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Selling Empowerment

A Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis of Feminist Discourse and Brand Legitimacy in Sports Femvertising

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Foreword

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to our supervisor, Maria Månsson for the support, guidance and valuable insights you have provided us with throughout this writing process.

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Abstract

This study examines how feminist discourse is constructed and adapted within sports femvertising in order to legitimise brand identity and positioning in a commercial context. The study analyses four campaigns by Nike (2020, 2025), Adidas (2025) and Puma (2022) through a qualitative multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis, based on Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model. The analysis analyses feminist discourses and multimodal elements through a textual level, discursive practice and in relation to broader social practices. The analysis show that the campaigns construct feminist discourse mainly through individualised empowerment, rather than collective struggle or structural change. The analysis also identifies linguistic mechanisms which allow structural barriers to be excluded, such as unnamed antagonists, empty imperatives and future-oriented language. As a result, feminist discourse is depoliticised and made compatible with commercial sports culture. The study further shows that this depoliticised feminism becomes useful for brand legitimacy. By incorporating feminist values, the brands can position themselves as progressive and socially responsible, while avoiding deeper political issues. The study concludes that the campaigns reshape feminism into a brand-friendly form that supports brand legitimacy more than actual feminist change.

Keywords: *femvertising, feminist discourse, sports advertising, brand legitimacy, commodity feminism, postfeminism, multimodal critical discourse analysis*

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Sammanfattning

Denna studie undersöker hur feministiska diskurser konstrueras och omformuleras inom sportfemvertising för att legitimera varumärkesidentitet och positionering i ett kommersiellt sammanhang. Studien analyserar fyra kampanjer av Nike (2020, 2025), Adidas (2025) och Puma (2022) genom en kvalitativ multimodal kritisk diskurs analys, baserad på Fairclough's three-Dimensional Model. Analysen undersöker feministiska diskurser och multimodala element genom en textnivå, diskursiv praktik och i relation till bredare sociala praktiker. Analysen visar att kampanjerna konstruerar feministisk diskurs främst genom individualisering av empowerment snarare än kollektiv kamp eller strukturell förändring. Analysen identifierar språkliga mekanismer som gör att strukturella barriärer kan exkluderas, såsom icke namngivna antagonister, tomma påståenden och framåtblickande språk. Som ett resultat av detta avpolitiserar den feministiska diskursen och förs förenlig med kommersiell sport kontext. Studien visar ytterligare att en avpolitiserad feminism är användbar för varumärkes legitimitet. Genom att inkludera feministiska värderingar kan varumärken positionera sig som progressiva och socialt ansvariga, samtidigt som de undviker strukturella politiska problem. Studien drar slutsatsen att kampanjerna omformar feminismen till en varumärkes vänlig variant av feministisk diskurs som stödjer varumärkes legitimitet snarare än feministiska mål.

Nyckelord: femvertising, feministisk diskurs, sportreklam, varumärkeslegitimitet, kommersialiserad feminism, postfeminism, multimodal kritisk diskursanalys

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1. Introduction

In today's advertising world, brands do not only sell products but also values and ideas. One example of this is femvertising. Femvertising refers to advertising strategies in which brands use feminist messages to promote products, shape brand identity, and position themselves as progressive (Windels et al., 2019). Femvertising often challenges traditional stereotypes of women in advertising and may generate more positive attitudes toward both the advertisement and the brand (Åkestam et al., 2017). In this sense, femvertising can appear as a more inclusive and socially aware form of brand communication, while also increasing the representation of women across media. However, it is important to examine femvertising more closely, as such progressive practices may hide a more complicated reality.

A growing body of research suggests that while femvertising is presented as empowering, it's often a way for brands to position themselves as progressive, without actually engaging in structural challenges needed for gender equality (Windels et al., 2019). Iyer and Dani (2025) highlights how the primary goals of feminism are to reach gender equality, but femvertising often deflects from this as it presents female empowerment as an individual act rather than a collective one. Instead of pointing towards economic and political systems that lie at the foundation of inequality, advertisers present feminism as something which can be reached through individual acts and hard work, or simply a positive mindset. Windels et al. (2019) highlights how this type of individualistic discourse is related to postfeminism, a cultural phenomenon where feminist goals are already framed as achieved. Gill (2007) establishes how postfeminism replaces the collective political struggle with individuality, self-confidence and personal choice. Based on this logic, female empowerment is no longer understood as a structural transformation but as something each woman is supposed to achieve on her own, through self-improvement.

When postfeminist ideas enter a commercial context, such as advertising, it's referred to as what Goldman et al., (1991) calls commodity feminism, which is the process of reshaping feminist ideas to fit commercial communication. Commodity feminism involves stripping feminist messages, such as empowerment and independence, of their political meanings and turning them into consumable signs and meanings. Thus, consumption is positioned as a political action towards equality (Windels et al., 2019). Sharifzadeh and Brison (2024) add to this by

suggesting that feminism is turned into a consumable message instead of promoting real structural change.

And rather than only selling products, brands are selling the feeling of participating in social change. So while an ad might look progressive, it still acts within the structures of capitalism and advertising, where the main goal is to make a profit (Sharifzadeh & Brison, 2024).

Furthermore, as Varghese and Kumar (2022) suggest, femvertising risks undermining feminism as a political movement when used for commercial purposes and as a marketing strategy. Thus, it is at this intersection between a commercial logic and ideological content where this study finds an unexplored issue. Feminism is based on reaching equality and social change, while brands follow a commercial logic where the purpose is to sell. This creates a tension when feminist messages are used in advertising because the ideological purpose of feminism does not always match the commercial goals of branding, as they are inherently different (Windels et al., 2019; Varghese & Kumar, 2022). The reason why brands decide to adopt feminist ideas into their brand communication can be understood through broader marketing trends. Vredenburg et al. (2020) identified how brands seek to align themselves with socially important values in order to appear credible, progressive and relatable, which in turn helps brands establish legitimacy among stakeholders in the market. Therefore, the concept of brand legitimacy is valuable within this context as it gives insight into exactly how it can be beneficial for brands to engage in femvertising and commodify feminist discourses. However, this raises questions if this legitimacy is built upon a genuine commitment to feminism or just being used as a strategic branding tactic.

This question becomes especially important within the sports industry, which also offers a particularly relevant context for examining femvertising. Sport is already a highly gendered field, where women have historically had to fight for equal representation (UN Women, 2024). Because of this, feminist messages in sports advertising become especially interesting to analyse. As previous studies note (Sharifzadeh & Brison, 2024), campaigns within this field often present themselves as empowering and progressive while still reproducing gendered stereotypes and postfeminist contradictions.

Despite this, there is still a limited understanding of femvertising within the sports industry and even fewer studies that deeply analyse the tension that arises when feminist

ideology is adopted in a commercial logic. Specifically within sports advertising, from the perspective of brand legitimacy. Therefore, this study will explore how feminist discourses are reshaped when applied in commercial sport advertising, and specifically when brands seek to legitimise their brand identity and positioning. From the larger perspective of strategic communication, this study contributes insights into how brands strategically incorporate ideological values into commercial brand communication to position themselves as progressive and strengthen brand identity through legitimacy.

1.2 Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine how feminist discourse is used in femvertising and how it is constructed and reshaped when introduced in a commercialised context, and how it can be used as a strategy for legitimising brand identity and positioning. The aim is to understand how feminist messages and commercial interests intersect, and what tensions this creates. Through a qualitative multimodal critical discourse analysis of four campaigns by established sports brands, this study examines how feminism is communicated within commercial sport advertising.

1.3 Research questions

1. *How are feminist discourses constructed within selected sport advertising campaigns to legitimise brand identity and positioning?*
2. *How are feminist discourses adapted within brand communication to fit a commercial context?*

1.4 Disposition

A critical feminist perspective is applied throughout this study. First, previous research introduces the background of femvertising, then a more critical perspective through postfeminism and commodity feminism is established, and lastly a presentation to the paradox of femvertising is made. The theoretical framework introduces discourse theory and brand legitimacy theory. The methodological section presents the study's qualitative multimodal critical discourse analysis and Fairclough's (2010) three-dimensional model, which will be used to analyse the selected empirical material. The analysis is structured through the textual, discursive and sociocultural levels, followed by a final discussion and conclusion.

2. Previous Research

The following section will present existing literature on femvertising. The first section establishes the background and main drives behind the rise of femvertising. Following, the second subsection applies a more critical lens as the concepts of commodity feminism and postfeminism are introduced and established. Finally, previous research relating to the conflicting nature of femvertising is presented.

2.1 Femvertising as a cultural and strategic phenomenon

The term "femvertising " was created by SHE Media in 2014, which also established the annual “*#Femvertising awards*”, which celebrate brands that challenge gender norms and feature pro-female images and messages in their advertisement (SHE Media, 2017). Since the introduction of femvertising, the phenomenon has been established as a common marketing technique. To understand this development, Varghese and Kumar (2022) identify five main drivers behind the rise of femvertising and provide reasoning for why it has come to be socially acceptable in recent years. These drivers can broadly be understood to have emerged due to marketing trends and a cultural demand for better and socially aware representations of women in advertising. Introducing the first factor, which is based on the rising activism against the commonly seen stereotypical and sexualised representations of women in today's advertising. This perspective is especially important as the media plays a large role in guiding the public understanding of feminism (Varghese and Kumar, 2022). Following more of a brand logic, the second driver refers to the rise of conscious capitalism and brand activism. Meaning that brands can use feminist messaging to differentiate themselves and align with consumers' values through purpose-driven engagement (Varghese and Kumar, 2022). The third driver Varghese and Kumar (2022) identified relates to criticism towards brands not practising femvertising authentically enough, and using it more as a validating symbol. In addition to the previous one, the fourth driver relates to the critique against gendered stereotypes in recent advertising and how a non-stereotypical representation is instead efficient for brands seeking ad effectiveness. Finally, the fifth driver of femvertising relates to the actual regulations which have been put in place to regulate stereotypical and sexualising advertisements (Varghese & Kumar, 2022). Based on these five drivers, it's evident that femvertising emerged through a cultural demand for change, but at the same time, due to brands seeking fresh strategic advertising opportunities.

