirects what "empowerment" means for girls and women, and thus is restructuring feminist politics within neoliberal culture' (2018, p17). Therefore, the relationship between 'empowerment' and feminist politics becomes a key point of exploration as this study's motive is to discover how representations of 'empowerment' are understood by young people. Indeed, participant's reactions tell us about the commodification of contemporary feminism in the femvertising age.

Looking to *Always*, the brand claims to bring confidence to ‘everyday girls’, fighting the perceived societal gender boundaries. Within the focus group many participants recognised the brand focused on confidence issues amongst young girls, commenting this was a refreshing take on the “female empowerment” movement. For example, Rachel states ‘I like that it was building on confidence and they wanted to feel like you were *worth* feeling confident’ (21, female group). Seen here, she is highlighting key perceptions surrounding the representation of women’s achievable ‘worth’, as sport is positioned as a means for girls to reaffirm and validate their value further. This directly links with wider notions of women and girl’s inner confidence; allowing girl’s actions to be a form of ‘empowerment’ rather than viewing their appearance as the pinnacle of their self-worth.

To note another key exploration, Chloe suggests *Always* move away from focusing solely on their products, commenting ‘they are not just talking about the period element; they are talking about how it can result in women lacking in confidence especially when it comes to the sport-side of it. I think that’s a worthy thing to do’ (mixed group, 21). Here, Chloe establishes how the advertisement invites the audience not to view *Always* as simply a sanitary pad company, instead it implies the brand help consumers to move past period taboos through citing confidence in sport as a way to “empower” young girls. Therefore, through disappearing their products, the brand attempt to portray themselves differently. Indeed, *Always* are different to some others insofar as they (through their parent company *P&G*) visibly sponsor leadership and sport initiatives for women and girls. Moreover, *Gillette* are also owned by *P&G* and *Gillette* should be considered in the same understanding. This indicates that to call *Always* and *Gillette* ‘faux feminist’ companies might be too dismissive considering they have evidence of supporting women in a wider non-commercial context. Whilst *Always* use a feminist ideology as a means of self-promotion they disappear their product and only use their own brand name a handful of times, perhaps indicating they may truly want to their advert to simply focus on ‘empowering’ young girls. However, to cast a sceptical element to the analysis, in an era of targeted ads it is in the interests of advertisers to appear sincere so that the adverts themselves will be viewed for longer. This also might explain the rise in adverts that seem to be more issue- and less product-focussed (Walker Reczek et al. 2016). Reflecting upon these points, the project analyses how femvertising brands tread a difficult boundary between capitalist incentive and being seen as genuine. However, considering the participants overwhelming positive response to the ad, *Always* appear to be succeeding.

Although, it can be argued *Always* actively ignore the wider social and structural issues causing the lack of girls' confidence and instead focus on the individualised process of playing sports rather than wider change. Through this, *Always* represents 'confidence' as part of their brand image, suggesting it is for sale; thus tying to understandings surrounding women's confidence as a purchasable element of individualised neo-liberal identity (Gill, 2007, Banet-Weiser, 2018). This fits with Lazar's argument that the new post-feminist landscape has seen a rise in a new feminine identity as the ideal woman is 'ultra-confident and comfortable in her fragmented, contradictory and ambivalent identity' (2014, p222). The 'ambivalence' is key as this entire study is based on the difficult relationships between being empowered whilst simultaneously disempowered by society's unbreakable ties to capitalist ideologies. However, such commodification was surprisingly well received by the participants as whilst the individualisation of the feminist rhetoric is taking place, the overall message of 'empowering' young girls into sport was deemed as 'undoubtedly positive'. For example, Jason stated 'I think *Always* are using their position as the market leader to raise awareness which is a really good thing to do' (mixed group, 22). This leads to the question: does the benefit of encouraging young girls to partake in sports outweigh the negatives of individualisation and commodification of the feminist rhetoric? The focus group argue it does, indicating a shift in contemporary perceptions of the feminist rhetoric.

The *Always* advertisement represents young girls playing sport, tackling, running and wearing boxing attire (Figures 1 & 2); this could be seen to challenge stereotypical representations of femininity. These are refreshing representations and affords a positive and powerful understanding of not only young girl's confidence but also their personal ambitions surrounding their involvement in sport. Interestingly, this contrasts with the critical literature surrounding femvertising. For example, instead of showing young girls in feminine dresses, the girls are shown in arguably 'masculine' ways through their behaviour and attire (Figures 1 & 2); juxtaposing Johnston and Taylor's suggestion that femvertising works to present an unattainable aesthetic of 'feminine' beauty (2008, p946). Whilst these representations are not politically centred, they can be understood as helping the core values of contemporary feminism as it allows audiences to view young girls in a non-stereotypical light, thus helping to break patriarchal structures.

