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## **How does femvertising work in a patriarchal context? An unwavering consumer perspective**

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# **How does femvertising work in a patriarchal context? An unwavering consumer perspective**

## **Abstract**

### **Purpose:**

Given the extensive evidence of femvertising's positive effects in Western cultures, this paper aims to investigate how femvertising may influence customers' perceptions and brand-related outcomes in a patriarchal context such as Pakistan.

### **Design/methods/approach:**

Qualitative methodology was employed in this study, which was based on in-depth interviews involving 17 consumers (including both male and females). Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

### **Findings:**

Results indicated that male and female consumers revealed varied and sometimes contradictory perspectives on the perception, understanding and behaviour towards femvertised adverts, which are governed by patriarchal gendered norms.

### **Originality:**

This study contributes to the body of knowledge by exploring the consumer perception towards femvertising in a patriarchal context, where gender disparity is evident. It also draws attention to the underlying cultural elements contributing towards the formation of these perceptions.

### **Keywords**

Femvertising, consumer behaviour, gender, empowerment, patriarchy, Asia

## **Introduction**

Advertising appeal based on the usage of a political feminist agenda that consists of using gender equality by brands (D'Enbeau, 2011; Eisend, 2010) is termed as 'ad-her-tising' or 'femvertising' (Åkestam *et al.*, 2017; Baxter, 2015), and it is defined as "advertising that

challenges traditional female advertising stereotypes” (Åkestam *et al.*, 2017, p. 796). These messages defy the stigmas and stereotypes associated with women and serve consumers with feelings of accomplishment and affirmation (Becker-Herby, 2016), with the final goal of stimulating consumption and earning profits (Sterbenk *et al.*, 2021; Sobande, 2019). In this regard, a positive influence of femvertising on brand evaluation and purchase intention has been reported in diverse markets (Abitbol and Sternaori, 2019; Åkestam, 2018; Kapoor and Munjal, 2017; Pérez and Gutiérrez, 2017; Teng *et al.*, 2021).

However, consumer responses through content and discourse analysis have been mainly conducted in western societies (Feng *et al.*, 2019; Sterbenk *et al.*, 2021; Tsai *et al.*, 2019; Windels *et al.*, 2020), and only recently in China and India (Duan, 2020; Kapoor and Munjal, 2017; Qiao and Wang, 2019; Teng *et al.*, 2021). Thus, there is a dearth of femvertising research in other cultural contexts where penetration of international brands is increasing; as in the case of Central and South Asian regions, which had the highest growth in advertising spend in the world in 2020, i.e., 6.7% and 5.3%, respectively, as compared to 4.7% growth in ad spending of north America (Zenith, 2019). In this regard, this article fills an important gap, since it draws on the analyses of male and female consumers' interview responses regarding femvertising within a strong patriarchal context (Pakistan), supporting the call from Roberts and Connell (2016) to remake and rethink feminist knowledge from the Global South economic region.

Pakistan, which ranks 153<sup>rd</sup> out of 156 countries in the global gender inequality gap report (World Economic Forum, 2021), was selected because this country is ranked low on individualism, suggesting a strong association with culture and societal rules (Brewer and Venaik, 2011; Sohaib and Kang, 2014), leading to a subservient position and patriarchal constraints placed on women in the form of strict regulatory behaviours, gender inequalities,

and ideas that link female virtue to family honour (Kirmani and Philips, 2011; Nazneen *et al.*, 2019), hence justifying control of men over women. These prejudiced practices, which aim to maintain and legitimise women's subjugation through Pakistani cultural traditions and religious implications (Farooq, 2020; Kirmani and Philips, 2011), are addressed in this study with respect to the western challenging practise of femvertising.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Patriarchy and female empowerment***

While patriarchal contexts set rules associated with gender relations to which both men and women conform, they control female empowerment through obstructive codes of conduct for women in which women's bodies symbolise the family's honour (Kandiyoti, 1988; Kabeer, 2015). Female empowerment is an iterative process about shifts in power relations, stated as the sense of self-worth to achieve individuality (Cornwall, 2016; Drydyk, 2013). In this regard, women's adherence to patriarchal norms has a significant relationship with the controlling behaviour of their male counterparts (Murshid and Critelli, 2017; Walby, 1989), restricting women's empowerment in patriarchal contexts by systematic enslavement, gender disparity, and sociocultural structures (Nazneen *et al.*, 2019).

In the aforementioned context, social role theory (Eagly, 1987), as part of the gender-space-power theories, is a relevant approach to studying female empowerment in a patriarchal society such as Pakistan. According to this theory, men are indoctrinated to be dominating, macho, and competitive in strongly gender-polarised public spaces, whereas females are encouraged to foster interpersonal peace within the family unit by being docile, sensitive, and empathic towards the gender-specific roles assigned to them (Koenig and Eagly, 2014; Ridgeway and Correll, 2004). Connell (1987) also constructed an integrative theory of gender and power, in

which the gender relationships between men and women are characterised by three major dependent structures that exist at the institutional (e.g., schools, media...) and societal levels: the sexual division of labour, power, and structure of cathexis (an affective component of relationships). These rooted interaction frameworks, use norms to explain the culturally embedded gender roles assigned to men and women, and are reinforced by social processes like power imbalances in relationships, and stereotyped and/or humiliating portrayals of women in the media (Theodoridis *et al.*, 2013; Walby, 1989; Wingood and DiClemente, 2002). Therefore, in patriarchal contexts, where men control the public and private spheres, messages that deviate from prescribed patriarchal norms are considered a threat to societal entities (Kirmani and Philips, 2011).

