

How young consumers in China perceive femvertising: A qualitative study

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Abstract

“Femvertising”, advertising that adopts the perspective of females, has become a popular global marketing strategy. Some Chinese brands are adopting it in their marketing communication. However, studies on audience response to femvertising mainly focus on Western consumers. Relevant research studies, particularly those with young consumers, are still scarce in China. This qualitative study aims to fill the research gap and examine young consumers’ responses to femvertising and its perceived effectiveness. Focus group interviews were conducted in March 2023 with three groups comprising female university students, male university students, and working females aged 20 to 25. The results showed that participants paid much attention to the advertising execution style and storytelling skills of femvertising. Liking of a specific feminist advertisement would enhance the brand image. However, a brand’s historical portrayal of female influences the communication effectiveness of its femvertising. An abrupt adoption of femvertising creates doubts and reservations. Female and male participants had different attitudes toward femvertising. As expected, female participants showed more appreciation of femvertising than male participants.

Keywords

Advertising strategy, consumer perception, advertising effectiveness, branding strategy, focus group study.

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Introduction

Since Dove's Real Beauty campaign was launched in 2004 as a pioneer of femvertising (Dan, 2017), femvertising has become a globally applied marketing strategy (Abitbol, & Sternadori, 2020; Pérez, & Gutiérrez, 2017). Most femvertising targets the youth market segment. Yoon and Lee (2023) observed that young people are more likely to discuss pro-female or female-empowerment-related messages online. Overall, the use of femvertising can improve target consumers' attitudes toward a campaign (Abitbol, & Sternadori, 2016) and their purchase intention for the advertised products (Jinah, 2022).

Several femvertising campaigns launched in China have stirred up much societal impact. Zeng, He, and Liu (2022) postulated that SK-II's 2016 "Marriage Market Takeover" advertisement was considered as the representative of femvertising in China. After the advertisement was released, it generated over 120,000 views within a few days on China's social media platforms, including Sina Weibo and WeChat (Rapp, 2017). This advertisement addressed the controversial social topic of "leftover women" and encouraged females to be autonomous and strong. After the launch of the campaign in China, sales of SK-II products were boosted by over 50 percent (Zeng, He & Liu, 2022). Although brands in China are increasingly turning to femvertising (Teng et al., 2021), extant studies, such as Abitbol and Sternadori's (2016) qualitative study of young consumers, mainly focus on Western countries. Relevant research studies, particularly those with young consumers as the study focus, are still scarce in China. Furthermore, in-depth analysis of the similarities and differences among young consumers with different demographic backgrounds is limited. To fill this research gap, a focus group interview study was designed to examine young consumers' responses to femvertising and its perceived effectiveness among different demographic groups in China. The results will be of use to global and local brands that are considering femvertising in developing an inclusive brand image among young consumers.

Literature review

Femvertising and its development in the global context

Scholars commonly use the terms "femvertising" and "women-empowering advertising" to describe advertising that promotes gender equality and women empowerment (Abitbol, & Sternadori, 2020; Skey, 2015). Femvertising challenges the public stereotype of what females should look like and what kind of social roles they should play (Åkestam, Rosengren, & Dahlen, 2017).

Due to the growing popularity of femvertising, scholars conducted various studies to examine its advertising effectiveness (Abitbol, & Sternadori, 2016; Åkestam et al., 2017; Drake, 2017) and corporate social responsibility/brand-cause fit (Champlin et al., 2019; Pankiw, Phillips, & Williams, 2021; Sterbenk et al., 2022). Specifically, Åkestam et al.'s (2017) experimental study proved that consumers generally appreciate femvertising more than other more traditional forms of advertising. Jinah's (2022) survey study of young consumers aged 18 to 29 found that consumers show positive attitudes toward femvertising, and that their intention to purchase the advertised products is boosted if the femvertising relates to their personal experience. Abitbol and Sternadori's (2016) interview study found femvertising to be effective among young female consumers, whose optimistic evaluation of it results in an improved attitude toward advertised brands. Similar findings were spotted by Drake's (2017) experimental design. Yin et al.'s (2020) experimental study highlighted that female consumers show more preference to advertisements presenting female endorsers in a smart way. In terms of critiques of femvertising, scholars generally see femvertising as an extension of commodity feminism and consumerism, while Nosheen (2016) sees femvertising as a brand's exploitation of feminist ideas and the packaging of some feminist concepts with products sold to consumers as essentially commercial hype. Besides, scholars do not just discuss gender-related topics in advertising. They also have raised concerns regarding the media's overall treatment of gender-related issues. For instance, in a study conducted by Bamezai et al. (2020), cross-sectional surveys and semi-structured interviews were employed to examine the landscape of journalism education in India. The media industry exhibits a dualistic nature in its approach and practices, as it tends to adopt a reactive stance towards the representation of women, often portraying them in sexualized and stereotypical ways, while simultaneously rejecting any biased portrayal when it comes to women's empowerment.

