Femwashing or Femvertising? A Look at Advertising Authenticity

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Abstract. Femvertising is a strategy that has become a trend in advertising campaigns. Femwashing is the lack of authenticity perceived by the spectator for not complying with the pillars an authentic femvertising campaign must have. Femwashing has also been called fake activism. This study analyzes the authenticity of Avon's #SuperAPruebaDeTodo spots. The paradigm and design are phenomenological. Through a qualitative methodology, the perception of fourteen university students in the last terms of the Human Medicine Program at Universidad de San Martín de Porres is analyzed through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data to identify, record and examine patterns and simplify them in a categoric and sub-categorical system and other thematic areas. As a result, it was found that Avon spots are unauthentic and are considered femwashing because some of the perceived advertising elements have little relation to the pillars of authentic femvertising.

Keywords: Empowerment · Advertising Strategies · Feminism · Qualitative Research · Online Advertising

1 Introduction

Currently, a trending strategy in advertising campaigns has emerged intending to challenge traditional stereotypes using a discourse that promotes female empowerment called femvertising [1–3]. Before, advertising included traditional stereotypes about gender roles in brand campaign pieces [2, 4, 5], the role of women in advertising of the past was to show an idealized image about the beauty of women mainly focused on a "perfect" body through thin models with aesthetically distributed features or, otherwise, editing the body [6–8]. Femvertising works not only as an advertising tool but also to raise awareness about what it means to be a woman; therefore, the creation of these ads is supported on ideas of inclusion of women with different physical characteristics to fulfill different roles as competitors, leaders, etc. [6, 9, 10].

This strategy has been considered among those currently generating more sales, as what is usually sought is an emotional impact on female consumers [1, 11]. However, some campaigns have not essentially achieved the objectives of femvertising, but have been perceived by the target audience as advertising only seeking to enter the femvertising trend with sales-focused objectives [11, 12]. This is because the messages and

the visuals were not used correctly in the pieces or, they were a type of brand that had not internalized the social activism in femvertising [3, 12]. This type of advertising not considered femvertising by the public was attributed the term femwashing, which means washing of women and refers to non-authentic femvertising campaigns [12]. Ambivalence or contradiction is perceived in the brand identity and the message they convey about female image [3, 12].

Femwashing has also been called fake activism and female power laundering [2, 13]. Campaigns considered to be femwashing employ post-feminist discourses that question female empowerment [11, 12, 14]. This concept of post-feminism refers to the reappropriation of some feminist arguments and the misunderstanding of other feminist demands [11, 14]. Besides, the capitalist drive of femvertising campaigns has made academic feminists and other experts see an attempt at mercantile feminism [2, 15]. In this way, the non-compliance of the pillars of the last table will cause the campaign to be perceived as femwashing [12]. This is because the public has become skeptical of femvertising campaigns [12, 16]. Analytical thinking and the radical opinion of consumers make actions contributing to the dissemination of traditional taboo stereotypes unacceptable [12, 14, 16]. Consumers expect brands to be increasingly empathetic, real and transparent about their values and actions, not just advertising [2, 11, 12]. When brands use traditional stereotypes about the female image and justify themselves before it, they open a gap that distances them from their consumers [12].

For the above mentioned, the following research question arises: How do university students of the last terms of the Human Medicine Program at Universidad de San Martín de Porres perceive femwashing of femvertising in Avon's #SuperAPruebaDeTodo spots?

1.1 Pillars of Femvertising

Since femvertising appeared in advertising, the same principles or pillars were found in this type of campaign [2, 6]. The pillars of femvertising (Table 1) are characteristic features that make a campaign to be defined as femvertising [2, 6]. The five pillars will guide the campaign to enhance the natural female image so that adult women and girls feel more comfortable and identified with what the spots or advertising pieces show [2]. There needs to be a remarkable interweaving between the first four pillars of Table 1 for the fifth pillar to exist in the femvertising campaign [2, 17]. The five pillars proposed by Becker-Herby [2] are the representation constituted from the analysis of what the brands produce from the perception of marketing professionals [2, 6, 12].

Table 1. Classification of the pillars of femvertising according to Becker-Herby [2].

Pillars of femvertising	Explanation
Use diverse female talent	It is the variety in female physical representation. This involves the use of women of different races and ages with different body shapes, sizes, and weights for advertising pieces.

