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Empowerment through Femvertising: Reality or Myth?

Empoderamiento a través de la publicidad feminista ¿realidad o mito?

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ABSTRACT

This article studied female empowerment and stereotypes through femvertising. Empowerment and stereotypes were characterized by the roles generated by the sexual division of labor, developing a qualitative analysis through the perception of young Mexican women. The challenges of this advertising strategy were identified as the role of messages and content. The results suggested the construction of new stereotypes without modifying the patriarchal structure.

Keywords: femvertising; empowerment; stereotypes; women; communication.

Jel code: M37



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RESUMEN

En este artículo se estudió el empoderamiento y los estereotipos femeninos a través de la publicidad feminista. Se caracterizó el empoderamiento y los estereotipos con base en los roles que se generan de la división sexual de trabajo, desarrollando un análisis cualitativo sobre la percepción de mujeres mexicanas jóvenes. Se identificaron los retos de esta estrategia publicitaria, así como el papel que tienen los mensajes y contenidos. Los resultados sugieren la construcción de nuevos estereotipos sin que con ello se modifique la estructura patriarcal que la propia estrategia cuestiona.

Palabras clave: femvertising; empoderamiento; estereotipos; mujeres; comunicación.

Código JEL: M37.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, feminist movements worldwide have caught the attention of diverse spaces that have transcended academic and political discussions and accompanied several actresses who have openly defended the cause. As a result, feminism has been incorporated into their public speeches, which have simultaneously echoed among young women, who have become visible, and organized through support networks and collectives.

In this context of acceptance of feminism and social demands for the need to make women visible, a new advertising strategy called femvertising arises.¹ It seeks to break with the traditional representation of women in advertising content and demystify the stereotypes and traditional roles in which they were represented, accompanied by an emancipatory discourse. In addition to discarding negative representations of women and breaking stereotypes, this strategy incorporates a positive message regarding them. It also promotes advertising with social responsibility that questions the status quo of gender and female empowerment (Menéndez, 2019).

Femvertising has undoubtedly translated into better results for companies (Abitbol and Sternadori, 2016; Kapoor and Munjal, 2019), and this is the result of the claims of the urgent need to break with sexist advertising content. Nevertheless, it would be biased not to recognize how the market's interest in benefiting from social movements that, on many occasions, has been documented, makes one suspicious of the true intentions of advertising proposals (Gómez, 2016). For Jalakas (2017), femvertising reflects a banal concept wholly detached from women's empowerment philosophical and political objective. For Menéndez (2020), it can be called feminiwashing of a brand to gaining women's trust and adopt a politically correct stance before society, so that this advertising strategy, far from empowering women, contravenes the political agenda that pursues the genesis of feminism.

However, for Codeluppi (2007), advertising cannot be qualified as good or bad since it can only become destructive if misused or intended to deceive through it. Nevertheless, given the social role it plays in communication, it is possible to recognize that advertising messages are capable of constructing or modifying the perceived reality (Caro, 2014).

Thus, this research sought to recognize the perception that young women have of femvertising and its role in empowering and perpetuating or modifying female stereotypes

¹ The neologism femvertising is the sum of the words *Female* + *Advertising*, which translates as feminine or feminist advertising.

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through advertising. Therefore, a qualitative study was carried out to investigate the meaning that the messages and the image used in advertisements represent for them.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Femvertising

This type of advertising strives to offer an emancipatory discourse and show its social responsibility (Menéndez, 2019) by positioning itself against sexist content and gender stereotypes, which, through campaigns in favor of women's causes, seeks to promote equality, genuine appreciation, and empowerment of girls and women. The challenge of femvertising lies in demonstrating a commitment to social change above commercial interests. This concept had its antecedents in 2014. SheKnows Media created it, defining it as "advertising that uses pro-female talent and messages and content that seeks to empower women and girls."