Although many extant studies show that consumers appreciate femvertising, different voices on the application of femvertising have also been recorded. For example, Kapoor and Munjal's (2019) study of female consumers challenges the effectiveness of femvertising. They postulated that although self-consciousness and emotional needs improve the attitudes of female consumers toward femvertising, such positive evaluation does not contribute to their purchase intentions. Ng and Chan's (2014) study used qualitative interviews to investigate the responses of adolescents to three types of female images in advertising, including an elegant woman, a strong woman, and a sophisticated

urban woman. The study found that male interviewees reject the strong woman image and imagine her as making them uncomfortable. They appreciate the urban sophisticated woman and imagine her as charming and approachable. Femvertising and related themes have become prominent in online and social media (Rodrigues, 2016). When incorporating femvertising into the practice of corporate social responsibility, brand-cause fit significantly influences how brands develop their advertising messages. Champlin et al.'s (2019) analysis of awarded femvertising found different messaging themes in high brand-cause fit and low brand-cause fit contexts. When brands have a high fit/ congruence with advertised social cause, the messages highlight key themes such as overt femininity. However, themes such as breaking gender stereotype are mainly used in femvertising when brands have a low fit/congruence with the advertised social cause.

In summary, femvertising is a commercial product that blends with feminism and social culture. Existing studies mainly use surveys (Abitbol, & Sternadori, 2020; Jinah, 2022), experiments (Åkestam et al., 2017; Drake, 2017), or content analysis (Champlin et al., 2019; Pankiw et al., 2021) to analyze the phenomenon of femvertising. Only a limited number of studies, such as Abitbol and Sternadori's (2016) study of American youth, explore the topic via focus group interviews. Therefore, to enrich the understanding of femvertising among consumers, our study adopts focus group interview methodology to investigate how consumers perceive femvertising.

Femvertising in China

It is not uncommon for advertising in China that highlights female characters to demonstrate gender stereotype (Teng et al., 2021). Traditional female beauty images frequently appear in Chinese advertising (Chan, & Cheng, 2012; Qiao, & Wang, 2022). However, this trend starts to fade due to the glocalization of pro-female campaigns (Teng et al., 2021). In recent years, scholars have extended their study focus to femvertising. Case studies were mainly conducted to analyze femvertising from the perspective of semiotic analysis (Qiao, & Wang, 2022), textual analysis (Duan, 2020), critical discourse analysis (Guo et al., 2022), and the like. However, these studies failed to measure audience responses to femvertising. It is necessary to apply other research methods such as focus group interviews and sample surveys to extend the breadth and depth of the study of femvertising by examining audience perceptions and responses to it.

Even though there is a relative lack of literature on femvertising research in China compared with foreign studies, some significant research findings can

still be deduced. First, the gender discourse delivered in femvertising is often contradictory. Qiao and Wang's (2022) symbol analysis identified that although the analyzed femvertising from a global cosmetic brand verbally promotes female independence, the meaning of the verbal symbols is contradictory to that of the applied visual symbols highlighting the stereotyped female images. Guo et al.'s (2022) case study on sanitary napkin products also interpreted the struggle between female liberation and constraint. Second, because of the commercial function of advertising, femvertising generates conflicting feelings among audiences. Duan's (2020) textual analysis of 2,975 Weibo comments from femvertising vlogs found that the majority of Weibo users appreciate femvertising, while a small number dislike it because of the superficial messages delivered in the advertisements. Such contradictory feelings about femvertising were also explained by Taylor, Johnston, and Whitehead (2016). Due to their commercial purpose, the feminist views reflected in femvertising are seen as politically shallow. Third, whether femvertising is an overall effective advertising strategy is controversial. Li and Kim's (2021) survey study of 583 Chinese consumers, ranging from teenagers to the elderly, found that femvertising that is female-oriented and breaks gender stereotype has a positive impact on consumers' attitudes toward advertising and their purchase intentions. Wang's (2021) experimental study showed that consumers are more emotionally responsive to femvertising from gender-oriented brands than non-gender-oriented brands. However, the advertising effectiveness of femvertising from non-gender-oriented brands is better than that of gender-oriented brands. Contradicting the previous two studies, Zeng, He, and Liu's (2022) content analysis of 5,000 Weibo comments concluded that audiences have quite different views on gender discrimination and stereotype. They do not fully accept the femvertising message and are wary of the ideology promoted in femvertising.