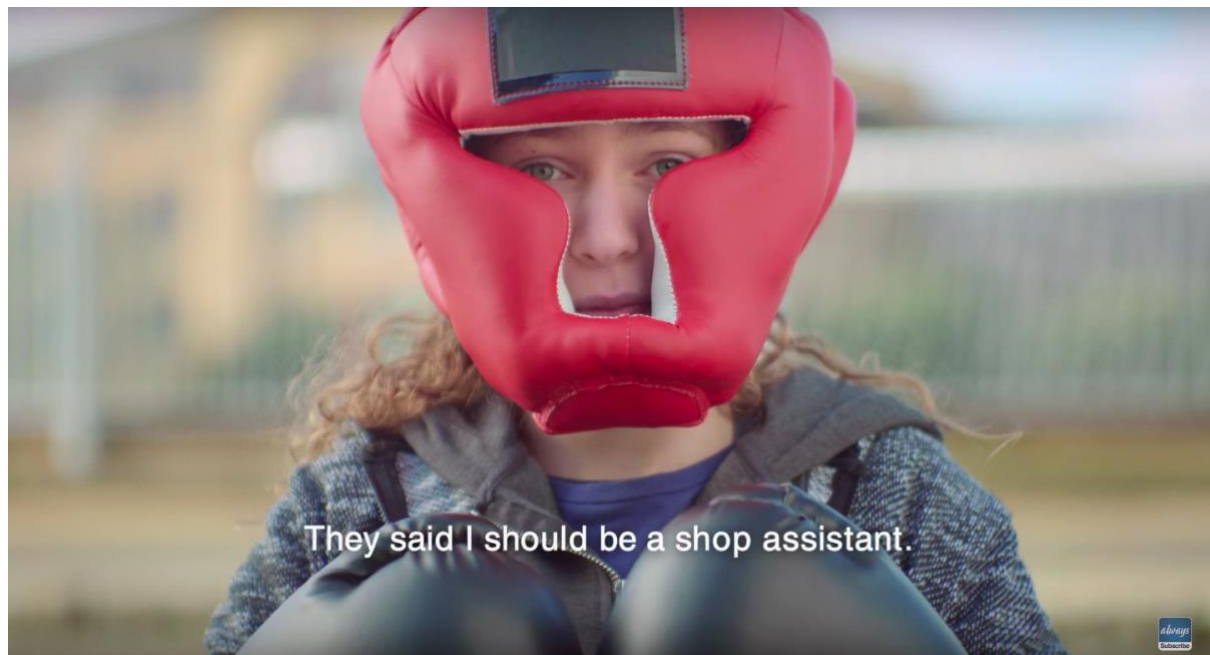


Figure 1



Figure 2

Looking to the focus groups and discourse analysis, it is clear women's confidence and their subsequent 'empowerment' has become a commodified entity. Whether this exploits feminist values or simply part of living in a neo-liberal capitalist age, *Always* use individualisation of feminist values as a means of instilling confidence within young girls. The advert focuses on what individuals can do to feel 'empowered' rather than exploring the wider issues of institutionalised issues that cause a lack of confidence such as rampant sexism in sports,

schools and wider society. This resonates with Johnston and Taylor's argument that newfound 'feminist' consumerism 'resists naming structural inequality, classism, or institutionalized racism' (2008, p960). However, the positive comments from the focus group and the representations explored through the discourse analysis indicate the relationship between 'empowerment' and the core values of contemporary feminism doesn't necessarily have to be negative.

### **Brand Insincerity: Is Empowerment Solely for the 'Beautiful'?**

Of all the advertisements shown, the debates about women's appearance in reference to 'empowerment' surrounded *H&M*. For the purposes of this section, I am going to approach the discourse analysis first rather than focus group discussion as the focus group discussion unpacks the discourse regarding representation.

Looking to a discourse analysis using feminist perspectives and ethos, some representations broke normative trends of women in the media. For example, the advertisement included shots of women eating (Figure 5), muscular women (Figure 4), women with underarm hair (Figure 5) and larger women (Figure 6), all examples of non-stereotypical femininity. Moreover, the advertisements featured women of all different races; a positive step for intersectional feminism. Each of these elements fit into the femvertising rhetoric as the 'diverse' representations aim to engage and characterize a range of women. Representing these 'diverse' women helps to challenge beauty ideals in fashion advertisements and therefore can be seen as helping to improve the overall representation of women in the media. Indeed, Johnston and Taylor argue beauty ideals presented in the media hold great power as these notions of beauty are internalised and socially legitimised by audiences and wider media sources. Considering audiences receive validation of their own beauty from the media, the 'diverse' representations of women allows a range of women to embrace their forms of 'less stereotypical' beauty; thus indicating how the commodification of feminism can still be empowering.

