



Department of Business and Management

Master's Degree in Marketing – Market Relationship & Customer Engagement

Chair of Product and Brand Management

**FEMVERTISING EFFECTIVENESS:  
THE ROLE OF ATYPICALITY FOR NON-FEMALE PRODUCT  
CATEGORIES**

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*A tutti coloro che hanno sempre creduto in me e continuano a farlo.*

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# INTRODUCTION

In the first chapter the context and conceptual background of the present study is presented by introducing the phenomenon that is at the centre of this research, namely femvertising.

The different managerial, economic, cultural and social conditions are also described through a deep review of the extant literature and knowledge of experts and professionals of the field, which highlight that femvertising refers to the practice of incorporating feminist narratives and gender empowerment messages in advertising campaigns. It has gained significant attention in recent years as a mean to challenge traditional gender roles, influence social perceptions, and contribute to discussions on gender equality and feminism. At the same time, while this phenomenon has been extensively studied in the context of female-oriented product categories, a gap in the literature emerged regarding its effectiveness when applied to non-female-oriented product categories.

This research aims to examine the effectiveness of femvertising in non-female-oriented product categories exploring its impact on consumers' attitudes toward the advertisement and the brand through the lens of atypicality.

In order to answer the research question under investigation, the second chapter of the research highlights a number of theoretical and empirical contributions in the extant literature that lay the foundations for the development of the hypotheses and conceptual model of the present study. Following this theoretical framework, the study investigates whether femvertising, when applied to these product categories, results in a more atypical advertising message compared to traditional advertising, seeking to determine whether it can be considered an effective strategy in these contexts by leading consumers to experience more positive attitudes toward the advertising and the brand compared to traditional advertising. The choice to focus on non-female-oriented product categories is motivated by the need to understand how consumers respond to gender empowerment messages in contexts where the connection between the product and feminist narratives may not be immediately apparent. By examining this dimension, the research aims to provide insights that can inform marketers and advertisers operating in diverse industries.

To investigate these questions, in the third chapter, the empirical development and results of the research are presented together with the discussion of the research methodology behind the different quantitative studies conducted, namely a pretest and a main study. After explaining the different methodologies, the results of the various studies and analyses are reported and discussed. The research employs a quantitative approach composed by several statistical analyses measuring consumers' gender perceptions and perceived fit between different product categories and the theme of women empowerment in the pretest. While the main study focused on measuring the consumers' perceived atypicality and attitudes

toward the advertisement and the brand in response to femvertising versus traditional advertising in non-female-oriented product categories. This will be to gain deeper insights into consumers' perceptions and reactions.

The anticipated findings of this research are twofold. Firstly, it is hypothesized and supported that femvertising, when applied to non-female-oriented product categories, will result in advertising messages that are perceived as more atypical compared to traditional advertising. This is based on the assumption that the inclusion of feminist narratives in these contexts challenges existing gender norms and expectations. Secondly, it is expected that femvertising, due to its atypicality, will lead consumers to experience more positive attitudes toward the advertisement and in turn toward the brand compared to traditional advertising. In this regard the statistical results did not support the direct influence of atypicality over consumers' attitudes toward the advertising, but at the same time they still proved that femvertising applied to non-female product categories effectively leads consumers to experience more positive attitudes toward the advertising and successively toward the brand, compared to traditional advertising. The results of the study successfully answer the research question proposed and prove the effectiveness of femvertising practices in the field of non-female oriented product categories which is crucial for marketers and advertisers seeking to adopt inclusive and socially conscious strategies.

In conclusion, the findings of this research provide valuable academic and managerial insights into the potential of femvertising practices to reshape perceptions and consumer attitudes in traditionally male-dominated industries and contributes to the ongoing discussions surrounding gender equality, feminism, and advertising practices. These main findings together with a general discussion, study limitations and future research and the conclusions are presented in the fourth and final chapter, in order to sum up the core aspects of the research and all the benefits and advantages that it can bring to managers and academics.

# CHAPTER 1 – Conceptual background

## 1.1. Brand activism

### 1.1.1. Phenomenon and practical relevance

Nowadays, our society is experiencing a shift regarding what it takes to be considered a “good” company, as *“the ideas that predominate in consumers’ minds are perpetually changing”* (Eyada, 2020, p. 30). The emerging reality highlights that people are increasingly becoming politically active due to a growing interest in environmental and socio-political issues and a progressive loss of trust in institutions (Kotler & Sarkar, 2019).

Society is afflicted by problems in front of which governments seem to be powerless or unable to act. Therefore, companies may become the main institutions considered capable, thanks to their resources, to bring changes and concretely contribute to improving people's lives (Kotler & Sarkar, 2019). As a result, customers expect brands to be politically active as well, wishing that they would focus not only on leading the economy but also on leading social change (Aarons-Mele, 2017; Kotler & Sarkar, 2019). With this aim in mind, *brand activism* was conceived, which can be considered as *“business efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to promote or impede improvements in society”* (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018).

Indeed, a brand is considered as one that engages in brand activism and said to be “active” when it freely takes a stand on a social issue and *“when it makes its purpose and concerns clear to the target customers”* (Kotler & Sarkar, 2019), who are now requiring meaningful conversations with brands (Stanley, 2016). This is because consumers now feel defined and connected to the brands they consume and *“consider the products they buy as an extension of their view, values, beliefs, and lifestyles”* (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018).

Today, goods consumption is perceived by consumers as *“a form of political and social act, an opportunity to make an impact”* (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018) and *“a way of having a voice, making a statement and exercising power”* (Eyada, 2020, p. 31). As a result, when making their choices, customers are increasingly paying more attention to which brands and products carry emotional and spiritual weight, transforming this element into a new criterion for selecting one product over another.

These ever-demanding consumers, who have high expectations for the brands they purchase, have established new consumption standards and values, resulting in a significant evolution of marketing

constructs, which has given rise to a brand-new conceptualization of marketing itself: *Marketing 3.0* (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2010).

Marketing 3.0, also known as value-centric marketing, is defined as an era where companies' focus is to “*create a deep connection with their audience through transparency and social responsibility*” (Eyada, 2020, p. 33), and in which the consumer is seen as more than just a simple buyer, but as a human being with mind, heart, and emotions, which have become the main elements to appeal to, as now consumers seek brands that address their deepest needs and values (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2010).

Therefore, companies and their managers feel the pressure to find new ways to engage with consumers' emotions and needs, and to connect to social issues. In other words, they need “*to be more public in the way they express and defend their values*” (The Economist, 2022) and they have to find the right way to do so.

Based on this evolution, brand activism not only can capture the attention of the audience, but also assists brands in connecting with people who share common values and beliefs, resulting in a positive impact on the brand's profits, but most importantly, can build a special relationship between the brand and its customers, based on loyalty and emotional connection. Over time, this type of relationship evolves into a strong and highly valuable bond that extends beyond product quality and price, providing brands with a significant competitive advantage (Eyada, 2020).

More in-depth, brand activism is rooted in *Corporate Social Responsibility*, which is defined by Angelidis & Ibrahim (1993) as “*corporate social actions whose purpose is to satisfy social needs*”. Hence, this practice is based on the goal of brands to take responsible decisions and actions to benefit society and consumers. Through CSR activities, brands transform themselves into visible identities that drive awareness and change toward a specific cause, which is usually related to social, environmental, economic, or political issues (Eyada, 2020).

In doing this, corporate social initiatives such as corporate *social marketing* and *cause-related marketing* play a key role as instruments to enable brand activism (Kotler & Sarkar, 2019). For these most encountered categories of corporate social responsibility activities, Nancy Lee and Philip Kotler (2005) identified six major areas (*Figure 1*) that can be divided into marketing-driven and corporate-driven, which evolving over time created the path and the basis for the rise of *value-driven* corporate activities, namely brand activism (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018).



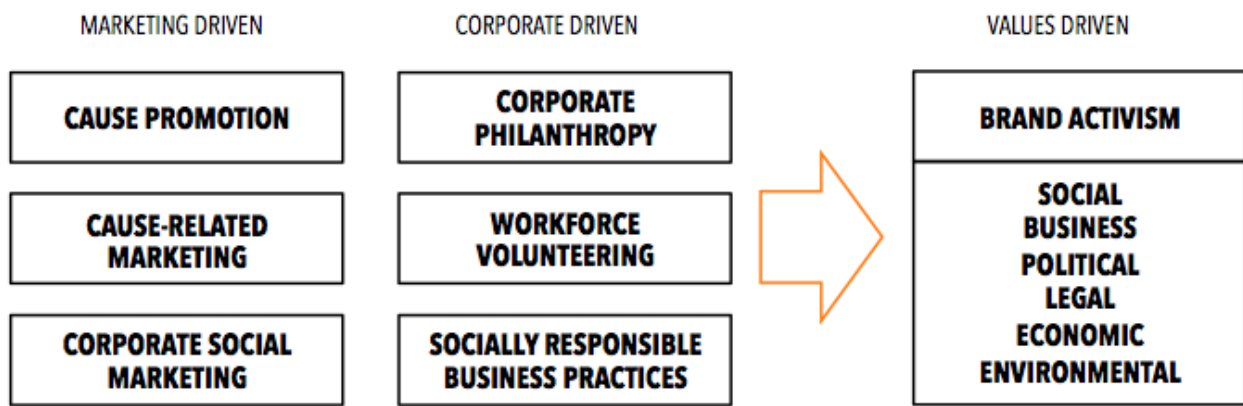


Figure 1: Value driven brand activism (Kotler & Sarkar, 2019)

These six categories of CRS practices can be better described as follows:

- Cause promotion, also called “cause marketing” refers to companies supporting social causes through paid sponsorships or promotions
- Cause-related marketing, one of the most relevant and studied practices, implicates the donation of a percentage of revenues to a specific cause, based on product sales during an announced period of time
- Corporate social marketing refers to supporting behaviour change through campaigns
- Corporate philanthropy involves direct cash grants to a charity or a specific cause
- Community volunteering involves encouraging employees to volunteer in local communities
- Socially responsible business practices refer to promoting discretionary activities, intending to associate the corporation’s conduct with what is generally considered as social good (Kotler & Lee, 2005).