Finally, existing literature suggests that mass media outlets promote feminist consciousness and provide new avenues for women's empowerment (Brunner and Partlow-Lefevre, 2020; Jackson, 2018; Sowards and Renegar, 2004), in this regard, it is important to investigate the assumptions that consumers associate with female empowerment in the patriarchal context of Pakistan to inform the creation of culturally sensitive ad campaigns. It would also be valuable to comprehend brands' failure due to the incorporation of *westernised* female empowerment in advertisements created for patriarchal markets; for example, Nike has triggered strong negative reactions against messages of female empowerment in its ads, consequently resulting in little success in patriarchal regions (Aswad, 2017) because advertisers lack knowledge of cultural narratives makes consumers unreceptive towards ad campaigns (Livas, 2021). The above discussion has led us to the first research question:

RQ<sub>1</sub>: What are the perceptions of consumers about female empowerment in the patriarchal context of Pakistan?

### ***Femvertising as a commercial strategy to attract consumers.***

The advertisements have vastly portrayed women in traditional subservient roles and positions that lacked individual identity (Kitsa *et al.*, 2019; Tsihla and Zotos, 2016) and were either victims of objectification or unachievable idealised images of femininity presented in western media from the 1980s to 1990s (Gill, 2008). This has been challenged in the last decade's femvertising strategy, in which advertising messages present women in powerful roles (Kapoor and Munjal, 2017; Sternadori and Abitbol, 2019; Teng *et al.*, 2021) and question traditional female gender stereotypes used in advertising (Åkestam *et al.*, 2017) concerning physical characteristics, role behaviours, and occupational status (Eisend, 2019; Knoll *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, brands employing femvertising use various female abilities, send pro-female messages, target gender stereotypes, and present a fair depiction of women (Becker-Herby, 2016; Lima and Casais, 2021). Previous research shows advertisers tend to promote brand cause fit by advocating social issues such as gender equality (Sternadori and Abitbol, 2019; Champlin *et al.*, 2019; Teng *et al.*, 2021). In this line, brands use femvertising to link cultural and social implications of women empowerment to their products (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2017; Varghese and Kumar, 2020a), transforming the feminist discourse in advertising to an act of brand activism (Campbell *et al.*, 2021; Champlin *et al.*, 2019) that may lead to acceptance of company efforts towards social wellbeing and justice. However, despite its widespread positive use, the popularity of femvertising has been criticised as it exploits feminist values (Windels *et al.*, 2020), thus becoming a commodity and an advertising strategy only employed by brands for profit maximisation. In this regard, different terms like fempowerwashing (Sterbenk *et al.*, 2021) and femwashing (Hainneville *et al.*, 2022) have been used to interpret the unauthentic depiction of femvertising campaigns. Whether we consider femvertising to be authentic or utilitarian, it can be split into different message strategies under the wide umbrella of women/gender empowerment (Kordrostami and Laczniak, 2021); for

example, championing females' self-confidence beyond a beauty focus, calling females to overcome societal barriers to be active and play sports, or depicting females in a new multiplicity of roles beyond stereotypes (Hsu, 2017). Femvertising plays a key role in the emotional connection between women and brands; however, consumers may react unfavourably to femvertising if brands do not demonstrate knowledge of true feminine values, continue to promote sexist stereotypes, or lack brand fit. (Lima and Casais, 2021). In this line, other studies concluded that femvertising campaigns were praised but also generated scepticism due to the commercialisation of social movement (Feng *et al.*, 2019; Yoon and Lee, 2021). Such advertisements tend to depoliticise the meanings behind feminist ideology, while they sell their products (Windels *et al.*, 2020).

Although, the rationale of empowerment has been well-received by female consumers in different contexts (Qiao and Wang, 2019; Um, 2022), where exposure to feminist ideals may increase the feminist consciousness of individuals (Case, 2007; Ford *et al.*, 1999). Previous research on gender-themed empowerment magazine campaigns highlighted the emphasis on female empowerment through agentic power and the individualistic nature of empowerment advertising narratives, but not to the general audience, exhibiting its limited impact on transforming gender perceptions of the males (Tsai *et al.*, 2019). Different studies reported that femvertising may effectively generate a positive reaction in consumers, reducing ad reactance and an enhanced positive effect on ad and brand attitudes that may lead to increased purchase intent among the target audience (Åkestam *et al.*, 2017; Teng *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, female feminist consumers have been found to have more positive attitudes towards femvertising, brands, and purchase intention than male and non-feminist audiences (Um, 2022). Thus, not only gender but also awareness of gender issues is important in the reception of femvertising messages. Women's rights supporters and self-identifying feminists seem

highly receptive to femvertising (Sternadori and Abitbol, 2019), and the lower participants' hostile sexism, the more positive ad attitudes, and stronger purchase intent of participants (Teng *et al.*, 2021). Finally, an experiment conducted in India, a strongly patriarchal culture, discovered that femvertising increased the self-esteem of female adolescents (Varghese and Kumar, 2020b). Considering this, the second research question is proposed:

RQ<sub>2</sub>: What is the understanding of male and female consumers towards femvertised ads in the patriarchal context of Pakistan?