For Becker-Herby (2016), this advertising stands on five pillars: 1) the intersectional use of women by including in its advertising content women of different races, weights, body shapes, and ages, who are depicted in natural settings and contexts; 2) Messages in favor of women seeking inspiration and empowerment by generating feelings of affirmation, self-confidence, and motivation; 3) Challenging traditional gender stereotypes by showing women in a variety of spaces and activities not associated with their gender; 4) Downplaying sexuality by reducing cleavage, make-up, sexual poses; and 5) Portraying women authentically, keeping congruence between the image, the message, and the advertised product.

Some critics of femvertising point out that it is not a movement in favor of feminist causes but arises under the logic of advertising agencies that appropriate some feminist elements resulting from contemporary social tensions, where advertising can rarely be considered genuine (Lazar, 2006), and the brands themselves dismiss it as a philanthropic social movement (Becker-Herby, 2016). For Zeisler (2016), this strategy reflects the risk of heeding the call of market feminism². Where young women's enthusiasm to adopt this modern label, ends up depoliticizing feminism.

The positions in favor of femvertising focus on the authenticity of the brands. In contrast, consumer behavior is interested in the products they question and the motives and intentions of the brands. In the case of femvertising, moral authenticity is intended to be communicated

² Zeisler (2016) uses the term *marketplace feminism* as a synonym for *commodity feminism*, but the theoretical premises of formulation are the same.

by the way women are shown in advertising and the feelings of realism that these signals provoke (Becker-Herby, 2016).

Indeed, it is complicated to answer the rhetorical question about the existence of feminist advertising, given the theoretical contradictions of both premises. However, it is possible to recognize that this advertising strategy seeks brands to transform historical advertising content to break stereotypes derived from the sexual division of labor, for instance, objectification, hypersexualization, and the standard of feminine beauty, by using messages close to women's realities, which project a new individual and collective reality for women.

Femvertising as a tool for female empowerment

Women's empowerment has been used for different demagogic and cultural purposes. As a result, advertising agencies have included this concept in their business strategies. For Martínez (2017), empowerment processes should lead women to train self-esteem and assertiveness so that they can live with personal autonomy. However, this process should not only be carried out in the individual dimension of their lives but generated simultaneously with the context in which they interact, so their social dynamics should also be included. Hence the importance of recognizing the plurality of roles and spaces in which women of the 21st century are inserted so that advertising has been forced to modify its status quo and redirect both its contents and its messages. All of this is in order to contribute to the empowerment of women. It is precisely from this new vision that femvertising emerges as a strategy for advertising that replaces lewd and sexist archetypes with messages that empower women (López and García, 2019).

Femvertising seeks to show women a reality that counteracts patriarchal paradigms. It is the spokesperson of empowerment through egalitarian content (Ojeda, 2016). It promotes a feminist message, and it breaks with the stereotypical representation of women (Pérez and Almanzor, 2017). From both of them, women's identity and social perception are modified, but, above all, the one they have of themselves.

Roles and stereotypes in femvertising

Since the seventies, gender roles in advertisements had a marked tendency toward women as sexual or decorative objects, like mothers or responsible for the care of the house or children, dependent on men, weak and unintelligent (Bigné and Cruz, 2000; Chacón, 2008; Osuna, 2011). However, they did not leave aside other traditional roles. The four categories of stereotyped roles for women in that decade were linked to 1) women's place is in the house, 2) women do not make important decisions, 3) women are dependent on men and need their protection, and finally 4) men perceive women as sexual objects.

By the 1980s, an almost invisible trend of independence and equality began for both men and women. Nonetheless, advertising continued to privilege men in professional roles and

scenarios outside the house. On the other hand, women were advertised with domestic products. However, in the 1990s, the change in the use of stereotyped roles in advertising increased to the point of visualizing inverted roles where men were found with traditionally feminine roles, and there was a precise balance between the roles they represented and the products shown in advertising (Bigné and Cruz, 2000). This path toward the search for authentic and equal representation has been slow but progressive. Moreover, it has caused women to be more critical in their opinion about the representation of the roles that appear in advertisements, in which they strongly point out discrimination and raise their voices against the brands that promote it.