More in detail, *cause-related marketing* (CRM) can be considered a communication tool applicable in many ways as through advertising, packaging, promotions and so on, to inform consumers and influence their perceptions about a company’s, mostly monetary, affiliation or work with non-profit organisations or causes support. In other words, cause-related marketing is defined as “*the practice of advocating corporate social responsibility in marketing communications activities*” (Brønn & Vrioni, 2001, p. 214).

By engaging in this practice, organizations can “*attract consumers wanting to make a difference in society through their purchasing*” (Brønn & Vrioni, 2001, p. 208), build brand equity by attaching to the brand relevant and long-term added value, contribute to the creation of competitive advantage and enhance financial performance (Collins, 1993; Mullen, 1997).

On the other hand, *corporate social marketing* (CSM) is “*a powerful, if often misunderstood, strategy that uses marketing principles and techniques to foster behaviour change in a target population, improving society while at the same time building markets for products or services*” (Kotler & Lee, 2005, p. 92).

With this definition, it is possible to highlight that *behavioural change* constitutes the core of corporate social marketing and the main difference between it and the other corporate social initiatives, “*which mainly endeavour to raise money, goodwill, and awareness of a cause and a brand, but not to change people’s individual behavior*” (Kotler & Lee, 2005, p. 92).

This difference indicates the main reason why Kotler and Lee believe that CSM “*is ‘best of breed’ among alternative corporate social initiatives in terms of support for marketing goals and objectives, including brand positioning and preference, market development, and increased sales*” (Kotler & Lee, 2005, p. 92).

This is because it is potentially capable of changing consumer behaviour and, if this new behaviour leads consumers to personal benefits, they will be likely to experience a strong and positive association with the company, engage again with it, and replicate the new behaviour. In this way, the company can derive tangible marketing benefits, with the most relevant being that, over time, “*CSM is one of the surest ways to have a measurable impact on a social issue, because it actually increases the number of people who act in a way that benefits society*” (Kotler & Lee, 2005, p. 93).

But still, even if there are strong connections and similarities with these other relevant forms of social activities, in which corporations engage to make marketing responsive in association with the evolving attitudes of customers (Ptacek & Salazar, 1997), they are not the same as brand activism.

As mentioned before, previous corporate social responsibility activities and practices with similar objectives were associated and linked to a marketing or corporate drive (Kotler & Sarkar, 2019). On the other hand, brand activism differentiates itself from them, emerging as a *values-driven* practice for companies that are concerned about the future of the planet and society. With this aim, brand activism represents a strategy and a tool to mobilize *progress* based on a sense of *justice* and *fairness for all* (Sarkar & Kotler, 2017).

Brand activism is described as different from other forms of corporate social responsibility practices as “*it is driven by justice and a fundamental concern for the biggest and most urgent problems facing society*” (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018).

In this way, it defines the meaning of being a “values-driven” company, which main concern is the society as a whole, including employees, customers, communities and the whole world, for which actions and facts count more than words.

Following this lead, brand activism, goes beyond mere advertising, as it is not only based on delivering messages but involves also impactful and relevant practices toward the support of specific socio-political causes, aligned with the brand's purpose and values. Therefore, a meaningful characteristic of it regards both the intangible and tangible commitments that activist companies simultaneously pursue (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020; Dodd & Supa, 2014; Nalick, Josefy, Zardkoohi, & Bierman, 2016; Wettstein & Baur, 2016). This indicates that, to facilitate social change, the messages spread through the companies' communication strategies are simultaneously supported by corporate practices, organizational policies, monetary donations, and partnerships (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020; Kapitan, Kennedy, & Berth, 2019; Crimmins & Horn, 1996; Duane & Domegan, 2019).

To make the distinction clearer, brand activism involves advertising practices that, unlike CRM and CSM, engage in *controversial* socio-political causes, issues, charity, or events, which main aim is to “*support a cause, raise awareness, change behaviour, and encourage socio-political change*” (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020, p. 446). More in detail, this controversial factor represents one of the most relevant differences between CSR activities and brand activism, as the firsts are commonly addressed and perceived by the majority of society as positive and beneficial, while, in contrast, brand activism, dealing with socio-political issues where usually there are not “right” and “wrong” sides, achieves a more sparse type of consensus (Nalick, Josefy, Zardkoohi, & Bierman, 2016; Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020; Korschun, Rafieian, Aggarwal, & Swain, 2019).

In this regard, we can argue that brand activism, in response to the always increasing socio-political needs and pressure, represents the highest level of corporate social responsibility ever developed by companies, as it merges and conciliates: high levels of external impact, having the aim of bringing changes and make a difference in the world; and high levels of internal impact, engaging in behavioural changes and social causes support from within the organization itself (*Figure 2*). By achieving the right combination of these spheres, which usually are not simultaneously applied in other forms of corporate social activities, brand activism aims at reaching higher-level goals, namely *justice* for the common good (Kotler & Sarkar, 2019).



Figure 2: Business as a Force for Good (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020)

Moreover, brand activism is superior to other forms of corporate social responsibility as it can serve as signal of a firm’s position on socio-political issues; as it involves the sincere alignment of the activist marketing messaging with company purposes, values and prosocial corporate practices, being these necessary elements to be impactful and bring social change; and also because it delivers high brand equity outcomes (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020).

To sum up brand activism’s main characteristics we can use Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, Kemper (2020) and Moorman’s (2020) studies and highlight that brand activism should be “a purpose- and values-driven strategy in which a brand adopts a nonneutral stance on institutionally contested sociopolitical issues, to create social change and marketing success” (p.445-446). Drawing on this definition we can underline four key boundary conditions to correctly implement and pursue brand activism practices:

1. The brand must be purpose- and values-driven;
2. The brand activism practices should aim at addressing “controversial, contested, or polarizing sociopolitical issue(s)” (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020);
3. The causes involved “can be progressive or conservative in nature (issues are subjective and determined by political ideology, religion, and other ideologies/beliefs)” (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020, p. 446);

4. The company contributes to supporting a socio-political issue by simultaneously using messaging and practice.

Therefore, brand activism, to be properly implemented, must prioritise the realisation of social and environmental benefits (Bocken, Short, Rana, & Evans, 2014) above the brand's economic interests (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018; Wettstein & Baur, 2016). In cases of maximum expression, these activities may be undertaken as an actual political mission embedded directly in the brand's purpose, usually predisposed by the founders' initial mission (Moorman, 2020). In addition, brands that undertake these types of prosocial activities may also consider themselves as significant and legitimate sources of cultural power with the aim to educate society and incite social change (Moorman, 2020).

Lastly, we can differentiate several fields and spheres to which brand activism can be attached. Nevertheless, the various topics and issues may change and evolve over time, Kotler and Sarkar (2017) identified main six broad categories reporting the largest problems of society, that can be considered encapsulating them all. The categories are identified and defined as follows:

- *“Social activism includes areas such as equality – gender, LGBT, race, age, etc. It also includes societal and community issues such as education, school funding, etc.*
- *Legal activism deals with the laws and policies that impact companies, such as tax, workplace, and employment laws.*
- *Business activism is about governance – corporate organization, CEO pay, worker compensation, labor and union relations, governance, etc.*
- *Economic activism may include minimum wage and tax policies that impact income inequality and redistribution of wealth.*
- *Political activism covers lobbying, voting, voting rights, and policy (gerrymandering, campaign finance, etc).*
- *Environmental activism deals with conservation, environmental, land-use, air and water pollution laws and policies” (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017).*

### **1.1.2. Brand activism managerial relevance**

Starting from this perspective we can argue that brand activism “represents a way for brands to satisfy consumer needs trying to improve the world’s most urgent problems” (Kotler & Sarkar, 2019). Through this practice, companies can touch consumers’ spirits and infuse individual and societal change

according to specific causes or issues that matter the most to them, such as confidence, women empowerment, social justice, feminism, climate change, racism, and political issues (Kotler, Kartajaya, & Setiawan, 2010; Mullen, 1997).

