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FEMVERTISING AND ITS EFFECTS ON BRAND IMAGE
A study of men's attitude towards brands pursuing brand activism in their
advertising

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A study of men's attitude towards brands pursuing brand activism in their advertising

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to investigate how brand activism in advertisements (specifically femvertising in this case) affects male consumers' attitudes towards the brand behind the advertisement

Methodology: The study is of qualitative nature, using primary and secondary data. Secondary data were gathered from academic journals forming the foundation for the theoretical framework. Primary data was collected through eighteen semi-structured interviews with men, helping us gain in-depth insights into the effects of femvertising on the attitudes of men towards such advertisements and brands pursuing such communications

Findings: The results of this paper indicate that men's attitude towards brand image can be either enhanced or abated, depending on the communication, authenticity and the inclusion of other both genders

Research limitations/implications: The limitations of this study compromise of the sampling (homogeneity and age) and the limited amount of advertisements explored. Future research should try to validate the findings of this paper by using a larger sample group as well as examining more advertisements

Practical implications: The presented study will give marketing practitioners an insight into the effects of pursuing social activism and aspects to be cautious about

Originality/value: This paper is the first of its kind to investigate the males' perception toward femvertising and female empowerment in advertisements

Keywords: Brand image, brand activism, femvertising, attitudes toward advertisements (Aad), attitudes toward brands (Ab)

Paper Type: Research Paper

Introduction

Due to the competitive environment of today's marketplace, companies use brands as strategic differentiators in order to attract consumers over competitors. By building a distinct brand, companies can be more proficient in connecting with their customers and their beliefs, due to the added value created by the brand. (Kotler & Armstrong, 2015; Kapferer, 2012) Companies need to create a strong brand image, which is consistent and in line with the expectations of the consumers (Kapferer, 2012). As consumers are showing more loyalty towards brands that go beyond providing them with a mere product and/or service, the concept of brand activism has become an emerging trend, where brands declare their political standpoint (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017).

Brand activism can be expressed in different forms, one of which is social activism (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017). By addressing gender inequalities and by pointing out stereotypical gender roles, companies show a clear involvement in social activism (Drake, 2017). In order to get the consumers' attention, it is getting more common to use these sorts of messages through marketing activities such as advertising (Kaushal & Kumar, 2016). As the consumers' exposure to advertisements is increasing, there is a need for brands today to authentically communicate how they take a stance in societal questions to connect with their consumers on a more emotional level and gain awareness (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017; Dahlén & Rosengren, 2016). As a result, female empowerment has become more present in companies' advertisements, challenging the more traditional ways of advertising. These types of ads, aiming at changing gender differences through incorporating female empowering messages have been given the name of "femvertising" (Drake, 2017).

While such advertisements have been applauded for driving social change and creating a positive brand attitude among women, there is still limited research validating the results. Previous research has

mainly focused on the rise of femvertising as a concept. Among the few studies that have been made, the focus has almost solely been on how it influences the female consumers' perception, to some extent proving that there are positive effects in terms of brand attitude. However, the effect on purchase intentions are still debatable. (Drake, 2017; Kapoor & Munjal, 2017; Akestam, Rosengren & Dahlen, 2017) Undeniably, the female perception is of great importance, however there are no studies exploring the male perception of such advertising. Therefore, as a result of this gap in the literature, this study will focus on men and their attitudes towards femvertising. One could argue that their perception is of equal importance, due to equality not only being a female matter and due to the fact that many of the brands pursuing femvertising are offering products to both genders. Further, by making use of the previous research within this area, the study aims to contribute to theory by examining consumers' attitudes and how they are linked with brand image.

The aim of this paper is to explore how brand activism in the form of femvertising affects male consumers' attitudes towards the brand behind the advertisement. Based on that purpose, the following research questions are set to be answered:

- *How is femvertising perceived by male consumers?*
- *How does femvertising affect men's attitudes and perception of the brand?*

The following sections begin with a critical review of the existing literature on the concepts of brand image, brand activism, femvertising and attitudes. Then, the method chosen in order to investigate the research question is presented. This is followed by the results, where our empirical data is analyzed and discussed in comparison to the theory. The study concludes with our key findings, while also considering the managerial implications of the research.