However, due to women's demands through different channels for the reality to be communicated, brands promote the femvertising advertising strategy that breaks with the stereotyped cognitive structures. The standards of physical beauty and the traditional roles observed for decades now show new models of empowered women, leaders, active, independent, and professional women (Moral, 2000). The first brands that deployed their femvertising strategy were those that sold products oriented to the female market. They showed natural women. They bet on diversity with different physical complexions and of different races or skin tones. Lately, other companies - with products more oriented to the male market- have joined the strategy, considering the evidence that defending women can have a positive impact on the growth of the company, the purchase intention, and on-brand loyalty (Abitbol and Sternadori, 2019; Davidson, 2015; Iqbal, 2015). As a result, more and more advertising messages aligned to the femvertising strategy are observed. The common denominator is women in public spaces, who are diverse, and with the power to make decisions.

METHODOLOGY

This study sought to recognize young women's perceptions of femvertising and its role in empowerment and the perpetuation or modification of female stereotypes through femvertising, so the most appropriate approach for this purpose was a qualitative one (McCracken, 1988). Furthermore, to seek answers to the research questions, focus groups were chosen as they provided significant flexibility in the design and allowed participants to clarify their ideas and opinions (Stewart et al., 2006; Wimmer and Dominick, 2010). Therefore, this is exploratory research, which is conducted through focus groups.

Participants

Mexican women between 18 and 24 years old. They belong to socioeconomic levels C, C- and C+ that are identified as the country's middle class. They represent approximately 40% of the population (AMAI, 2022), who are characterized by having more excellent stability, capacity to establish vocational and social commitments, but, above all, are more susceptible

to social change and the development of positive actions on behalf of themselves and their environments (WHO, 1986). Therefore, they are close to femvertising as the profile to which this strategy is directed.

Selection of the research corpus

The selection of the research corpus was based on the similarities between the brand and its cause-fit, the visual and auditory framing, and the message. As a result, three advertising campaigns from 2020 and 2021 for consumer products aimed at young women were chosen. Its language is Spanish for Mexico. They can be played both from the official pages of the brands and through YouTube. The first one was the campaign "Let us be clear" of the brand Sprite (a soda), in which the protagonist shows different activities she performs during the day and the way she takes on the challenges she faces. The slogan she presents is "Small actions, big achievements."³ The second advertisement was "From invisible to invincible" of the brand Secret (a deodorant).

It shows different women performing leadership activities historically associated with men. The slogan it communicates is "Change to Secret and do not sweat, move forward."⁴ Finally, the third one analyzed was "We are all influencers" from the Natura brand (cosmetics). It shows a diversity of women in different aspects, including skin color, physical structure, and age, who try to inspire other women. The slogan used is "We are all influencers."⁵ The three ads show characteristics that classify them as femvertising advertising.

Procedure

Two focus groups were conducted, in which 6 and 8 women participated, respectively. These groups were made up of participants who previously knew each other to generate greater trust to motivate discussion and present their ideas on the subject (Krueger and Casey, 2000). The sessions were held in the evening, using the ZOOM tool due to the restrictions on face-to-face work due to the health contingency. Each session lasted approximately 120 minutes and was led by a female moderator of the same sex as the participants, as previous work documents that this decision leads to an open and honest conversation (Morgan, 1997). Each session was recorded and transcribed verbatim. At the beginning of each group's discussion, the moderator welcomed the participants and explained the purpose of the research. Then, the three advertisements with femvertising content were shown. After showing the ads, questions were asked regarding their opinions about each one.