As previous researchers above have established the drivers and emergence of femvertising, researchers have also sought to understand how consumers respond to femvertising, which can explain how femvertising has become an established phenomenon and strategic tool. Åkestam et al. (2017) introduce a consumer perspective by showing that femvertising is proven to generate less ad reactance than traditional and stereotypical representations of women in advertising. This also generates a more positive brand attitude among consumers. Following this consumer perspective, Ho et al. (2026) introduce *perceived femvertising*, a framework which examines how women perceive femvertising in accordance with their identity, based on six dimensions: Authenticity, Commitment, Empowerment, Compliance, Representation and Transformation are supposed to help brands align advertisements with women's values and expectations, which in turn heightens brand loyalty and brand advocacy. This suggests that brand does not achieve the effective outcomes of femvertising simply by including feminist messages, rather it relies on whether the consumers believe it to be authentic and aligned with the brand's identity. However, earlier findings by Martínez-Aguirre et al. (2025) suggest that females with more feminist knowledge have a more positive and authentic perception of femvertising,

So far, previous research has given context to the rise of femvertising and established the impact it has on consumer behaviour and brand attitudes (Åkestam et al., 2017; Ho et al., 2026; Martínez-Aguirre et al., 2025). However, much of the existing research focuses more on the limitations of femvertising and the implications of it being used as a strategic tool used to serve commercial interests (Windels, 2019; Iyer & Dani, 2025). Looking back at Varghese and Kumar (2022), their study does something else besides identifying the main drivers behind femvertising. It also highlights the importance of distinguishing between advertising using authentic and fabricated feminist messages, as it often works in favour of business interests rather than the goals of feminism. In addition, Windels et al. (2019) point towards the risk of brands adopting feminist discourses in a commercial setting, as it eventually risks weakening feminism as a political movement. This criticism concerning the commercialisation of feminist ideas suggests a more fundamental and critical question and is captured through the concept of commodity feminism (Goldman et al., 1991), which will be further developed in the following section.

2.2 Commodity feminism and Postfeminism

Following the critique Windels et al. (2019) raise against the commodification of feminism, Goldman et al. (1991), who introduced the concept of commodity feminism, explain it as the process by which advertising translates feminist values into commercial signs and consumer meanings. Thus, feminist ideas such as empowerment, independence and bodily autonomy are turned into marketing messages where they are stripped of their political meanings. Instead, they are made to fit a commercialised context, where feminist ideas are used to sell products and build brand identity, eventually depoliticising feminism. Furthermore, Goldman et al. (1991) highlight how commodity feminism presents feminism and empowerment more as an individual act of self-expression, rather than a collective battle aimed at tackling structural inequalities. These discourses surrounding individualisation, self-confidence and personal choice are all referred to as neoliberal ideas and postfeminist discourse, which deflects from the true structural feminist transformation, which is actually needed for overcoming feminist struggles (Windels et al., 2019).

Gill (2007) explains postfeminism as a state where all goals of feminism are thought to be achieved and frames postfeminism as a sensibility which is made up of characteristics that have evolved as a response to feminism. The first characteristic is the media's heightened obsession and constant scrutiny surrounding the female body, which is seen as a sexy weapon and a powerful tool at the same time. Similarly, the second characteristic relates to the general sexualisation of pop culture and women in media. Unlike before, women are not necessarily presented as sexualised objects through a male gaze, but rather they are presented as willing subjects who actively present themselves in sexualised ways because they have taken back the power over their own bodies. Importantly, Windels et al. (2019) argues how postfeminist media discourse praises individual choice and presents women as individuals free from all constraints of inequalities, which deflects from the fundamental goals of feminism, as oppression can only be overcome through collective struggle. Gill (2007) continues to exemplify how postfeminist discourses expect women to constantly monitor and improve their appearance externally and manage emotions and feelings introspectively. Similarly, the media reflects similar postfeminist discourses as it presents women's lives as lacking and in need of constant renewal, which then can be achieved through consumption.

As presented by Gill (2007) as well as by Iyer and Dani (2025), postfeminism is closely related to today's consumer culture, as self-improvement and empowerment are positioned as being achieved through consumption rather than through social or political change. Iyer and Dani (2025) analysed 80 award-winning advertisements through six common postfeminist discourses, for example, commodity feminism, self-surveillance and individualisation and the results concluded that even celebrated advertisements included postfeminist discourses. The findings suggest that advertisers in recent years have attached more feminist discourses to products and branding, and that women will experience more empowerment through the consumption of said products. But at the same time, the findings prove that advertisements emphasise women's self-monitoring and evaluation (Iyer & Dani, 2025). Windels et al. (2019) conducted a similar study and found that 65% of awarded advertisements aimed at empowering women contained postfeminist discourses. The most common one being what the authors distinguish as confidence cult(ure), referring to the extent to which the advertisements suggest that women lack confidence and should improve such aspects.

Similarly, Sharifzadeh and Brison's (2024) study also recognises how postfeminist discourse is based on the assumption that feminism has already achieved its major goals and is therefore no longer needed in the same political sense. Instead, it emphasises personal choice, self-improvement and self-management. In their study, they analyse female representation in sports advertisements using Gill's (2007) characteristics of postfeminist media discourse. Their findings (Sharifzadeh & Brison, 2024) revealed that these postfeminist characteristics are reflected on multiple levels and found that despite efforts made by sport brands to promote equality, the current state is not free from gendered stereotypes. Furthermore, the authors introduce a reimagined version of commodity feminism within a sports context, where female athletes are portrayed as powerful and sexually appealing and emphasis is put on physical attributes, rather than the actual performance.

Sharifzadeh and Brison (2024) highlight a central tension as sports femvertising presents women as autonomous individuals who can achieve empowerment through confidence, discipline and consumption rather than through collective action. This means that femvertising can function in an ambivalent way. On the one hand, it increases the visibility of feminist themes and presents brands as supportive of women. On the other hand, it risks depoliticising feminism by transforming it into an individualised and market-oriented discourse centred on personal

choice, identity and consumption. Similarly, Varghese and Kumar (2022) suggest that femvertising risks undermining feminism as a political movement when used for commercial purposes and as a marketing strategy. This tension points towards a larger contradiction within femvertising, and it's therefore highly relevant to examine exactly how feminist discourses are reshaped when put in a commercial advertising context.

2.3 The paradox of femvertising: Ideological vs Commercial interests

As presented in the research above, a central tension arises as feminist messages intersect with commercial interests. Feminism seeks to reach equality through collective social change, and advertising works within a commercial logic where one of the primary goals is to improve brand positioning and increase profit.

Windels et al. (2019) highlight how this tension is reflected as advertisers position consumption as a legitimate way to achieve equality by playing on commodity feminism, which borrows from true feminist discourse and places it within a consumerist context. Furthermore, the authors point out that advertisers have learned that brands and products need to be tied to meaningful symbols and values to stand out, where advertisers see feminism as a “*Fertile Ground*” (Windels et al., 2019) for creating brand images and identities that resonate with consumers.

Furthermore, this tension is reinforced as Iyer and Dani (2025) suggest that femvertising often reproduces hegemonic postfeminist and neoliberal principles of feminism, which reinforces gender stereotypes. Thus, Machin and Mayr (2023) highlight how power relations in modern societies and a multimodal CDA cannot be discussed without referencing neoliberalism, an ideology which reflects the same forms of individualisation seen in postfeminism (Iyer & Dani, 2025). Machin and Mayr (2023) refer to neoliberalism as a way of running economies and societies where profit is of the utmost interest and everything can be marketised and works best when treated as commodities. This thought process is reflected in the principles of femvertising and commodity feminism. Furthermore, Machin and Mayr (2023) point to one of the characteristics of commodification being that all goals come with a set of performance indicators. This relates to the process of brands possibly leveraging femvertising in order to legitimise and improve brand identity and brand positioning.

2.4 Relevance of previous research

The previous research above presents femvertising as a well-established field of research from multiple different angles. Previous studies begin by establishing the background and drive of femvertising while examining it from a consumer perspective and as a strategic opportunity for brands (Varghese & Kumar, 2022; Åkestam et al., 2017). A more critical field of research is introduced as it evaluates femvertising from the perspective of postfeminism and commodity feminism, and highlights the risk of feminism being diluted and depoliticised within a commercialised context (Goldman, 1991; Gill, 2007; Windels et al., 2019). Hinging on this commercialisation of feminism, the paradox of femvertising is introduced in the third section, which highlights the tension between ideological content existing in a commercial context (Iyer & Dani, 2025; Sharifzadeh & Brison, 2024). By establishing a solid foundation of previous research, it will be of value when developing the field further.

Although this paradox of femvertising has been introduced in previous research, the field is lacking studies on how this tension is actually produced by deeply examining the discursive and multimodal construction of feminist messages in commercial sport advertising. Similarly, analysis of the very mechanisms that allow a depoliticised version of feminism to be present in advertisements needs closer study. Even more, the field is lacking studies further examining the role of brand legitimacy as a motive for brands incorporating feminist discourses in advertising, to present themselves as progressive and to strengthen their identity.

3. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework is based on brand legitimacy and discourse theory. Brand legitimacy helps explain how brands use socially important values to appear credible, progressive and socially responsible (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Discourse theory helps analyse how a social reality is constructed through language, images and representation (Foucault, 1981). Together, these theories make it possible to analyse the tension that arises as feminist values and discourses are constructed in order to reach commercial goals in femvertising.

3.1 Brand legitimacy

Legitimacy can be understood as the process through which brands try to appear appropriate, credible and socially acceptable in relation to dominant values in society. Consumers expect brands to engage with important social and political issues in today's world. This means that companies can strengthen their legitimacy by publicly connecting themselves to values that are seen as relevant in society (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Vredenburg et al. (2020) explain that brands often use social issues in their communication to appear more relevant and trustworthy. By taking a public stand on issues that matter to consumers, companies can position themselves as responsible and not only profit-driven (Vredenburg et al., 2020). In this way, social values become important resources in brand identity, since they allow brands to build stronger emotional and cultural connections with their audiences. To make legitimacy analytically useful, this study draws on Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) framework of authentic brand activism. They argue that brand activism becomes authentic when there is alignment between a brand's purpose, values, activist messaging and corporate practice. This means that brand legitimacy is not only created through what a campaign communicates, but also through whether the message appears connected to the brand's wider identity, values and actions.

This understanding of legitimacy is closely connected to Dowling and Pfeffer's (1975) view of the relationship between organisations and the wider social system in which they operate. They argue that organisations seek to create harmony between the social values associated with their activities and the norms of acceptable behaviour in society (Dowling & Pfeffer, 1975). If there is a gap between these values and societal expectations, organisations may

need to adapt their communication to be more legitimate. However, this process also depends on authenticity. Vredenburg et al. (2020) explain that a brand's communication is more likely to be seen as legitimate when its message is aligned with its purpose and values. If a company communicates support for a social issue without backing it up through its actions, consumers may instead view the message as inauthentic. Then the attempt to gain legitimacy may have the opposite effect and damage the brand's credibility. Dowling and Pfeffer (1975) further argue that organisations can try to gain legitimacy by identifying themselves with symbols or values that already have a strong social legitimacy through communication.

This is relevant for this study because brands in the sports industry use feminist messages to present themselves as progressive and socially aware (Sharifzadeh & Brison, 2024). Through this, they may try to construct legitimacy by associating themselves with ideas such as empowerment and equality. This raises questions about whether such legitimacy is based on a genuine commitment to feminist values or whether feminism is mainly used as a strategic resource in brand communication.