### ***Femvertising in Pakistan***

Despite the global trend of femvertising mentioned above, advertising portrayals of Pakistani women still widely feature submissive and decorative roles, trivialising the social rank of women in society, which is also termed as the symbolic annihilation of women through patriarchal marketing (Gurrieri, 2021; Yasmin *et al.*, 2019). This practise is rooted in social and religious identity, where unequal power relations are embedded in patriarchal structures.

Several studies indicate that countries with strong religious affiliation, such as Pakistan, reject advertising that deviates from cultural and/or religious norms (Fam *et al.*, 2004; Noor *et al.*, 2021; Parry *et al.*, 2013), and subsequently, such advertising may create complaints and critics for its negative impact on society (Waller *et al.*, 2013); however, some products have increased sales (e.g., Condoms) using this strategy (Madni, 2017). Femvertising could be framed as a strong controversial advertising strategy in Pakistan, as it challenges the established norms by capitalising on the western feminist agenda (Shafiq *et al.*, 2017). Ariel detergent is one such example of Pakistani Westernised femvertising that sparked controversy signalling scandal because women in the ad defied widely acceptable gender standards and therefore went against

traditional values and religious sentiments (Ebrahim and Mustafa, 2019). This campaign employed a feminist stance of encouraging women to strive for their personal achievements (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer, 2017; Sowards and Renegar, 2004) and to make decisions by breaking the societal boundaries that preserve the patriarchal systems in South Asian countries (Kabeer, 2015; Nazneen *et al.*, 2019). Hence, advertising creatives have to adjust their strategies to avoid cultural and religious blunders in regions with predominantly Muslim populations (e.g. Middle East, Morocco, etc.) where strong religious conservatism and commitment are prevalent (Farah and El Samad, 2014; Slak Valek and Picherit-Duthler, 2021). While the relationship between patriarchy and religious affirmations remains complex and a controversial issue (Shaheed, 1986) in this study to understand the consumer's vision about femvertising in such a context, the following research question is proposed:

RQ: What is the influence of femvertising on consumer responsiveness in the patriarchal context of Pakistan?

### **Methodology**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted (Braun and Clark, 2006; Patton, 2002), consistent with Kapoor and Munjal (2017), participants met the following inclusion criteria: 1) being urban based (living in the twin cities of Pakistan, Rawalpindi or Islamabad) and 2) having a university degree. To begin collecting data, purposive sampling was used (Patton, 2002). Firstly, six key informants were recruited through one of the researcher's social networks soliciting a face-to-face interview. Later, snowball sampling allowed access to more participants through chain of referrals (Emmel, 2013). Considering the sensitivity of the issue in a setting where certain beliefs and viewpoints about female empowerment are stigmatised and marginalised, snowball sampling offered access to a pool of participants who were likely to have unique insights pertinent to the research topic that purposive sampling may have

overlooked (Parker et al., 2019). A consent form was signed by the interviewees, who were briefed about the definition of femvertising, through a cover letter, followed by showing a femvertised print ad in the Pakistani context. Interviews conducted included both male and female subjects (see Table 1), as men and women process the messages in advertisements differently (Fischer, 2015; Wolin, 2003). A saturation point was achieved at eight individuals in men and nine in women (17 interviewees in total), in line with efficiency guidelines to obtain at least 90% of the possible categories using small samples (Guest *et al.*, 2012).

**Table 1:** Characteristics of respondents

<b>Males</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Females</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Occupation</b>
M1	38	Self-employed	F1	29	Public worker
M2	27	Private worker	F2	38	Housewife
M3	30	Private worker	F3	25	Student
M4	28	Freelancer	F4	26	Private worker
M5	32	Public worker	F5	43	Freelancer
M6	35	Private worker	F6	27	Private worker
M7	25	Student	F7	27	Private worker
M8	26	Private worker	F8	41	Public worker
-	-	-	F9	39	Housewife

M: Male (mean age=30.1)

F: Female (Mean age=32.7)