Femvertising and young consumers

Existing studies frequently analyze the femvertising phenomenon and its impact on young generations. This might be explained by social cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001). Media are effective in developing role models or representations for audiences to observe, learn, and imitate. Such impacts are more significant among young generations as their value systems are not solidly developed (Levine & Harrison, 2009). Femvertising as a media phenomenon may also be influential among younger generations in the long run.

Overall, young people actively participate in conversations about supportive representation of female empowerment. Yoon and Lee's (2023) content analysis of 343 YouTube videos related to a femvertising campaign found that the young generation, particularly females, are more willing to spread pro-female messages online. Furthermore, the impact of femvertising is significant among the youth. After young consumers are exposed to a brand's femvertising, their attitudes toward the advertised products and intention to buy them are enhanced (Teng et al., 2021).

Apart from the overall femvertising effect, some limited studies also explored demographic differences mainly through quantitative research methods. However, their research findings are to some extent inconsistent. Specifically, Wang's (2021) experimental design argued that there is no significant difference between female and male participants in terms of femvertising effect. Teng et al.'s (2021) experimental study with college students in China extended the impact of female empowerment to their male counterparts by analyzing young consumers' attitudes with regard to sexism/gender. Their study found that as with female consumers, young male consumers with low sexism/gender hostility also show feelings supportive of femvertising. On the other hand, femvertising may not always boost young male consumers' purchase intention toward the advertised products. In other words, whether demographic factors such as gender make a difference in femvertising effect is not clear. Continuous studies are necessary.

Moreover, extant studies on femvertising and demographic differences seldom apply qualitative research methods to collect young consumers' in-depth views. Abitbol and Sternadori's (2016) focus group study compared female and male youngsters' views on femvertising, and concluded that young female consumers show more support for femvertising on the affective and behavioral levels than their male counterparts. In addition, both female and male young consumers appreciate the perceived fit/consistency between brand and the advertised social cause in femvertising. Although Abitbol and Sternadori's (2016) study used qualitative research method to collect young consumers' views about femvertising, the interview participants were recruited from one university in the United States. Whether their views are representative in Asian countries such as China is unclear. Further explorations are required.

To summarize, although many brands employing femvertising in China made a success of it (Teng et al., 2021), existing literature shows that femvertising-related studies are limited in the country. As one of the most important consumer

markets (Caballero & Fengler, 2023), China cannot be ignored in femvertising studies. Further studies need to be conducted. Furthermore, young consumers are the focus in the existing femvertising studies. Even though some researches such as Abitbol and Sternadori's (2016) tested how demographic factors like gender influence young consumers' views on femvertising, they mainly focus on Western countries. Whether such demographic differences exist in the China market is unknown. Therefore, the following two research questions are addressed in this study to explore the femvertising phenomenon among young Chinese consumers:

RQ1: How do young consumers perceive femvertising and its effectiveness?

RQ2: Do young consumers of different demographic backgrounds respond to femvertising differently?

Methodology

To answer the aforementioned research questions, focus group interviews were conducted in March 2023. The focus group interview is one of the most commonly used research methods in advertising studies (Stewart, & Shamdasani, 2017). It generates fruitful data and produces more fully articulated views from the participants (Wilkinson, 1998). The focus group interview is commonly conducted when researchers would like to collect interviewees' feelings about one specific topic, or figure out perception and attitude differences between groups, such as differences between females and males (Rabiee, 2004). The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the university at which the second author was studying.