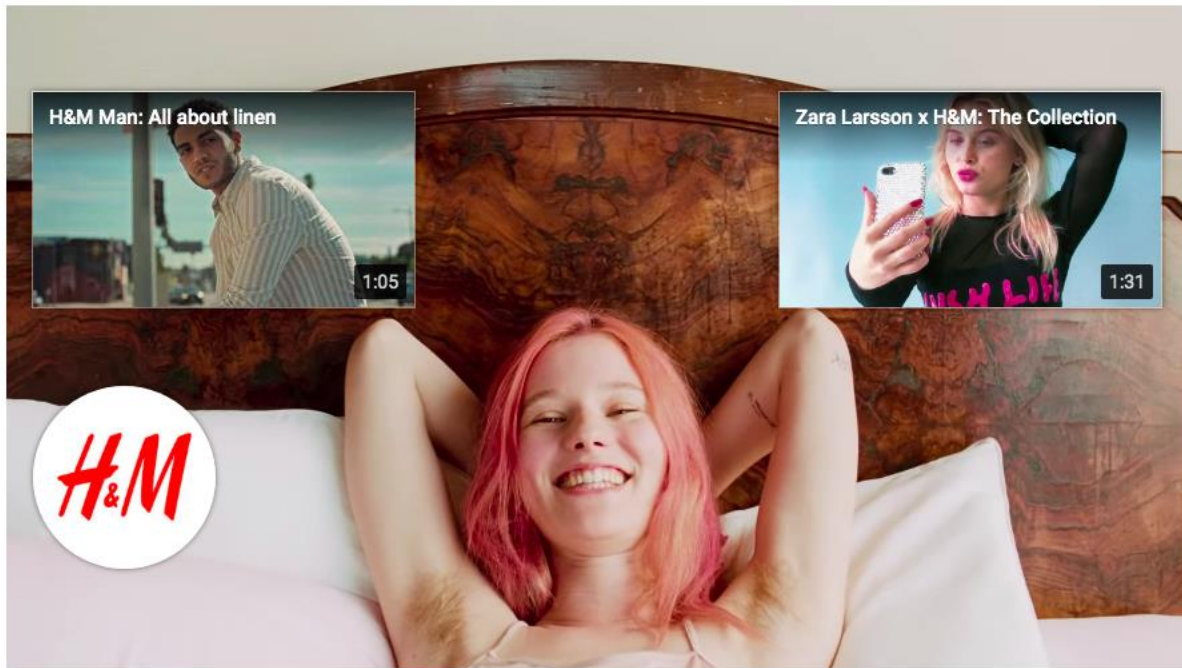


*Figure 3*

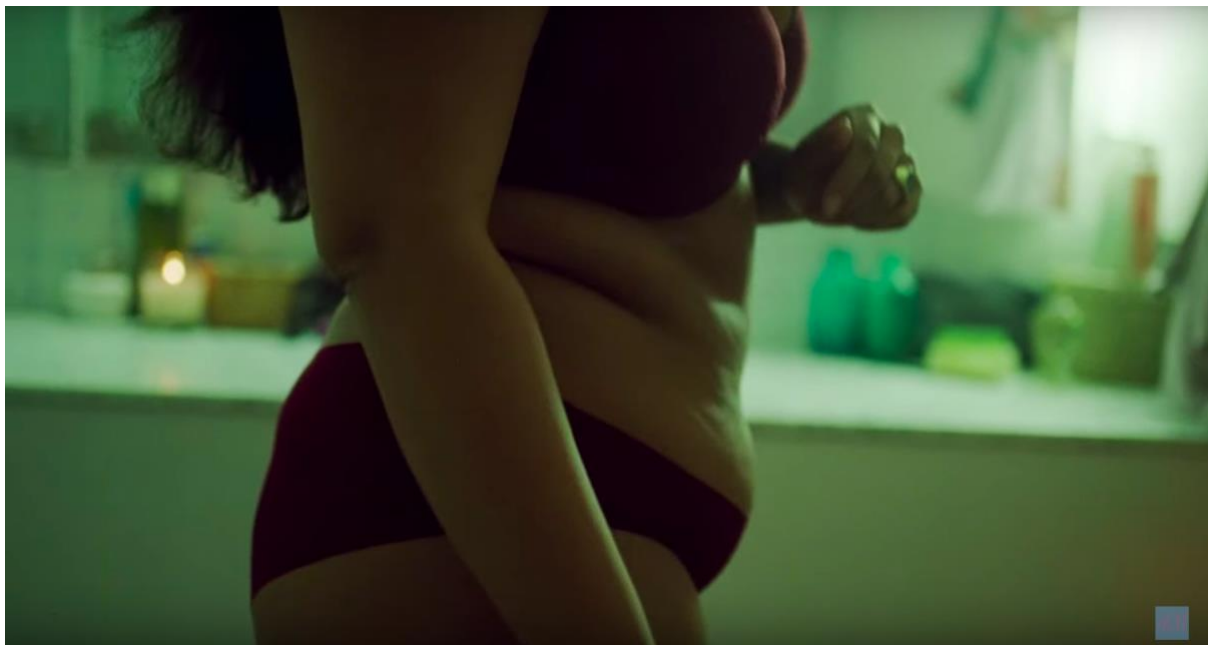


*Figure 4*





*Figure 5*



*Figure 6*

However, diversity of appearance doesn't offer women a realistic idea of how they can champion political feminism, focusing instead on 'stylish' feminism. This provides a superficial form of 'empowerment' and is about individual change instead of societal change. Consequently, it does not support the core political values of contemporary feminism. Linking to scholarly work, Groeneveld argues whilst femvertising invites women to embrace different forms of beauty, albeit if somewhat limited, it does so at the cost of 'true' activism. Therefore,

the *H&M* advert fulfils Groeneveld's argument that femvertising 'seems to advocate the possibility of claiming a feminism that is almost devoid of politics' (2009, p187). The advert views women's appearance as a key focus of importance rather than the wider social issues, reiterating the troubling idea that women can 'be a feminist or just dress like one' (Groeneveld, 2009, p187). Following this, the project has highlighted how femvertising messages can be devoid of political incentive and thus can hinder the core values of feminism.

As part of the focus group's critique of the advertisement, the notion of 'female empowerment' was regarded as insincere. For example, it was noted that whilst a small number of women in the advert have a 'larger' body type, they appeared to be simply 'tokenistic' inclusions and their faces still fit stereotypical notions of beauty. For example, Toby argued 'these were women who are the fashion industry's standard of 'plus size'. They were all commercially attractive rather than the women you see every day' (male group, 23). This led him to ask the question, 'is empowerment only for beautiful people?' (male group, 23). Moreover, Hugo supported this idea: 'it didn't really feel that empowering because it doesn't really feel inclusive' (male group, 20). The boys share a tone of scepticism surrounding the 'diverse' nature of the advert, revealing a level of animosity towards femvertising amongst young adults. Toby's focus on commercial attractiveness in reference to the wider fashion industry is a testament to how even femvertising cannot break the powerful hegemonic notions of feminine beauty: beauty still presented as a gatekeeper of worth and 'empowerment'. This links directly to Gengler's argument surrounding 'pseudo-feminism', in which femvertising ads are refocused towards embracing toxic ideas of beauty and consumer centred ideals at the cost of women demanding further political and economic equality (2011, p68). This is thoroughly problematic when considering femvertising's role in helping or hindering the core values of today's contemporary feminism. In this case, *H&M*'s femvertisement appears to hinder the feminist cause as the focus on patriarchal standards of beauty renders the 'feminist' ideology within the advert obsolete.

Furthermore, many of the female participants argued their own experiences in the *H&M* stores are a stark contrast to the 'diversity' conveyed in the advertisement. This ties to wider notions of using feminist ideologies merely for capitalist gain instead of implementing real changes. Abitbol suggests consumers will often judge a brand's sincerity by looking at whether the corporation supports an ideology across the company instead of simply conveying 'staged performances of women's power' (2016, p122). Linking this idea to the participants'

comments, Megan said ‘I liked that they had bigger women, but *H&M* are renowned for having small sizes’ (female group, 20). For Megan, her understandings of the advert are framed by the lived experience of interacting with the brand, and this caused scepticism around whether the advertisement is truly sincere in its ‘empowerment’ message. Through this, one can induce that young people’s understandings towards the commodification of feminism is parallel with their lived experiences of the brands; femvertising is only sincere if the lived experience matches the ‘empowerment’ message.

Furthermore, Antonia notes *H&M*’s involvement with sweatshops completely undermines the credibility as a ‘feminist’ brand stating:

‘sweatshops are always where women are being sexually, physically and emotionally exploited. They don’t pay decent wages and they don’t care about their worker’s rights. I can’t buy the idea that it’s a ‘feminist brand’ because as soon as you get down to the production line it’s all just all about exploiting women’ (mixed group, 20).

Her comments indicate femvertising messages fail if brands do not have the institutional evidence to support their standpoint: the sexual and emotional exploitation of women clearly negates the core values of feminism. Antonia continues, stating ‘you can wear these clothes so you can become “the feminist woman” in the first world off the back of women who are being exploited in the third world’ (mixed group, 22). Considering this, *H&M*’s actions hinder contemporary feminism, limiting their ‘empowerment’ to an entirely first world rhetoric through exploiting those in the third world. The brand hides their exploitation of women in the ad and is arguably no better than that of the damaging patriarchy, actively going against the equality issues that feminism is fighting for.

In all, the discourse analysis and the focus group discussion implies the ‘diverse’ representation of women’s bodies stays within the limits of the fashion industry’s damaging beauty ideals. Furthermore, the lived experiences in *H&M* stores and the company’s use of sweatshops leads us to question the sincerity of *H&M*’s apparent ‘feminist’ rhetoric. However, *H&M*’s attempt to become part of the femvertising rhetoric indicates a step towards more positive responses to feminism in the media, albeit a small step.