Literature Review

Brand Image

Hung (2018) identifies the brand as a tool for consumers when evaluating products, where it functions as a reference and a guarantee of a consistent brand source and quality. This is in line with Melin's (2002) findings, whereby the five basic functions of the brand are highlighted. The brand operates as an information carrier, a catalyst, a guarantee, a risk reducer and an image creator. Although all of the functions are aimed to add value and assist consumers in identifying and evaluating products, the brand as an image creator is especially interesting when reviewing the exchange between the brand and the consumer (Melin, 2002).

Previous research on brand image has studied it in various applications, such as its symbolic utility, its personality image and its connection to brand meaning (Pohlman & Mudd, 1973; Sirgy, 1985; Durgee & Stuart, 1987). In Dobni and Zinkhan's quest to draw consensus and identify the essential elements of brand image, they conclude that "brand image is the concept of a brand that is held by the consumer" (1990, p.117). Brand image is connected to the receiving side; it is subjective and formed through the consumers' interpretation. Brand image is not something that is endowed in the functional concerns of the product, but rather shaped and affected by the marketing activities of the organization (Kapferer, 2012). It is mental associations in relation to the brand, created in the minds of consumers through exposure to marketing communication, consumption experiences and social influence (Kapferer, 2012; Aaker, 1991; Riezebos, 2003). Nowadays, it seems that a majority of the researchers agree on this perceptual terminology for brand image (Hung, 2018; Urde, 2013; Mårtenson, 2007; Nandan, 2004).

In the Brand Management Literature, brand image is often linked to the concept of brand identity. As stated by Kapferer (2012) there is a difference between brand image and brand identity. While the brand image has a clear

external focus and refers to the perception of a brand in the customers' minds, brand identity has an internal focus and stems from the firm (Nandan, 2004). Brand identity is how the organization sees itself and is something that is created consciously in order to shape the meaning and intent of the given brand (Kapferer, 2012, Nandan, 2004). Although being two separate concepts, image and identity are highly interconnected when it comes to the creation of brand value (Kapferer, 2012; Urde, 2013).

As the research on branding and value creation includes brand image as one of the key concepts, this implies the relevance of pursuing research on the topic. To build brand equity, it is crucial for a brand to communicate its brand image clearly and effectively to the consumers (Keller, 1993; Park, Jaworski & MacInnis, 1986). Due to this, the importance of understanding how consumers form their perception have been stressed by marketing researchers. Brand image is an impression created by numerous elements, such as brand reputation, purchasing experience and forms of advertising (Pars & Gulsel, 2011). By using deliberate marketing, brands aim at creating a desired mental positioning and associations in the minds of the consumers. In the formulation of brand building and brand imagery, Keller (2001) also stresses the time aspect. Over time, with consistent communication, brands can build and reinforce emotional and brand personality associations. Research has shown that emotion has a considerable impact on the response people have towards a message (Hamelin, Moujahid & Thaichon, 2017). Therefore, brands try to communicate and connect with the potential customers on a more emotional level. Thus, organizations are taking a more proactive positioning in their advertisements by aligning their brand identity and image with what is happening in the world and issues that consumers care about, a phenomenon called brand activism (Suggett, 2017).

Brand Activism

Traditionally, many brands have been marketed on their performance characteristics e.g. “our product is better than yours”, where positioning was of essence (Ries & Trout, 1980). However, positioning is no longer enough. Millennials, being one of the main target groups today, have higher expectations towards the brands and value companies that care more about the community than only about profits (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017). As a result, brands have started to use their advertisements to take a stance in societal issues and connect on an emotional level with their potential and existing consumers (Dahlén & Rosengren, 2016).

Under the term of brand activism Kotler and Sarkar (2017) identify six subcategories: social, legal, business, economic, environmental and political activism. The six areas of brand activism can furthermore be combined to create a brand activism scorecard to measure the extent of a firm’s commitment to the issues based on how progressive they are (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017).

Social activism, being one of the most prone forms of activism, refers to issues including equality and gender, race, and LGBTQ. Gender stereotypes have been prevalent in advertising as they offer ways to simplify information and make sense of the world (Johnson & Grier, 2012). Firms have been contributing to the norm of female appearance and stereotypical roles in society (Jalees & Majid, 2009), by being more likely to show women as subordinates than men in print advertisements (Goffman, 1979). However, brands have become more aware and started taking an active stand in equal opportunities for all genders, leading to a trend of changing gender roles in advertising (Grau & Zotos, 2016). Thus, in recent years there has been a rise of marketing campaigns hoping to empower women, termed “femvertising”.