Sampling

Convenience sampling was used in the study. All interviewees were recruited online from various social media platforms, including WeChat, Weibo, and Douban. They were aged 20 to 25. All of them came from the first-tier and second-tier cities in mainland China. Three focus group interviews with 15 young interviewees were conducted. Each group consisted of five participants, which is a reasonable sample size for a focus group interview (Krueger, & Casey, 2002). To address the proposed RQ2, focus group interviews were conducted with different demographic groups. The first focus group interview was conducted with young female college students, the second one with young female employees, and the last one with young male college students. Since femvertising is a heavily gendered topic, participants with the same demographic profile such as gender were grouped together for

interview. Among the three groups, the young female employee group reported more frequent exposure to femvertising. Male college students, however, reported that they seldom paid attention to advertising in general, including femvertising.

The procedure

Prior to conducting the interviews, the corresponding author as the interview moderator provided the participants with an informed consent form and a brief introduction to the background of the research project. Following this, three advertisements were used as prompts because the content of video-based advertisements is easy to understand and can convey feminist ideas more directly (Zeng, He, & Liu, 2022).

Three selected television advertisements featuring both international and Chinese brands were shown. These advertisements shared some similarities in order to form a representative sample of femvertising. For example, the selected advertisements featured nontraditional female roles or activities as well as demonstrating female empowerment and autonomy. The duration of each advertisement was around 30 seconds to one minute. Femvertising clips promoting beauty and skincare products were selected because these products mainly target female consumers, and the beauty and skincare product industry has a responsibility to represent females in the media context (Sterbenk et al., 2022). Based on the aforementioned criteria, femvertising from two Chinese brands, PROYA and Watson's, and the global brand Olay were selected. The first advertisement, from PROYA, highlights how a teenage girl lion dance team strives to break down gender bias, and eventually win in the competition. The second one, from Watson's, tells the story of a young girl who plans to study abroad but is put down by her relatives. Eventually her mother encouraged her to pursue her dreams. The third advertisement, from Olay, features five successful Indian women asserting that individuals, including females, can overcome any challenge as long as they have the courage to follow their heart and can "grin at what they see in the mirror".

After showing the three advertisements, the interview moderator followed the interview protocol in the Appendix to raise questions relating to female images in the advertisements, participants' responses to the images, and the perceived effectiveness of the advertisements. Participants were encouraged to exchange their views openly. The focus group interviews lasted from one hour for the female student group to two hours for the young female employee group.

Data analysis

The interview transcripts were written in Chinese. The second author prepared the transcripts and verbatim. Grounded theory was used to analyze the interview transcripts. After reading the interview transcripts several times, the authors used NVIVO to code and explore important content themes from the transcripts and keywords frequently reported by the interviewees. First, open coding was used to identify keywords and views that were frequently mentioned by interviewees. Second, selective coding was undertaken to explore potential links between the open codes. Third, axial coding was carried out to summarize the core categories and themes that emerged from the textual data. Here is an example of the coding procedure. When coding young consumers' perceptions of the female images portrayed in the femvertising, keywords and phrases such as "not influenced by stereotype", "break through the prejudice", "independent", "strong", "powerful", "brave to hold on when being challenged", "persistence", and "sincere" were identified from the interview transcript. After highlighting these keywords and phrases, selective coding was conducted to categorize these open codes. Regarding the examples mentioned above, the first five open codes were categorized to "autonomous/empowered"; codes of "brave to hold on when being challenged" and "persistence" were grouped to "resilient"; and the code of "sincere" was categorized to "sincere". After that, all selective codes relating to young consumers' perceptions of female images portrayed in the femvertising were compared in terms of their importance among the interviewees. The following theme emerged from the axial coding: autonomy is the most significant characteristic shared among females in perceiving femvertising.

Results

To answer the proposed research questions, thematic analysis was conducted. Overall, participants showed a positive attitude toward femvertising, as such advertising portrays females in an optimistic and independent way. They believed that the promotion of female empowerment and autonomy reflected the advertised brands' corporate social responsibility and representation of the disadvantaged, which effectively improved the advertised brands' images. However, young consumers from different demographic groups had different views on femvertising strategy. Gender difference was significant.