## New Way to 'Be a Man'?

Of all of the adverts played, *Gillette* received the most praise. Their ad uses the femvertising rhetoric and channels it through a male perspective, showcasing how men can change their behavior towards each other, as well as women. This, in my opinion, sends a powerful message in relation to the fight for equality as it engages men in a conversation they may otherwise dismiss.

The participants intensely discussed the advert's engagement with sexual harassment. Lucinda stated 'I like how it's teaching men to be better rather than telling women how they can change their behaviour' (female group, 18). She continued to say, 'it shows decent men stopping other men's poor behaviour and that's the best bit about it because it tells men not to turn a blind eye to it. Whilst you might not do it yourself, you should stop other people from doing it' (female group, 18). What this reaction directs us to think about is *Gillette*'s use of an issue such as sexual harassment (a problem that is clearly relevant within contemporary feminism) and utilise their advert as a platform to promote a positive message. This fits within the femvertising framework: it suggests that men's behaviour needs to change rather than women's behaviour or attire. Considering this, one can argue femvertising does aid the core values of contemporary feminism.

The range of reactions to *Gillette*'s emphasis on men as the agents of change whilst placing men as objects within the advertisement was particularly interesting. Placing men as objects is not common within stereotypical advertising, as men are normally the subjects of advertisements, whilst women instead are routinely objectified (Lazar, 2014). The groups acknowledged the wider public backlash to the advert as Ethan suggests 'the Gillette ad was telling men *not* to do something whereas the other ads were telling them *to* do something, so that was why the reactions may have been different' (Male group, 22). Men may have found this advert problematic because masculinity is taken for granted and is the set norm, almost as if masculinity is a given process of identification (Connell and Messerschmitt, 2005). It could be argued that when men watch adverts, they identify not only with characters but also the grounds of the text, which are gender normative and patriarchal (Lazar, 2014). However, the *Gillette* advert moves away from this normative behaviour and instead calls men out. One of the male participants had an oppositional response to the advert, stating 'we put it on in the

house and watched it to see what all the fuss was about and we thought it was a waste of our time' (Sebastian, mixed group, 21). What we can note here is the rejection of the advert and its message, as well as the hostility to it ('waste of our time'). This is perhaps a response to the 'outing' of men (as subject and object), disrupting the normalised concepts of masculinity. Moreover, to explain this through a theoretical perspective, Connell and Messerschmitt argue men have become accustomed to a culturally accepted form of hegemonic masculinity as any alternative embodiments of masculinity are routinely marginalised and delegitimized' (2005, p846). *Gillette's* complete overhaul of this 'routine behaviour' is thus problematic for some men. The problem for men is that they are being asked to identify with people on screen and in doing so have to look at the problems that are being represented in society, putting men in an unusually comprising position. Indeed, Sebastian's argument that the advert was 'unnecessary' is the very reason femvertising needs to prosper; the narrative around sexual harassment has to be made more common place, indicating it should not and will not be accepted. Some may find it disheartening that an individual would be so dismissive of an advert that is clearly trying to help both men and women. It is an example of the flippancy some have in the regard of men's treatment towards women, thus indicating the necessary need for feminism and femvertising.

Conversely, the overwhelmingly positive reaction to the ad from nearly all participants invites us to examine how commodification of contemporary feminism is understood. The positive response links well to Calder-Dawe and Gavey's theory that femvertising can paint feminism in a positive light, helping to abolish the negative stereotypes of hard line 'bra burning' feminists that became known in the media. For example, the pair suggest 'by constructing feminism as fundamentally concerned with tackling gendered inequalities facing both men and women, this discourse refutes claims that feminism is deceptive, out of date, extreme and man-hating' (Calder-Dawe and Gavey, 2016, p497). Linking this to *Gillette*, they are making feminism accessible and help the core values of contemporary feminism thus contrasting the superficial feminism in the *H&M* advertisement. Moreover, the groups positive reaction links to Abitbol's study in which his participants hoped femvertising could help men respect women more (2016, p129) and my study mirrors this exact finding, thus cementing the research within the wider field.

Shifting to discourse analysis, the use of #MeToo is particularly interesting. The advert uses real news clips exploring the movement from multiple channels worldwide (Figure 7);

legitimising the advert within a real-world context. This was also noticed by participants, as Toby stated, ‘the inclusion of the #MeToo campaign was really powerful and using news clips gave it a real world tangibility’ (male group, 23). In this instance, the ad affords femvertising a somewhat political stance and works to validate and promote feminism’s political agenda thus, aiding the core values of feminism. In addition, the use of celebrity is notable as *Gillette* use Terry Cruse as a spokesperson for the #MeToo movement (Figure 8). Here, the ad draws from wider perspectives to support and validate their feminist arguments. I argue this empowers audiences more than just a brand focusing on ‘empowerment’ through appearance (*H&M*) or individualised confidence (*Always*). Tennent and Jackson’s argument that celebrity involvement in feminism is ‘empty and devoid of political traction’ (2017, p2) is entirely discredited in this ad, as Terry Crews’ speech was not only heartfelt as he himself is an abuse survivor, but also because the case of sexual assault is very much a political issue. In this instance, instead of feminism becoming diluted through individualisation (Tennet and Jackson, 2017), the promotion of group incentive for men to change affords a collective feminist identity within the ad, helping the core values of feminism.



Figure 7



Figure 8

Furthermore, Evans and Riley's argument surrounding the sheer impact celebrity feminism has upon societal gender norms is particularly applicable within the *Gillette* ad. For example, showing men such as Terry Crews speaking out about how 'men need to hold other men accountable' contributes to a reinvention of traditional masculinity. As Evans and Riley explain, the public learn and reproduce the gendered norms reflected within the media, Crews' reinvention of gender expectations can arguably benefit the feminist movement as it helps reshape toxic masculinity. This idea was followed in the focus group as Toby stated 'Terry Crews helps *redefine manliness* by being this huge muscular man who talks about his feelings' (23, male group), indicating that gender constructions play a huge role in young people's understandings of contemporary feminism.

Considering both the focus group and the discourse analysis, *Gillette's* ad helps fulfil the core values of contemporary feminism. The focus groups' reaction highlighted how the commodification of feminist ideas does not have to strip feminism from its political ideologies as it showcases the #MeToo campaign in a positive light. Moreover, the inclusion of Terry Crews challenges fundamental understandings of masculinity, indicating celebrity involvement can actually help engage audiences and benefit the core values of today's contemporary feminism.