Femvertising

The term femvertising gained acceptance in 2014, and is used as a label for contemporary advertising campaigns focusing on

questioning the traditional female gender stereotypes commonly used in advertisements (Akestam, Rosengren & Dahlen, 2017). The aim of femvertising is to celebrate women in advertising rather than to objectify them (Bahadur, 2014). Although gender equality in the shape of female liberation has been a part of advertising in various forms since the 1960s, what is described as pioneering about femvertising is the self-awareness and questioning of female stereotypes created and reinforced by advertising (North, 2014). As previous research has shown that advertisement rather follows the societal norms than challenges them, this is one of the key differences when it comes to femvertising (Eisend, 2010; Akestam, Rosengren & Dahlen, 2017).

When examining the concept of femvertising Becker-Herby (2016, p.19) found that the majority of campaigns followed the same five principles, mainly: “the utilization of diverse female talent; messaging that is inherently pro-female; pushing gender-norm boundaries/stereotypes and challenging perceptions of what a woman/girl ‘should’ be; downplaying of sexuality; and portraying women in an authentic manner”.

Femvertising has been proven to be effective in driving sales. According to Drake (2017) females who were exposed to female empowerment advertisements indicated significantly higher positive attitudes towards the ads and brands that were making use of femvertising, as well as higher purchase intentions. This is in line with a SheKnows Media survey, where 52 percent of the women stated that they had purchased a product because they liked how the brand portrayed women (SheKnows Media, 2014). Femvertising has been criticized on the basis of this, as some theorists believe that the connection between capitalism and commodity feminism water down the movement and manipulate those who believe in it (Johnston & Taylor, 2008). Others argue that capitalism being our current mode for existing and inseparable from the fight for gender equality, and therefore selling a

product is a small price to pay for a better representation of women in advertising.

When it comes to the effects of femvertising, authenticity seems to be the key, as the message promoted by the brand should also be apparent in its business practices. In order to measure the effectiveness of such advertising, one needs to review and measure the attitude towards the advertisement, the brand, the intention and in the end also the actual behaviour of the consumers. (Lewinski, Fransen & Tan, 2014)

Attitudes toward Advertisements (Aad)

In order to stand out in the overwhelming competitive environment of products and services, brands are more often being used as differentiators to drive purchase behaviour (Kotler & Armstrong, 2015; Gupta, Czinkota & Melewar, 2013; De Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2001; Narayandas & Rangan, 2004). The concept of “attitude toward the ad” was coined to describe the consumers’ thoughts and feelings toward the advertisements (Kirmani & Campbell, 2009). Emotional characteristics of an ad can have considerable impacts when forming attitudes towards ads and customers purchase attitudes (Allen, Machleit & Kleine, 1992; Morris, Woo, Geason & Kim, 2002).

Interdependence between attitude towards the ad and attitude towards the brand have been argued for as per MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch (1986). Brand attitudes can be affected by attitudes towards the ad in two different ways, on one hand through a simple influence (e.g. the likeability of the ad is transferred to the brand), and on the other hand, through a more complex influence (e.g. the credibility of the ad causes favourable opinions towards the brand) (MacKenzie, Lutz & Belch, 1986).

Attitudes toward Brands (Ab)

Attitude towards the brand was interpreted by Mitchell and Olson (1981, p.318) as an “individual’s internal evaluation of the brand”. Unlike feelings, attitudes are enduring interpretations of brands that promote consumer behaviour (Spears & Singh, 2004).

Research by Faircloth, Capella and Alford (2001) has shown that attitude toward the brand has an indirect effect on brand image and therefore on brand equity. This relationship between brand image and brand attitude is in line with Keller’s (1993) findings.

Conceptual Framework

In order to direct the reader and give a clearer understanding of how the research was conducted in relation to the theoretical framework, a model was created. The purpose of this model is to act as a guide through the key theoretical concepts, display the interrelatedness as well as the specific constructs within the theory that this study researches.