As a general affirmation, we can consider brand activism as a way for brands to show responsibility for the most important social causes, stand out from the competition and “*build and maintain a relationship with consumers based on trust and transparency, demonstrate a commitment to employee welfare and bake purpose into corporate strategy*” (The Economist, 2022).

With this in mind, we can argue that brand activism has been identified as a relevant tool providing numerous positive effects, affecting all stakeholders. From a corporate perspective, it has been shown that important socio-political contributions lead companies to experience significant positive effects in various areas, one of which is certainly to enable brands that engage in this strategy to set themselves apart from their competitors.

Going more in-depth into these positive and relevant aspects, we can first consider that brands aim at building a strong brand equity by defining and setting their points of parity and points of difference compared to their competitors (Keller, Sternthal, & Tybout, 2002). Keeping this in mind we can highlight that “*While CSR-related marketing activities have been reduced to a baseline requirement (Fleming & Jones, 2012) - a point of parity - brand activism as a more novel, less expected activity, is at present arguably a point of difference*” (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020, p. 452), which contributes to the brand equity and helps in attracting new customers. Furthermore, Du et al. (2007) proposed that brands that position themselves as socially responsible brands can influence and improve consumer awareness levels more than brands that simply engage in CSR activities, having a stronger impact on internal consumer outcomes such as awareness and attribution.

Secondly, as mentioned above, brand activism has also played a crucial role in setting new standards in brand preferences and purchasing decisions, as customers now tend to consume goods that represent a way to make an impact and express their position and values concerning specific issues and controversies (Eyada, 2020). Consequently, a company's responsible practices are one of the most important factors for consumers when deciding which brand to buy because, for the same price and quality, buyers will be more likely to switch to a socially involved and responsible brand compared to those that are not (Brønn & Vrioni, 2001). In this way, in addition to a favourable impact on purchases and profits, the positive effects of brand activism practices are also associated with the bond that arises between the brand and the customers who choose it because they share the same values and beliefs. Therefore, this bond also contributes to increasing customer loyalty (Eyada, 2020).

Another very important link between brand activism activities and overall company performance is related to brand reputation, which together with long-term relationships with consumers, represent the most relevant elements for a brand to live long and brand activism can be a tool to build and shape them.

As reported by previous studies, if a company engages in social engagement, brand reputation will tend to positively increase and with it brand awareness among consumers. In this way, brand differentiation and competitive advantage will also improve (Kay, 1993), allowing the company to charge higher prices, attract better candidates and investors (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990) and contribute to building brand equity and image (Brønn & Vrioni, 2001).

Linked to all these positive and practical advantages for companies and their managers engaging in brand activism, is also important to mention all the great impact and additional positive resonance that these practices gain through social media and online platforms, which is a relevant and impactful sphere of today's society to take into consideration (Hsu, 2018).

More in detail, associated with the notion that society is now aware of the necessity to behave in a sustainable manner, resulting in higher consumers expectations towards sustainable and conscious business practices, studies suggest that being associated with non-profit organizations, engaging in prosocial activities and building a caring and compassionate company reputation, can, other than enhancing motivation and productivity among workers and consumer preferences, bring companies positive media coverage and engagement (Brønn & Vrioni, 2001; Duncan & Moriarty, 1997).

This is also connected to the spread of new technologies, hyperconnectivity and social media, which have improved the communication between consumers and brands, providing the platforms for consumers to personally engage in activism and the possibility for them to exercise their power on brands (Bain, 2018).

With these bases *“consumers are no longer passive receivers of information provided through advertising, they have become more interactive and share their values and beliefs”* (Eyada, 2020, p. 40) turning into a crucial part of the content creation and brand activists themselves.

Consequently, brand activism does not only capture the attention of the target audience but, depending on the advertising form used and the correct selection of media, creates excitement around the brand and an opportunity for it to reach out and collaborate with the audience (Eyada, 2020).

Therefore, benefits emerging from the connection between brand activism and social media are several, but one of the most relevant is surely the increasing exposure generated by third parties, such as consumers, blogs and influencers, who engage with and share these types of advertising and content that have touched their inner beliefs on social media, as a way to become brand ambassadors, to raise awareness and support their values (Eyada, 2020).

### 1.1.3. Authenticity and managerial problem

To achieve all these positive effects with the practice of brand activism, managers need to ensure that a crucial and essential condition in their activities is met, namely *authenticity*.

*“Differentiating your company/brand through the image of care and compassion to society is a strategy that can be highly rewarded. However, only a consistent, believable contribution to a cause (or non-profit organisation) can build brand image and brand equity”* (Brønn & Vrioni, 2001, p. 218). For this reason, corporate social responsibility activities need to be strategic and perfectly designed. Consequently, a boundary condition of brand activism concerns the congruence between the brand, its reputation, aims, values, messaging and practices, and the socio-political cause to which it is dedicated, as only in this way authenticity can be achieved.

Therefore, achieving and communicating the authenticity of brand activism is a key enabler for the achievement of the company’s marketing success, the building of brand equity, as well as for the success of the social change resulting from this strategy (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020; Eyada, 2020).

More specifically, brand activism authenticity can be defined as *“the alignment of a brand’s explicit purpose and values with its activist marketing messaging and pro-social corporate practices”* (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020, p. 445) and as the strategic implementation of mutually reinforcing and supportive brand purpose, values, messaging and business practices.

Additionally, when the willingness to actively participate in bringing a change of these practices is perceived as credible and sincere, it can lead to positive associations related to the brand knowledge in consumers’ minds, to lower consumers’ information costs and to lower possible perceived risks involved in choosing a brand. In turn, these factors associated with a brand can generate in buyers positive responses and behaviours, contributing to increasing consumer-expected utility (Erdem & Swait, 1998), delivering added value and growing the brand’s equity (Farquhar, 1989; Keller, 1993; Eyada, 2020).

Subsequently, we can highlight that consumer-based brand equity, intended as increased utility and positive brand knowledge, is going to eventually guide and influence purchase decisions, leading in this way to potential market outcomes, also durable over time (Silverman, Sprott, & Pascal, 1999; Srivastava, Shervani, & Fahey, 1998). Therefore, authentic brand activism contributes to impacting current brand equity but also increases the likelihood that future campaigns, if still perceived as authentic, will further contribute to enhancing it.

Moreover, brand activism studies and literature indicate that the main factors affecting brand outcomes related to brand activism practices, including brand trust, are consumer awareness, personal judgement,



and brand reputation (Gürhan-Canli & Fries, 2009). More in detail, consumer awareness related to social responsibility provides an influence on attitude, attribution and purchase decisions (Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009), and is also associated with the brand's ability to create socially responsible marketing that fits the corporate strategy, which in turn directly influences the brand identity perception, leading to potentially increase "*the level of brand loyalty among existing consumers, attract new consumers and influence the marketing power for the brand*" (Eyada, 2020, p. 32). Hence, the fit between the social responsibility actions pursued by the company and the brand itself highly affects consumer perception (Yoon, Gürhan-Canli, & Schwarz, 2006).

Related to the fit between the social cause and the brand, interpreted as a factor highly influencing consumers' perception towards the brand, we can add that, if the consumer perceives the company's motives are self-centred rather than sincerely dedicated to the support of the cause, negative effects, as damaged equity, loyalty and trust, will be experienced by the brand (Eyada, 2020).

More in detail, if brands match their activist messaging, purpose, and values with prosocial corporate practices, they are said to be engaging in authentic brand activism, thus having the opportunity to potentially generate social change and simultaneously obtain relevant gains in brand equity. Nevertheless, even when a socio-political cause is supported by clear and transparent brand practices and values, this still does not shield brand activists from controversy.

On the other hand, if brands propose activist messaging which is dissociated and distant from their main purpose, values, and practices, for example by using confusing and equivocal language in marketing or business activities, or ambiguous relationships with non-profit organizations, this can lead to perceptions of their brand activism as insincere or even deceptive and if so, the brand can be appointed as pursuing *inauthentic brand activism*.

Inauthentic brand activism is based on the fact that consumers increasingly expect and want companies to take a stand on social issues, but at the same time they highly question and scrutinize brands' motives (Holt, 2002), indeed, taking a public stance has never been more risky. This consumer attitude can be associated with another factor influencing consumers' perceptions of corporate social responsibility activities, namely scepticism.

Nowadays the levels of consumers' scepticism toward advertising are generally high, especially toward practices that unite the interests of charity and business (Brønn & Vrioni, 2001). Some studies related to CSR activities have shown that scepticism, deriving mainly from customers' distrust and cynicism towards advertising, mainly arises towards the brand's motives, which can be perceived as 'self-serving' (Webb & Mohr, 1998; Brønn & Vrioni, 2001). Therefore, "*marketers consider how consumers perceive the company's motivation*" (Brønn & Vrioni, 2001, p. 217). Moreover, consumers' negative perceptions related to the brand's efforts in supporting a cause or toward the alignment between the promotion and

the real help provided, can be the primary cause of scepticism. In this way, perceived scepticism toward a brand's motives, efforts and messages-practices alignment can affect consumers' purchase decisions (Szykman, Bloom, & Levy, 1997) and lead to perceptions of inauthenticity toward CSR activities. Consequently, it can be a great help for managers developing campaign strategies to gain more understanding of the audience's level of scepticism. However, it should be kept in mind that levels of consumer scepticism may arise from the fact that consumers are not very aware of companies' social responsibility activities, so these may be diminished as knowledge increases (Boulstridge & Carrigan, 2000).