## Step in The Right Direction?

As my findings come to a close, I'm going to use this section to further explore the themes I have already discussed. This includes the 'disappearing' of products or brands, and the power of consumerism, alongside a separate aspect of analysis specifically about *Google*.

Within focus groups, the *Google* advert created the most controversy. This appeared to be linked to the gravity *Google* hold as one of the most powerful brands on the planet, as Ryan illustrates, 'they are in the best position to get the message out there even though they might be doing it for selfish reasons' (male group, 22). The conversation centred around the capitalism vs feminism debate, questioning whether the two can exist harmoniously. Within the advert, the notion of 'female empowerment' is elevated above *Google*'s status as a brand. The imagery focuses on the public rather than *Google* itself with the logo only featured in the last two seconds of the ad (Figure 9). By elevating the feminist rhetoric above the importance of the brand, the advert follows a popular femvertising-theme that the message is 'not about the brand'. This can be considered a hypocritical idea put forward by capitalist companies in an attempt to convince the public their focus is on feminism and not consumer sensibilities when in fact they are merely using feminist ideologies to sell a product. This links to Abitbol's argument that femvertising is merely a '*corporate* message that takes an activist stance' (2016, p123). Through this 'activist stance', *Google* are choosing to be a 'vehicle' rather than a facilitator in real activism: they do not change us but we change ourselves. Looking to how this fits within the question of whether the commodification of feminism can still be 'empowering', it appears that in some cases the public empower themselves and do not rely on the femvertising message as a source of 'empowerment'.



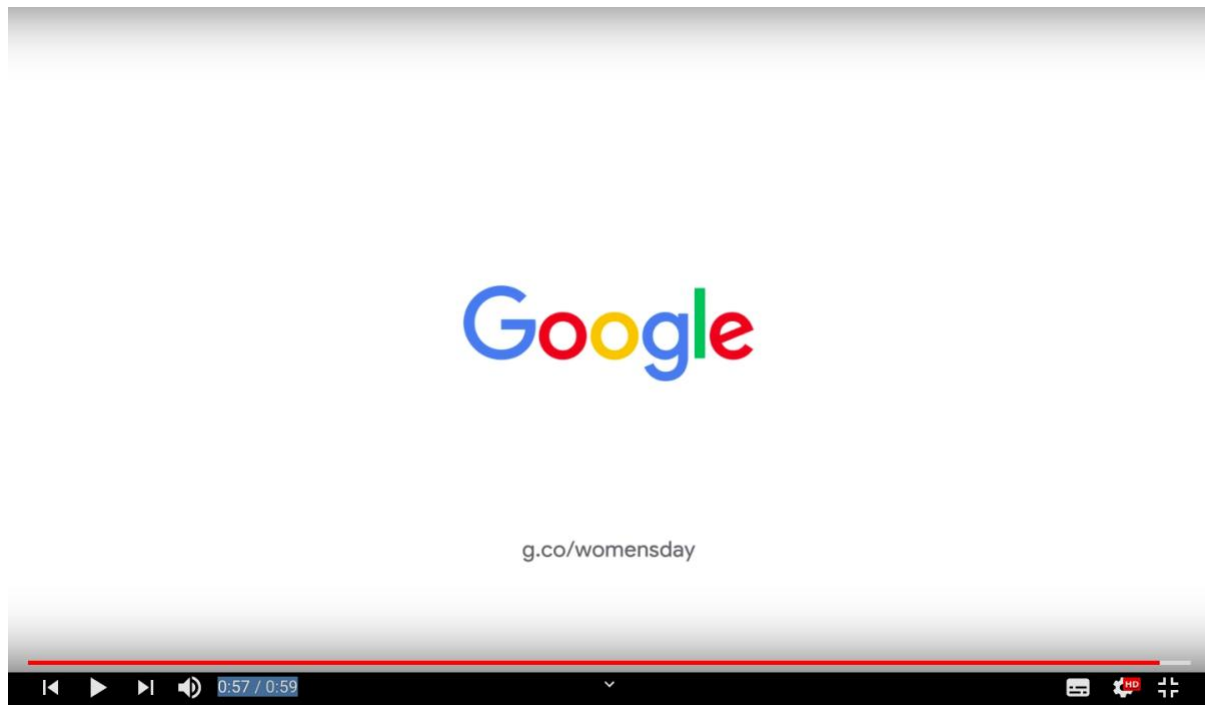


Figure 9

The focus group and discussion revealed that participants understood the core role capitalism plays within organisations like *Google*. The discussions brought together two discourses surrounding the benefits of femvertising and the negativity surrounding commodification of ‘empowerment’. Many argued that negotiating our capitalist society is simply a necessary feat when promoting the feminist movement. For example, Hayley astutely pointed out:

‘We currently live in a capitalist society and we can’t escape that. Things are going to be used to make money and I’d rather things that are feminist be used even if its shallow because it means the message is there and creates a social discourse...we should be wary when saying as soon as something is used in advertising it’s no longer a movement...maybe certain companies do really care’ (female group, 24)

Here, Hayley tackles with the overall dilemma within the study: are the feminist ideologies presented in femvertising undermined by the overall capitalist framework advertising exists within? For Hayley, there appears to be an acceptance of the capitalist status quo, as she understands capitalism is part of the society we live in and therefore argues capitalist messages can at least have a positive ideology of ‘empowering’ women. Moreover, Hayley’s notable point that we need to be wary of dismissing the brands using the feminist rhetoric was particularly key. Just because the feminist rhetoric has entered the advertising space, it doesn’t make the mission of feminism any less valid. As this study has revealed, some brands do use

the rhetoric to help promote a positive feminist message. All considered, the feminist fight will continue, with or without a capitalist framework.

Megan explores this similar idea, arguing capitalist messages may be the only way to grab audience attention, suggesting ‘you can’t have a campaign about women’s rights if it’s not cloaked in some kind of advertising, you need to be realistic about the society we live in. It has to use celebrities and people that others are interested in for it to work’ (female group, 20). Indeed, *Google* use the idea of ‘individualistic celebrity interest’ as a means of promotion, a reoccurring theme throughout the study. For example, the ad features Malala Yousafzai, Noble Prize winner (Figure 10); Tarana Burke, founder of the #MeToo movement (Figure 11) and Danica Roem, the first transgender person to be elected and serve in any US state legislature (Astor, 2017) (Figure 12). Tying to scholarly explorations, this inclusion flips Hopkin’s rationale that celebrity involvement within the feminist rhetoric only promotes a form of feminism that is fundamentally ‘privileged, white and a Western interpretation of ideal femininity and heteronormativity’ (2018, p274). Instead, *Google* use non-white and socially marginalised celebrities to champion feminism and therefore can be seen as breaking away from superficial femvertising norms. This begs the question: in order for feminism to gain publicity, is it okay for it to be tied to capitalism or does this stray too far from the anti-capitalist core of the traditional feminist rhetoric? Megan and Hayley view capitalist engagement as a necessary grievance but it’s important to consider whether the status quo can be broken.