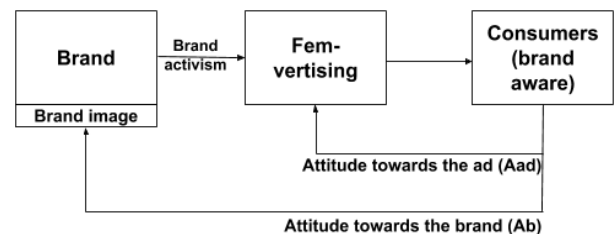


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Methodology

Qualitative Research Method

The direction of research can either take a qualitative or quantitative approach (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). Quantitative research focus on numbers rather than words and gives the opportunity to gather quantifiable data from large sample sizes (Bryman & Bell, 2011). As quantitative data makes it difficult to give the study an in depth meaning, qualitative research strives towards an understanding of people’s constructed meaning of reality and how they reason with their everyday experiences and surroundings (Merriam, 1998). Since people do not always know the reason behind why they feel as they do and why they have certain attitudes (Evans, Jamal & Foxall, 2009), a qualitative approach where words and explanations are utilized becomes more applicable when conducting research on attitudes. In addition, as the objective of this

research paper was to contribute to the understanding of brand management practices in a real-world context, an empirical approach as commonly proposed by Yin (2012) was chosen. Yin (2012) also proposes a qualitative interpretative approach when having a research question asking “why” or “how”. Therefore, the study was conducted using such an approach and by making use of semi-structured interviews.

Sample Selection

Due to accessibility, this study made use of a convenience sampling method, which is a non-probability sampling method where the most relevant and accessible respondents fulfilling the criteria were selected (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Furthermore, Bryman and Bell (2011) argue that non-probability sampling is less generalizable because it is hard to find representative samples. However, in this context, it is both cost efficient and time saving, which makes it suitable for this study.

The sampling was based on the criteria of gender and brand awareness, the interviewees had to be familiar with the brands Audi, Nike and Bianco. Interviewees, who supposedly were less familiar with the brand of Bianco, were asked to view an ad by the brand as well as visiting their website. The final sample consisted of eighteen male respondents, between the ages of 22 and 44.

Data Collection

The data collection for this research study was done in two stages. First, the secondary data of existing academic literature on the chosen theories were examined. Due to the shortage of male perception on the topic of femvertising, a research question was formulated. As the previous research was limited, primary data was needed. Primary data was collected through eighteen semi-structured interviews, where open-ended questions were asked, lasting 27 minutes on average. In-depth interviews were chosen over focus groups as they provided us with rich data and eliminated the risk of participants being able to influence one another, which

could have affected the validity of the data (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

An interview guide was designed to collect information regarding the respondents’ attitudes toward the brands, before and after exposure to the advertisements. The interviewees were asked open ended questions in relation to the chosen brands, as well as being asked to rate the level of brand appeal before and after. The brand appeal was measured on a six-point Likert type scale (1=low, 6=high). The ratings created a consistent way for us to measure and compare the difference in appeal before and after viewing the femvertising.

The brands chosen were Audi, Nike and Bianco. They were selected on the basis of the progressive brand activism within gender equality that they pursue, which is in accordance with Kotler and Sarkar’s (2017) definition of social activism. The brands were chosen due to being within different industries as they have different norms (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017) and due to conveying the message of femvertising in disparate ways making use of the five principles of femvertising in various combinations (Becker-Herby, 2016).

Data Analysis

In order to analyze the gathered data we recorded the interviews and transcribed the most relevant findings in an excel document. The respondents were then anonymized and given alphabetical aliases (A-R). The transcribed data was reviewed through a thematic analysis, which is an applicable tool for interpretation when the aim is to identify patterns of relevance for the study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This was done through coding, transferring the data into themes. The themes identified were later matched with our theory and conceptual framework in order to draw conclusions about the results of brand activism and the effects on brand image.

Brands

Audi

Audi, founded in 1909, is a German automobile company that designs, develops and manufactures luxury vehicles (Business Insider, 2018). The Audi TV advertisement under the title [“Daughter” \(2017\)](#) aired during the 2017 Super Bowl. The ad aims to promote the Audi 2018 S5 Sportback car though depicting a girl competing amongst all boys in a cart race, while her father contemplates how society and the workplace could value his daughter based on her gender. After the girl wins the race, the father expressed hopefulness for a future where his daughter can be treated fairly and equally, and Audi’s commitment for gender pay equality is highlighted (AdAge, 2017). Opinions on the advertisement were divided, and it received its share of criticism, mainly because only two women are on Audi’s American executive team and no women on their management board (Business Insider, 2017; Forbes, 2017)

Nike

Nike, incorporated in 1967, is an American multinational corporation that designs and manufactures footwear, sports apparel, performance equipment and accessories (Nike, 2018). The main message of the Nike ad ([Nike “Voices” 2012](#)) is the empowerment of women. This ad was released in June 2012. The ad celebrated women in sports and the 40th anniversary of a U.S. legislation, that provided female athletes with equal opportunities in sports. The ad showed stories of four different female athletes, over three generations, fighting difficulties and challenges throughout their journey in sports (Nike, 2012).