3.2 Discourse theory

Discourse theory focuses on how language, knowledge and power shape the way reality is understood. In this study, discourse theory is combined with a multimodal critical discourse analysis, based on Fairclough's (2010) three-dimensional model. This makes it possible to connect detailed analysis of language, visuals, sound and representation with broader social structures and power relations. Discourse is therefore about more than words or communication. It also concerns the rules and structures that decide what can be said, who can speak and which ideas are accepted as true (Foucault, 1981). This is relevant for this study because feminist meanings in advertising are not neutral, but shaped by wider social power relations and commercial context.

Foucault (1981) argues that discourses are rarely free, but are controlled and regulated through systems that select and limit what can be said, what is seen as valid and who is given authority to speak. This connection between discourse and power is important because control over discourse also means control over meaning. Actors within society therefore struggle to influence discourses, since dominant discourses shape what is seen as normal, acceptable and true (Foucault, 1981). In this way, discourse helps to produce and organise how people

understand reality. This can affect how social issues are discussed, which perspectives are taken seriously and whose voices are heard. Foucault (1981) identifies different systems of exclusion that regulate discourse. These systems decide which discourses can be expressed and by whom. Examples include prohibition, taboos and restrictions around certain topics. Another important form of exclusion is the division between what is considered true and false knowledge. This distinction is often connected to institutional forms of power where some forms of knowledge are given more authority than others. This can be professionalism, education and culture (Foucault, 1981).

While Foucault provides a theoretical understanding of how discourse is regulated by power and knowledge, Fairclough's critical discourse analysis helps examine how these power relations are expressed in actual language use. Fairclough (2010) views discourses as layered and social relations between communication, people and power relations, which are all mutually dependent. Thus, discourses have both internal and external relations and are always understood through these relations instead of being viewed as an isolated object. This reasoning is very important for this study, as the selected material consists of advertisements which can be viewed as discursive practices that are connected to larger social issues, such as power relations. Fairclough (2010) highlights the dialectical characteristics of these relations, meaning that discourses create and are created by social structures. This logic suggests that discourses reflect reality but also produce it, meaning they have the potential to challenge and transform existing discourses.

Furthermore, Fairclough (2010) argues that textual analysis has a dual character. First, it involves interdiscursive analysis, which means analysing which discourses are used in the text and how they are combined. Text rarely contains only one discourse and often brings up several ones (Fairclough, 2010). Second, textual analysis involves linguistic or multimodal analysis, where the researchers examine language, visual images, body language, music and sound (Fairclough, 2010). This helps to analyse how the meanings in the campaigns are created through aspects other than only words.

Multimodal critical discourse analysis makes it possible to connect the microlevel of textual details on the campaigns with the macrolevel of social practices, institutions and power relations. This allows the study to move beyond describing the campaign and examine how feminist messages are constructed and how this supports brand legitimacy.

3.3 Brand legitimacy and discourse theory

Brand legitimacy, discourse theory and multimodal CDA are combined in this study because they help explain the relationship between feminist discourse and commercial brand communication. Since the purpose of the study is to examine how feminist discourse is constructed in sports campaigns to legitimise brand identity, the theories contribute with different but connected perspectives.

Discourse theory helps explain how feminism is constructed as meaning through language, representation and power. It also makes it possible to analyse which feminist ideas are made visible and which voices or structural issues are excluded. Multimodal CDA provides the analytical tools for examining how these meanings are expressed through language, visuals, sound, body language and brand symbols in the campaigns.

Brand legitimacy adds a commercial perspective by explaining why brands use feminist discourse in their communication. Through values such as empowerment, equality and representation, brands can position themselves as progressive, socially aware and culturally relevant. This makes it possible to analyse feminism as a strategic resource for brand identity and positioning.

Fairclough's (2010) three-dimensional model connects these perspectives in the analysis. The textual dimension focuses on how feminist meanings are constructed. The discursive practice dimension examines how feminist ideas are adapted through advertising. The sociocultural practice dimension connects the campaign to broader social issues.

Together, these perspectives make it possible to analyse both how feminist messages are created and how they may function as part of brand identity and positioning within a commercial context.

4. Method

This section will describe the study's choice of method. First, it will present the scientific approach. Furthermore, it will describe how the data and empirical material were collected.

4.1 Scientific approach

This study employs a qualitative and interpretive methodological approach in order to examine the research problem in depth. A qualitative approach is suitable because the study aims to explore meanings, representations and social contexts rather than measure effects or identify statistical patterns. This is relevant within strategic communication, where communication can be understood as a sensemaking process (Eksell & Thelander, 2014). Therefore, the approach makes it possible to analyse how feminist messages can be connected to broader ideological and commercial meanings.

The study also takes a critical perspective, as it examines how power, ideology and commercial interests influence the construction of feminist discourse. This is relevant because advertising communicates values, identities and social meanings. From a discourse analytical perspective, language and communication do not simply reflect reality, but also help shape it (Möllerström & Stenberg, 2014). Therefore, the analysis focuses on how feminist ideas are represented, which meanings are made visible and which structural issues may be excluded.

To analyse this, the study applies a multimodal critical discourse analysis paired with Fairclough's three-dimensional model. Multimodal CDA is suitable because it makes it possible to analyse the relationship between language, power, ideology and social structures (Fairclough, 2010). Since the empirical material consists of advertising campaigns where meaning is produced through several semiotic resources, a multimodal perspective is also relevant. Rasmussen (2014) explains that multimodal analysis is useful for analysing visual brand communication because it examines how different communicative resources work together to create meaning. A reflexive approach is also important, since qualitative research requires an understanding of how the researcher, the chosen method and the specific communicative context shape the research process (Eksell & Thelander, 2014).

4.2 Data collection

The data collection method aligns with the qualitative approach, and the material is chosen through strategic selection, meaning that the material is selected based on its relevance for the study. Within qualitative studies, this strategic selection means that the researcher identifies information-rich cases, suggesting the chosen case can provide information that aligns with the phenomenon which is studied (Patton, 1990).

The selected material consists of four sports advertising campaigns produced by Nike, Adidas and Puma between 2020 and 2025. The selection was based on specific criteria. First, the campaigns had to be produced by globally established sports brands with strong cultural and commercial influence. Second, they had to include explicit messages connected to women's empowerment. Third, the campaigns had to contain multimodal elements, such as videos, still images, narrated voiceovers and sound, making them suitable for multimodal CDA. The timeframe 2020-2025 was chosen because it reflects a contemporary advertising context where femvertising, women's sport and brand activism have become increasingly visible.

4.2.1 Presentation of material

“One Day We Won't Need This Day”, Nike (2020)

This Nike campaign was released in honour of International Women's Day, March 8, 2020. The campaign consists of a 48-second-long video posted on Nike's YouTube channel (Nike, 2020). The video includes a voiceover, background music and clips of women participating in different sports. The campaign title, which is repeated in the video and acts as the overarching theme, is the quote: *“One Day We Won't Need This Day”* (Nike, 2020).

“So win”, Nike (2025)

The *“So Win”* campaign was released in time for the 2025 Super Bowl. The material consists of a campaign article posted on the Nike website, 23 still images and a 60-second campaign video featuring famous female athletes. The campaign material includes the slogan *“You Can't Win, So Win”*. (Nike, 2025).

“You got this”, Adidas (2025)

The Adidas “*You Got This*” campaign was released on June 23, 2025, in order to celebrate the UEFA Women’s Euros (Adidas, 2025). The material consists of a campaign article on the Adidas website, 26 still images and a campaign video titled “*Great Rivals Make Great Motivation*” on YouTube. The campaign includes female football players such as English Alessia Russo and Spanish Aitana Bonmatí (Adidas, 2025).

“*She Moves Us*” Puma (2022)

Puma’s “*She Moves Us*” campaign was released over the course of 2021 and includes interviews with Puma’s female ambassadors, which will not be analysed. However, this study seeks to specifically analyse the campaign video published on YouTube on March 8, on International Women’s Day, led by popstar Dua Lipa, who is also the face of the campaign (Puma, 2022).

4.3 Analysis method

As mentioned, this study applies a qualitative analytical approach. This is suitable because it makes it possible to interpret meanings, structures and social contexts in the material (Flick, 2014). The analysis focuses on four cases of advertising and explore the tension between ideological content and commercial branding strategies.

This study is based on multimodal critical discourse analysis and Fairclough’s three-dimensional model, where the campaigns are analysed through the textual level, discursive practice and sociocultural practice (Fairclough, 2010). In other words, the analysis focuses both on how feminist messages are expressed in the campaigns, how these messages are produced and understood and how they relate to broader social structures and power relations. Fairclough describes discourse analysis as involving attention to processes of text production, distribution and consumption. While also relating texts to the broader social practices in which they operate (Fairclough, 2010).

At the first level, the analysis focuses on text, which Fairclough (2010) understands as the descriptive dimension of the campaigns, including close examination of linguistic and multimodal features. This can be vocabulary, grammar, structures, slogans, tone, imagery and representations of feminism. The purpose is to identify how feminist messages are formulated and what meanings are made visible in the campaigns without making any broader interpretations yet.

At the second level, the analysis examines the discursive practice, including how texts draw on and combine different genres, discourses and styles, also known as interdiscursivity (Fairclough, 2010). The discursive practice becomes more interpretative as it allows closer examination of how the material is produced, distributed and consumed. The focus is on how brands draw on existing feminist discourses and adapt them to advertising formats and branding strategies. This level makes it possible to analyse how feminist ideas are packaged in ways that are intended to be both socially meaningful and commercially attractive.

At the third level, the analysis addresses sociocultural practice by connecting discourse to broader social structures, practices, institutions and power relations (Fairclough, 2010). This includes relating the empirical material to the theoretical framework and highlighting issues such as gender norms, consumer culture, postfeminist values and the commercialisation of political ideas. At this level, the study can examine how feminist discourse in advertising may both reflect and reproduce dominant ideologies while at the same time appear progressive.

Together, the three levels will be used as connected parts of the same analysis. In this way, the model makes it possible to analyse how feminist messages are constructed in the campaigns, how they are shaped by commercial communication and how they may support brand legitimacy.

4.4 Reflection of Method

The chosen method is suitable for this study because it allows for a close and critical analysis of how feminist meanings are constructed in sports advertising. Since the study applies a qualitative multimodal critical discourse analysis, it becomes possible to analyse both linguistic and visual elements in the campaigns. This is supported by Rasmussen (2014), who explains that a multimodal approach is useful for analysing how different communicative resources work together to create meaning in brand communication.

However, the method also has limitations. Since the study is based on four strategically selected advertising campaigns, the findings cannot be generalised to all forms of femvertising or brand communication as a whole. Instead, the purpose is to provide a contextual and in-depth understanding of how feminist discourse is constructed within these specific campaigns. This is in line with Eksell and Thelander's (2014) view that qualitative methods need to be understood in relation to the specific context in which they are applied.

Another important limitation is that the analysis is based on interpretation. Since multimodal CDA is an interpretive method, the author's previous knowledge and critical feminist perspective may influence how the material is understood. This makes reflexivity important. Eksell and Thelander (2014) describe reflexivity as a way of making the researcher's role, the field and the specific communicative context visible in the research process. In this study, this means being aware that the analysis is shaped by the selected theories, the feminist perspective and the focus on commercial sports advertising.