Data analysis

³ Sprite brand campaign: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZqPe9ZNx5E>

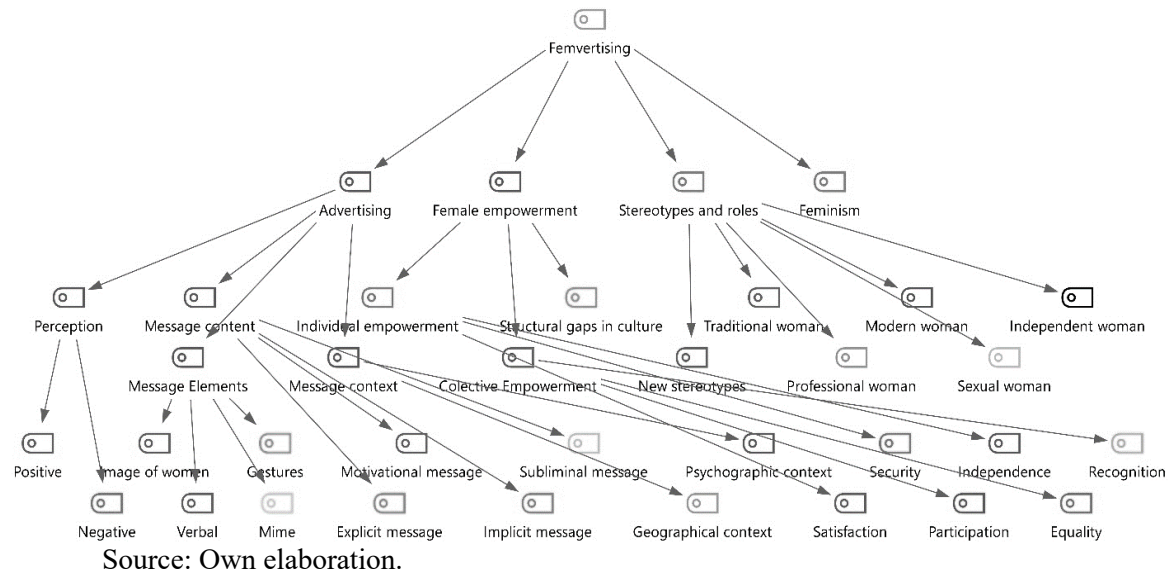
⁴ Secret brand campaign: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UBatKz1CskM>

⁵ Natura brand campaign: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JrT-z0IrYa4&list=PLlLel0J_R8hMC8YLVxxlLgZ6kL45PLv6X&index=2

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In order to reduce difficulties and systematize the results, MAXQDA software was used to analyze of the qualitative data. The transcripts of the discussions were coded following the grounded theory methodology described by Strauss and Corbin (1990). They were first coded from the established theoretical dimensions (femvertising, advertising, stereotypes, roles, and empowerment). Then, they were recorded to identify new conceptual themes (structural gaps in culture and feminism). Finally, the topics were reduced by combining identified theoretical concepts (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Codes of the dimensions for the qualitative analysis.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For the analysis of the results, the codes were grouped by category, as shown in Table 1; in this stage, the frequency in which they appear in the participants' speeches is shown, where the perception of advertising was present in both groups, as were stereotypes and roles, while individual empowerment has a more significant presence in the speeches than the collective dimension. Figure 2 shows the frequency of the analysis codes represented by the intensity and size of the words.

Table 1. Frequency by categories of analysis in speeches

Code	Focus 2	Focus 1	Total
Femvertising	0	0	0
Femvertising\Feminism	7	1	8
Femvertising\Advertising	0	0	0
Femvertising\Advertising\Message context	16	18	34
Femvertising\Advertising\Message content	26	17	43
Femvertising\Advertising\Message Elements	39	7	46
Femvertising\Advertising\Perception	52	50	102
Femvertising\Stereotypes and roles	36	27	63
Femvertising\Female empowerment	107	117	224
Total	283	237	520

Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 2. Word cloud with the frequency of codes and categories of analysis.



Source: Own elaboration.