Following this lead, brand activism activities may be perceived by buyers as a marketing trick used by brands to sell more products and subsequently, this may alienate core customers (Shetty, Venkataramaiah, & Anand, 2019) which nowadays represent one of the most relevant corporate assets.

More in-depth, brand activism perceived as inauthentic is further addressed as "woke washing," (Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg, Spry, Kemper, & Kapitan, 2018) i.e. the practice of misleading consumers with activist advertising claims that are not aligned with a brand's purpose, values, and corporate practice, defined also as brands with "*unclear or indeterminate records of social cause practices*" (Vredenburg, Spry, Kemper, & Kapitan, 2018, p. 3) that try to appear as concerned for inequality and social injustice causes (Sobande, 2019), hence indicating inconsistency between their messaging and their corporate practices (Vredenburg, Spry, Kemper, & Kapitan, 2018).

Therefore, by engaging in this practice brands and managers could fall into harmful consequences as impactful damages to their brand equity, involving aspects such as reputation, brand associations, consumers' trust and loyalty, and also damages to the general potential social change that they could have brought.

The result of these failed campaigns can potentially lead to serious problems for companies such as backlash and, in the worst cases, even a boycott by consumers with opposing social, political and environmental beliefs, which would result in a negative impact on brand image and reputation, a decrease in consumers' attitudes towards the brand and purchasing decisions, and thus also a decrease in sales and profits (Klein, Smith, & John, 2003).

However, the perception of inauthenticity in brand activism does not only have negative implications on the brand equity perspective but also from an ethical point of view, as the use of misleading and unsubstantiated content or claims important for customers' purchase decision, can lead to irreparable damage to consumer trust (similar to greenwashing; e.g. Kapitan, Kennedy, & Berth, 2019).

In line with these aspects just mentioned, it is therefore of utmost importance for brand managers and marketers to identify which factors make brand activism perceived as authentic and can make it result

as a successful strategy to build brand equity and foster social change, along with how to ensure that such activist marketing does not circumvent the controversial positioning toward the issue or inspire consumer distrust (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020).

## **1.2. Femvertising**

### **1.2.1. Brand activism and Femvertising**

Femvertising is a marketing neologism that merges the words “feminism” and “advertising”. This new term refers to a type of advertising developed in recent years, receiving greater attention both by practitioners and researchers, which can be identified as an emerging type of brand advocacy strictly associated with corporate social responsibility and *social brand activism* practices (Sternadori & Abitbol, 2019; Teng, Hu, Chen, Poon, & Bai, 2021) which is focused on women empowerment, gender equality and breaking down gender stereotypes. More in detail, femvertising can be considered as a relevant practice since it plays a crucial role in challenging and changing traditional gender norms and stereotypes by showcasing women in a more inclusive and authentic way contributing to a broader cultural shift towards more inclusive and equitable representation, indeed having a significant positive impact on society by raising awareness about gender issues, encouraging conversations, and influencing social change (Mortimer & O'Connor, 2016). Together with that femvertising allows companies to align themselves with progressive values and demonstrate their commitment to promoting gender equality, thereby building trust and loyalty among consumers and achieve new targets (Pinkleton, Austin, & Fortman, 2012). Additionally, femvertising campaigns can influence the media and advertising industry as a whole because successful campaigns like these can serve as example for other brands and to inspire them to adopt more inclusive and progressive approaches to advertising (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020).

This phenomenon has arisen as, now more than ever, corporations feel pressure to take stances on political and social issues, especially through advertising as it represents the most direct tool to widely distribute their messages. Unsurprisingly, issues of *gender equality* and *stereotypical representation of women* have recently become one of the most relevant and widespread social issues in activist advertising (Zeisler, 2016) as these issues are still strongly present in today's society and people no longer accept them demanding that companies take the lead in breaking down these barriers through their status and resources.

Indeed, to date, it is possible to observe the rapid spread of brand responsibility and increased societal focus on issues of gender equality reflected in activist corporate practices, not only regarding advertising but also business practices under various forms (Champlin, Sterbenk, Windels, & Poteet, 2019). Therefore, bringing social change and positive responses by consumers together with economic benefits for the brands engaging in it “*makes the concept of gender equality, specifically female empowerment, and its corresponding advertisements, a leading example of successful brand advocacy practices*” (Champlin, Sterbenk, Windels, & Poteet, 2019, p. 1244) where the number of brands engaging in it is continuing to grow day by day. As a result, this phenomenon has led to relative changes in the market, as it is transforming these issues and the truthful representation of women into a now necessary element for companies to be embraced in their strategies. Subsequently, a significant shift in companies’ stereotypical representation of women is taking place, which should eventually contribute to changing and weakening female stereotypes and gender differences.

### **1.2.2. Femvertising phenomenon**

More in depth *Femvertising* is the expression of “*socially-conscious advertising*” (Dan, 2017) “*tackling gender biases*” through “*women-centric campaigns*” (Stanley, 2016) conveying messages of feminism, woman empowerment and equality, challenging stereotypes and inspiring social change functioning as “*a vivid reminder that we can and should insist on gender equality*” (Ruiz, 2017).

It is also defined as “*advertising that employs pro-female talent, messages, and imagery to empower women and girls*” (Skey, 2015) as it is a way for brands to promote their products or services and simultaneously impact stereotypes and give voice and relevance to uncomfortable issues regarding women, with the aim of either eliminating traditional social taboos or stereotypes linked to women or portraying them with more powerful roles in the society (Kapoor & Munjal, 2019).

Women’s empowerment arises as a core pillar of feminist ideologies oriented toward the achievement of gender equality, which represents a general value and status recognized by everyone, both feminists and non-feminists. More in detail the definition of woman empowerment reflects “*the idea of inspiring women to confidently take control and responsibility for their identity and choices*” (Drake, 2017, p. 2; Alcoff, 1988).

This phenomenon is considered to be originated by Dove through the “Real Beauty” campaign of 2004 that gained immense success by introducing in the advertising individualistic messages about redefining women’s beauty, challenging common stereotypes associated to women and representing them under a different and more realistic perspective (Dan, 2017).

More in detail, the personal care brand owned by Unilever pioneered Femvertising (Hsu, 2018) with this campaign by providing a new representation of women in media in terms of their physical characteristics, namely body size and shape (Åkestam et al., 2017). Indeed, the advertisement publicizing Dove products, instead of perfect models, depicted normal women wearing only their underwear (*Figure 3*). The campaign's goal was to demonstrate that women of all shapes and sizes should feel comfortable in their own skin (Abitbol and Sternadori, 2016), thereby encouraging real beauty above unrealistic perfection standards.



*Figure 3: Real Beauty campaign, Dove, 2004 (retrieved from Google Images)*

The great success achieved by successfully marrying in the campaign women-related social change with the brand (Dan, 2017) gave to this practice so much relevance that, by 2015, SheKnows Media launched an annual contest titled #Femvertising Awards (Sternadori & Abitbol, 2019; Monllos, 2015).

Consequently, although there are still many companies that continue to use the usual clichés relating to female representation in their communication strategies, in recent years there has been a marked increase in the media representation of women alongside positive and stereotype-free messages (Drake, 2017). This shift in favour of the representation of independent, self-confident, free and therefore empowered women represents a clear departure from the advertisements that portrayed women as domesticated and objectified figures until today, indicating that companies are adapting their advertisements and messages to these socio-demographic changes that recognise modern women as figures with more economic and political power compared to those of previous generations (Drake, 2017). Therefore, Femvertising, by breaking the typical female portrayals found in advertisement, can truly be considered as a new form of advertising bringing great changes in the marketing industry, which, as previous studies have shown,

until now has always adapted to, and in part created, the stereotypes dictated by society rather than challenging them (Åkestam, Rosengren, & Dahlen, 2017; Eisend, 2010; Knoll, Eisend, & Steinhagen, 2011).

Although many improvements have been made over the time and more than ever before women cover relevant powerful positions and embody always increasing social and economic power (The Economist, 2009), gender biases and women empowerment social issues, including gender gaps, inequalities, stereotypes and discrimination, still persist. To illustrate, women in Italy earned about 3.1 thousand euros less annually, compared to men (Statista Research Department, 2021), a report by Mazars in collaboration with the Gender Balance Observatory showed the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions despite the fact that around 60% of graduates worldwide are women. In 2019, only 20% of board members globally were women, and Stoxx Europe 600<sup>1</sup> companies had just 17.4% of women in executive roles and only 7.5% of women as CEOs. The report also identifies eight prevalent biases that hinder efforts to promote gender diversity in organizations. These biases include myths such as women having fewer ambitions, motherhood being incompatible with leadership roles, and the perception that competent female candidates are hard to find. These biases contribute to the persistent underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. Additionally, Italy holds a negative European record with 25% of young women classified as NEET (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) (Ansa, 2023).