To strengthen transparency, the same analytical framework is applied to all four campaigns. Each campaign is analysed through Fairclough's three levels: textual level, discursive practice and sociocultural practice. This creates a consistent structure for comparing the material and clarifies how the interpretations have been made. At the same time, the analysis remains flexible enough to identify patterns and themes that appear in the empirical material.

It is also important to reflect on the risks of discourse analysis. Möllerström and Stenberg (2014) point out that discourse analysis can risk giving too much explanatory power to discourses. This is especially relevant since the study does not include a consumer perspective. The analysis examines how feminist meanings are constructed in the campaigns, but it does not examine how consumers actually interpret or respond to these messages. Therefore, this study does not claim to determine the actual effects of the campaigns. Instead, the analysis focuses on how feminist meanings are constructed, represented and commercialised within the selected material.

Finally, the feminist perspective of the study also needs to be considered. Since the study analyses representations of women and feminism, it is important to avoid treating women's experiences as universal. Researchers, therefore, need to make sure that the feminist perspective is inclusive (Ekström & Larsson, 2010). It is also relevant to acknowledge that both authors are women, which may shape how the campaigns are interpreted.

5. Analysis

The following section presents a multimodal CDA and will analyse the empirical material through Fairclough's (2010) three-dimensional model. The analysis is structured around the three levels: Text, discursive practices and social practices, where each level follows either descriptive, interpretative, or explanatory forms of analysis (Fairclough, 2010).

5.1 Textual Level

The textual level will examine the discursive and multimodal aspects of the empirical material, deeply examining how feminist ideas and meanings are constructed through discursive choices and visual elements. The textual analysis is thematically organised around the overarching themes: Individualised discourse and systems of exclusions.

5.1.1 Individualised discourse

Individualisation through linguistic and grammatical choices

Across all four campaigns, a prominent theme is that much discourse is framed in terms of individual empowerment rather than collective struggle. This form of individualisation is first visible through linguistic choices in these quotes featured by Juju Watkins in the Nike (2025) “*So Win*” campaign, as they are aimed at directing attention inward and improving personal performance, not collective performance:

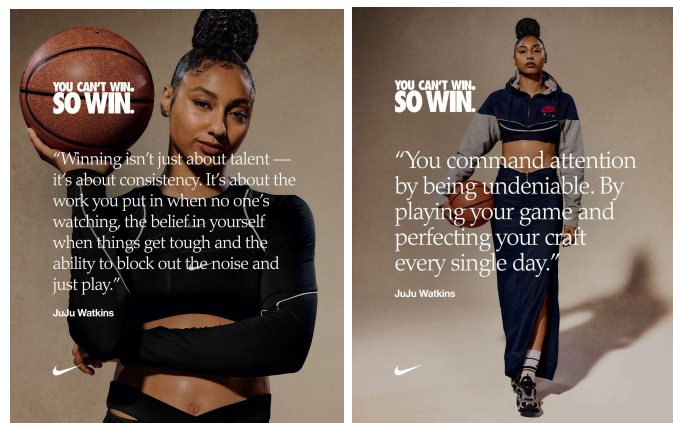


Figure 1: Quote by Juju Watkins (Nike, 2025)

Figure 2: Second quote by JuJu Watkins (Nike, 2025)

“It’s about the work you put in when no one’s watching, the belief in yourself when things get tough, and the ability to block out the noise and just play”. Especially the words *“block out the noise and just play”* suggest that women who seek to improve their personal performance should focus on themselves rather than seeking guidance and empowerment through a collective context. Similarly, this quote: *“You command attention by being undeniable. By playing your game and perfecting your craft every single day,”* suggests that goals should be reached through isolated performances and portrays the road to reaching goals as merciless and ruthless. This individualised discourse of reaching goals through extreme self-improvement is also presented in the Puma (2022) *“She moves us”* campaign video through the quote: *“There’s only one rule in this game, keep going. No stopping, no exceptions, no apologies”*.

Furthermore, this individualised discourse is intensified through the grammatical structure as much of the featured quotes from the Nike (2025) *“So Win”* campaign pictures only refer to a singular subject, a “you” rarely a collective “we”. This is evident in the quotes by Juju Watkins presented above, as well in this quote by Sha’Carri Richardson: *“Winning starts in your mind before it ever shows up on the clock. If you aren’t locked in, if you don’t believe in you first, nobody else will. Bet on yourself every time.”*

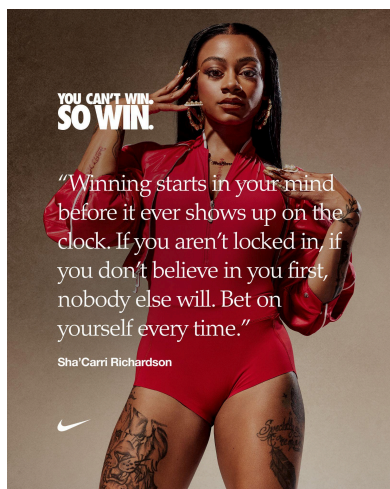


Figure 3: Quote by Sha’Carri Richardson (Nike, 2025)

Nike also presents similar instances in the “*So Win*” campaign video as the entire narration of the campaign is directed towards a singular individual never collective or plural, for example: “*You can’t be demanding, you can’t be relentless, you can’t put yourself first, so put yourself first.*” At the same time, the empirical material also refers to a collective group and a collective “we” in this quote by A’ja Wilson for the Nike(2025) “*So Win*” campaign: “*We’re not waiting for permission anymore. We know our worth, we know our impact, and we’re making sure everyone else does too.*”



Figure 4: Quote by A’ja Wilson, Nike, 2025

A similar pluralised type of discourse is also visible throughout Nike’s (2020) campaign video “*One Day We Won’t Need This Day*”, as the entire narration refers to a collective group: “*We won’t need a day to prove we’re just as fast, strong or skilled*”. However, it’s important to assess which “we” these quotes are referring to. Fairclough (2003) differentiates between an inclusive “we”, which includes the audience and an exclusive “we”, which refers to a group but excludes the addressee. Both quotes refer to an inclusive we, and the “*One Day We Won’t Need This Day*” video is also narrated by a young girl and shows clips of “regular” women and athletes. Here, Nike succeeds in opening up and actually allowing the audience to identify with the campaign. However, the quotes containing “we” in Nike’s “*So Win*” campaign only refer to the achievements made by a group of professional elite female athletes, creating a sort of false collectivism.

Individualisation through visual elements

This individualised discourse is not only visible through linguistic and grammatical choices but also reinforced visually throughout the four campaigns. As seen in the still image material presented above from the Nike (2025) “*So Win*” campaign, the female athletes are presented one by one, never together. This is also reflected in the “*So Win*” campaign video where the women usually are alone in the frame and are rarely shown together as a group. The campaign video also uses short and fast clips, which create a feeling of speed, pressure and intensity. This individualised form of empowerment is reinforced through the intense and confrontational narration made by famous singer Doechii as she says, “*You can’t dominate, so dominate. You can’t flex, so flex*” with added sound effects of a growling tiger. The video features short clips overlaid with a black-and-white filter, which strengthens the campaign’s serious and dramatic tone and creates a feeling of struggle and resistance rather than playfulness. All women featured in the campaign are elite athletes with trained bodies and are shown through sweat, physical strength, serious facial expressions and powerful poses. This makes women appear capable and powerful, but it also makes empowerment depend on elite performance. Because the campaign mainly shows already successful athletes, the message can become less relatable to ordinary women.

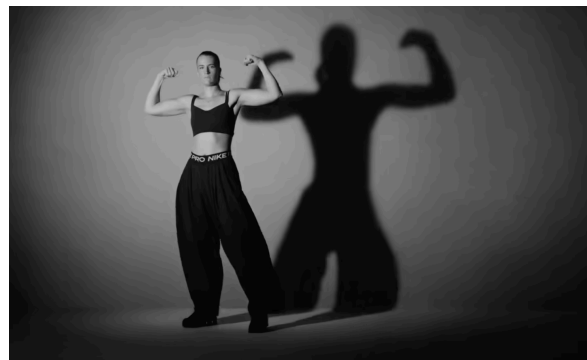


Figure 5: Sha'Carri Richardson on track (Nike, 2025)

Figure 6: Sabrina Ionescu power pose (Nike, 2025)

Figure 7: Tennis player winning (Nike, 2025)

Figure 8: Sha'Carri Richardson posing on track (Nike, 2025)

The Adidas (2025) “*You Got This*” campaign presents the most extreme case of individualisation as the entire theme of the campaign centres on rivalry, which is reinforced by the campaign video: “*Great Rivals Make Great Motivation*”. On the Adidas (2025) campaign website, women are not only presented as isolated individuals but also actively positioned against each other and to be used as a springboard towards better individual performances. Florian Alt, Vice President and Global Brand Communications at Adidas, states: “*Rivalry is often viewed as negative, but it can be such a powerful driving force in sport and beyond. We want to inspire the next generation of players to see that competition and support can co-exist, making both the individual and the game stronger.*” While rivalry very well can be seen as something positive within sport, the “beyond” which Alt refers to is not specified. This causes confusion within feminist discourses as rivalry is rarely seen as a positive driving force, rather the very thing that keeps women from reaching feminist goals.



Figure 8: Alessia Russo facing Aitana Bonmatí (Adidas, 2025)

Figure 9: Aitana Bonmatí facing Kadiatou Diani (Adidas, 2025)

Eleven of the main still images of the campaign feature close-up portraits where the female players' faces are placed directly against each other, looking focused and disciplined. Also, it's important to note that the Adidas logo is placed in the middle of the two women, diverting attention to the brand. This visual representation not only creates an individualised version of empowerment, but it also puts women against each other.

The campaign video centres around the same theme of rivalry, where athletes Aitana Bonmatí and Alessia Russo, as well as other famous athletes, are shown improving their own performances in order to win over the other female athlete. Also, clips of young girls looking up to the athletes are featured. Adidas (2025) “*You Got This*” campaign video channels a dramatic feeling by featuring dim and moody lighting. The background song, “*I’m Sticking with You*” by the Velvet Underground, suggests closeness and staying together. Because of this, the sound can slightly soften the visual rivalry by adding a feeling of connection between the players. However, the campaign still frames this connection through competition and empowerment is represented as being pushed by a rival.



Figure 10: Aitana Bonmatí biking alone (youtube, Adidas, 2025)

Figure 11: Alessia Russo practicing football alone (youtube, Adidas, 2025)

Figure 12: Young girls watching football match (youtube, Adidas, 2025)

Figure 13: Russo and Bonmatí as rivals (youtube, Adidas, 2025)

The individualised linguistic choices and visual representations of female empowerment are closely related to one of the main characteristics of postfeminist discourses, which Windels et al. (2019) refer to. This type of discourse suggests that women's achievements or failures depend on their individual choices and efforts rather than on social or cultural structures (Windels et al.,

2019). This shift from collective struggle to introspective personal improvement is clearly visible in the analysed empirical material.