Concerning the frequency of the categories by codes, the interrelated presence of the codes and the meaning of the discourses in the participants were sought. Table 2 shows that the perception of the femvertising message is associated with the psychographic context. At the same time, the structural gaps for empowerment are identified with greater intensity in the verbal elements, the image of women, and the context in which the advertisements are presented.

Table 2. Interrelation matrix of the codes with the highest frequency in the speeches.

Code System	Structural Gaps in Culture	Social Equality	Leadership	Personal achievement	Decision Capacity	Feeling of Accomplishment	Opinion about herself	New Stereotypes	Psychographic Context	Image of Women	Elementos verbales	Negative Perception	Positive Perception
Decision Capacity	1	3	5	4	0	6	6	5	1	2	0	1	5
Psychographic Context	8	0	2	2	1	1	2	3	0	5	6	10	10
Image of Women	8	3	3	3	2	2	3	8	5	0	2	2	4
Structural Gaps in culture	0	3	0	0	1	0	1	2	8	8	13	6	6
Feeling of Accomplishment	0	1	9	9	6	0	8	1	1	2	0	1	8
Opinion about herself	1	1	4	5	6	8	0	1	2	3	0	1	7
Leadership	0	2	0	5	5	9	4	1	2	3	0	0	7
New Stereotypes	2	3	1	1	5	1	1	0	3	8	0	2	6
Personal achievement	0	1	5	0	4	9	5	1	2	3	0	1	5
Negative Perception	6	1	0	1	1	1	1	2	10	2	8	0	5
Social Equality	3	0	2	1	3	1	1	3	0	3	1	1	3
Positive Perception	6	3	7	5	5	8	7	6	10	4	7	5	0

Source: Own elaboration.

From this point on, the interpretative analysis of the participants' discourses began to recognize the perception that young women have of femvertising and its role in empowerment and the feminine stereotypes constructed through advertising.

In this sense, for Becker-Herby (2016), femvertising arises at the moment when experts notice the demands of women who are part of the new generations for a change in the representation of the female image. A situation that was found to be present in the discourses of young women who were part of the object of study of the present research:

Well, I think that compared to ads from previous decades... because I have seen the typical ads of the housewife from the 50's and the husband reading the newspaper or watching TV, I think they have changed a lot... but there are people, for example, women of a previous generation or older, who already see it as usual. The reality in which we are living is not like that... maybe that's why they call us the crystal generation, right? Because we are offended by everything, but it is just not right... previous generations take it for granted (Participant 1, 2021).

When discussing the perception of the femvertising message of the three advertisements that were part of the research corpus, the women who participated in the focus groups pointed out that both the messages and the image of women showed a new reality. For Becker-Herby (2016), this advertising leaves aside the traditional beauty standards and represents women in real scenarios. However, the participants do not recognize that this advertising breaks with those standards since they state that the image of women in the advertisements is far from their daily lives:

They always show us messages of women who are already entirely successful, and I feel that there is also a lack of women working in a place that is not there yet, women who are studying... I think that in some cases there is also a lack of inclusion in the sense of image because, for example, in Secret, I think they were all if I am not mistaken, white women with more or less the same complexion... with the same standards of beauty (Participant 2, 2021).

However, all participants recognized themselves in the messages of the second ad (Secret), which uses dissonant phrases with negative messages about stereotypes arising from the sexual division of labor between men and women, and then presents women breaking them:

The one that caught my attention the most was the second video (Secret) because I feel that it emphasizes all these stereotypes that women have, such as you cook or you are there because she got involved with someone or things like that... but they turn it around and change that perspective, like the keyboard... (Participant 3, 2021).

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For Menéndez (2019), the role of femvertising focuses on designing campaigns in favor of women's causes, in which equality and appreciation of their reality are promoted, and they contribute to the empowerment of girls and women. The perception of empowerment within the content of this advertising strategy was analyzed. The participants recognized that it is present in different ways. First, through the images and then through the messages shown in the advertisements:

The use of these phrases "she is on her days" and "she sure slept with someone" is like to remove the labels that women have...besides, I think they could also be used to motivate women to get out of where they are pigeonholed (Participant 4, 2021).