Bianco Footwear

Bianco Footwear was founded in 1987, in Denmark. “Bianco is an affordable, fashion-forward Scandinavian footwear brand for women and men, founded on the pillars of style, craftsmanship and edgy self-expression” (Bianco website, 2018). Their ad under [“Equal Pay is Not Enough” \(2017\)](#), shows women

who can no longer tolerate unequal pay for equal work, and use their shoes to fight against this status quo. The women in the ad argue that equal pay is not enough due to the fact that women spend generally more money than men, because women’s shoes, clothes, make-up, and haircuts are more expensive.

Although Bianco claimed that the aim of the ad was to “put petrol on the embers” and demand that women do not stay silent anymore, raising the bar demanding not only equal pay but more, the ad campaign received substantial backlash. The reasoning behind the message was seen as offensive by many of the viewers. (The Huffington Post Canada, 2017; DailyMail UK, 2017).

Results

This section includes data from the interviews, exploring the men's attitudes towards the femvertising and the brands behind the advertisements.

Audi

All the interviewees had a high awareness of the brand Audi, stating that it is a German car manufacturer producing and selling premium cars. All except one of the interviewees had positive perceptions of the Audi brand by stating good quality, innovativeness, technology driven, reliable, and high performance as characteristics of the brand.

The feelings evoked when thinking about the Audi brand varied among the men. When thinking about Audi, the majority mentioned liking the car and described it as edgy, cool, classy, luxurious and rather exclusive, modern and elegant. Whereas, a few people were indifferent towards the brand, expressing no strong connection. This might be due to the fact that they do not own a car or are environmentally concerned. Only one person had unfavourable feelings towards the brand, stating that the cars are uncomfortable and uninviting.

“If I invest in an Audi, it won't break down in a couple of years, it is a safe way of getting from A to B.” -Person M

When being asked about the brand persona all the interviewees stated that the brand is male, successful (engineer, office job, banking), between 35 and 50 years old.

After viewing the advertisement from Audi, all of the respondents understood the main message, revolving around gender equality, with half of the interviewees also noticing Audi's effort to convey a positive image of their brand in connection to such a cause. Many people mentioned that it was a good, emotional and well-crafted ad, whereas some people already expressed their scepticism about the connection between a car manufacturer and the gender equality message.

"It's a positive message that they're working for equal pay but it's kind of random for a car brand to pursue this ad." -Person B

The attitudes towards the brand did not change after viewing the ad among the majority of the interviewees. However, some of them stated that their attitudes towards the brand were slightly more positive.

"The commercial doesn't really change anything, the car is still appealing but it's more that "great, you're doing this as well; it's more of a hygiene factor." -Person A

When asked if the ad corresponded to the brand being advertised there was a mix of emotions. Almost half of the respondents believed that there was a connection between the ad and the brand, since the ad was targeting men. One third was unsure of the link between the brand and the ad. The remaining men did not see a clear connection between Audi and their ad.

Seven men believe that Audi is a credible sender of the message about gender equality, relying on Audi's general credibility. Whereas, seven other men found that Audi was not a believable sender of such a message mainly because it was seen as a marketing tool, and one mentioned that the male narrative on

gender equality made the ad lose credibility. Due to the diesel scandal, or the fact that the participants were unsure about Audi's employee diversity, four of them mentioned that they were uncertain about Audi's credibility with this ad.

"It is difficult to say if they live as they teach and therefore there is an issue of authenticity." -Person O

As the respondents were asked to rate the brand appeal and attractiveness on a scale from 1 to 6 before and after seeing the advertisement, one can notice a slight difference in their ratings. Before seeing the ad, Audi's brand appeal was rated as 4,2 on an average. Meanwhile after being exposed to the ad, the brand appeal went up to an average of 4,4. Although most people stated that their perception was unaltered, five people put it higher, and one person lower due to questioning the authenticity.

Nike

All the participants had a high awareness of the brand Nike. They recognized Nike as being an American sports brand, which makes shoes and clothes. Nike was described as a fashionable, high quality, sporty and reliable brand. Some of the men still associated Nike with questionable manufacturing.