5.1.2 Mechanisms of exclusion

The previous section presented how the empirical material features individualised discourse that is directed towards the singular athlete's mindset and performance. However, while it's important to analyse the included themes and representations, it's equally important to analyse what's not included or not given any context. Fairclough (2003) argues that which discourses are included is never a coincidence, but rather a strategic selection of including certain elements and excluding others. This selected representation carries deep analytical weight as the inclusion often stands against the exclusion of others.

Unnamed Antagonists

In Nike's "*So Win*" campaign video, most of the narration by Doechi follows a structure similar to this quote: "*You can't be demanding, you can't be relentless, you can't put yourself first, so put yourself first. You can't be confident, so be confident. You can't challenge, so challenge.*" It's visible that the narration is framed as a denial, which Fairclough (2003) argues introduces a new voice into the text and is therefore positioned as a claim made by someone. The authority that states what women can and cannot do in the text is present but remains unnamed, leaving it up to the audience's interpretation, as it could very well be the coach, society, someone's parent, a politician or critics who are stating these limitations. Nike (2025) presents a more visible authority only once on their campaign website: "*Women athletes can't stand out- or so they're told*". However, who this is said by is never specified, only put as a blank statement. Puma's (2022) "*She Moves Us*" campaign video produces similar exclusions of attribution in this quote: "*You've got to keep moving forward, it doesn't matter what that looks like or who gets in your way. Show them your speed, your power. Show them what you're made of. Don't stand still for anyone*". The narration by Dua Lipa never clarifies which group of people "them" and "anyone" is referring to, only that there exists an entity that women need to prove themselves towards and overcome. However, the Puma (2022) campaign video partially attributes the otherwise vague statements from authorities in the form of pop-up notifications where mock usernames such as

"@Mansplain" and "@Grumpy Man" are used. Nothing in the empirical material besides this small instance in Puma's (2022) campaign video features any visuals referencing the antagonists who are making claims on what women can and cannot do.



Figure 14: Young girl laughing at haters (youtube, Puma, 2022)

Empty Imperatives

When looking closer at Nike's (2025) "*So Win*" campaign, the entire narration is framed around stating what women can't do and suggesting that they do it anyway: "*You can't put yourself first, so put yourself first. You can't be confident, so be confident. You can't challenge, so challenge...*" This is what Fairclough (2003) refers to as grammatical moods, which is an indication of the type of action a sentence implies. The first section of the sentence is known as a declarative sentence type, meaning that the narrator is stating something that women can't do: "*You can't put yourself first*". The next part of the sentence is an imperative sentence type, which works as a command, telling the women to do it anyway: "*So put yourself first*". This creates nothing but empty imperatives since no context or directives are added to the text, simply a command.

As mentioned above, the empty imperatives presented in Nike's (2025) "*So Win*" campaign cause confusion to arise when interpreting how to move forward from being told "*You can't be confident*" to "*so be confident*". The quote starts by confirming that women lack confidence and then states the solution, which in this case is to just be confident. No further context, no directives and no explanation of why have been added, only that the woman should simply reclaim what she is lacking. This reflects Fairclough's (2003) distinction between

explanatory logic, which gives explanation to a text, and logic of appearance, when the text simply presents signs of change without adding any deeper context to the cause. A similar mechanism is visible in the Nike (2025) “*So Win*” quote: “*block out the noise and just play*”. Here, the specific phrase “*the noise*” functions as what Fairclough (2003) describes as a nominalisation, which is the process of compressing complex social issues into a vague and abstract noun. As a result, the campaign doesn't have to specify the concrete issues which women are faced with or where they originate from.

Future-oriented language

A similar type of exclusion is made visible as the campaigns consistently reach toward a future of equality and better conditions for women, without specifying how to reach said conditions. First of all, Puma's (2022) campaign video “*She Moves Us*” presents a future-oriented discourse in this narrated quote: “*You've got to keep moving forward. Move mountains if you have to, just keep moving forward.*” The quote suggests a future which women must reach towards, but never specifies the context for why and how.

This forward-oriented type of discourse is also reflected in Nike's (2020) “*One Day We Won't Need This Day*” campaign video, which is constructed entirely in the future tense: “*One day, we won't need this day at all. Because one day, this day, will be our everyday*”. Fairclough (2003) describes this distinction through realis and irrealis statements. Realis statements explain what is and give context to why, and irrealis statements are predictions or hypothetical statements. Evidently, Nike's (2020) “*One Day We Won't Need This Day*” campaign video is built upon irrealis statements as it makes claims about an imagined equal future, rather than acknowledging any direct suggestions on how to reach said future. Similarly, the word choice “*One Day*” creates an aspirational feeling and positions Nike inside such future-oriented aspirations. This aspirational and almost dreamlike discourse is reinforced by the multimodal aspects of the campaign. The video is narrated by a young girl, which adds depth by symbolically referencing future generations. Also, the video alternates between bright scenes of women and young girls in the present day and black- and white footage of historical sporting moments. This contrast presents the historic struggle and visually connects to an imagined equal future. Also, the uplifting and dreamlike background music enhances this optimistic belief which

Nike's campaign video constructs about the future, however, without providing any real context on how to reach said future.



Figure 15: Young girl in bright background (youtube, Nike, 2025)

Figure 16: Black-and white photo of women cheering (youtube, Nike, 2025)

Figure 17: Black-and white photo woman crying (youtube, Nike, 2025)

Figure 18: Young woman in gym (youtube, Nike, 2025)

Put together, these linguistic mechanisms shape what parts of feminist discourses Nike, Adidas and Puma choose to include and exclude in their campaigns. As the campaigns are not naming the antagonists, which state what women can and cannot do, present empty imperatives without any further directives and construct a discourse oriented in an aspiring future, the brands only present parts of surface-level feminist values and ideas. The campaigns fail to engage in the structural challenges of feminism, only presenting a symbolic version of feminist discourse.

5.2 Discursive practice

This section moves from textual analysis to discursive practice by examining how feminist discourse is produced and distributed within a commercial advertising context. Since the study does not include a consumer perspective, consumption is not analysed. The focus is instead on production, interdiscursivity and distribution.

5.2.1 Production: Promotional logic and systems of exclusion

This section seeks to analyse how the feminist discourses included in the four campaigns are constructed within a commercialised context. Also, the previous textual analysis identified two overarching themes across the empirical material: Feminist discourse framed through individualised visuals and language. As well as a set of linguistic mechanisms that allow the campaigns to exclude structural conditions to be made visible, through an unnamed antagonist, concrete directives on how to tackle already empty imperatives and future-oriented discourses. These findings are important to analyse further within the discursive practice as they raise questions regarding how feminist discourses are produced when entering a commercial setting.

Promotional culture

A theme which is prominent throughout the empirical material and very important to acknowledge is the fact that none of the four campaigns seeks to actively promote a specific product, such as a shoe or piece of clothing. The athletes are dressed in Nike, Adidas and Puma sportswear, but no explicit linguistic or visual reference towards any material products is made. Rather, the campaigns appeal to the audience by promoting emotional or symbolic feminist values such as empowerment or confidence. This is visible in the campaigns that feature still images of female athletes in static poses, often in photo studies with accompanying inspirational quotes. For example, the Nike (2025) “*So Win*” campaign images are overlaid with inspirational quotes such as: “*The world is watching right now, and we’re making sure they don’t look away*”, and the Adidas (2025) campaign features the motivational campaign slogan “*You Got This*” at the top of the images.

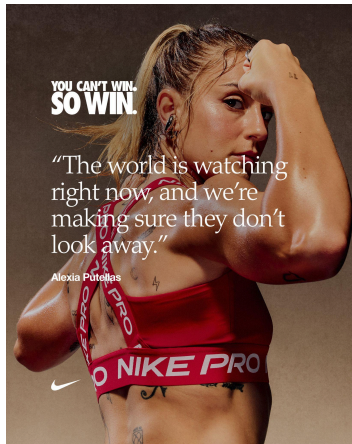


Figure 19: Inspiring quote by Alexia Putellas (Nike, 2025)



Figure 20: Kadidiatou Diani facing Alessia Russo (Adidas, 2025)



Figure 21: Inspiring quote by Jordan Chiles (Nike, 2025)

This can be understood through Fairclough's (2003) presentation of Wernick's concept of promotional culture (Wernick, 1991, in Fairclough, 2003). Promotional culture describes how contemporary cultural phenomena often go beyond simply informing or explaining and instead always carry some sort of subtle promotional element. Such elements could be seeking attention, promoting ways of thinking and feeling or seeking to create strong emotional connections, which in turn can strengthen brand identification. Thus, it's valuable to establish the campaigns within this promotional culture, as it gives context to why feminist discourses are commercially valuable for brands even though they are not promoting specific products. The brands are including feminist messages while also promoting a way to feel, think and identify with the brand. Here, feminist discourses strengthen the brands' identities as progressive, which is also a direct reflection of how Vredenburg et al. (2020) argue that brands can strengthen their legitimacy.

A prime example of this promotion culture is how Nike (2025) positions their "So Win" campaign as their "brand anthem". This wording is important as it presents the "So Win" campaign not only as part of their advertising but as part of Nike's broader values, purpose and entire brand identity. This is made visible on their campaign website, but also in this quote by Chief Marketing Officer at Nike Inc, Nicole Graham: "This brand anthem, featuring elite Nike

athletes, is a perfect example of how we can inspire everyone to win, whatever that means for them". Nike is explicitly mentioning that the campaign promotes a way of thinking and feeling, as well as opening up the opportunity for consumers to identify with the brand.

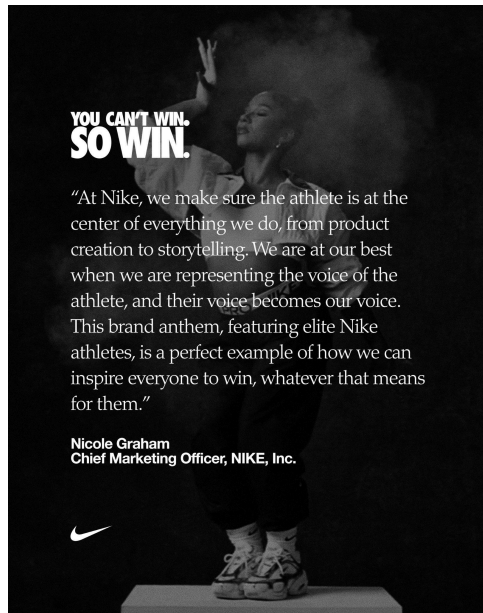


Figure 22: Nicole Graham establishing “So Win” as Nike’s brand anthem (Nike, 2025)

Now that the campaigns have been anchored as part of a promotional culture, it’s necessary to move on to how the feminist discourses are shaped and reshaped when put in this commercial context. Here, Fairclough’s (2003) logic of what is included in contrast to what is excluded is important, as the exclusion of some feminist discourses is just as analytically important as what is included.