Theme 1: Young consumers appreciate femvertising due to its superior advertising execution and storytelling about female empowerment and autonomy

When participants were asked to indicate their impressions of the females featured in the femvertising and whether their images were desirable, they mainly used terms such as autonomous and resilient to describe the female characters highlighted in the advertisements and to show their appreciation. Most of the participants believed that the females in the advertisements were brave enough to challenge gender stereotypes and show gender diversity. The majority of participants held a positive view of the women portrayed in the three advertisements under study. The sense of appreciation was demonstrated strongly among female participants. Some female participants even admitted that the female characters in these advertisements were exactly who they wanted to be. Here are some representative quotes about participants' views of female characters featured in the femvertising and their attitudes toward them.

“Overall, ladies in the advertisements are open-minded, and not constrained by gender stereotype and how others evaluate them. They are very brave” (Male college student);

“The women in the Olay advertisement are the ideal female images in my view. I wish I could be as successful as the women in the Olay advertisement. I also wish I could be at least as successful as those in the PROYA advertisement” (Young female employees).

Overall, participants showed positive attitudes toward the selected femvertising. Most participants liked the advertisements due to their excellent advertising execution and storytelling. Specifically, the application of slice-of-life execution style allowed the participants to relate the advertising scenario to reality, easily generating resonance with the audience. The young interviewees also mentioned frequently that the femvertising clips, particularly the one about a lion dance team, were able to generate empathy because of strong storytelling. Some explained that good storytelling and appropriate pacing allowed the audience to stay focused and even forget they were watching advertisements. The two selected quotes are about advertising execution style and storytelling.

“The scenarios or problems faced by the female characters in the advertisements are close to reality. When females grow up, they somehow need to deal with the problems mentioned in the advertisements. When advertising applies such scenarios to communicate with a female audience, it's much easier to resonate with it” (Female college student);

“The strength of the PROYA advertisement is that it has strong storytelling. It doesn't feel like you're watching a commercial and there are few mentions

of the features of the brand. This indicates that the brand is serious and attentive to women's concerns. I think it is somehow a success" (Young female employee).

Although most participants appreciated the femvertising, some also mentioned their concerns or the disadvantages of the femvertising, particularly with regard to the Olay advertisement. Their concerns focused on the depth of the message relating to feminism. These participants did not like its slogan-shouting style of advertising, because it was fast-paced and highly ad-hominem, and the message was shallow. The following quote is a proof.

"The Olay advertisement just recorded a few successful women saying something, which I didn't really like... They just say something in the advertisement, and it's more like chicken soup for the soul. It didn't work for me" (Male college student).

Participants also discussed their feelings about femvertising in comparison with historical advertisements showing female images in China. Most of them agreed that, although uncommon, femvertising in China was witnessing an increasing trend. According to the observations of some participants from the young female employees' group, social media platforms present femvertising more frequently than traditional media. Some male participants reported that these advertisements usually appear during special holidays and events related to women such as Women's Day.

Theme 2: The effectiveness of femvertising among young consumers depends on the use of ideal female images and brands' previous images

The majority of participants admitted that femvertising could help brands improve their image, because the use of autonomous females in femvertising broke down the prejudices of females in the market and allowed the female voice to be heard. It made them believe that the advertised brands were genuinely respectful to women and spoke out on behalf of the disadvantaged. However, some participants from both the male and the female college student groups also pointed out a perceived gender difference in advertising effectiveness. They assumed that although feminism is on the social issues agenda, femvertising is more acceptable to female than male consumers. They also perceived that femvertising would not work for certain brands that previously featured female images in a traditional and sexy way, but suddenly changed advertising style to promote independent and autonomous female images. The following are two selected quotes, the first one highlighting the majority's view about how femvertising helps brands develop images and the second one showing

the minority's view about different advertising impacts on female and male consumers.

“Adopting this type of femvertising shows that the brand is working to eliminate prejudice against women. So, it can help build the brand's image” (Male college student);

“Some brands have a relatively consistent brand image by featuring sexy ladies in their advertisements in the past. All of a sudden, if they change the image from sexy ladies to strong and independent women, I think male consumers would not buy it” (Female college student).