(*continued*)

Table 1. (*continued*)

Pillars of femvertising	Explanation
Inherently pro-feminine messages	They are empowering and inclusive messages that convey feelings of trust and motivation by celebrating certain traits or qualities that were taken as imperfections in traditional advertising.
Challenging perceptions of what a woman should be	It is assigning actions to women in professional, competitive settings or non-discernible locations not associated with marital, home or maternal tasks.
Minimization of sexuality	It is the exposure of the female body, but in an important and authentic way that does not trivialize sexual desire.
Portray women authentically	It refers to showing authenticity on stage, art direction, message and product. The ad message must be real and transparent.

To create authentic femvertising campaigns, it is necessary to know the consumer's point of view [12]. Faced with this, Hainneville et al. [12] propose six pillars of authentic femvertising from this perspective (Table 2). The use of the adjective "authentic" regarding femvertising is emphasized since the most important aspect of a femvertising campaign is its authenticity [2, 12]. For this reason, this study takes into account Hainneville et al. proposal [12], as it uses a modern and comprehensive model to analyze campaigns and determine if they are authentically femvertising from the consumer's perspective. The premise is that consumers recognize and interpret these pillars through a general perception which will lead them to define authenticity (femvertising) or inauthenticity (femwashing) in campaigns [12]. Often advertising managers unconsciously fall into portraying women with traditional stereotypes, so it is important to work campaigns within the framework of the pillars of authentic femvertising in Table 2, as they are better adapted to today's society [12, 18, 19]. In addition, organizations have begun to ban stereotypes that denigrate or do not promote gender equality [20].

Table 2. Classification of the pillars of authentic femvertising according to Hainneville et al. [12]

Pillars	Explanation
Transparency	The message given by the brand to its consumers need to be transparent, natural, trustworthy and humble.
Consistence:	It refers to the internal consistency which the brand identity must show throughout its history, its values, and its parent company; in the communication through the form and congruence of campaigns; and in the supply offered by the brand in the market.

Table 2. (*continued*)

Pillars	Explanation
Identification	It is appealing to the deep feelings of the public to generate connection between advertising and consumers themselves by using resources promoting accessibility, projection and proximity.
Diversity	The diversity in body types, identity and health in women needs to be depicted. Physical diversity does not imply showing only more or less curvy women but also their marks such as stretch marks, varicose veins, wrinkles, etc.
Respect	Brands must show respect toward women's bodies without exposing them sexually. Additionally, respect of women for themselves, promoting self-esteem and acceptance; that is, portraying women with confidence in various aspects so that the public sees her without introducing a mandatory message about self-confidence.
Challenging stereotypes	There are three types: (a) challenging role stereotypes; must include all roles in all genders; (b) physical stereotypes: it is to put aside the traditional way of dressing for women, as they can dress and wear any type of hairstyle and clothing; and, (c) stereotypes about interests and abilities: diversity should be included in interests about colors, hobbies, personality traits, etc.

The authenticity of the femvertising will depend on the actions taken by the brand, as it can be criticized or disregarded from the consumer's perspective [12, 15]. If the femvertising message does not match the brand's values and actions, authenticity will reach a low level that will not achieve the advertising objectives of this type of campaign [11, 12]. Femvertising is also linked to the social responsibility of the brand [12, 21]. In this way, if there is social responsibility, attitudes and purchase intentions improve and strengthen emotional connections with the target audience [10, 22]. In addition, the impact of the message on the consumer should raise awareness about the change of roles on gender stereotypes, in this case the female role [22, 23]. This relates to brand activism, as it speaks of a pro-feminist campaign with a social impact [12, 15]. Brand activism consists of the explicit values and what the brand intends with its activist advertising message [15].

2   Methodology

This study stands within the phenomenological paradigm and design, since it will analyze the perceptions of the participants and helps to understand the responses of individuals based on their human experiences related to the subject [24, 25]. It is qualitative as it aims to provide information about the perception of each person based on their concepts, reasons, and motivations to solve the questions about the advertising authenticity of *femvertising* [26]. Data was collected through the semi-structured interview technique because, without a strict question guide, it is dynamic and flexible. This favors the study

by posing spontaneous questions that will depend on the answers of the informant to interpret their thoughts and motives [26, 27]. The 43 questions in the guide prepared were grouped in two topics: (a) pillars of femvertising, (b) recognition of femwashing. The instrument was validated in the field through two initial interviews to find out if the participants understood the questions [28]. The interviews lasted between 29 to 62 min through Zoom and Meet the virtual meeting platforms.