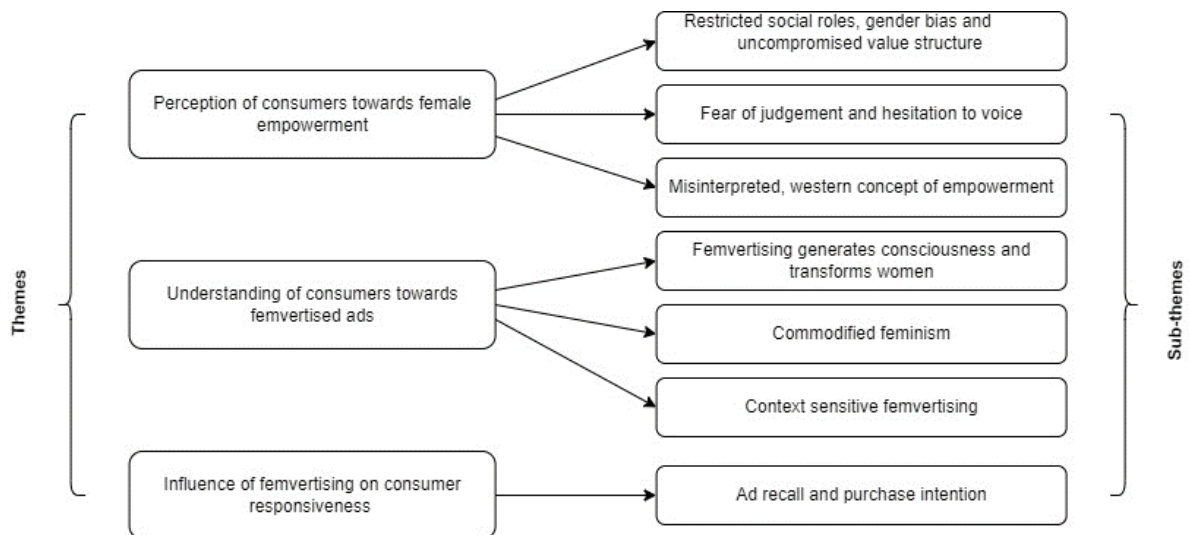
*Source: Authors' own elaboration .*

The interview guide consisted of four overarching questions, supplemented by follow-up probes to elicit comprehensive perspectives: 1) What do you think about female empowerment in Pakistan? 2) What is your opinion about empowered women in your society, related to culture and norms? 3) What do you think about brands promoting female empowerment in their ads? 4) What could be the best-suited femvertising to influence Pakistani consumers? The interviews lasted for 35 to 50 min and were conducted either in English or Urdu. Narratives were later transcribed and shared with respondents for member checking (Cho and Trent, 2006). A three-stage thematic analysis was conducted for data analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Rositer, 2010). The analysis developed abstract categories to summarise the accounts provided by the participants (Guest *et al.*, 2012). Open coding was applied to determine first categories line by line (Campbell *et al.*, 2013; Thomas 2006). To alter, confirm, and elaborate

categories, constant comparison was used. To do this, related and similar categories were grouped through conceptual mapping (Grbich, 2013). The categories were then checked and verified using selective coding with systematic sampling from transcripts, and modifications were made as required (Thomas, 2006). After several iterations of individual interpretation and evaluation of the data for each research question, the researchers mutually identified the most relevant and reoccurring themes in the scope of the study (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Lapadat *et al.*, 2010) until they were convinced that the analysis accurately reflected the data's real meaning.

## Findings

Thematic analysis revealed three themes: a) Perceptions of consumers towards female empowerment, b) Understanding of consumers towards femvertised ads c) Influence of femvertising on the consumer's responsiveness emerged along with subthemes (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Thematic analysis** (Source: Authors' elaboration and synthesis of findings)

### *Perceptions of consumers towards female empowerment*

As we attempt to delve into the nuance of our primary theme, it is crucial to recognise the subthemes that contribute to its intricate nature.

#### *Restricted social roles, gender bias, and uncompromised values*

Irrespective of their social status, female interviewees were subjected to gender discrimination. Female interviewee's comprehension of empowerment was explained by them as having the same social status as men, having the choice to perform roles regardless of gender: freedom of unaccompanied mobility in public spaces or at night, selecting a professional career, dressing according to their own will, selection of a life partner by choice, etc. They perceived empowerment as an act of independence from patriarchal norms that define their restricted social roles and options; for example,

I want to be empowered. Empowerment means I should be independent of my life choices. As a woman, I have faced many hurdles to achieve social status in society since I am not a privileged gender (man) who can walk freely in the streets... (F8)

Growing up I saw how boys have always enjoyed life and I was expected to stay home mostly, the outside world seemed like a distant dream. So, empowerment is not just a girls' right but it is a necessity, a key that can unlock a different world for us where we are heard and not silenced. (F2)

On the contrary, the male interviewees reduced the empowerment of women to access financial and educational realms, arguing that a woman should be liberated enough to seek education. Still, the options of professional and social roles should be limited to areas accepted by society for women. Thus, men view female empowerment only at the surface level due to the ingrained patriarchal mindset by demonstrating support for the gender role binary that requires women to be constrained to roles associated with social nurturing. For example,

In my opinion, women should be empowered by allowing them to seek education. However, their primary focus should be on their domestic roles. They should take care of their kids and raise them as good citizens... They should only work in professions where they are most needed, like the education and health sector. (M2)

Female participants further emphasised that although traditional patriarchal norms are shifting, there is a strong presence of an uncompromised value framework serving patriarchy. This is because people are expected to obey the norms and values in Pakistan. Women stressed following cultural values while pursuing empowerment. The narratives of female interviewees showed willingness towards compliance with cultural and religious values despite believing in struggles for equality. On the one hand, this shows that women are partners in perpetuating socially deep-seated patriarchal notions, yet on the other hand they are trying to negotiate with the power to be able to acquire some empowerment. For example,