Most of the interviewees had a positive image of the brand. It was seen as cool trendy, having good and consistent quality, and a few associated it with having a healthy lifestyle. Others mentioned they liked that Nike sponsored several sports and included a lot of celebrity endorsements. However, three of them raised the issue of unfair ways of production, like making use of child labour. Another thing that was disliked is that their products are overpriced.

"If you buy a pair of Nike shoes, you know what you get." -Person I

If the brand would be a person, most of the participants described the brand as of a neutral gender, being within the age range of 20-30 years old, sporty, tolerant, outgoing, open, active, leader, competitive and successful.

After seeing the Nike advertisement, all of the participants realized that the main message of the ad was addressing female empowerment. Some of them also liked that the ad was about diversity in terms of ethnicity and age. Many interviewees associated the ad with female empowerment and the slogan: Just do it! and thought there was a good fit with their brand identity over time. However, they thought that the connection between buying a pair of shoes and contributing to gender equality was a bit far-fetched. A few liked that the message was delivered by women.

“It really speaks the same language that Nike has been pursuing for quite some time. It's about the sport, not the gender.” -Person Q

Seven of the interviewees had a more positive view of the brand after seeing the ad due to the empathetic stance Nike is taking in the ad. More than half of the respondents had unchanged feelings about Nike after seeing the ad, mostly because in their minds Nike has always been associated with standing up for such causes. Only one of the participants showed more sceptic feelings towards the brand.

Everyone believed that there was a good fit between the ad and the brand being advertised, because it fits the motto of Nike and their target has always included women.

“It's a better fit than the Audi one. But then again the topic of promoting women being athletes, is more aligned with the business objective of Nike.” - Person M

The majority of the men believed that Nike was genuine with the message portrayed, although some of them expressed some scepticism questioning the motives behind it.

“Yes, because it is not trying to convince people that there should be any women quotas within any board of directors, it is just about equality in professional sports, which perfectly fits the brand.” -Person K

When asked to rate the brand appeal and attractiveness of Nike, there was a difference in the ratings as well. Before viewing the ad Nike's brand appeal was rated as 4 on an average. Meanwhile after seeing the ad, the brand appeal increased to an average of 4,4. Out of all the respondents, seven changed their perception of the brand appeal, giving it a more positive rating.

Bianco

The brand awareness of Bianco among the interviewees was lower compared with the other brands, however everyone knew that it manufactures and sells shoes. A few also knew that the brand is Danish.

The general feelings shared by the majority of the participants about Bianco were plain, or neutral. Many seeing it as a somewhat boring and generic brand. Many believed that Bianco could be a brand for everyone.

“My idea about Bianco is that it's a generic shoe store, it's not that distinguishable.” -Person M

Almost everyone, except of one person, thought that the brand personality was female, although opinions were split concerning the age. While some saw Bianco as a younger woman in her 20s or 30s, they described the brand as mainstream, friendly and generic; others saw Bianco as a middle-aged woman in her 40s and 50s, rather quiet and not opinionated. They described the brand as boring and old fashioned.

“A middle-aged woman, who is a teacher, 40-45 years old, likes to take walks and knitting.” -Person I

Everyone understood the message of the Bianco ad about equal pay is not enough for women, however, the reasoning behind the message was unclear and many thought that the message was delivered in the wrong way, using descriptions such as; over-the-top, aggressive, funny, unauthentic and a twisted way to create an ad and buzz. All the men had unfavourable opinions towards the ad, mainly because it portrays women stereotypically. They questioned the logics behind the

arguments of the message. There were some aspects that were liked by a few of the men, like the powerful women, the graphics of the ad and that it was from a woman's perspective.

"The message is rubbish because it portrays women as silly, and being all about appearance; that women are only after looking good, choosing good shoes and underwear, haircuts and dresses, while not all women are like that." -Person J

The majority of the participants did not believe that the ad elevated the image of the brand, as many felt attacked by the ad. Five of them thought that their attitudes towards the brand were unchanged as they did not have very strong connections with the brand from the start. Only two people thought that the ad elevated the image of the brand because it was strong, edgy and that Bianco goes beyond equal pay for equal work.

"They are a bit too feminist. With that single ad they excluded all men from the brand. I can't image a guy seeing the ad and saying - Wow, I want to buy shoes from them now." -Person D

Since most of the participants did not have a strong connection with the brand before, the answers were ambivalent. More than half of the men did not find that the ad suited the brand since they believed that the ad was offensive to women, who were Bianco's main target, and even men, who were supposedly also their target segment. On the other hand, five people thought Bianco's ad corresponded with its brand because the ad was tailored to women. A few of the men were inexact if there was a good match between Bianco and the message behind the ad.