The interviewees were fourteen female university students of the last terms in the Human Medicine Program at Universidad de San Martín de Porres (Table 3). Students of the last terms were chosen, specifically from terms 11 and 12, since it is expected that after five years of study, they already have a well-trained critical analysis and are part of a professional career in which the female image has suffered gender discrimination before stereotypes [29, 30]. Students in the last term were not interviewed, as students are serving their internship for most of the day [31]. The qualitative sampling method was convenient and homogeneous since the participants were from the same academic space and volunteered to study the phenomenon [32]. After transcribing the interviews, the data were analyzed from the proposal of thematic analysis, since this type of analysis helps to identify, record and examine patterns and simplify them in a categoric and sub-categorical system and other thematic areas that served for discussion of results and to find other unforeseen elements [33]. Each participant received a Fact Sheet containing the study data, benefits, risks, costs and compensation, confidentiality, and rights of the participants. Alphanumeric coding was used when presenting the information to keep the participants anonymous [34]. Finally, verbal consent was requested from each participant to conduct and record the interviews [24].

Table 3. Participants' characteristics.

Participant	Age	Employment Status	Course	District	Length
P01	23	Student and intern	12	Jesús María	00:35:58
P02	23	Student	11	San Martín de Porres	00:50:59
P03	24	Student	11	San Miguel	00:46:40
P04	22	Student	11	San Juan de Lurigancho	00:56:42
P05	24	Student	12	Surco	00:50:35
P06	23	Student	11	San Miguel	00:41:29
P07	25	Student	12	Santa Anita	01:02:03
P08	24	Student	11	San Juan de Lurigancho	00:38:54
P09	24	Student	11	San Martín de Porres	00:29:01
P10	23	Student	12	La Marina	00:48:54
P11	28	Student	12	San Juan de Lurigancho	00:32:13
P12	23	Student and trainee	11	Cercado de Lima	00:29:49
P13	25	Student	11	Santiago de Surco	00:38:24
P14	25	Student	12	La Molina	00:31:50

3   Results and Discussion

3.1   Inauthenticity (Femwashing) of Femvertising in Avon's #SuperAPruebaDeTodo Spots

The participants perceive the inauthenticity of femvertising in Avon's #SuperAPrue-baDeTodo spots, through the lack of diversity and representation of these advertising elements: (a) physical characteristics of the main character of the spot, (b) relationship of the campaign message and the brand, associated with the social and competitive context of Peru. This is because they feel that these elements, although they look correct, do not have such a powerful impact, since the characters still have certain traits accepted by society but are not representative of the reality of ordinary Peruvian women [5, 7]. In both spots, we see women with fair skin and light wavy or straight hair, belonging to different uncommon professions and accompanied by a message about a woman who can do everything after accepting herself. At first glance, the interviewees see that everything is correct; however, they consider that it would be better to have more representation of female Peruvians through different skin tones, several types of hair, and other different physical characteristics that can impact and convince the public through socio-cultural identification.

> They are two white women in an Avon makeup spot, eh it does not represent me. For example, I am a woman of a dark complexion, which predominates in our country; so, I don't feel very much represented. (P04)

In the first spot, there is more identification with the image of the plus-sized woman, since they consider this type of body uncommon in advertising (Table 4). Specifically, the character is seen with curvy and harmoniously balanced body, light complexion, wavy light hair, and other aesthetically presented features, whether the nose profile, a harmonic face, and others. However, even though most of these features were perceived as accepted, the first spot fails to make them feel identified more than by the character's build. It is important that women in femvertising have the same race, shape, age and body type, so that the public is reflected in them [2, 7, 12]. In Peru there is a large number of Afro-Peruvians and mestizos, so it would be important to reflect this characteristic. Likewise, the message of the first spot is not considered original because there are other brands that have transmitted a similar message in their femvertising campaigns (Table 4). The interviewees consider it a repetitive message and the strength it should have to persuade and captivate the public is lost [7, 12]. This finding agrees with another study, which reveals that the authenticity of the narrated message is key to making a campaign more memorable and attractive, much more so when its target audience are women [2, 12].

> It is a message used very frequently in advertising, precisely about empowerment, accepting yourself. And, well it is so much used, and at the same time it seems a worn-out message. (P04)

> It is not the typical skinny girl, eh…90-60 that always appears in ads, I think she is a girl… a little more like some girls who are a larger size, as for example me. So, you feel a little more identified. (P11)

In the second spot, they could identify a little more with the character shown, but because of her qualities and professional skills. Nothing negative was found regarding the character's physique since her thin build was justified by her sports profession. In this case, there was a slim, athletic, fair-skinned woman with body and facial symmetry. However, as presented at the beginning of this section, another interviewee believes that both spots have a marked pattern on the women's skin color. In addition, the relation of makeup with the profession as Olympic artistic swimmer of the second character is perceived as a good strategy, but also little different, which renders the spot less authentic [2, 12]. As for the message of the second spot, the lack of authenticity is found in the lack of diversity of the profession of the character linked to the message, as they perceive the profession as one that is mostly made up of women. This falls into a social stereotype about female roles in the professional field [5, 12].