...empowered females should not challenge the culture or religion because that will generate hatred towards women empowerment. I just want recognition of women, they should not be considered as second to men, it is best if we see women in roles where previously men were dominating... (F5)

The male interviewees saw that form of empowerment as a threat which challenged the values of consolidated system, religion, and culture. For example,

To be honest, I have seen a lot of cases that have taken women empowerment too far... you can talk about men who don't treat women well but you cannot categorise the whole male gender... feminism here becomes battle of sexes... if you want to spend a better life you obviously have to keep balance you can't just rush into something without considering the values on which our whole system is based. (M5)

### *Fear of being judged and hesitation to voice*

Women's narratives revealed a lack of societal support and recognition of their individual identities. They shared a fear of being judged negatively and labelled as rebels against religious and cultural norms if they challenged culturally acceptable merits. Accepting male relatives' control, for example, is a typical attribute of womanhood, and claiming the right to independence and the ability to exercise one's rights is regarded as a disobedient gesture in the name of empowerment. Women respondents had favourable views about empowerment, but they were afraid to express them publicly because they feared society would sanction them for their beliefs. This fear and the associated stigma of name-calling hinder them from making free choices. One such example is:

When women are not cautious in being vocal about their rights...we have groups (right-wing political parties considered as conservatives) who start giving verdicts for such women... the empowered woman is a name called, and she is rejected by the society... because of this fear, even if young girls want to express their opinions, they can't...  
(F5)

From a very young age we are trained to not rock the boat and hold back our opinions that is the reason of us just going with the flow and cause no more issues for ourselves.  
(F4)

The narratives of men indicated negative perceptions about efforts towards women's empowerment as they showed hostility towards women who disregard or want to break free of sociocultural barriers and are too vocal about freedom. One of the reasons for this strong rejection of women's struggles is the association of family honour with female virtues. In this vein, it is expected that women guard their body language, choice of dressing, and interactions

in public spaces. These observations reflect the culturally determined concept of women empowerment. For example,

It is okay to stand for your rights, but women become *madar pidar azad* (women who are not restrained by their elders) and start looking down upon men and forget about all the sacrifice we men give for their wellbeing. (M7)

#### *Misinterpreted and Westernised concept of empowerment*

The findings further suggested that two stigmas are associated with the narrative of empowerment in Pakistan. First, the true meaning of empowerment is misinterpreted, and second, westernised empowerment is a threat to society. Respondents supported a locally, culturally driven concept of empowerment leading to limited choices for women under strict values associated with male superiority. They view the western concept of empowerment as a threat; therefore, it is misinterpreted and used for self-serving motives. However, men showed strong resistance against the faux empowerment narrative that they think aligns with the west, as westernisation is seen as a threat to society because it challenges the traditional gender dichotomy. For example,

Empowerment is not about disrespecting the values and the men in your house; some people start to forget that values should be retained, those values which play a role in our social wellbeing. (F3)

Male respondents saw freedom of choice and the right to express oneself as negative values of western societies. Pakistani women are also not indoctrinated to be confrontational towards men, and the western form of empowerment is frequently viewed as a means of achieving individual freedom and reducing male authority over females. For example,

There are few women who instead of being empowered become westernised. This westernisation leads them to wrong paths, where they disrespect their culture by questioning the existing values. (M6)

### *Understanding of consumers towards femvertised ads*

To further unpack the complex nature of our main themes, following subthemes provide a more comprehensive understanding.

#### *Femvertising generates consciousness and transforms women*

The women in the interviews shared an understanding of feminism that is rooted in the recognition of unequal male and female power relationships. The first concern raised by the study participants was that femvertising should help create the visibility of women in non-stereotypical social roles. Hence normalising women's presence in non-traditional roles is a step towards giving them the freedom to reject gender stereotypes. The purpose of femvertising is that it recognises the existence of women by endorsing feminist beliefs and self-identification with feminism. This leads to the collective feminist consciousness of women. On elaborating on the benefits of femvertising, women understood femvertising as a source of transforming beliefs and attitudes of both men and women towards gender equality, particularly encouraging men to accept women in non-stereotypical roles:

Most of the time I see ads where women are not represented equally, either they are in subordinate roles or they are shown in stereotypical roles (homemakers). First and foremost, women should be presented as having an existence, an independent being, not someone related to a man, whether that man is her husband, father, or anyone.(F8)

Contrary to the above account of women having positive feelings about femvertising, male interviewees described femvertising at a superficial level. Despite this, they expressed

insecurity of loss of respect and superior male status or *machismo* due to excessive femvertising.

Femvertising is cool, but it sometimes looks down towards men, making them feel less of their existence. A man deserves some status and respect, and I feel that in a humorous way or another, advertisements like this disrespect men's status to make women happy. (M8)

*Feminism is commodified.*

The female respondents whilst endorsing femvertised ads were equally sceptic of the corporate brands for capitalising on the feminist rhetoric. They believed that while brands introduced them to the concept of feminism, there is a lack of actual effort on the part of such brands to empower women in reality. The analysis also revealed that the underlying motive for showing pro-female ads was to gain consumers' positive perceptions of brand values.