Figure 10

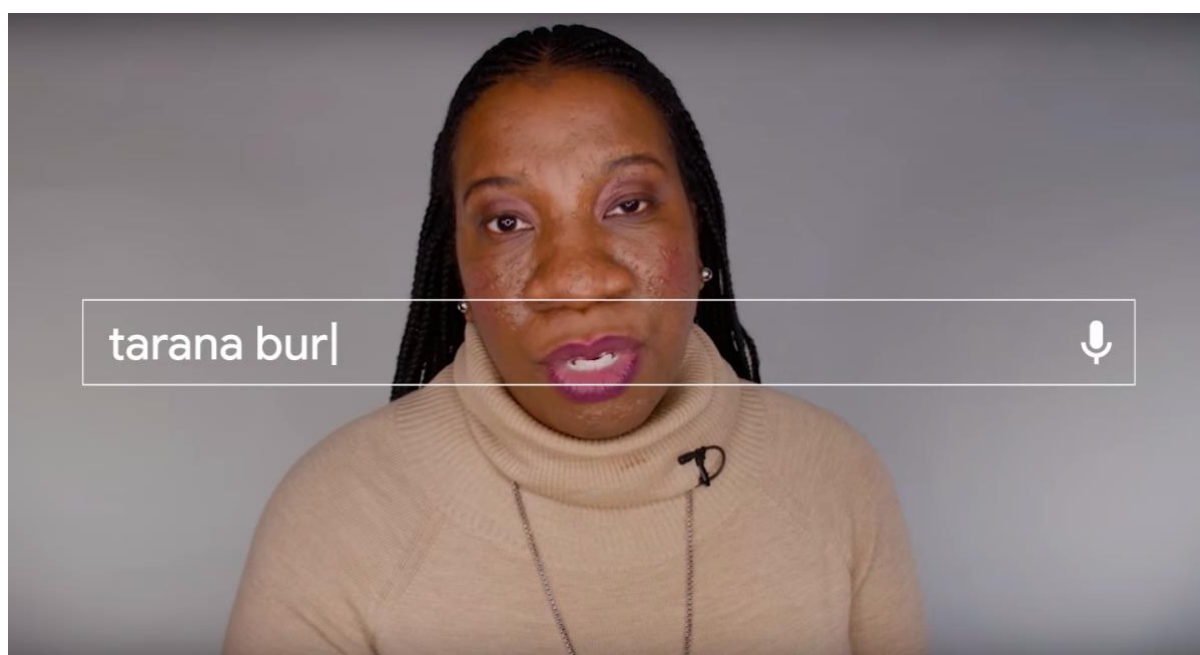


Figure 11

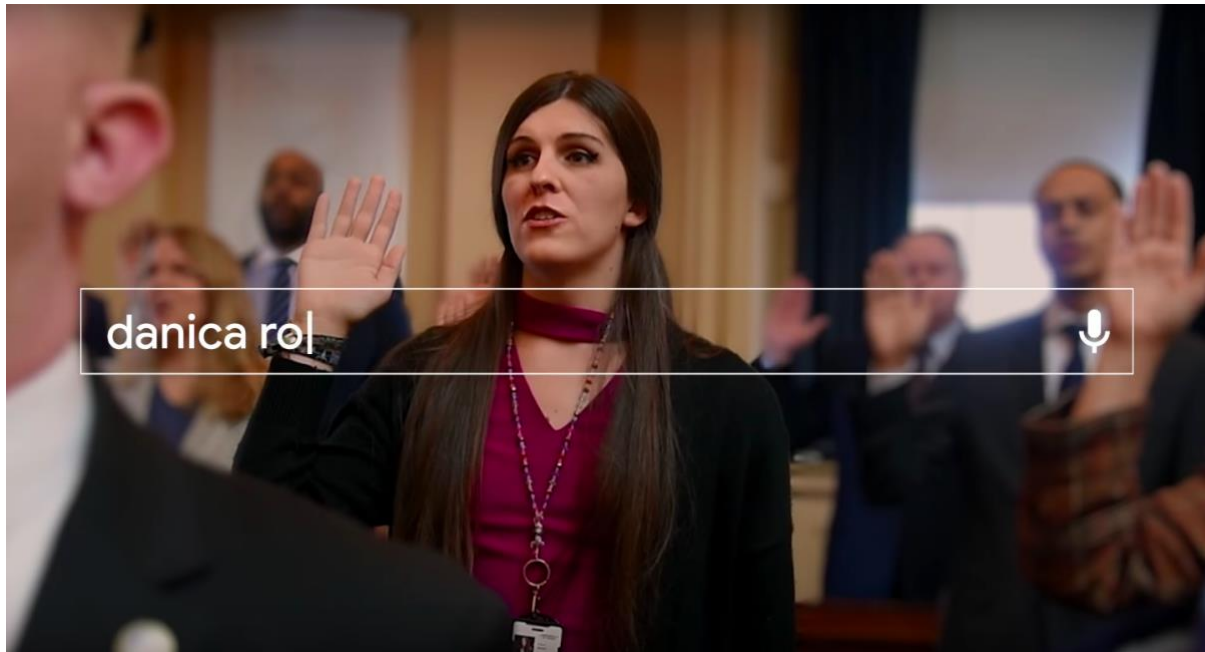


Figure 12

Following this, a further theme present in all the ads, but especially *Google*, is the construction of the normative status quo and how audiences are arguably asked to believe it as fact. To reflect the status quo of the other adverts, *Always* problematize young girls' lack of confidence, *H&M* suggest all bodies have the 'potential' to be beautiful and *Gillette* indicate society needs to tackle toxic masculinity. The status quo within the *Google* advert suggests *the* company is underpinning our lives, merely a vehicle for information about female 'empowerment' rather than influencers themselves. For example, within the ad, audiences are shown questions such as 'how to raise a feminist son' (Figure 12) typed into the search engine, implying it is the audience collectively championing the feminist rhetoric rather than the company itself. This highlights Gilliespe's (2010) notion of the 'platform', arguing platforms such as *Google*, 'need to position themselves as just hosting – empowering all by choosing none' (2010, p357). This ties particularly well within the femvertising debate as it is important to question whether 'empowered' feminist messages are truly believed by those at *Google* or are they merely using it as a promotional tool whilst appealing to a mass audience by 'choosing none'. Indeed, *Google* support the feminist rhetoric without implementing much change themselves and this is visually represented within the ad through the audiences asking the questions rather than *Google* imposing the questions on the public (Figure 13). Therefore, we as an audience do not see the power of *Google*, instead the company only demonstrate their minimal support of good practice, and consequently feminism, not attempting to shape it or directly control it. In doing