Theme 3: Significant gender difference in how brands portray female images in advertising and whether brands should use femvertising as their communication strategy

When comparing results among different focus groups, it is clear that female participants showed different views than their male counterparts. First, female and male participants' perceptions varied in terms of how brands use female images in advertising. Female participants showed more particular concern for whether brands portray females appropriately in femvertising. In other words, they were more interested in whether the femvertising describes the female characters optimistically, and whether they present women's images in a negative and stereotyped way. When sharing their concerns, female participants more frequently referred to the Watson's advertisement as they felt that this advertisement did not present female images in an ideal and confident way. Most of the female participants complained that such advertisements show the negative side of women. Some participants also found that they might deepen the perceived conflict between traditional older females with gender stereotyped traits and nontraditional younger females. The following is one of the representative quotes:

“Regarding the Watson's advertisement, the plot of the advertisement sets up a conflict between women. But in real life, when relatives convince girls not to study for higher degrees, those words mainly come from males, rather than females. The advertisement actually exacerbates the conflict between females to a certain extent” (Female college student).

When comparing historical advertising with femvertising, the majority of female participants claimed that women in advertisements in the past were mostly portrayed in gender stereotyped roles such as virtuous wives and mothers, or beautiful ladies who met societal expectations of physical appearance. Overall, the images of women in femvertising are more diverse.

However, few male participants mentioned this. In addition, around half of the female participants found that the value of altruism, always thinking about people around and taking care of them, was commonly linked to female characters in past advertisements. In other words, the advertisements relating to females, previously, were others-focused. They seldom portrayed females' individual interests and personal dreams. However, femvertising emphasizes self-development and growth of females. Here is one representative quote:

“Previously, advertisements delivered messages about how females met social expectations. Ladies were expected to be physically attractive and beautiful. However, advertisements nowadays are more likely to consider females as individuals and pay attention to their inner needs” (Young female employee).

As with female participants, male participants also paid attention to the storytelling strategy of the advertisements. However, differences exist. Some male participants were more concerned about how female images portrayed in advertising contribute to advertising effectiveness. They claimed that how to present a female image in an advertisement was all about marketing. If femvertising targets female consumers, it would be more successful and even increase the sales performance of the advertised products. Here is a selected quote:

“How to construct female images in advertisements should consider the objectives and functions of the advertising” (Male college student).

Second, male participants showed a different level of appreciation of femvertising, compared with female participants. Specifically, some female participants from the young employee group admitted that they want to become strong women like those presented in the femvertising, while some male participants clearly pointed out their aversion to such female images as shown in the femvertising. In their view, the choice of subject matter and the way in which women are portrayed in femvertising are contradictory to the ideal type of female. Besides, male participants even questioned if femvertising is a wise choice for brands to use. In their view, the advantage of portraying autonomous women in femvertising is to win favor with the consumer base and thus lead to an increase in sales. But the disadvantage is also obvious. Male participants perceived that this type of femvertising would make some audiences feel uncomfortable. The followings are two quotes from male participants:

“Brands make profits. In China, few brands or advertisements portray females in this way. If brands promoted femvertising, it could become their selling point” (Male college student);

“When a brand makes a feminist advertisement, it is placed in a position to be judged by others. Men and women will make their own judgments about the advertisement. People who have the traditional idea of what a woman should be like may feel uncomfortable and they will criticize the brand” (Male college student).