When I see an ad showing women in a power role, it captures my interest, but what happens next? Are they putting forth any effort? Or are they simply taking advantage of my existence and profiting from it? (F1)

Male respondents generally believed that women's empowerment themes could not cause a sudden shift in buyer perceptions because brands have personal agendas of selling products, and they jump on the bandwagon.

When we talk about feminist themes, the corporate sector uses them for its own good. They only want to build up an image in the mind of customers that they advocate female empowerment, but actually they are doing nothing to uplift women and, as they say, na

baap bara na bhaya sabse bara rupaiya (neither father nor brother but money is everything). (M7)

### *Context-sensitive femvertising*

Women's responses also illustrated the negative side of femvertising. They felt that femvertising had the tendency to exaggerate female possession of power by portraying females in unrealistic positions, corresponding to a world of fantasy. The ground realities are mostly absent, and there is an absence of any depiction of how females struggle in society to achieve equality. The main issue stemming from the way femvertising is carried out is that cultural values and context are ignored (e.g., restricted occupational roles, confined to veil and home, restricted mobility, etc.) The development and presentation of ideas in femvertising are often copied from popular western brands. As empowerment is not a universal concept, therefore, women were of the view that they could not just imitate what was being followed in other cultures.

The problem is that we do not see the real picture of our women in ads, it is because of this reason that we cannot relate to that woman because she is far away from what is the actual image of empowered women in our society... (F2)

Male interviewees reported the same views of cultural relevance. Common views of the respondents were that women are frequently portrayed in culturally objectionable ways. A few male respondents also emphasised that the portrayal in femvertised ads does not consider the struggles they had faced in achieving the position that is being presented in the ad. Whereas, the essence of female empowerment in advertisements was inadvertently contaminated by objectification. Thus, because of the failure to execute femvertised advertisements in a culturally and ethically relatable manner, the mass audience rejects such conceptualisations.

You will never see a woman who is not pretty and attractive coming in a power suit to tell you that she achieved something in life. In femvertised ads, they choose women who are beautiful and successful at the same time, the real struggle is missing that needs to be addressed... (M6)

The narratives indicate support for the harsh everyday realities of most of the women in Pakistan who are faced with strong resistance against gender equality and are unable to relate to the fancy and advanced depiction of empowered women in femvertising whose achievements are too assured.

### ***Influence of femvertising on consumers responsiveness***

The subthemes to further explain the main themes are as follows:

#### *Ad recall and purchasing intent.*

In terms of brand-related consequences, women showed responsiveness towards femvertised ads; they can recall them because of their difference with respect to the rest of brand communications since it celebrates womanhood and unheard feelings, which makes them show interest and appreciation towards this type of ads. However, they declared that their decision to buy the product was not influenced, showing a defensive position towards this type of strategy when it refers to real behaviour.

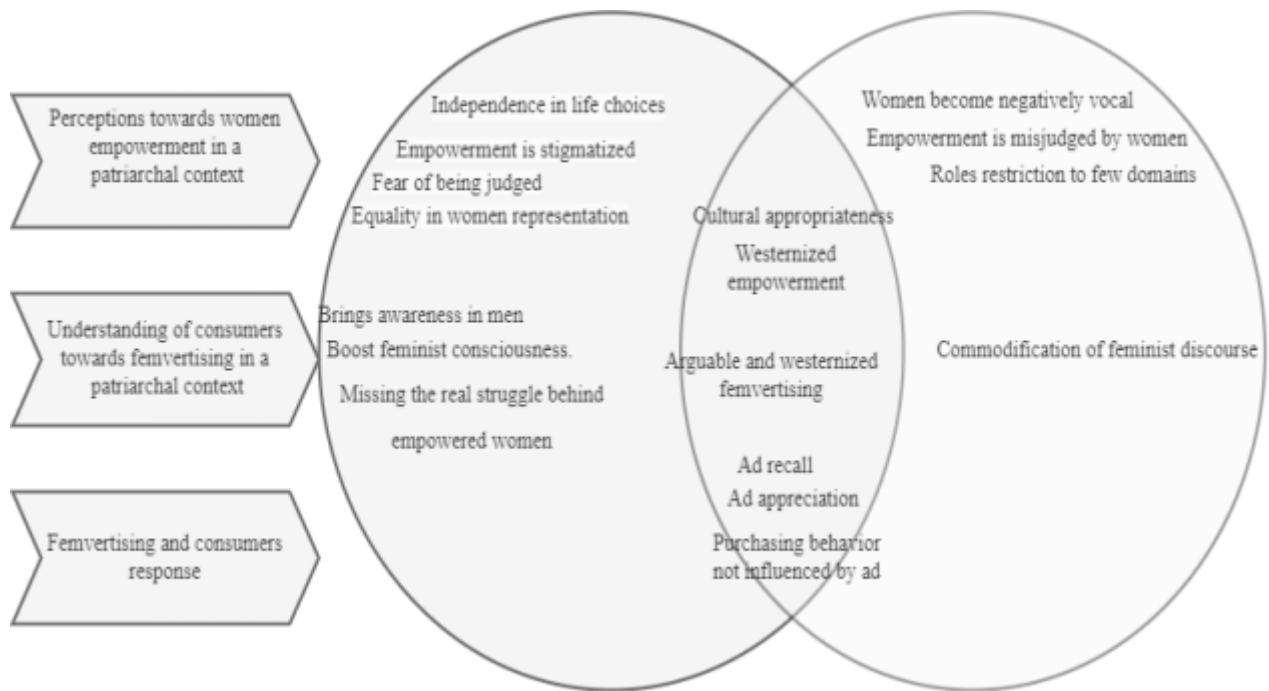
I can easily recall which brand used a femvertising theme as it is something different, something that acknowledges the achievements of women...I know my rights and I am aware so if a brand highlights my unspoken feelings that will remain in my mind for a longer period of time. (F4)