This misalignment between the actual female figure and the societal issues still attached to them has therefore arisen a need for companies to update their practices in order to depict a more realistic picture of today's world and consumers perceptions. Hence, *“now is the worst time for companies to patronize women or produce tone-deaf ads that reinforce cliches or stereotypes about gender roles and identity”* (Ruiz, 2017).

More in general, stereotypes can be defined as a set of common beliefs and associations related to a specific social category, offering to individuals a simplified system of information to decodify the world around them (Johnson & Grier, 2012). With this also explaining why they are so common in advertising.

Stereotypes in advertising can be both related to gender biases, known as gender stereotypes, and to the female figure, known as female stereotypes. Gender stereotypes are identified by the literature as concepts for which certain attributes distinguish men and women in association to the evolution and changes of general social values and gender roles, which are then reflected in advertising practices (Eisend, 2010; Knoll, Eisend, & Steinhagen, 2011; Pollay, 1986). On the other hand, female stereotypes commonly portrayed in advertising, use to be mainly associated to women's physical characteristics,

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<sup>1</sup> The STOXX Europe 600 or STOXX 600 is an equity index consisting of 600 of the major European market capitalisations, designed by STOXX Limited (Wikipedia, s.d.).

roles, and occupational status (Knoll, Eisend, & Steinhagen, 2011). For instance, women in ads are more likely to be represented in roles that are characterized by dependence and reliance on male strength, in occupations within the home also in markets characterised by women with out-of-home professional careers, and in decorative roles, together with sexual objectification and a focus on physical attractiveness (Åkestam, Rosengren, & Dahlen, 2017; Plakoyiannaki & Zotos., 2009). Literature also highlights that advertising has strongly contributed to make female stereotypes and sexist view of women proliferate through their symbolic visual cues and messages (Champlin, Sterbenk, Windels, & Poteet, 2019; Plakoyiannaki & Zotos., 2009; Gill & Elias, 2014; Grau & Zotos., 2016).

Spears and Amos (2014) also show that the female portrayals in advertising in the twentieth century has been varied based on social and economic conditions, *“but even in the most progressive times, the emphasis has always been on women’s sexual and bodily freedoms rather than on their financial, career or athletic successes”* (Sternadori & Abitbol, 2019, p. 740) causing consumers to criticise these limited representations (Ford, LaTour, & Lundstrom, 1991).

In response to these actions and to the always increasing rise of women to key leadership positions, *“we’re currently experiencing a global gender revolution where women are not only finding their voices, but they’re using them”* (Edouard, 2014) contributing to the growing backlash against this objectification, taking place mostly online thanks to social media platforms where consumers are free to express their perceptions and feelings. Therefore, brands and managers now should really consider conveying woman empowerment and celebration messages in their advertising strategies as a way to minimize risks of consumer’s negative reactance, but mostly as an opportunity to decrease gender-based disparities (Champlin, Sterbenk, Windels, & Poteet, 2019).

After discussing the relationship between brand activism and the phenomenon of Femvertising, as well as acknowledging its role and purpose, it is important to delimit the main characteristics of this phenomenon.

Regarding the definition of the main characteristics of Femvertising practices, is useful to take into consideration the work of Becker-Herby (2016) who, after evaluating hundreds of Femvertising and taking into consideration marketing professionals’ viewpoints, found out that nearly all these advertisements adhere to the same principles. Indeed, from these analyses, the author established five pillars of this new advertising trend, as follows:

- 1) The utilisation of diverse female talent;

This first pillar is closely linked to the reality that Femvertising is intersectional, i.e. a term that stands for something *“that jointly concerns several sections or takes place between several sections”*. Indeed, this is a term increasingly used in policies against discrimination of all kinds. Thus, this definition

associated with femvertising means that femvertising advertisements usually opt for the use of a *variety* of female representations, rather than choosing ideal supermodels as the only type of representation. The reason behind this lies in the fact that girls and women are more likely to recognise themselves in models of their own race, shape, body type and age (Becker-Herby, 2016).

## 2) The occurrence of intrinsically pro-women messages

This second pillar emphasizes the empowering, inspirational, and inclusive messages conveyed by Femvertising campaigns. In these messages, the focus is not on insinuating that women are not enough and that the product sold is the solution to their flaws, but rather on providing the female consumer with feelings of affirmation, motivation, and self-confidence. In other words, the underlying concepts behind these advertisements are always encouraging and celebrating women in all their facets (Becker-Herby, 2016).

## 3) The strive of overcoming the boundaries and stereotypes of gender norms

The third pillar revolves around the fact that in Femvertising advertisements girls and women are depicted in scenarios that deviate from conventional stereotypes associated with the female gender. Indeed, in this type of commercial, rather than show women doing housekeeping or performing other activities associated with marriage or motherhood, they are typically depicted in sporty or competitive contexts while engaging in sports, enjoying leisure activities, working, or in neutral scenarios (Becker-Herby, 2016).

## 4) The intention to diminish sexuality

The fourth pillar points out that Femvertising is not always lacking sexual associations and appeals when portraying women, but rather it employs them in more nuanced way compared to traditional advertising. In other words, exposed skin and bodies are presented in a way that appears to be relevant and authentic (i.e., athletes in sports bras). What is certain is that female advertising is very rarely exaggerated with unrealistic cleavage, make-up or sexual poses (Becker-Herby, 2016).

## 5) The authentic and realistic portrayal of women

This final pillar underlines the relevance of authenticity in all aspects of advertising, including talent, product, scenario, and styling, therefore indicating that the campaign has to appear and be perceived as realistic and genuine in all of its components. Indeed, authenticity constitutes a crucial and integral part of all of the pillars previously mentioned. Following this lead the author also highlights that this drive for authenticity and openness needs to extend beyond the advertisement and guide women's support also within the corporation itself and in its business practices (Becker-Herby, 2016).



These five pillars provide a good and precise picture of what technically constitutes Femvertising, as they emerged from an analysis of what is currently produced by brands and interviews with marketing professionals, but it is important to keep in mind that they do not involve consumers' perspectives.

Moving on to the themes implemented in Femvertising practices, Hsu (2018) outlined and explained ten theme categories that marketers have used and continue to use to promote pro-female messages and fight unfavourable or inaccurate representations of the female gender.

- The first theme proposed is related to the *promotion of body confidence with realistic images of women*.

This theme recalls notions already mentioned in this and the previous sections of this chapter about Femvertising as it focuses on the challenge of unrealistic beauty standards emphasising the perfection associated with thin, young and sexualised bodies, through the portraying and embracing of diversity and realness through a wide range of body shapes and sizes. As main examples of these new representation of women in media promoting confidence and self-esteem the author mentions Dove with its “*Real Beauty*” campaign (2004) and American’s Eagle Aerie lingerie with its campaign “*#AerieReal*” (2014) (*Table 1*).

- The second theme revolves around the *championing females’ confidence beyond a beauty focus*. The goal in this case is to boost women’s self-esteem beyond the single dimension of attractiveness. This strategy moves away from portraying women as weak, submissive, and obsessed with physical appearance, and instead emphasizes women’s strength, confidence, and achievements, hence traits normally associated with men.

Here the author mentions the Under Armour’s 2017 digital campaign “*You’re more than a pretty face*” (*Table 1*) as example of a brand supporting women in all aspects, rather than just their exterior attractiveness.

- The third theme involves *calling females to overcome societal barriers to get active and play sports*.

Here the focus is on emphasising the promotion of women’s participation in sports by breaking the gender stereotypes depicting girls as inactive compared to boys being active and athletic. For example, Sport England created the “*This girl can*” campaign (*Table 1*) in 2015 to free females from the idea that they aren’t “good enough” to engage in physical exercise. The advertisements showed real women and girls of various sizes, shapes, and skills exercising and participating in sports.

- The fourth theme is about *acknowledging women’s athletic prowess and inner strengths*.

The concept in this scenario is similar to the preceding one and consists in recognizing women's athletic abilities and inner strengths but differs from it as instead of common women depicts strong athletic women with muscular bodies to represent power, which traditionally are all associated exclusively to men. For this theme the example proposed is the campaign "*I will what I want*" (Table 1) launched by Under Armour in 2014 which featured ballerina Misty Copeland, supermodel Gisele Bundchen and Olympic skier Lindsey Vonn, emphasizing how these women's willpower helped them overcome stereotypes and prejudices, pursue their objectives, and achieve their sporting goals.

- The fifth theme relates to *depicting females in a new multiplicity of roles beyond stereotypes*.