Systems of exclusion

Referencing back to the textual analysis, section 5.1.2 identified mutually dependent mechanisms which allow the exclusion of structural aspects in feminist discourses, based on Fairclough’s (2003) linguistic tools. These were: unnamed antagonists, empty imperatives and future-oriented language. Within the discursive level, these become the very mechanisms through which the brands can claim the positive aspects of feminist discourses, without actually engaging in the more structural, yet sensitive issues of feminism.

First of all, the unnamed antagonists identified in the textual analysis refer to an authoritative voice that states what women can't do without ever naming where or from whom the statement is coming. This was made visible in the grammatical structures as exemplified in Nike's (2025) *"So Win"* campaign video: *"You can't be demanding, you can't be relentless.."* and in Puma's (2022) *"She Moves Us"*: *"Show them your speed, your power. Show them what you're made of"*. Both of these statements fail to explicitly name the source of who is making such statements, keeping it as an undisclosed entity. This acts as a strategic exclusion, as in order to name the antagonist, Nike and Puma would be required to reference specific structures, institutions or other actors responsible for gender inequality within sport and in the larger context of women's empowerment. Referencing such structures would make the campaigns and, in turn, the brands more politically confrontational, but also conflict with the valuable relationships. For example, it would not be strategic for the brands as commercial actors to directly reference the underrepresentation of women within sports media and among sponsors, as these are valuable commercial relationships for the brands.

When looking closer at Puma (2022) *"She Moves Us"*, this is the only instance when the empirical material comes close to pointing out the specific voices as they refer to mock individuals such as *"@Mansplain"* and *"@Grumpyman"*. By keeping the antagonist partially unnamed, referencing a male but only a singular person, never a structural struggle such as the patriarchy, the brands succeed in incorporating some sort of feminist struggles to align themselves with the values of the audience (Windels et al., 2019), however, without referencing structural issues behind the struggle, which would aid the goals of feminist but not be commercially strategic.

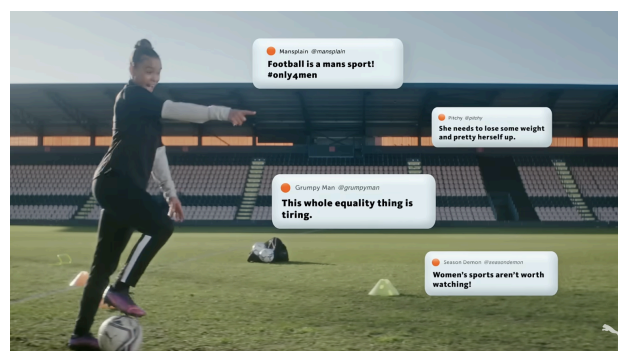


Figure 23: Young girl laughing at haters (youtube, Puma, 2022)

Similarly, the textual analysis points toward a recurring use of empty imperatives, explained through Fairclough's (2003) grammatical moods and logic of appearance. This is especially visible in this quote from Nike's (2025) campaign video: *"you can't be confident, so be confident"* and Puma's (2022) *"There's only one rule in this game: Keep going, no stopping, no exceptions, no apologies. You've got to keep going"*. Here, both campaigns establish a problem or a limitation women are faced with, but present no further context on why this limitation exists or directives on how it should be overcome.

This is also reinforced multimodally in Nike's (2025) campaign video, where the imperatives such as *"You can't be confident, so be confident"* are supported by clips of elite female athletes performing and celebrating success. While these visual elements heighten the emotional symbolism and make empowerment feel achievable and powerful, the visuals also strengthen the logic of appearance by showing already accomplished athletes at the end goal, as winners. The campaign video does not feature any elements of the struggle which the athletes have faced to get where they are today. Fairclough (2003) argues that when actors use the logic of appearance, it does not necessarily seek to open up for debate around the message, but rather they seek to persuade the audience into connecting the presented values to the brand. This aspect is important as it allows Nike to attach feminist values and ideas to their brand identity while avoiding reference to any structural barriers, as they, according to Fairclough's (2003) logic, actually do not seek to open up for debate around the main problem.



Figure 24: Sha'Caarri Richardson running (youtube, Nike, 2025)

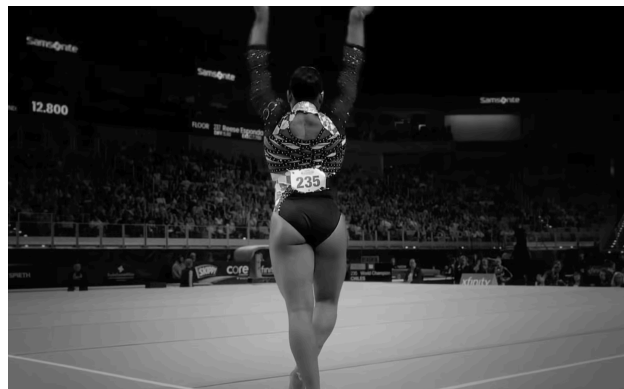


Figure 25: Jordan Chiles doing gymnastic (youtube, Nike, 2025)

A similar mechanism presented in the textual analysis is Fairclough's (2003) concept of nominalisation, which is the process of compressing relevant social issues into simple wording. This concept is important as it gives insight into how structural issues are softened within femvertising. As exemplified through Nike's (2025) "So Win" quote by Juju Watkins "block out the noise and just play". What this noise refers to is never specified as it compresses multiple potential issues into one. This interpretation is left to be made by the receiver of the campaign and "the noise" in this context could refer to something serious such as sexism, media pressure, institutional barriers, criticism or referring to something as ridiculous as screaming fans in an arena.

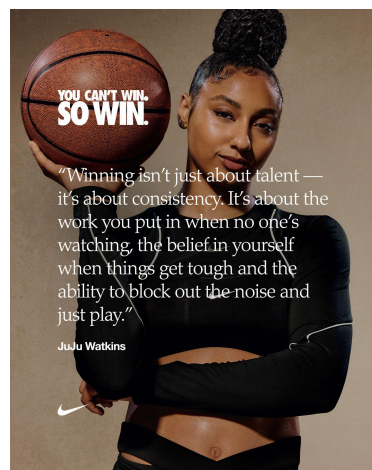


Figure 26: Quote by Juju Watkins, (Nike, 2025)

Fairclough (2003) argues that a consequence of nominalisation is that it makes socially important events generalisable. Thus, turning potentially important messages into vague nouns, which removes the urgency and cause from the sentence. This abstraction of feminist messages allows the brand to include feminist discourses without naming specific actors or systems, making it easier for brands to incorporate them into advertising.

Finally, the last mechanism presented in the textual analysis is the use of future tense and the use of realis and irrealis statements (Fairclough, 2003). Here, Nike's (2020) "One Day We Won't Need This Day" provided a good example as the entire campaign video is narrated through future tense and irrealis statements, meaning that the equal future is only a prediction and a hypothetical statement. Here, the future tense is used so consistently that it generates an imagined feature which appears to be a definite reality. Also, the multimodal aspects of the

campaign, such as the young girl who narrates the video, the blend of historical and present moments, as well as the uplifting music, reinforce the vision of an imagined equal future.



Figure 27: Black and white clip of women running (youtube, Nike, 2020)



Figure 28: Young girl holding a football (youtube, Nike, 2020)

Through discursive practice, Fairclough (2003) argues that not everyone is in the position to make authoritative claims about the future, since it's a matter of distributed power. However, as Nike predicts an equal future, the brand also claims a predictive authority which is capable of predicting the future of feminism. This also positions Nike as an authoritative voice that can speak of the future of feminism and equality. Also, Fairclough (2003) is cautious towards the implications of blurring the line between fact and prediction, as it can position the future state as an already given reality. Nike follow this logic as the campaign video presents an equal future as something which will eventually arrive, but does not specify or include any concrete actions needed to achieve it.

Together, these three mechanisms do not act independently; they all reinforce one another in order to systematically exclude structural aspects of feminist discourses, while only including symbolic parts of feminist discourses. Based on Foucault's (1981) system of exclusions, these mechanisms present similar characteristics as they determine what parts of feminist discourses are appropriate within commercial brand communication and the form it takes in order to fit a promotional logic. This system creates a version of feminist discourse which is emotionally appealing but politically neutral. Thus, it allows brands to appear progressive and at the forefront of feminist change, but only on a symbolic level, as they fail to actually touch upon the structural aspects of true feminist discourse. This form of feminist discourse is useful for brand legitimacy (Vredenburg et al., 2020) as it carries feminist symbolism while still being suited for a

commercial context, as it avoids any discourse which would harm commercial relationships and the promotional logic within which it works.

5.2.2 Interdiscursivity

Fairclough (2003) defines interdiscursivity as the way texts draw on and combine multiple discourses simultaneously. A text is rarely organised around a single discourse, rather it operates through the configuration of several ones. This is analytically significant because the meaning of any discourse within a text is shaped by the others it is combined with. Where the production analysis in section 5.2.1 showed how commercial logic excludes certain forms of feminist speech, the interdiscursive analysis shows how the remaining feminist discourse is reshaped when paired with other discourses. All four campaigns contain multiple discourses at once, such as postfeminism, sport-related discourses and subtle forms of commercial brand discourse.

The textual analysis established the use of individualised discourse over a collective one. Windels et al. (2019) and Gill (2007) establish individualism as one of the main features of the postfeminist sensibility, where collective struggle is replaced by self-confidence and self-improvement.



Figure 28: Aitana Bonmati facing Alessia Russo (Adidas, 2025)

Figure 29: Two women biking (youtube, Adidas, 2025)

This interdiscursive pattern is visible in the Adidas “*You got this*”, where women are framed as opponents and feminism is shown through the discourse of rivalry. Women are not primarily positioned as a collective challenging the patriarchy, but as competitors who push each other toward stronger individual performances.

Instead of presenting gender equality as something that requires collective action, the campaign frames progress as something that happens through individual effort. This individualised framing is produced interdiscursively. Adidas (2025) “*You Got This*” combines feminist discourse with discourses of sport, rivalry and commercial advertising. The campaign includes feminist meanings by placing women’s football at the centre. The soundtrack, *I’m Sticking With You*, by The Velvet Underground, also contributes to the campaign’s individualising discourse. By framing support through an “I” and a “you” rather than a collective “we”, the song positions empowerment as personal rather than collective. From a postfeminist perspective, this reflects how empowerment becomes connected to individual responsibility and personal effort rather than structural conditions (Gill, 2007). Also, Adidas (2025) includes clips of young girls admiring the older athletes, which creates a strange tension, suggesting that young girls should see this form of rivalry as something inspirational. The interdiscursive tension, therefore, lies in how feminist visibility is combined with a performance-based discourse, making feminism compatible with competition, achievement and brand promotion.