If I do not like the quality of product then I would not care if they are showing support towards women or not...they are just making women aware of what they can do but they are not supporting them through actions, however my purchasing will depend upon my need for a particular product (F6)

Similarly, male interviewees also appreciated and recalled femvertising when it portrays women in gender-equal roles, while they would not approach brands based on their support towards women's empowerment. Thus, the narratives emphasised that femvertised advertising receives attention, but because women's empowerment is not widely celebrated and cherished in the given context, it has little impact on male consumer purchasing intentions.

I remember the female-empowering advertisements because they are different, sometimes in a good way and sometimes in a terrible manner, but even if the female-empowering ad is really intriguing and fits well with the culture, I don't think they can persuade me to buy anything. Because I am a reasonable buyer, these types of advertisements will never convince me to purchase their stuff.(M3)

In conclusion, both males and females were not inclined towards purchase intent based on femvertising; nevertheless, women expressed that they only bought products because of their quality; therefore, positive emotions developed because of femvertising would take a secondary position. In the case of men, it was revealed that first, the femvertised ads are all about products consumed by women, and second, previously in this study, men also refute the western concept of empowerment, which provides them a reason to contradict the femvertised ads. Figure 2 summarises the findings of the study with a comparison of male/female perceptions regarding women empowerment and femvertised ads.



**Figure 2: Gender differences and similarities**

*(Source: Authors' personal elaboration and synthesis of findings)*

## Discussion

This study provides an explanation of femvertising with a cultural lens, while explaining factors that can guide the successful execution of femvertising in patriarchal contexts. These factors are a) destigmatising women's empowerment, b) tolerance towards the public appearance of women, and c) relatable portrayal, which can lead to the development of feminist consciousness in individuals. If these notions of women's empowerment in the advertisements can be managed, customers may have a more positive attitude towards femvertising as they will understand the core meaning behind the advert rather than acting defensively and dismissing the feminist discourse in the advertisements.

Furthermore, the present research using a qualitative approach sought to provide new insights into the understanding of femvertising in the patriarchal context of Pakistan through semi-structured interviews, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of consumers' feelings and perceptions towards such advertisements (Broderick *et al.*, 2003). Earlier studies employed a

quantitative approach to address this topic (Kapoor and Munjal, 2017; Kordrostami and Kordrostami, 2020; Lucka *et al.*, 2021), and there was little evidence examining femvertising in this region of the Global South.

The findings suggest that patriarchal cultures have distinct views on female empowerment from western cultures, which influences consumers' perceptions of female empowerment depicted in advertisements (Moghadam and Senftova, 2005; Porter, 2013). In Pakistan's patriarchal culture, where collectivism is high, people place a greater focus on collective values and culture (Hofstede, 1984). Having said that, the findings revealed a culturally grounded view of women's empowerment, in which women are afraid of being judged by others if they speak out about their independence (Roy *et al.*, 2007), while men have insecurity about women's freedom owing to their entrenched machismo and patriarchal mindset (Critelli, 2010). In line with previous research, the central argument in this study is that the understanding of empowerment varies according to culture, and hence the measures to promote empowerment (e.g., advertising) in contexts where gender equality is not a norm must be culturally driven (Porter, 2013). These inequalities, based on Connell's (1987) gender and power theory, are the product of patriarchal civilisations built around men's quest for authority, control, and exploitation of women (Kabeer, 2015; Walby, 1989). Although both men's and women's narratives were grounded in accepting women empowerment within cultural boundaries, men's attitudes towards women empowerment revealed their insecurities, regardless of having possession of Connells' (1987) "Patriarchal dividend", as patriarchy is driven by control and fear of losing the privilege men have over women. These patriarchal dividends allow men to enjoy economic and external spaces, while women are limited to internal spaces and objects of male desire (Roberts and Connell, 2016); thus, the true substance of women's empowerment is being renegotiated according to culture.