Here the author points out, women have long been linked with conventional advertising roles such as housewives, mothers, and sex objects. For this theme Hsu mentioned the Ram trucks (a truck brand that typically targets male audiences) campaign "*The courage is already inside*" (Table 1) of 2015 as example, which featured Eva Shockey, the first woman in years to appear on the cover of Field and Stream magazine, horse racing winner Rosie Napravnik, award-winning country music singer Miranda Lambert, and professional motocross rider Tiana Falls. Indeed, the advertisement had the aim to highlight that women have the courage to challenge gender preconceptions and achieve success in roles that are typically male-dominated or deemed impossible for women to achieve.

- The sixth theme proposed is related to *honouring mothers beyond their nurturing role*.

Regarding this theme Hsu highlighted that the aim is to challenge that traditionally, mothers have mainly been portrayed as nurturing and caregiver roles toward their children. To break this stereotype General Electrics with "*Childlike Imagination: What My Mom Does at GE*" (Table 1) campaign of 2015, opposes to the stereotypical motherly portrayal. Indeed, the campaign features a little girl's voice happily narrating all of the great things she imagines her mother creates as a GE employee (such as underwater fans, talking airplanes, miniature hospitals, and so on). Therefore, the brand displays the mother figure, rather than the father, doing outstanding work in technology and inspiring the young girl.

- The seventh theme encompasses *encouraging young females to pursue science, technology, maths and engineering (STEM)*.

This sort of pro-female advertising tries to challenge gender stereotypes which categorize boys and girls into distinct interests and qualities by encouraging young women to explore traditionally male-dominated fields. Following this theme Verizon launched the "*Inspire Her Mind*" campaign (Table 1) in 2014 to demonstrate how parents typically prioritize girls' neatness, quietness, and safety over risk-taking and confidence, and that by following this approach, they unconsciously discourage their girls' growing interest in STEM and withdraw them from areas and activities traditionally associated with boys. Related to this theme also GoldieBlox is another business that has done an excellent job of

encouraging girls' interest in scientific subjects. For example, a famous citation of their CEO Debbie Sterling which was introduced in their communication strategy is: "there is nothing wrong with being a princess, we just think girls can build their own castles too".

- The eighth theme relates to the *advocating equal opportunity and equal pay for women*.

This theme focuses on gender equality in the workplace, which is still a major social concern. Related to this, in 2016, the "Secret" deodorant commercial "*Raise #StressTest*" (Table 1) addressed this critical issue. The commercial features a young lady anxiously practicing, in front of a bathroom mirror, for asking her male employer a raise, while being encouraged to do so by an older female co-worker. At the end of the video a message shows on the screen: "*Stress Test #4528: Lucy does her part to close the wage gap at 3 o'clock*". With this commercial the brand aims at empowering all women who endure stress in confronting cultural conventions and pushing for fair treatment at work.

- The ninth theme is associated to *men advocating for positive female roles and equality*

This theme is about men promoting positive female roles and equality, hence addressing gender equality through a man's voice supporting his female counterpart. In this case the commercial "*Daughter*" (Table 1) created by Audi for the 2017 Super Bowl is an excellent example. The advertisement depicts a dad watching his daughter competing courageously with a group of boys in a downhill race and winning in the end. While doing so he thinks about all the obstacles his daughter will encounter because of her gender, making him concerned on how to explain to his young daughter that, despite her education and ability, she will always be viewed and valued as less than every man she meets in her life. By delivering this strong message the campaign aims at promoting change starting also from men and the society in general, indeed the spot concludes with a statement about the company Audi commitment to equal payment for equal work and the hashtag "*DriveProgress*".

- The tenth and last theme is about *normalising and celebrating menstruation*

This last theme is therefore focused on overcoming unclear and ambiguous language as well as unrealistic images of women during their menstrual cycle. In this sense, Kotex proposed the admiring campaign "*Break the cycle*" (2010) (Table 1) embracing the aim of breaking the stereotypes of shame, humiliation, and antiquated attitudes about menstruation and creating a societal shift toward open and honest talks about feminine health. Specifically, the whole commercial has a humorous and honest tone and depicts a girl asking her mother if she can discuss her menstruation with her while walking along a beach. The core message of the commercial then arises with the mother's answer, saying for example: "*Of course! But since this is a TV commercial, I'll have to use confusing metaphors*", hence criticising the usual representation and language used along with women and menstruation in media.

To sum up, all the ten themes of empowerment of women and girls presented are the most commonly used so far and constitute an example that femvertising has been embraced both by brands proposing women’s products such as Dove, Always, or Pantene, as well as by a variety of brands, like Audi, Verizon, Under Armour, and Ram Trucks (but also Microsoft and Nike), not associated to women’s products. Indeed, femvertising, if developed in the right way, can be considered as a valid option for all firms that sincerely want to engage with female consumers and overcome the societal issues that exist in women’s lives (Hsu, 2018).

**Table 1 – Hsu (2018) femvertising themes and example campaigns**

<b>THEME</b>	<b>BRAND</b>	<b>CAMPAIGN NAME</b>	<b>CAMPAIGN LINK</b>
Promotion of body confidence with realistic images of women	American’s Eagle Aerie lingerie	#AerieReal	<a href="#">Aerie Real – image</a>
Championing females’ confidence beyond a beauty focus	Under Armour	You’re more than a pretty face	<a href="#">You’re more than a pretty face – image</a>
Calling females to overcome societal barriers to get active and play sports	Sport England	This girl can	<a href="#">This girl can – image</a>
Acknowledging women’s athletic prowess and inner strengths	Under Armour	I will what I want	<a href="#">I will what I want – image</a>
Depicting females in a new multiplicity of roles beyond stereotypes	Ram trucks	The courage is already inside	<a href="#">The courage is already inside – video</a>
Honouring mothers beyond their nurturing role	General Electrics	Childlike Imagination: What My Mom Does at GE	<a href="#">Childlike Imagination: What My Mom Does at GE – video</a>
Encouraging young females to pursue science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM)	Verizon	Inspire her mind	<a href="#">Inspire her mind – video</a>
Advocating of equal opportunity and equal pay for women	Secret	Raise #StressTest	<a href="#">Raise Stress test – video</a>
Men advocating for positive female roles and equality	Audi	Daughter	<a href="#">Daughter – video</a>
Normalizing and celebrating menstruation	Kotex	Break the cycle	<a href="#">Break the cycle – video</a>

### 1.2.3. Femvertising: practical relevance

More in depth, studies have found that Femvertising has a positive impact on several factors:

Abitbol & Sternadori (2016), for example, studied the perceived effectiveness of femvertising in changing attitudes toward product/brand and the perceived effectiveness of femvertising in changing attitudes toward women's empowerment. The results emerged indicated increased positive attitude toward some brands and the expectations of change in how men treat women, increased awareness of stereotypes and increased concern for women for male participants with younger sisters.

Kapoor & Munjal (2019) in their study reported that women respondents valued femvertising as helping in building self-esteem and promoting empowerment among women. Moreover, from their research emerged that purchasing intention and intention to forward ads is varied across different age groups.

Additional findings from Åkestam, Rosengren and Dahlen (2017) research on femvertising and advertising reactance highlight that this type of message, by challenging female gender stereotypes, is less likely to provoke (gender) stereotypes when processing the advertising and thereby it reduces advertising reactance, which explains higher advertising and brand attitudes compared to traditional advertising.

Moreover, Drake (2017) reports from her analyses comparing femvertising and traditional advertising that exposure to an advertising with female empowerment messaging has positive impact on attitudes towards ads and brands, together with respondents reporting higher intent to purchase the advertised brand/product and stronger emotional connection to brands.

Furthermore, Google's "Think Insights" marketing research group stated that "*empowering ads on the YouTube Ads Leaderboard have more than doubled in the past year, and millennial women are more than twice as likely to think of a brand that made an empowering ad*" (Drake, 2017, p. 594). Other study results obtained through a SheKnows online survey conducted in America in September 2016 among 4.000 respondents including women and men, uncovered that nearly all (92%) of the women respondents could recall at least one campaign including positive female portrayal, and over half (52%) indicated to have purchased a specific brand product because they appreciated how the ads depicted the women figure.

*"These findings highlight the need for marketers to more accurately depict their target audiences to better relate to their consumers and improve brand attitudes"* (Drake, 2017) as advertisings with woman empowerment messages have gained positive reactions among the public for raising awareness about issues facing females and challenging the common stereotypes associated to them in media. *"From a business perspective, Dove has reported multi-billion dollar profits since launching femvertising*

*branding initiatives such as the “Real Beauty” campaign*” (Drake, 2017, p. 594), which aligns with previously mentioned survey data.

Moreover, proposing women empowerment in marketing is even more appealing today, considering that *“a perfectly timed ad with the right message about equality [...] may go viral because it's what consumers want to share with friends and family”* (Ruiz, 2017). Hence, engaging in this type of advertisement can be an opportunity for brands to achieve great *visibility*, thanks to the advertising their *values* rather than products, as *“people aren't sharing advertising, they're sharing a sentiment”* (Stanley, 2016).