"It's offensive for women. It's like they're trying to dumben their audience down. It's really a hit and miss." - Person Q

Two thirds of the participants thought that the brand was not a credible sender of the message. The ad was depicted as creative, but

too macho and aggressive for being feminist and therefore not credible. Four participants thought that the brand was a credible sender of the message, since their target group is young women. Two of them were ambivalent as they did not have strong brand associations from the beginning.

"As it is now, they're just trying to sell shoes, which I think is really weird because it's not correlated. It feels like they're just taking the opportunity that the focus is on these issues nowadays. They're using societal issues to make a profit." -Person R

When conducting the rating on brand appeal and attractiveness of Bianco there is an even clearer difference as of before the ad and after. Before watching the advertisement for Bianco the brand appeal was rated as 2,3 on an average. Although after seeing the ad, the brand appeal decreased to an average of 1,6. Two thirds of the interviewees stated that the ad changed their perception of the brand and its appeal, giving it a lower rating.

Social activism

All but two of the men believe that it is important for brands to take a stance with regards to equality between men and women, because they have financial capabilities and the power to affect a big audience. However, they highlighted the importance of credibility and connection between the brand and the message. The remaining two men believe that companies should not capitalize on the message of gender equality.

"Yes, if they are authentic, but it should be communicated in another way. An example could be a press release where the company could talk about what they do to incorporate equality like having a balance between men and women and equal pay. Also to back-up the stance with facts instead of an emotional message that does not have authenticity." -Person F

Eight of the interviewees preferred the Nike ad mainly because they felt that the ad was more

coherent with the Nike brand and what they are about, while two men liked the Nike ad due to personal connection to the brand. Seven of the interviewed men preferred the Audi ad because it addressed men mainly and their emotions, and the ad was seen as having more action. The remaining three men preferred the Bianco ad, as they found it more memorable.

“The Nike one, because they still have a connection to sport and they're doing sportswear. It feels relevant. The alignment between the brand and what they're selling is there.” -Person Q

“I liked Audi the best as it changed my perception of the brand and it addresses older men who often pose the biggest problem to gender equality for young women, as they are more old-fashion.” -Person O

“Bianco, it was the cleverest one, a bit aggressive but it was the one that will stick in my mind” -Person E

Analysis and Discussion

This section will analyze the results of the interviews, identify trends and discuss how it fits with the prior literature.

Attitude towards the advertisements (Aad)

As challenging societal norms is one of the key aspects of femvertising (Eisend, 2010; Akestam, Rosengren & Dahlen, 2017), the interviewed men were not unfamiliar to the idea of brands pursuing a social agenda in their advertisements, and could easily identify and comprehend the main messages supporting gender equality. They were actually supportive of the idea that brands should take a stance with regards to gender equality showing that companies care more about the community than profits, which is in line with Kotler & Sarkar (2017). When describing the main messages of the ads, the men highlighted ad traits that fall under the five elements of femvertising identified by Becker-Herby (2016), especially mentioning the clear pro-female message as well as pushing the gender-norms and challenging the

female stereotype. At the same time, while expressing the importance of such advertisements, some of the interviewees stated a feeling of exclusion in connection to the Bianco ad as they were using a really strong, and aggressive female narrative.

According to Hamelin, Moujahid and Thaichon (2017) emotion has a considerable impact on the response people have towards a message, however, our findings show that the emotional appeal alone is not enough. It has to be supported by facts and actions i.e. equal representation of men and women within the organizational hierarchy to be authentic. In line with this, the respondents also explicitly stated that brands should not use the message of gender equality to make a greater profit, as Bianco was mainly seen as aggressively pushing the agenda of gender inequality to gain attention. These findings are congruent with the fact that capitalism and commodity feminism waters down the movement and manipulates those who believe in it (Johnston & Taylor, 2008).

Credibility in terms of the message being told in the advertisement seems to be the key when pursuing femvertising. Many of the respondents highlighted Nike as pursuing femvertising in an authentic way, having females giving their perspective of the issue rather than having a male driving the narrative as in the Audi commercial. The authenticity being a key component when formulating the message is further accentuated by Lewinski, Fransen and Tan (2014), whom connects it to the brand and the importance of also promoting it within its business practices.