In these reflections, it is possible to identify that young women recognize an emancipating discourse in advertising content, which could be considered campaigns in favor of women's causes in which they seek to promote equality and the reality of their stories. As Menéndez (2019) mentions, it is positioned against sexist content. However, the latent risk described by Gill and Orgad (2017), where this empowerment is based on the inner work and the confidence generated regarding the image of the body and the capabilities of women, is present. It loses sight of the political concept of empowerment:

I feel that when they want to empower women, they begin to pigeonhole them in certain new stereotypes that it is convenient for companies to have... Then, more than anything, society itself shows the type of women we should be and does not reflect the type of women who are

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in everyday life and only these (the first ones) are shown in advertising... So, I feel there is a great need to include this reality in this type of ad (Participant 5, 2021).

At this point, it is also essential to recognize that although indeed, brands do not have an advertising vocation that promotes structural social changes and the true intentions of companies can be discussed, young women recognize the efforts of these companies to change the image implicit in male subordination relations as identified by Pérez and Almanzor (2017):

I see that they have a relationship with corporate social responsibility...mmm since they seek to empower women, and the situations they give are for you to identify. Because, I think the situations are obvious, and at least one of us in each one of them identifies ourselves and it seeks to raise awareness among women and also to see a new way for them to empower themselves. Because there are many women who still feel that they are less than men, and these situations help them realize that it is not normal. Well, it is not correct (Participant 1, 2021)

Regarding the dimensions of empowerment analyzed within femvertising (Martínez, 2017), it is possible to observe the presence of both individual and collective dimensions in the discourses of young women. In the individual dimension, security, independence, and satisfaction are identified:

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I feel that the second video (Secret) transmits like independence and... also like self-confidence and leadership. In the first one (Sprite) I feel like it even conveys rebelliousness... and in the last one (Natura), I feel it conveys... I don't know... I feel it's like security and freedom... (Participant 6, 2021).

Meanwhile, as part of the collective dimension of empowerment in femvertising, participation, equality, and recognition can be identified through their narratives:

I want to focus on the third one (Natura) because I saw that the women in this video supported each other... and it reflects something of what the feminist movement is... which seeks for women to be united in the face of many things (Participant 7, 2021).

It is possible to recognize what Yániz (2007) calls submission a lifestyle in some femvertising advertising content. This one considers inevitable that an attitude without subjugation is promoted in empowerment:

The one I noticed the most was the woman who was tattooed in the second ad (Secret)... she totally caught my attention because I don't know, now I think about her...mmm she transmitted to me that she is a woman who is like ungovernable, you know? Like she is very determined, like she knows what she wants, she knows which people she wants in her life and which ones she does not (Participant 8, 2021).

Another dimension was identified about the empowerment messages in femvertising, which was denominated as structural gaps. These gaps recover the narratives of the participants in

which it is recognized how cultural, social, and economic aspects mark a difference between men and women and how this is reflected in the advertising content:

For me, the phrase that struck me is the one about "sure it is in her days" because it always seems that our emotions and those of all women are always subject to our menstrual cycle or our gender when this is not the case (Participant 1, 2021).

Regarding stereotypes and the roles associated with them, young women recognize that there are still people who look down on women with discriminatory comments, in which they generalize attitudes or actions that are deficient or unattainable for them.

I feel that at some point we have all been made to feel lesser or they say to us: all women don't know how to drive (Jelena, 2021). You go with a name in the car and someone stops and they say "surely she is a woman" or "they should just stay home and cook" (Participant 3, 2021).

Indeed, these comments have been normalized in some generations. However, these seem to be totally out of the current context for young women. Nevertheless, in Mexico, they are cognitive structures associated with the culture and macho society that prevails in different parts of the country (Uresti et al., 2017), where activities are assigned based on biological sex and stereotypes imaginaries are built.