so, *Google* look as though they support ‘empowerment’ whilst actually doing very little to aid the values of feminism. Through this, it is difficult to answer whether *Google*’s ad helps or hinders the core values of contemporary feminism. Whilst the ad represents influential women and a positive message towards equality, their complacency towards true activism is disappointing; especially as a huge brand like Google has the money and influence to make a real change.



Figure 13

There are tensions between what the advert is doing and what the conversations amongst the focus group are about. Whilst some accepted *Google*’s involvement in the feminist rhetoric as a means of giving the feminist message enough reach, others problematized the brands’ involvement. For example, Jordyn stated ‘its hijacking peoples support for feminism to promote their own product rather than using their product to promote true feminism’ (mixed group, 21). This ‘hijacking’ is particularly prevalent for those who argue brands use feminist ideas for solely monetary gain, indicating how the commodification of femvertising is understood differently amongst young people. Whilst some participants had a desire to protect ‘true feminism’, others argue these ads are simply a sign of the times. Nevertheless, what has become incredibly clear is companies need to enable real change before they can ‘win over’ all the consumers who question their legitimacy.

Considering each of these elements, the debate is whether femvertising is enough of a shift towards helping the core values of feminism. Does the problem lie in some of the participant's apparent acceptance of capitalist and patriarchal structures evident in the Google ad? In all, the resounding theme throughout is that embracing positive ideas of gender equality is good for both the brand and the public, regardless of whether the brand are implementing these ideas for economic gain or not: it is simply getting the message out that is a positive feat.

## **Summary of Findings**

At this point in the dissertation, it is worth briefly recapping the findings:

Theme one looked to *Always*. The focus group discussion analysed the emphasis on confidence in sports, critiquing how the brand centred on individualistic notions of 'empowerment' rather than unpacking the wider systemic and institutionalised patriarchal structures that primarily limit girls' and women's confidence. On the other hand, the discourse analysis at looked how to the brand supported non-stereotypical representations of girls and highlighted *Always* involvement in women's charities. Therefore, whilst confidence is commodified, it was difficult to dismiss the *Always* advertisement as a form 'pseudo-feminism' (Gengler, 2011, p68).

Moving to theme two, whilst the discourse analysis noted *H&M* represented a limited range of 'diverse' representations of women, the focus group argued these representations were insincere and tokenistic, remaining within the parameters of conventional beauty. The focus groups' dislike towards their lived experience in the store and the company's use of sweatshops made the overall message of 'empowerment' appear disingenuous, truly showcasing a form of 'lifestyle feminism' that is entirely superficial, image obsessed and commercially centred (Groeneveld, 2009).

Theme three explored *Gillette*'s refreshing take on masculinity. The overwhelmingly positive response amongst the groups indicates how femvertising can help both men and women prosper towards equality, thus allowing feminism to appear accessible to all audiences. However, the interesting responses to men as the agents of change whilst also being objectified in the ad implied that whilst some men embraced the shift towards equality, others were outwardly dismissive. As part of the discourse analysis *Gillette*'s use of celebrities was

considered, exploring the representation of Terry Crews redefining masculinity in aid of feminism. This indicates the instrumental role celebrities can play in the construction of gender identities (Evans and Riley, 2013).

The final theme questioned the acceptance of the capitalist status quo and whether the feminist ideologies presented in femvertising are undermined by the overall capitalist framework advertising exists within. It investigated whether feminism could be positively tied to a capitalist rhetoric in order for feminism to gain publicity, or does it stray too far from the deep anti-capitalist core of traditional feminism. The discourse analysis explored Gilliespe's notion of the 'platform' as *Google* appear to support 'empowerment' without implementing any real change themselves.

To sum, the real question across each theme is whether the companies engaging in femvertising are truly attempting to revolutionise the ways women and their endeavours towards 'empowerment' are represented. Or, are they simply trying to appeal to this new wave of 'feminist' women?

## **Conclusion**

My research sought to uncover the nuanced relationship between feminism and femvertising, exploring the depths of ‘feminist’ consumer sensibilities.

The questions explored were:

1. What does the reaction to contemporary advertising by the young people tell us about the commodification of contemporary feminism in the age of femvertising?
2. Can the commodification of feminism still be empowering?
3. Does femvertising help or hinder the core values of today’s contemporary feminism?

In response to these questions, it is clear femvertising can be a form of ‘empowerment’, aiding the core values of feminism. For example, *Always* and *Gillette* were received positively by the focus group citing the non-stereotypical representations of women and the shift in representation of masculinity as key evidence of progression and ‘empowerment’. However, considering the juxtaposing argument, the feminist ideologies presented in femvertising are engulfed by advertising’s commercial agenda; implying femvertising isn’t an entirely positive contribution. In light of this, the entire notion around the benefits and challenges of femvertising appear deep and complex.

Moving to the findings, both my discourse analysis and focus group discussion examined whether the commercialisation of the feminist rhetoric too greatly contrasted the anticapitalistic stance of traditional feminism or whether the benefits of promotion compensate for the negativities surrounding commodification. Examining the transcripts and speaking with participants, it became clear the commercialisation of the feminist rhetoric is understood as a necessary grievance due to capitalism’s role within our culture. Instead of rejecting the commercialisation of the feminist discourse, it was argued we should use it to our advantage. Indeed, despite the commodification of feminism’s rhetoric, the feminist movement can benefit from publicity- notwithstanding its apparent de-politicisation. Taking this together, perhaps contemporary feminism has transcended traditional feminism. Indicating ‘popular feminism’ may be both a cause and effect of the commercialisation of feminist discourse.