Discussion

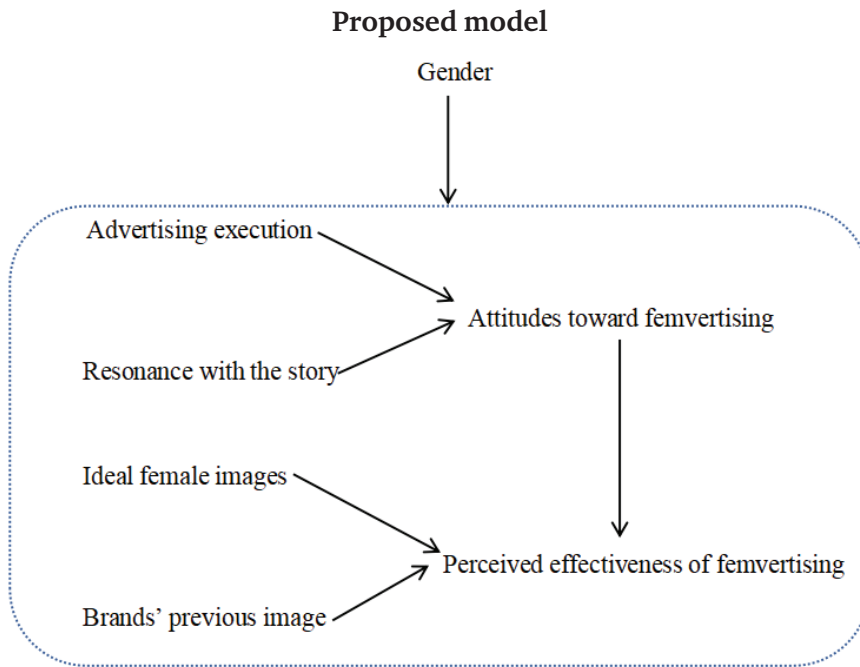
Three focus group interviews were conducted in March 2023 to figure out young consumers’ responses to femvertising and how they may differ. The results of this study, showing an overall supportive attitude toward femvertising, are consistent with Åkestam et al.’s (2017) experimental study of European females, Jinah’s (2022) survey study of young Japanese consumers, and Teng et al.’s (2021) experimental study about youth in China. Our focus group study also concurs with Duan’s (2020) finding about femvertising vlogs, namely that superficial messages delivered in femvertising work to its disadvantage. Although young participants in our study generally showed positive feelings about femvertising, not all of them admitted such advertising is beneficial to the brands. Some participants pointed out that the shallow messages presented in the advertising limit the femvertising effect. In addition, this study shows gender difference in how consumers perceive female images and femvertising. Echoing Abitbol and Sternadori’s (2016) focus group study and Yoon and Lee’s (2023) content analysis of femvertising videos, female participants were more accepting of femvertising. Moreover, among some male participants, fear of the strong woman image and preference for the gentle and traditional female are similar to findings in Ng and Chan’s (2014) study. Chen’s (2023) study also reported that the strong woman image was not widely accepted.

Theoretical contributions

A theoretical model, visualized in *Figure 1*, was developed from the results. This exploratory study confirms that young consumers’ attitudes toward femvertising are positively affected by the advertising execution style used in the advertising. Meanwhile, whether the storytelling in femvertising resonates with young consumers plays a significant role in attitudes toward

femvertising. If young consumers appreciate a feminist advertisement, they also believe it will enhance brand image. In other words, young consumers' attitudes toward femvertising have a positive impact on the perceived advertising effectiveness. In addition, how brands portray female images in femvertising and the consistency of these images before and after a campaign significantly influence the perceived effectiveness of femvertising. In this model, gender effect was considered. Through comparison of the views of different demographic groups, gender difference was found to be outstanding in terms of young consumers' attitudes toward femvertising and its perceived advertising effectiveness.

Figure 1



To summarize, the main theoretical contribution of this study is to propose a model to explain what factors contribute to the communication effectiveness of femvertising among young consumers. Previous studies on femvertising in China mainly applied quantitative methods such as experiment (e.g. Wang, 2021) and content analysis (e.g. Zeng, He, & Liu, 2022). This study provides empirical evidence of young consumers' views about femvertising in contemporary China.

In addition, this exploratory study extends the application of social learning theory in femvertising among the youth in a qualitative context. Bandura (1971) developed social learning theory to explain how children learn from direct experience and modelling. It is suggested that media is effective to develop role models for children to observe, learn and later model the expected behaviors (Bandura, 2001). Advertising as a type of media texts is no exception (Varghese, & Kumar, 2020). In line with this logic, previous studies such as Varghese and Kumar's (2020) study about India youth have examined social learning theory in the femvertising context through experiment. They found that femvertising about female empowerment could effectively limit the gender bias and grow the youth's self-esteem. Our study applies qualitative approach as an alternative to discuss how symbolic communication happens in femvertising and to what extent it helps youth socialize in terms of gender equality. Some of the female interviewees admitted that their self-esteem grew, and they would like to become the female role models portrayed in femvertising in the future. In other words, social learning theory works among female youth. However, male interviewees in our study held a different attitude toward use of femvertising in marketing communication. Future studies are suggested to use qualitative interview approach to continue analyzing what causes the gender difference in social learning about femvertising's advocacy to women empowerment.