While it is true that the participants do not identify modifications in beauty standards, they do perceive new stereotypes based on the roles that somehow reflect women with different physical characteristics, self-confident, ungovernable, with leadership, empowered, fresh, but who are also mothers:

The third video (Natura) transmitted to me a context of women with very different realities and very different styles, but each one of them, even though they had very different styles. I could see that they felt good where they were. The same in the second video (Secrets), women working in places where historically women have been told that we are not made for that (Participant 1, 2021).

Stereotypes of women shown in advertising continue to be kept in the social expectations of what is considered correct or is a trend. So, for example, now presenting women naturally is an excellent nice thing, without brands taking the risk of showing intersectional women that reflect their race, economic position, and the contexts of the reality they interact with.

In this sense, it is possible to question femvertising, since the authenticity of brands and advertising agencies arouse suspicion in consumers when they perceive a lack of honesty (Menéndez, 2020). The participants recognized that, in this type of advertising, some messages present a false discourse, which, in seeking empowerment, presents situations far from reality and with prefabricated messages that are not very credible:

The first one is like fake (Sprite)... I feel it is like fake and saying the stereotypes of what it should be, how to be a woman like that... where now, ugly is beautiful (Andrea, 2021). For

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me, I understood that brands do it to pretend they support the cause or just because it is trending and use it to their advantage to promote products (Participant 9, 2021).

As Menéndez (2020) points out, another aspect that should be taken into account when studying femvertising is the increase in "awareness of the use of gender stereotypes" (p. 254) since the new generations express that they do not feel comfortable with the representation of themselves in advertising. A situation that arises from feminist claims and that, in turn, converts them into consumers, which impacts on the advertising strategies of the brands. In this case, the participants recognize in the advertisements the primary intention of selling the product and even point out that the brands seek to build new stereotypes, taking for granted the lack of capacity of women to make their own decisions since they are shown in activities in public spaces, omitting the possibility of choosing the activities of private life, such as home and care.

I feel that women who choose to stay at home being home makers, taking care of the house and taking care of the children cannot also be pushed aside (Participant 10, 2021).

Finally, these results lead us to reflect on the true intentions of femvertising and its empowering discourse and its role in modifying of stereotypes, which encourage consumption and move away from the political objectives pursued by feminism.

CONCLUSIONS

Not only does Femvertising seek to break with gender stereotypes and traditional beauty standards, as well as with the imaginary related to extraordinary women making superhuman efforts in order to access emancipation, but also it seeks to empower women through narratives by incorporating the intersectionality of women in advertising content with messages that turn out to be inspiring and inclusive that generate confidence and improve self-esteem, challenging traditional gender stereotypes and downplaying the hypersexualization of the female image, in a way that shows the congruence of the ad with the product and the brand (Becker-Herby, 2016).

The results of the empirical work allowed recognition that the advertising contents that were part of the research corpus are identified as femvertising advertising, and even when a negative perception was present due to the use of stereotypical phrases and traditional beauty standards about women, there was also a positive response from the participants towards the openness of the brands to not objectify women and include inspiring messages that contribute to their empowerment processes.

It is essential to point out that although women favor these new contents and advertising messages, they are skeptical about the fundamental objective pursued by the brands in joining

the contemporary social demands without seeking to modify the patriarchal structures that are part of the demands of feminism. However, the intention is to encourage consumption through an unclear strategy that does not reflect a real sense of corporate social responsibility.

Finally, within the fieldwork narratives, it is recognized that young women are concerned that brands are more concerned with breaking traditional stereotypes and configuring new roles for women's participation and development than with their capacity to make individual decisions. In other words, cultural prejudices are maintained, in which it is assumed that women can be influenced and manipulated and that their capacity to exercise their productive and reproductive rights is minimized.

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