> Maybe some diversity would be shown by a woman of another color. A woman with a different body. A woman, I do not know, in other activities. (E04)

> In this case, I really do not see it that related, because it seems to me that artistic swimming is indeed related to women, then it seems to me that it is quite within the stereotype. (E05)

Regarding the consistence and congruence of the message in both spots with that of the Avon brand, the answers reveal certain differences about what the brand supposedly defends, for example, innovation and the fight against breast cancer. The interviewees acknowledged that there is no relationship with the fight against breast cancer in the spots and that innovation is hardly seen since they show women in scenarios that they no longer consider as authentic because they are common in advertising [2, 12]. For example, in the case of women, being a makeup artist or an outstanding athlete.

> I think they should have, regarding innovation, found another way to demonstrate how a woman is able to empower herself. Not only in the classic ways, sport or through an undertaking, but also for those women who (…) have breast cancer. They could have mentioned this, too. (E03)

Table 4 presents the results according to the classification of femvertising pillars according to Becker-Herby [2]. It should be recalled that these pillars do not attribute authenticity to a femvertising campaign, since the author proposes the pillars from the perspective of the advertising specialist and not from the consumer.

Table 4. Classification of the pillars of femvertising according to Becker-Herby [2] and results.

Pillars of femvertising	Results
Use diverse female talent	In both spots, female talent was used in a variety of ways; however, there is a lack of representation of Peruvian women.
Messages that are inherently pro-feminine	In both spots, inspiring, motivating and empowering messages of the modern image of women were perceived. However, they do not have the originality necessary to captivate and impact the audience.
Challenging perceptions of what a woman should be	Both spots presented the professions of enterprising makeup artist and Olympic artistic swimmer were presented; therefore, scenarios where women were not related to domestic tasks or other traditional roles were depicted.
Minimization of sexuality	In both spots, the display of female bodies was not perceived as a trivialization, since there was modesty and respect for the body of each woman.
Portray women authentically	Authenticity was perceived in the scenarios; however, neither the message nor the characters were authentic enough, since the message was recognized as non-original and repetitive; and the characters were perceived with few uncommon characteristics.

4 Conclusion

It is concluded that Avon's #SuperAPruebaDeTodo spots are perceived as femwashing because there is a greater perception of inauthenticity on the advertising elements: (a) physical characteristics of the character in the spot; and (b) relationship of the campaign message and the brand, associated with the Peruvian social and competitive context. It became evident that in the Peruvian context, using a model of non-slim build is not enough if there is no diversity in skin tones, facial profiles, types of hair or hairstyles in accordance with the real women wherever the femvertising is to be spread. Also, the definition of a brand should be reflected in all its advertising pieces; otherwise, it is perceived as not congruent with what it represents. Taking into account the six pillars of authentic femvertising by Hainneville et al. [12], it is evident that the presence of the Consistency, Identification, Diversity, and Challenging Stereotypes pillars are vaguely represented through the advertising elements mentioned before. This is disadvantageous for the Avon brand, as it is not meeting the expected goals of the campaign. In this way, it becomes evident the skepticism shown by the female audience about the campaigns with messages trying to empower them.

This study had three limitations: (a) a reduced sample because of the limited time and lack of accessibility of the interviewees, since there were cancellations due to work and studies, which hampered a fluid and direct communication; (b) the attitudes of some interviewees who at the beginning of the interviews were shy and gave wrong answers; (c) the gestures of the interviewees are not known, since the interviews were conducted without a camera, which does not give a complete perception of the emotions; therefore the body language could not be analyzed and interpreted. This research contributes to the general intercontextual understanding of the concept of femwashing applied to the Peruvian social and cultural context, expanding the knowledge of authentic femvertising. Given that this is the first femwashing and femvertising study conducted in Peru, it is expected to be considered as part of future studies of femvertising campaigns nationwide. In the future, it is recommended to conduct more studies on femwashing and femvertising in Peruvian femvertising campaigns with little recognition to validate the perception of the physical characteristics the models must have and the congruence of the campaign message with the message that encompasses the brand, in the Peruvian context.

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