However, whilst publicity may be considered a benefit, visibility in the media does not necessarily equate to visibility of equality (Banet-Weiser, 2018). Indeed, Banet-Weiser, a core scholar throughout this thesis, argues ‘in a capitalist, corporate economy of visibility, those feminisms that are most easily commodified and branded are those that become most visible’ (2018, p13). This explains brands focus on ‘confidence’ (*Always*) or ‘beauty’ (*H&M*) as it is easier to commodify these ideas in comparison to the wider systemic issues associated with the patriarchy. In this case, femvertising is making simple issues visible whilst negating the wider fight for equality through ignoring the core societal problems. Furthermore, Banet-Weiser explains ‘simply becoming visible does not guarantee that identity categories such as gender, race, and sexuality will be unfettered from sexism, misogyny and homophobia’ (2018, p11). In this regard, ‘popular feminism’ within advertising isn’t a ‘fix-all’ answer. Certainly, this study has uncovered how some brands represent identity categories progressively (*Gillette*) whilst others remain within misogynistic patriarchal structures (*H&M*). In all, femvertising is not a panacea, but it is a positive step on the path towards female equality.

The decision to conduct this study was not to establish a cause and effect relationship between femvertising and opinions of female ‘empowerment’, instead the research is focused on exploring young people’s perceptions of ‘empowerment’ through a femvertising lens. Looking to the forms of ‘empowerment’ found, *Always* represented ‘empowerment’ through sports, centring around individualised confidence; *H&M* promoted superficial ‘empowerment’ through consumption, representing patriarchal standards of beauty; *Gillette* endorsed political ‘empowerment’ through #MeToo and ‘empowerment’ towards social and behavioural change; finally *Google* presented ‘empowerment’ sourced from audiences, presenting their brand as a mere ‘platform’ (Gilliespe, 2010). Each of these examples suggest that representations of ‘empowerment’ in femvertising are complex. Whilst brands such as *H&M* clearly associate the power of consumption with the power of equality, the other brands are a more ambiguous in their authenticity. Companies will always need consumers but whether companies such as *Always* and *Gillette* view consumption as the only form of power is debatable. To this end, dismissing the femvertising rhetoric as a complete hindrance to the feminist cause is unhelpful. Instead we should focus on the brands with ads that work more positively towards equality—such as *Gillette* and *Always*. Indeed, it is interesting that the two stand out ads from the study are both within the same parent company *P&G*; perhaps it can be attributed to a true authenticity of feminist beliefs or instead a well sculpted company message.

Questioning whether participants confuse the power of consumption with the power of equality- many participants were acutely aware of their unquestionable position as an influenced consumer. The fact the focus groups were a lot more politically aware than previously conceived leads to the suggestion that everyone has their own politics on the matter. This was a major finding, implying audiences question the representations and ideologies conveyed in femvertising. Henceforth, even if some of the femvertisements are 'good enough' representations of feminism, there is always space for further questions. Indeed, within the parameters of consumerism and advertising, femvertising may well be the best we can get but this isn't the only place feminism is felt and it is not simply limited by consumerism. Therefore, the debates and engagements of the focus group indicates feminist politics goes beyond the advertisements and maintains a rhetoric of its own.

This leads to the question: is femvertising enough? Exploring the discussions of the group and my own findings, it's apparent some forms of femvertising, particularly those from *Always* and *Gillette*, are 'enough' within current societal limitations of capitalism. Evidence of this is *Always*' non-stereotypical representations of young girls, indicating a rejection of patriarchal beauty ideals- a positive shift within advertising. Moreover, *Always*' and *Gillette*'s investment into women's charities through their parent company *P&G* indicates the brands are funding 'empowerment' rather simply capitalizing on the feminist discourse like *H&M* and *Google*. Looking to *Gillette*, it's 'outing' of toxic masculinity and men's behavior towards women held an incredibly powerful message of gender equality and the use of Terry Crews' #MeToo speech broke confines of gender normativity. Considering this, femvertising can help both men and women prosper towards equality making it hard to dismiss this as simply 'pseudo-feminism' (Gengler, 2011, p68)

In all, the project was entirely successful. The focus groups brought honest, relevant and intelligent discussion and it was a privilege to listen to my peers speak so candidly about the future hopes for the feminist movement. Indeed, focus groups were the best way to truly uncover the depths of femvertising, enabling long discussions informed by scholarly literature in a way that was entirely personal and sincere. Furthermore, the choice of the ads worked well, allowing participants to explore a range of femvertising ideas and representations. My later interactions with the adverts through feminist discourse analysis allowed me to fill in the blanks where participants had not explored, allowing a deeper level of analysis. In essence, whilst some femvertisements may be depoliticising, commodifying and individualising feminism, the

promotion of positive ideas of 'empowerment' are worth the supposed limitations. Femvertising has proven to be an ally to feminism and not a fleeting 'trend'. Similarly, we now hope 'true equality' will become a global norm.

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## **Advertisement Figure 16: Advertisement Overview**

### **Always:**

**Advert Title:** Always #LikeAGirl – Keep Playing

**Date Released:** 28 Jun 2016

**Views on YouTube:** 28,342,072 views

#### **‘Femvertising’ Themes:**

- Building young girls confidence through puberty
- Intersectional feminism
- Building on already successful ‘feminist’ campaigns
- Collective power of girls
- Challenging stereotypes

### **H&M:**

**Advert Title:** H&M New Autumn Collection

**Date Released:** 11 Sep 2016

**Views on YouTube:** 4,585,179 views

#### **‘Femvertising’ Themes:**

- Different body types
- Female hair
- Non stereotypical female behaviour such as eating in public and ‘manspreading’ on the train

### **Gillette:**

**Advert Title:** We Believe: The Best Men Can Be | Gillette (Short Film)

**Date Released:** 13 Jan 2019

**Views on YouTube:** 28,748,943 views

#### **‘Femvertising’ Themes:**

- Combating Men’s conduct towards women in the workplace
- Combating sexual harassment of women
- Challenging traditional ideas of masculinity in relation to their interaction with women
- Breaking from previous campaigns that lauded male’s relationship to women.
- Featured the #MeToo movement

**Google:**

**Advert Title:** International Women's Day: A Moment in Search

**Date Released:** 7 Mar 2018

**Views on YouTube:** 36,487,824 views

**'Femvertising' Themes:**

- Particular focus on the historical progression of women's rights, i.e. suffragettes
- Global focus on women entering the workplace
- Focus on attitudes towards women
- Featuring important feminist related movements such as #MeToo
- Featuring numerous feminist celebrities such as Malala Yousef
- Intersectional feminism