Consequently, with respect to the understanding of consumers towards femvertised ads in the patriarchal context of Pakistan, the data further demonstrated that according to social role theory, the audience has pre-set notions regarding the female appearance and roles that are dictated by the patriarchal codes. Even though the empowered appearance of women in advertising was appreciated and acknowledged by the interviewees yet restricted behavioural codes and ideology, associating female virtues with family honour (Critelli, 2010) showed that the public appearance of women is controlled according to cultural and religious explanations. While several studies have demonstrated a positive attitude towards female empowering ads (Champlin *et al.*, 2019; Middleton *et al.*, 2020), this study brings attention to the cultural dimension of women empowerment portrayal, hence contributing to the body of literature in femvertising as structures of female empowerment in the patriarchal context of the global south, are different because of differences in their cultural, political, and economic autonomy and intervention (Kandiyoti, 1988; Nazneen *et al.*, 2019). Further identifying through evidence, the narratives concluded that the rhetoric of women empowerment has indeed been embraced as a “buzzword” by corporate entities advocating capitalist values through advertising and has been deployed in ways that have robbed it of its ideological significance (Sobande, 2019; Sterbenk *et al.*, 2021; Windels *et al.*, 2020).

Despite their concerns about femvertising being adapted to Pakistani cultural values, female respondents recognised that femvertising helps them understand their worth as they felt conscious towards their rights; hence, advertising could be one of the drivers of societal change in terms of shifting gender roles (Murray, 2013; Varghese and Kumar, 2020a). Therefore, this study adds to the growing body of evidence that femvertising can increase feminist consciousness in women. Furthermore, contrary to previous findings in the contexts with better conditions of gender equality (Åkestam *et al.*, 2017; Abitbol and Sternadori, 2020), the findings

of this study highlighted that femvertising captures the audience's attention in patriarchal contexts, but because women empowerment is not widely celebrated by society, it does not seem to compel consumers purchasing behaviour in patriarchal and struggling economies. This could be due to the effectiveness of the functional route of persuasion (product features and benefits) rather than the experiential route (ad evoked feelings and sensations) in emerging economies (Zarantonello *et al.*, 2013).

### **Implications**

This study has managerial implications for foreign and local practitioners in the advertising industry that operate in a rigidly patriarchal culture like Pakistan. Advertising creatives should adapt to the local context rather than jumping on the bandwagon of femvertising in which cultural sentiments are hurt. They should create femvertising campaigns featuring men and women in harmony rather than making it a battle of the sexes or provoking culture by portraying women as better than men. They can carry out their advertisements by knowing the locally ingrained cultural beliefs of women's empowerment to build a positive picture of the brand in the minds of customers through successful femvertising. The participants in this study were highly educated, advertisers should understand that for different levels of education, the non-traditional and empowering portrayal of women in ads could not be perceived in a similar manner, as education serves to improve acceptability towards feminist consciousness (Pilwha, 2008). Identifying the perception towards femvertising in contemporary advertising the study can have a greater impact on marketing communication practitioners in patriarchal settings like Pakistan as they can devise informed and strategically designed campaigns regarding the representation of women in such cultures.

### **Conclusion**

Our interviews demonstrated how young women and men could unpack power relations in a patriarchal context related to women empowerment and femvertising, using examples from their own lives. Even though criticism regarding the commodification of feminist discourse in advertising was observed, the sensitive response to women's empowerment and the cultural barriers associated with it was an undeniable part of their lived experiences. In the era of global business competition, contemporary consumers expect brand activism from companies as their corporate social responsibility (Lima and Casais, 2021). This activism, especially in terms of social issue advocacy, assists in bridging the relationship between consumers and the brand (Campbell *et al.*, 2021; Teng *et al.*, 2021).

Although femvertising is supported by multinational brands, this study provides an in-depth understanding of its use in a patriarchal context where inclination towards stigmatised identity and nonconventional gender roles is abducted (Murshid and Critelli, 2017). The study highlighted the perceptions of consumers towards female empowerment, and contrary to previous studies (Åkestam, 2018; Kapoor and Munjal, 2017; Pérez and Gutiérrez, 2017; Teng *et al.*, 2021), depictions of westernised women's empowerment could jeopardise the social order by ripping the basic cultural fabric of society. Advertisers should come up with creative solutions to promote brands, as culturally appropriate tailored femvertising was suggested by the data. Instead of presenting women as challenging cultural narratives by belittling society, they should consider sensitive gender ideologies akin to religion and culture. Brand communications are effective when they present thought-provoking issues that counter preconceived assumptions in a dignified manner that does not undermine societal and cultural norms (Parry *et al.*, 2013; Waller *et al.*, 2013).

This study has various limitations, which open new possible directions for future research. 17 interviews were conducted, so these findings cannot be generalised. A focus group study with

both men and women, allowing individuals to talk about specific advertising and analysing how men and women communicate while discussing the advertisements, could be another avenue for future research. Moreover, this study was conducted in two metropolitan areas of Pakistan; a similar study can be conducted in future by comparing perceptions of consumers towards femvertising in rural and urban settings. Moreover, perceptions of consumers with diverse forms of femvertising messages such as body positivity and gender equality on different types of advertising mediums, e.g., social media and print ads, can be studied in the future.

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