This illustrates how interdiscursivity reshapes feminist values by making them fit both the performance logic of sport and the promotional logic of advertising. This connects to commodity feminism, where feminist ideas such as empowerment are turned into marketing messages (Goldman et al., 1991). In Adidas (2025) “*You Got This*” campaign video, feminism becomes visible, but only in a form that aligns with sport’s performance logic and Adidas brand identity as presented through the overarching theme of the campaign being centred around rivalry. Also, the multimodal aspects support this as the athletes are shown working on their own strength, alone, in order to win over other athletes. The campaign can therefore appear progressive by celebrating women's football, while also reproducing an individualised version of empowerment that fits within advertising. Feminist discourse is not removed, but it is reformulated into a message about motivation, competition and personal success.

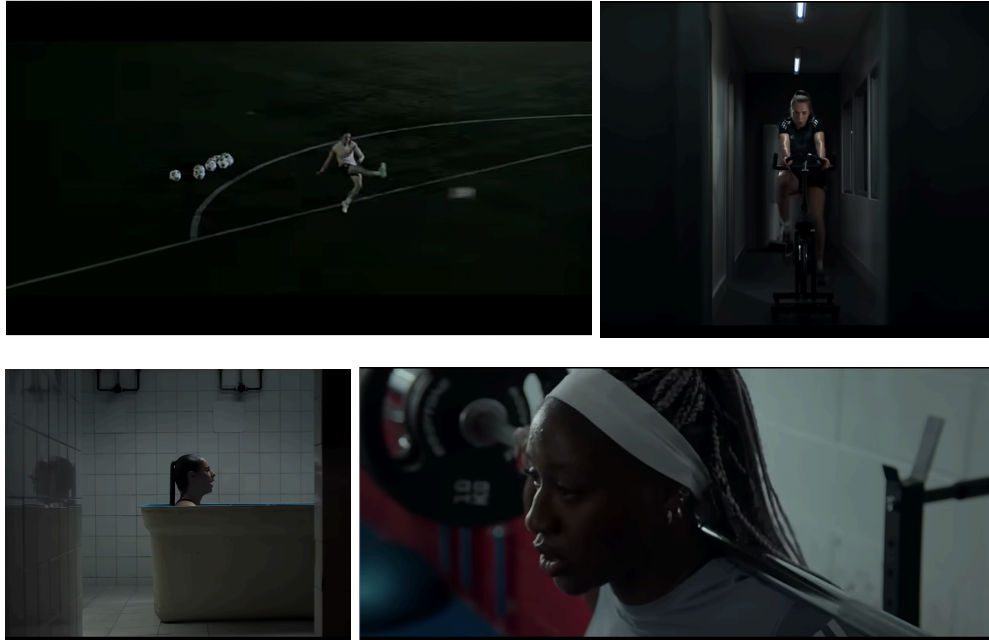


Figure 30: Aitana Bonmati practicing football (youtube, Adidas, 2025)

Figure 31: Aitana Bonmati biking (youtube, Adidas, 2025)

Figure 32: Woman in bath (youtube, Adidas, 2025)

Figure 33: Woman lifting weights (youtube, Adidas, 2025)

5.2.3 Distribution

Within the discursive practice, Fairclough (2010) highlights the importance of including the circumstances in which the texts were produced. This is relevant because the meaning of a campaign is shaped by where, when and through which channels it circulates.

First of all, the timing of the distribution of the campaigns is important in order to analyse how the feminist discourses are framed within them. Puma's "*She Moves Us*" Campaign and Nike's "*One Day We Won't Need This Day*" campaign video were both released on International Women's Day, March 8. This is a politically and historically significant day which carries a lot of symbolic value. By distributing the campaigns on this specific date, the brands position themselves within an already existing feminist discourse. As Vredenburg et al. (2020) argues, this creates a good opportunity for brands to associate themselves with gender equality while also allowing them to borrow feminist meanings for commercial purposes.

Similarly, the Nike (2025) "*So Win*" campaign was released in time for the annual sports event, Super Bowl LIX and the Adidas (2025) "*You Got This*" campaign was released for the

UEFA women's Euros. Both campaigns were created and released in time for huge sporting events, and especially the Super Bowl is one of the most commercially important events. These campaigns were not released in a political context like the previous Nike(2020) and Puma(2022), but rather in a sporting context. The feminist discourse connects to competition instead of a political struggle. By distributing feminist messages within one of the most commercially powerful media events, the brands can present themselves as supporters of women in sports while strengthening their own visibility.

The channel of distribution is also important (Fairclough, 2010). All of the four campaigns have been released on YouTube, meaning that the campaigns are public for everyone to see and also shareable, which means that the circulation of the material can increase. Also, Nike's (2020) "*One Day We Won't Need This Day*" campaign video is the only part of the empirical material which does not have an accompanying campaign website. Nike (2025), Puma (2022) and Adidas (2025) all have campaign websites that allow the brand to explain in their own words how the campaign is supposed to be interpreted by the audience. This strengthens the relationship between feminist discourse and brand legitimacy, as the feminist message becomes embedded in a controlled brand environment and allows the brand to guide the audience's interpretations. Overall, the distribution of the campaigns through timing and platforms provides insight into how feminist discourses are adapted to different communicative contexts and connect to the brand.

5.3 Sociocultural practice

The following section moves into the third level of Fairclough's model, which is the explanatory stage. This section aims to explain how the version of feminist discourse which have been constructed within the campaigns relates to wider social structures, ideologies and power relations. The sociocultural practice places the discursive event within its broader social, political and historical context, focusing on how discourse is embedded in and contributes to broader social practices (Fairclough, 2010).

5.3.1 Three mechanisms to a system of exclusion

The textual analysis identified a set of overarching linguistic mechanisms: unnamed antagonists, empty imperatives, and future-oriented language. In the discursive practice, this was further

elaborated by proving how these interlinked mechanisms allow Nike, Adidas and Puma to present a version of feminist discourse that is reshaped to fit a promotional context. This is a direct reflection of commodity feminism (Goldman, 1991), as the feminism presented in the campaigns has been stripped of its political values and is made to fit a promotional logic.

Importantly, Foucault (1981) argues that discourses are never truly natural but colored by systems of exclusion of what can be said, who can speak of it and if it will be seen as legitimate or not. This systematic exclusion of discourse can be analysed specifically from Foucault's (1981) concept of prohibition, which is visible in the antagonists Nike (2025) and Puma (2022) avoid naming. The campaigns state the resistance, limits and challenges women stand against, but refrain from naming exactly from where or whom these types of setbacks come from. Similar to prohibition is Foucault's (1981) exclusion of taboos, which refers to the more sensitive topics a certain discourse avoids including, which in this sense would refer to the lack of structural feminism included in the campaigns. This is especially evident in Nike's (2025) quote: "*Block out the noise and just play*", where the vague expression "the noise" has compressed several possible important issues into one unclear statement. This protects Nike's (2025) campaign from touching on the real uncomfortable structural issues within sports, such as the unequal pay gap, sexualisation of female athletes or sexual abuse. Furthermore, the distinction Foucault (1981) makes between what discourses are believed to be true or false in society is especially important, as it explains what parts of the feminist discourse are presented as legitimate and acceptable in the campaigns. The campaigns only present a sort of brand-friendly feminism that is based on individualised self-improvement and individualised strength, and excludes the feminism which seeks to reach structural change through collective action. What is considered to be true or not hinges on the channels and authorities which the discourses circulate and whether these validate it (Foucault, 1981). This is important to acknowledge as the campaigns are created by some of the largest sporting brands in the world and have been distributed through global advertising channels, such as social media or in relation to large sporting events and international Women's Day. This authority can therefore legitimise and make this brand-friendly version more acceptable. As Foucault (1981) argues, discourse has the power to shape the way reality is understood. Therefore, when advertisements present a brand-friendly version of feminism, they may also shape how people understand feminism.

As Foucault has established how discourse is regulated through exclusion, Fairclough's (2010) dialectical understanding shows how discourse is both shaped by social structures and contributes to the reproduction or transformation of those structures. This means that the commercial structure and postfeministic structures which shape the production of the campaigns also help reproduce said structures and distribute a depoliticised version of feminism. Thus, Nike, Adidas and Puma are active authorities who help shape the public's understanding of feminism.

Furthermore, Fairclough's (2010) understanding of hegemony is relevant as it refers to how certain meanings and understandings become dominant and are viewed as common sense. In this sense the campaigns make a limited depoliticised version of feminism circulate through channels, making a distorted version of feminism visible for society. Feminism is not rejected but accepted in a form that is positive, inspirational and compatible with commercial sport culture. As Windels et al. (2019) argue, advertisers can use feminism as a fertile ground for creating brand meaning and improving brand positioning. In these campaigns, feminist values become useful because they signal progress without requiring deeper political critique. The consequence is that feminism loses part of its political force (Varghese & Kumar, 2022) while it's modified to be commercially valuable.

5.3.2 Individualised discourse within a Neoliberal system

The individualised discourse identified in the previous sections can be understood as an ideological pattern where postfeminism and neoliberalism overlap. Gill (2007) and Windels et al. (2019) argue that postfeminist discourse replaces collective struggle with individual responsibility. The campaigns construct a specific kind of woman who is expected to manage herself, improve herself and take responsibility for her own success. This is visible through the repeated focus on the singular "*you*", confidence, discipline and personal effort. Expressions such as "*be confident*" and "*keep going*" address women as individual subjects who must overcome obstacles through mindset and performance.

This connects to neoliberalism, which Machin and Mayr (2023) describe as a way of organising economies and societies where profit becomes central, and where more areas of life are marketised and treated as commodities. In the campaigns, empowerment becomes something that can be performed, measured and turned into brand value. Feminism therefore becomes a

commodity: a symbolic resource that strengthens the brand's image rather than a political demand for structural change. Women are encouraged to improve themselves rather than to challenge the structures. This reflects Iyer and Dani's (2025) argument that femvertising often reproduces postfeminist and neoliberal principles.

This neoliberal version of feminism is useful for brands because it allows them to appear socially responsible while still operating within a commercial logic (Varghese & Kumar, 2022). The campaigns communicate empowerment without challenging the structures of the gender inequality, meaning that feminism becomes acceptable when it is inspirational, individualised and brand-friendly, but less visible when it demands structural change or collective responsibility.

5.4 Brand legitimacy

The concept of brand legitimacy helps explain why feminist values become meaningful in the four campaigns. In this study, brand legitimacy is analysed through Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) framework of authentic brand activism, which focuses on the relationship between purpose, values, messaging, practice and alignment. This makes it possible to examine whether feminist discourse is connected to the brands wider identity and actions, or whether feminism mainly functions as a symbolic and commercial message.

At the level of purpose, the campaigns position Nike, Adidas and Puma as more than commercial sportswear companies. Through the campaigns, the brands connect themselves to broader ideas of social progress, female empowerment and support for women in sport. This creates a connection between feminist discourse and the brands wider identities as actors within sports culture. However, this purpose is also shaped by commercial logic. The campaigns do not simply support feminist values, but incorporate them into the brands own identity and positioning.