Attitude towards the brands after seeing the advertisements (Ab)

MacKenzie, Lutz and Belch (1986) argue for the need to measure brand attitude in connection to the marketing activities as there is a clear interdependence. They proposed two influences that one can review, the likeability of the ad and how it is transferred to the brand as well as the credibility of the ad in connection to the brand. When measuring this among our respondents it is clear that there is

a dependence between the Aad and the Ab. The results show that the brand appeal and attractiveness were affected after seeing the femvertising. In Audi and Nike's case it increased, going from 4,2 to 4,4 and from 4 to 4,4 respectively. Whereas in Bianco's case the rating deteriorated, from 2,3 to 1,6. One of the reasons could be due to the rather aggressive way of broadcasting the message. At the same time this could potentially also be due to the incongruence between the brand personality and the advertisement. As Bianco was seen as being a mainstream, quiet and friendly woman, there is an evident incoherence between the brand persona and the strong characteristics of the ad. This finding clearly shows that brands need to review how they convey the message of gender equality in their advertisements. Consistent communication is a key when brands want to build and reinforce brand personality and image (Keller, 2001). Our findings support this notion, since the interviewed men recognized Nike's consistent communication pattern of social activism.

Albeit Drake (2017) stated an evident connection between positive attitudes towards an ad in connection to the brand affecting the purchase intentions. This was unaidedly mentioned in our results, whereby one man mentioned that if Audi was sincere with its message he would in fact buy an Audi. Whereas, the Bianco ad was seen as non-inclusive of men, one respondent declared that no man would say they wanted to buy Bianco shoes after seeing the ad, and another outright mentioned that he would definitely not buy products from them.

Even though there is a stated difference between brand image and brand identity (Kapferer, 2012), our findings point to the importance of reviewing both when communicating, conducting marketing and taking a stance as an organization. It is clear that there needs to be an alignment between the internal values of the company and the external communication. In the study, the interviewees expressed a mismatch between the brand identity of Audi, being mostly male

oriented, and the communication empowering females and gender equality.

Finally, as brand image is not only endowed through the functionality of its products or services, but rather shaped by its marketing activities (Kapferer, 2012), it is important to have clear values and to authentically convey them.

Managerial Implications

Brand image, being strongly connected to brand equity (Keller, 1993), makes it important for brand managers to analyze and review how the social activism which the company pursues affects their brand image. From a managerial perspective, this research offers insights into the perception of femvertising and how it should be constructed. In a society where people buy brands based on their values it is important to take a stance in regard to social issues and authentically support them, which will ultimately affect the bottom line.

This research also adds to literature by examining femvertising from the perspective of men. As this had not been researched before, the study improves the understanding of using femvertising by brands that target both women and men. It is important, in order to also have an impact on the perception of men, to actually include them. The result of our study shows that the use of femvertising needs to be used cautiously in order to improve the brand appeal for men. However, if it is not consistent with the brand image, done aggressively and none-inclusive of men, it can lower the brand appeal.

Conclusion

This study evidently answers the two research questions posed in the beginning. The first question aiming at exploring the male perception of femvertising. Femvertising, supported by authentic actions and facts, is seen as positive and progressive, but also awaited by male consumers nowadays. According to our research men believe that brands should take a stance in regard to

equality between men and women through advertising because they have the financial capabilities and the power to affect a bigger audience.

In regard to the second research question regarding the effect on attitudes and perception, if done correctly, femvertising will enhance the brand image and appeal. In other words, having a consistent femvertising campaign, which is communicated in a subtle way and is inclusive of both genders can lead to better attitude of men towards the ad and the brand behind it. This study also clearly showed that if femvertising is communicated wrongly, it can lead to a deterioration of attitudes and perceptions towards the brand.

Limitations and future research

There are some limitations of the research. One of them concerning the generalizability, due to this study only looking at three different brands and their femvertising.

In addition, due to time constraints another limitation regards the sampling. The sample group could be considered quite homogenous, all of them being of western origin, well educated and several of them having a background in business. It is possible that a similar view on the topic of gender equality, femvertising and its importance exists. Furthermore, the age range being quite wide (22 - 44) could also be considered a limitation as it affects the validity of the results.

Therefore, future studies within this area should try to validate the findings in this paper, by looking at more advertisements and using a larger, more culturally diverse sampling group. Additionally, in order to truly measure the effectiveness of femvertising one would need to conduct longitudinal research, looking into the actual effects on the purchasing behaviour over time.

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