We can therefore highlight that femvertising brings with it strongly relevant effects and applications on online platforms, firstly because most femvertising campaigns are longer in duration and are more suitable for online platforms, secondly because if individuals are entertained and interested and experience an emotional connection with the ads by believing that the messages conveyed positively reflect themselves, they would be motivated to engage, share and forward the advertisement (Baek, Holton, Harp, & Yaschur, 2011; De Matos & Rossi., 2008; Eckler & Bolls, 2011).

More in detail, several studies highlighted that in order to be forwarded on social media, a message must be perceived as easy to understand, useful and entertaining (Palka, Pousttchi, & Wiedemann., 2009) and this is significantly influenced by receiver's positive attitudes towards the message (Hsieh, Hsieh, & Tang., 2012; Kapoor & Munjal, 2019).

Additionally, online sharing of advertising strongly benefits the companies involved as it leads to positive word of mouth and discussions (Graham & Havlena., 2007), and high brand recall, meaning high levels of consumers engagement, visibility and the possible achievement of virality, which will definitely add advantage to the brand.

Still related to advertising sharing and forwarding we can argue that this process also leads to another relevant factor, namely ad-talks. Ad talk indicates that, if consumers have optimistic attitudes towards these types of ads, they would probably engage in sharing and discussing the contents of the advertising with others. Relating to this, (Mitchell, Macklin, & Paxman., 2007) uncovered that ad-talk has the power to increase positive opinions and preferences about the brand involved, together with increasing the understanding of the message itself and directly influence both brand attitude and purchase intention (Martensen & Mouritsen., 2014; Kapoor & Munjal, 2019).

#### 1.2.4. Femvertising: managerial problems and risks

Despite the many possible positive effects, brand activism it's not an assured success, as brands can be accused of "*pinkwashing*", depending on how the marketing campaign is developed (Stanley, 2016). Nowadays consumers can act as brand stakeholders thanks to social media platforms on which they can and are very keen on expressing their opinions, making the Internet anxious to exploit every potential weakness (Stanley, 2016). Moreover, their ability to discern falsehood in marketing should not be underestimated, especially by millennials (Dan, 2017).

Although research suggests that femvertising can provide highly relevant positive contributions for a brand, consumers' reactions to femvertising attempts remain equivocal in literature (Hainneville, Guèvremont, & Robinot, 2022). Indeed, consumers scepticism is observable both in the literature (Feng, Chen, & He, 2019; Lima & Casais, 2021) and in previous studies highlighting that the authenticity of femvertising and the company's motivations are still doubted (Duffy, 2010) and denounced as inauthentic and identified as "*femwashing*" (or pinkwashing) on social media. It is therefore of primary importance for managers to better define the line of difference between what is perceived as authentic femvertising and what is perceived as femwashing.

Moreover consumers scepticism toward femvertising highlight that there is no general consensus toward this type of advertising related to authenticity, even in the case of famous ones as the Dove one, but also related to the type of receiver involved, as personal values and beliefs influencing consumers preferences and perceptions of advertisements differ from one person to another (Hainneville, Guèvremont, & Robinot, 2022; Sternadori & Abitbol, 2019).

More in detail, brands that want to exploit the potential of this communication strategy, need to propose *sophisticated messages* which don't look like a *bald effort to capitalize on woman* and effectively embrace these values from within (Ruiz, 2017). "*Companies that don't have authentic messages and don't implement initiatives to match their rhetoric will pay the price*", therefore, "*principled messages that feel authentic to the company pitching them are critical to success*" (Ruiz, 2017). Hence, dealing with social issues is a delicate matter since, even though there is plenty of savvy consumers who believe in gender equality, they also tend to remain highly critical of empowerment marketing, especially when brands engage with these causes "*without necessarily doing any real or radical work to achieve it*" (Ruiz, 2017), thus when equality doesn't exist at the brand itself.

With this in mind, we can argue that femvertising can be a double-edged weapon for brands, since it can nurture a good relationship with consumers, who in turn can enhance its effects and visibility, but at the same time, if the message is not perceived as authentic, it can be the recipe for a disaster.

### 1.3. Research gap and research question

Despite the recent increase, the existing literature on femvertising remains limited, especially regarding consumer's perspective related to how the audiences perceive, interpret and use femvertising (Abitbol & Sternadori, 2016; Drake, 2017; Kapoor & Munjal, 2019) and its marketing effectiveness (Drake, 2017; Hainneville, Guèvremont, & Robinot, 2022). Research needs to better understand not only consumers' expectations of this form of social brand activism, but also which are the main motivations and benefits for marketers to engage with this new approach (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020).

More focus on men's perception towards femvertising is also needed, as the literature highlights that most studies sample exclusively female consumers (Åkestam, Rosengren, & Dahlen, 2017) and that "*future research may be conducted across diverse genders*" (Hainneville, Guèvremont, & Robinot, 2022, p. 8). Indeed, analysing men's perceptions towards femvertising (Kapoor & Munjal, 2019; Drake, 2017) is needed and relevant because the "role of men is very critical in bringing any change" and because now many brands also targeting men utilize femvertisements (Champlin, Sterbenk, Windels, & Poteet, 2019; Teng, Hu, Chen, Poon, & Bai, 2021).

The extant literature highlights also that, initially, femvertising was a marketing strategy associated mostly with *female-oriented* products and brands, but now, more *non-female* brands, are embracing this practice in their communication strategies (Sternadori & Abitbol, 2019; Drake, 2017; Champlin, Sterbenk, Windels, & Poteet, 2019). Considering also that femvertising knowledge mostly focuses on commercials related to physical appearance products (e.g. clothing, skin care), existing studies have suggested that future research can investigate whether or how brands with *different product categories, neither related to physical appearance* (e.g. cars, beverages) *nor oriented exclusively towards women*, may induce different responses and effects (Teng, Hu, Chen, Poon, & Bai, 2021; Drake, 2017; Champlin, Sterbenk, Windels, & Poteet, 2019).

Following these paths, in this study I want to understand why femvertising effectiveness (compared to traditional advertising) can differ based on the product category it is applied to. More specifically, if and why femvertising increases the effectiveness of non-female oriented product categories communications, as this has been understudied until today, and compare the results with traditional advertising practices effectiveness.

With these assumptions in mind, I propose the following research question:

RQ: *how do consumers perceive femvertising, compared to traditional advertising, when it is applied to non-female product category campaigns?*



In answering this question, this study supposes that femvertising would be effective across neutral and male-oriented product categories even more than traditional advertising practices and that the reason for this effectiveness distinction sits on the *atypicality* of the advertising. In other words, atypicality will indicate if and why femvertising would be even more effective than traditional advertising if applied to *low-fit brands* characterised by non-female product categories.

In this research is therefore proposed that femvertising would be effective for promoting non-female products because it will be perceived as atypical compared to the usual category messaging strategies. Subsequently, atypicality indicates that the advertising is perceived as divergent and original compared to the traditional category advertising inducing positive attitudes toward the advertising in consumers and subsequently toward the brand advertised.

## CHAPTER 2 – Theoretical framework and hypotheses

### 2.1. Femvertising and product category

In exploring the connection between femvertising practices and the different product categories sold by the brands using them, previous studies analysing women empowerment advertising (Lima & Casais, 2021; Abitbol & Sternadori, 2016) have focused on the relationship between female empowerment and the products sold by brands through the study of the 'fit' between the two, in order to define the reasons for consumers' perception of inauthenticity and potential risks for the brand such as consumer alienation.

More specifically, this stream of research revealed the significance of the connection between the product and femvertising campaigns, together with the fact that the misalignment between the two is perceived as a factor inducing perceptions of inauthenticity, giving consumers “*the idea of exploitation of women by companies*” (Lima & Casais, 2021, p. 615). Consequently, it emerged to be critical to develop advertising messages that are aligned with the product sold by the company (Sternadori & Abitbol, 2019; Champlin, Sterbenk, Windels, & Poteet, 2019) and this remains relevant even whether the campaign's main focus is not on presenting and selling a specific product. This is because, when these messages are not consistent with the product or brand positioning, “*the message turns out to be incoherent and inconsistent, and the brand is subject to accusations of naivety by consumers*” (Lima & Casais, 2021, p. 615).

As these previous studies have been focusing on the perceived fit between the social cause and the product category in relation to authenticity, we can highlight that there is a strong and relevant connection between the product category and femvertising effectiveness. Expanding these assumptions, in this study we want to investigate this relation further and study it from a different lens to provide additional and new knowledge for managers in this field.

More in detail, despite the established relevance of the connection between product category and femvertising practices regarding its effectiveness in terms of consumer perception, it remains doubtful in the existing literature whether femvertising practices are *effective across all product categories*. In this regard, the existing literature points to a few studies concerning this relationship, especially those related to non-female-oriented products, which leave the issue unclear.

Most of the studies in question take into account either only female-focused product category brands or both female and non-female product category brands together (non-female ones are never considered alone), explaining that femvertising practices are effective and adaptable to all of them. On the other

hand, other studies present a different perspective where female oriented brands are potentially the most criticised, while those considered to have the best beneficial effects are the non-female oriented ones.