At the level of values, the campaigns align the brands with socially legitimated ideas such as equality, empowerment and confidence. This connects to Dowling and Pfeffer's (1975) understanding of legitimacy, where organisations seek to create harmony between their own activities and the social values that are considered acceptable in society. Through the campaigns, the brands align their commercial identities with feminist values that already hold legitimacy, such as equality, empowerment and women's representation in sports.

At the level of messaging, feminist discourse is constructed through slogans, visual representations, sound, celebrity voices and images of female athletes. The campaigns communicate feminism through empowerment. However, the messaging also reflects the individualised and commercial logic identified in the previous sections. Feminism is mainly communicated through personal strength, elite performance and symbolic visibility rather than through collective struggle or structural critique. This reflects Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) argument that social values can become important resources in brand identity, since they allow brands to build stronger emotional and cultural connections with their audiences.

At the level of practice, the campaigns differ in how clearly feminist messaging is connected to actual actions. Puma's connection to their partnership with Women Win creates a clearer link between message and practice, while Nike and Adidas mainly communicate feminism through campaign messaging. Within the analysed material, their feminist discourse therefore appears more symbolic than directly connected to visible structural or organisational action. Alignment is therefore central. Vredenburg et al. (2020) argue that authentic brand activism depends on whether purpose, values, messaging and practice support each other. In the campaigns, feminist values and brand messaging are clearly aligned, but the connection between messaging and practice is more uneven. This means that feminism can still create brand legitimacy, but mainly as a symbolic and progressive resource for brand positioning.

Beyond this, the visibility of the brand itself within the campaigns shapes how feminist discourse is interpreted. The use of logos in the Adidas (2025) and Nike's (2025) campaigns affects how feminism is produced and interpreted within the campaigns. How symbols are used is important when looking at how meaning is made (Fairclough, 2003). And the logo is not just a marker of the company behind the campaign, but part of the campaigns meaning making. In Adidas "*You Got This*", the large and central logo makes the feminist message difficult to separate from the brand itself. Feminist values are presented as meanings organised through Adidas visual identity. This affects the type of feminism that becomes visible. Through Fairclough's (2003) distinction between representation, action and identification, the logo can be understood as shaping more than the campaign's visual style. It affects how women's empowerment is represented, how the audience is invited to relate to the message, and how Adidas identifies itself as a supporter of women's football. The central logo therefore makes feminism appear as something that is mediated through the brand. The audience does not only

encounter a message about women's empowerment, but also a version of feminism that is attached to Adidas as the actor making this empowerment visible.

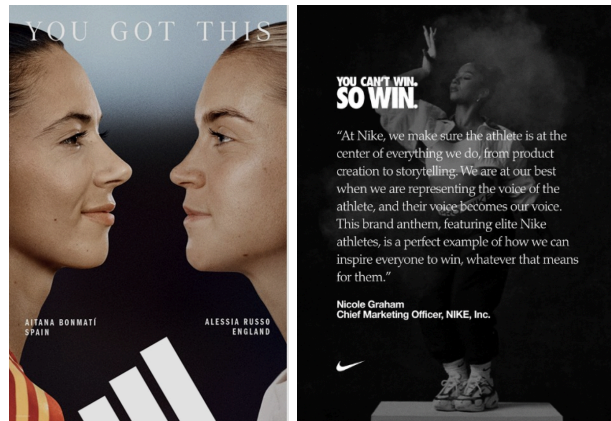


Figure 34: Aitana Bonmati facing Alessia Russo (Adidas, 2025)

Figure 35: Nicole Graham establishing “So Win” as Nike’s brand anthem (Nike, 2025)

This reflects the logic of commodity feminism, as feminist values such as empowerment and visibility become attached to commercial signs and brand identity (Goldman et al., 1991). In Adidas’ campaign, the logo becomes one of these commercial signs. It turns feminist values into part of the brand’s visual and symbolic identity. Nike’s more discreet use of the Swoosh creates a different effect. Because the logo is less dominant, the feminist message can appear less branded, and the commercialisation of feminism can be seen as more subtle. The difference between Adidas (2025) and Nike (2025) therefore, shows how logo placement can shape the meaning of feminism within femvertising. The degree to which the visual brand presence affects how clearly the feminist message is tied to commercial identity. At the level of discursive practice, the logo matters because it shapes how feminism is packaged and interpreted. In both cases, feminist values are affected because they are reshaped to fit the brand rather than remaining fully connected to collective feminist change.

The campaign's avoidance of structural critique further shows how brand legitimacy is created through a depoliticised form of feminism. If the campaigns directly named problems such as pay differences or institutional power, they would also risk criticising the commercial sports system that the brands are part of. Therefore, the campaigns can benefit from feminism’s symbolic value while avoiding its structural critique. This connects to Vredenburg et al.’s (2020)

distinction between authentic brand activism and inauthentic or symbolic forms of activism. The mechanisms identified earlier, such as unnamed antagonists, empty imperatives, nominalisations and vague future claims, allow brands to appear committed to feminism without taking significant political risks.

Overall, brand legitimacy in the campaigns is created through the alignment of feminist discourse with brand identity, values and symbolic messaging. However, the analysis also shows that this alignment is strongest at the level of messaging and weaker when it comes to visible practice. The depoliticised form of feminism becomes especially important when understood through brand legitimacy, as it clearly reflects the tension between feminism within a commercial logic. Nike, Adidas and Puma depend on feminist values to appear progressive and socially responsible, as they identify themselves with values that already hold legitimacy (Dowling and Pfeffer, 1975). However, the feminist discourse which the campaigns present also depends on feminism being made less political and more compatible with commercial sports culture. The feminist discourse becomes a resource for brand positioning. The brands can appear socially aware and progressive while the feminist messages remain compatible with competition, achievement and commercial promotion.

This is the structural paradox of femvertising. The brands extract legitimacy from feminism's accumulated political value, but at a low political cost. Feminist discourse becomes useful because it gives the brands cultural relevance and emotional appeal, while still remaining compatible with commercial sport culture. The campaigns do not simply combine feminism and branding. They reshape feminism into a form that can serve brand legitimacy.

6. Discussion and conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to examine how feminist discourses in femvertising are constructed and reshaped within a commercial context to legitimise brand identity and position, as well as to further examine what tensions arise at this intersection. Through a multimodal critical discourse analysis and Fairclough's (2010) three-dimensional model of discourse, four femvertising campaigns by Nike (2020, 2025), Adidas (2025) and Puma (2022) have been analysed.

The study found that the empirical material presents an individualised version of feminist discourses and identified a set of mechanisms which together deflect from valuable structural aspects of feminist discourse. Within a promotional logic, these mechanisms regulate what parts of feminist discourses are included and excluded in order to fit a commercialised sports context. Thus, the campaigns use a depoliticised and brand-friendly version of feminist discourse to create a seemingly progressive position that legitimises the brand's identity, while lacking deeper political substance.

The feminist discourses constructed in the campaigns are reframed through individualised empowerment, rather than focusing on structural inequality. This reflects the findings of Sharifzadeh & Brison's (2024), which states that femvertising campaigns within the sport industry often present themselves as progressive actors of change while still reproducing postfeminist discourses. As highlighted by Windels et al. (2019) and reflected in this study, femvertising rarely engages in the structural challenges necessary for overcoming feminist barriers. While the four campaigns refer to signs of feminist struggles, they rarely name the structures that produce them, as exemplified by the linguistic mechanisms: unnamed antagonists, empty imperatives and future-oriented language. When united in a promotional logic, the analysis identified how these mechanisms of exclusion allow Nike, Adidas and Puma to present a shallow version of feminist discourses compatible within a commercial setting.

This depoliticised form of feminism becomes especially important when understood through brand legitimacy. The mechanisms mentioned above create a version of feminist discourse that's emotionally appealing but stays politically neutral. The brands depend on feminist values to appear progressive and socially responsible, as they identify themselves with values that already hold legitimacy. At the same time, feminist discourse used in the campaigns depends on feminism being made less political. If the campaigns directly named structural

problems, they would risk criticising the commercial sports system that the brands themselves are part of. This reflects Goldman's (1991) logic of commodity feminism, where feminist meanings are adapted to fit a promotional culture. As a result, the brands present a distorted version of feminism, where part of its political force is lost as it is modified to become commercially valuable. This is supported in the findings of Varghese and Kumar (2022), who state that femvertising risks undermining feminism. This allows the brands to be at the forefront of feminist change, but only on a symbolic level, without addressing the structural conditions needed for actual change.

Looking beyond the specific findings within the context of sportsfemvertising, this study contributes to the larger field of strategic communication by showing how brands can construct a progressive brand identity through the use of linguistic mechanisms within brand communication. This is of value as this study not only identifies femvertising as depoliticising, but also points towards how this feminist discourse is engineered and made visible as it circulates in society. Thus, this gives practitioners within strategic communication insight on how to navigate the tension between value-based brand legitimacy and appropriation of feminist discourse.

This is the structural paradox of femvertising and the conclusion of this study. Feminist discourses are a way for brands to position themselves as progressive, but only when it is politically safe and brand-friendly. The central issue is that feminism is reformulated through linguistic mechanisms of exclusion, which allow brands to decide what parts of feminist discourses are made visible and what parts are excluded. This allows brands to represent only a symbolic sliver of feminism without ever risking getting too politically involved for what is deemed acceptable within a promotional culture. In relation to the purpose of this study, feminist discourse is therefore adapted through a process of strategic exclusions where political meanings are softened and translated into brand-compatible values. This allows the brands to create campaigns that position themselves as progressive, while presenting just the right amount of femvertising needed to stay relevant in a commercial context. At the end of the day, the only ones truly benefiting from such representations of feminism in advertising are the brands themselves and other authorities within a consumption-oriented culture. Women all over the world, even the ones featured as the voice of the campaign, cannot benefit from the feminist representations as they do not seek to address the structural barriers to reach true change.

7. Further Research

Due to the scope of this study and in accordance with the chosen methodological approach of a qualitative multimodal CDA, this study was only able to analyse a small selection of empirical material. This means that the conclusion can't be generalised to a broader context. Therefore, it would be of value for future studies to make a larger selection of femvertising campaigns from different sports brands and contexts. Here, a quantitative approach would be beneficial, paired with a consumer perspective, in order to deeply examine the consumers' perceived emotions and attitudes towards femvertising campaigns within a sporting context. It would be of interest to examine whether the consumers also identify the depoliticised nature of the presented feminist discourses or whether these are received as a genuine contribution to feminism and female empowerment.

Another area for further research, which this study was not able to analyse more closely, is the relationship between the feminist messages presented in campaigns and the brand's actual organisational practices. It would be valuable to examine sponsorships, gender equality policies, investments or social initiatives to evaluate whether the brand's commitment towards feminism goes deeper. This would help to see whether femvertising is supported by concrete actions, or whether it mainly functions as a symbolic strategy.

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