Marketing implications

This study generates some insightful marketing communication suggestions. First, if femvertising is used as part of a brand's social marketing strategy, it is suggested that practitioners develop stories based on real-life experience, struggles, and resolutions, rather than just featuring successful female characters. Our study found that young consumers care about the resonance emerging from the femvertising. Advertisements using slice-of-life or testimonial advertising executions more easily generate emotional response and empathy. Jinah's (2022) survey study about youth in Japan also supported such a view. This quantitative study found that the positive attitude of youngsters toward femvertising and their purchase intention for the advertised products could be enhanced when stories presented in the femvertising are relevant to their individual life/experience. Second, when a brand utilizes femvertising to attract young consumers, it should consider the fit between the brand's previous images and the advertised social cause. More specifically, it should consider the portrayal of females in its previous campaigns. If a brand wants to update

or even change its image in the long term, it should be done gradually and not abruptly. A pilot study of target consumers' acceptance of the re-branded images should be conducted before the execution. This suggestion is supported by our research findings. In the focus group interviews, some participants pointed out the sudden image change for certain brands as being undesirable. Many studies have also proved that a salient fit/congruence between brand and advertised social cause contributes to positive consumer evaluation of a campaign (Aaker, & Keller 1990; Abitbol, & Sternadori, 2019; Champlin et al., 2019).

Limitations and future studies

Although this study provides some significant insights for brand communication, it has some limitations to be addressed in future studies. First, employing the focus group interview limits the sample size of the study. Altogether, the views of 15 participants across three groups cannot comprehensively reflect how youngsters in China respond to the strategy of femvertising. It is suggested that future studies employ quantitative methods such as cross-sectional survey to generalize the views of youngsters on the effectiveness of femvertising. Besides, the participants in this study are living in the cities and are well-educated. They have high exposure to advertising messages. Therefore, their response to femvertising cannot fully represent less-educated young persons or persons residing in the rural areas. As a result, the findings are limited in generalizability. It is recommended that future studies can be conducted in rural part of China where participants may be less-educated or are less familiar with symbolic advertising images. Second, the selected femvertising clips are all from beauty- and skincare-related brands, which mainly target female consumers. To more accurately learn about youngsters' overall perceptions of femvertising strategy, future studies should select advertisements from gender-neutral brands and compare female and male youngsters' responses on the femvertising strategy. Third, focus group interview is not as effective as experimental design to test the cause-effect relationship about factors contributing to youngsters' review about femvertising and the persuasiveness of femvertising. Future studies can employ experimental study to accurately explore femvertising-related cause-effect relationship. Besides, longitudinal studies might be considered to study the evolving femvertising trends in the long run and changes of youngsters' perception.

Conclusion

A qualitative study was conducted to explore consumers' perceptions and perceived effectiveness of femvertising. The results showed that participants paid much attention to the advertising execution style and storytelling skills of femvertising. The utilization of storytelling techniques in femvertising is anticipated to resonate with the participants. The narratives employed in this study are genuine and pertinent to the experiences of the general public. The extent to which consumers establish a connection between advertising content and their personal encounters and recollections proves to be a crucial factor influencing the effects of femvertising (Jinah, 2022). When the characters depicted in the advertisements express their true identities in everyday life, devoid of the distance imposed by celebrity endorsements or the commercialization of product information, the authenticity showcased in the advertisements can more effectively resonate with the audience, thereby augmenting the empathetic impact (Li, & Fan, 2018). Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that femvertising may encounter criticism when it fails to convey a clear message.

Although some female participants showed appreciation of femvertising, considering these advertisements touching and speaking for them, some participants found these advertisements shallow and unauthentic. Male participants did not show as much appreciation of femvertising as female participants. A previous investigation delved into the individual comprehension of gender roles beyond childhood found that within traditional households, the emphasis on fostering interdependence and self-identity tends to be directed towards girls, whereas boys are encouraged to explore their autonomy and self-identity. In an environment characterized by fixed gender norms, emotional bonds among women give rise to a wide-ranging "sisterhood" (Liu, 2005). Consequently, when confronted with depictions of women's experiences and expressions in feminist advertisements, women are more prone to exhibit emotional inclinations, cognitive responses, and behavioral intentions.

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Appendix

Interview protocol

1.Can you use three phrases to describe the female character in this advertisement?

2.What are the advantages of portraying the female character in this way in the advertisement?

3.What are the disadvantages of portraying the female character in this way in the advertisement?

4.What do you like and dislike about the female characters in these advertisements?

5.Are the female characters in these advertisements the ideal female image for you? Why or why not?

6.How are the female characters in these advertisements different from the ones you have seen in previous advertisements?

7.Are advertisements that feature this type of female image common in China?

8.Can advertisements that use this type of female image helps to establish the brand image? Why?