For example, Åkestam, Rosengren, and Dahlen (2017), conducted a study on femvertising practices effectiveness across different product categories, focusing on the reactance of consumers. With this study the authors found that femvertising, compared to traditional advertising, reduces consumers' advertising reactance, leading to positive advertising and brand attitudes. These study results highlighted that femvertising effectiveness, in terms of reducing advertising reactance, is valid and beneficial across a range of four different product categories including cars, sportswear, shampoo and telecom. Moreover, the results showed that femvertising was effective also when addressing different stereotypes such as those more related to women's physical characteristics and the ones involving roles and occupations, and with the portraying women across different media such as print and online videos.

Similarly, a survey conducted by (Castillo, 2014) toward femvertising messages among female consumers, thus not considering men's opinion, indicated that this target believes that any brand can match their products with messages of female empowerment, hence indicating that in their opinion there is not a specific product type that best fits or has the right to use femvertising over another.

Further, Drake (2017) compared different examples of femvertising campaigns to traditional advertising for two brands, one related to feminine care and the other to household goods (paper towels), in terms of their impact on advertising and brand opinions, purchase intentions, and emotional connection to the brands. The data that emerged shows that the positive results hold true across both product verticals and through different messaging techniques. Here, however, it is important to emphasise that Always is a typical feminine brand with female oriented products, and Brawny, despite it has a more neutral product offer as it is a brand of paper towels, involves products stereotypically associated with the female figure, such as household cleaning.

Additionally, Abitbol and Sternadori (2016) study on product and social cause fit related to femvertising, highlighted that: for brands dealing exclusively with female products, the fit with women empowerment is considered obvious (*high fit*), representing an important and effective strategy to be applied by brands to stand out; for brands dealing with typically masculine or neutral product categories (*low fit*), femvertising practices may be suitable and useful to differentiate themselves, indicating a positive fit between social cause and product, only if this strategy is actually in line with the already established image and style of the company so that it would be perceived as authentic without the risk of alienating the existing consumer base while trying to reach a new one.

Therefore, up to this point the studies taken as examples agree on the notion that femvertising is suitable for all brand and product category types. It should however be noted that none of these studies

exclusively focus on non-female brands or product categories not stereotypically associated with women.

Differently from these just mentioned studies stressing that different and possibly all product categories can fit with femvertising, other relevant researches highlighted differing and interesting considerations on this relationship: *High-fit* brands, typically female-oriented ones related to physical appearance and beauty products, where the fit between the social cause and the brand is obvious, have been accused of exploiting femvertising practices only for their own interest being their products mainly targeting women. This is explained by the fact that these types of brands are considered the ones contributing to the creation of beauty and feminine stereotypes in the first place (Champlin, Sterbenk, Windels, & Poteet, 2019; Zeisler, 2016) and because they are the ones promoting positive messages for women to feel good with themselves but implying that this feeling and their empowerment would be achieved or associated only with the consumption of their products (Champlin, Sterbenk, Windels, & Poteet, 2019; Hoeffler & Keller., 2002). In other words, these studies, together with the one of Lima and Casais (2021, p.11) state that “*some brands are not suitable for gender equality*” because of the mismatch between the products’ functionality (especially for beauty brands or cleansing products) (Abitbol & Sternadori, 2016) and the women empowerment message.

On the other hand, it controversially emerged from another stream of studies, that engaging in social causes *inconsistent* with the brand and product category can be beneficial. Indeed, *low-fit brands*, hence the ones generally providing neutral or male-oriented products such as activewear and cars, that embrace social issues messages, can be perceived as competent or inclusive if they deal with a topic which is not directly related to their products (Hoeffler & Keller., 2002). This practice can be especially useful for non-female oriented brands trying to expand the appealing effects of their messages to the female audience and extend their target by adapting their typically masculine messaging.

## **2.2. Atypicality**

Despite the established relevance of the connection between product category and femvertising in relation to its effectiveness, the findings emerging from the above-mentioned studies emphasise different streams of thoughts concerning this relationship, as well as a scarce analysis of femvertising practices associated with neutral and male-oriented products. Therefore, the aim of this study is to further these findings to bring more attention and knowledge and to make clearer whether femvertising can be effective across all product categories, especially by focusing on low-fit brands and product categories (non-female oriented ones).

Matching this assumption and the previously mentioned benefits in associating social issues messages with low-fit brands and products, it is of my interest to investigate the relationship between product category and femvertising through the lens of atypicality.

Judgments of atypicality are relevant in this specific relationship as advertising typicality indicates how much an advertising is perceived by viewers as representative of a specific product category advertising practice (Veryzer & Hutchinson, 1998) and plays a crucial role in the viewers' processing of television advertising, as it indicates the themes and feelings that viewers expect to experience when exposed to the ads of a specific product category (Poels & Dewitte, 2019). Therefore, levels of perceived advertising typicality (and atypicality) represent a crucial component for this field as they are used by consumers to judge advertising *originality* (Peterson & Malhotra, 2023) that is a key dimension of creative ads (Rosengren, Eisend, Koslow, & Dahlen, 2020; Smith, MacKenzie, Yang, Buchholz, & Darley, 2007) and by advertisers as a reference point when trying to develop creative and unique ads (Agnoli, Kirsch, & Corazza., 2019).

In other words, advertising atypicality indicates the way in which the advertising is perceived compared to the traditional massaging and advertising of a specific product category (Peterson & Malhotra, 2023).

In the case of consumers' perception of atypicality, this implies that the advertising (or stimuli) doesn't match the existing schemas of the consumers advertising category (Boush & Loken, 1991) leading them to higher attention and more detailed and elaborated processing of the advertising (Stafford & Stafford, 2002; Goodstein, 1993). This mismatch and thus atypicality is considered aligned with advertising factors of novelty, divergence and originality (usually different definitions of the same concept) which, together with relevance, constitute the (two) main dimensions of advertising creativity (Rosengren, Eisend, Koslow, & Dahlen, 2020; Smith, MacKenzie, Yang, Buchholz, & Darley, 2007).

### **2.2.1. Categorization theory**

More in detail, these theoretical attributions arise from the categorization theory, which research in psychology and consumer behaviour has proven to be aligned with people's expectations, processing and affective evaluations of stimuli (Fiske, 1982; Sujan, 1985).

Categorization can be defined as the processes of aligning structural features and analysing if features of objects and candidate concepts match (Niedenthal, Halberstadt, & Innes-Ker, 1999; Forbus, Gentner, & Law, 1994; Gentner, 1988; Goldstone, 1996). In other words, categorization theory assumes that we use schemas of organized knowledge, usually generated by previous experiences and developed through repeated exposure within a domain (Berlyne, 1960; Mandler, Clark, & Fiske, 1982), which contain

information about category attributes, prototypical exemplars and the person's evaluation of the category members.

In order to extend category theory to advertising it is needed to identify whether consumers have schemas for ads. In this regard it is possible to highlight that consumers' schemas are developed through repeated exposure in a specific domain, therefore, considering advertisement repetition and regularity (e.g., redundant semantic, physical, and structural features) theory suggests that ad-related schemas do indeed exist (Stoltman, 1991).

Related to the advertising field, ad-related schemas might be of different types, but the most common and basic level at which advertising schemas are organized refers to schemas organized around product types (Sujan, 1985; Stayman, Alden, & Smith, 1992; Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989). Evidence for this organizational scheme is both managerially and empirically supported (Peterson & Malhotra, 2023).

More in depth, Peterson & Malhotra (2023) explain that consumer's schema of an advertising category for television advertising would contain cumulative knowledge about:

- attributes of the ads (such as themes used in the ads, feelings likely to be experienced when viewing these ads, and typical depictions of brands),
- relationships among these attributes,
- relationships between the ads of the advertising category and ads of other categories.

By taking into consideration that advertising schemas do exist in the mind of consumers we want to apply this theory to the specific field of femvertising and identify whether advertisements with these features will fit consumers' advertising schemas associated to non-female product categories, or if these are going to be perceived as schema-inconsistent (or category-atypical).

In this regard, in the following section I want to highlight the main difference between female oriented and non-female oriented product categories in the context of femvertising to further the knowledge on this connection and on which schemas consumers may have toward these categories in order to subsequently develop specific assumptions and hypotheses.

### **2.2.2. Femvertising and atypicality in non-female oriented brands**

Being femvertising a type of advertising revolving around the social cause of women empowerment, this practice can be considered linked to the knowledge present in extant literature related to the concept of fit between brands and a specific social cause, which aims at understanding when and under which circumstances it can be efficient for brands to engage in a specific social issue.

In relation to this concept, Barone, Norman and Miyazaki (2007) and Nan and Heo (2007) explain that the fit between a brand and a social issue can depend on different factors, namely:

- a *functional* match, where the cause connects to the functions of the product sold by the brand
- an *image* match, where the personality and/or similar characteristics (as activism) that the brand conveys are in line with the image associated with the social issue
- a *target audience* match, where a brand's target consumers coincide with those who might be willing to support the cause in question.

In relation to woman empowerment and brand fit, Champlin, Sterbenk, Windels, and Poteet (2019) state that *high-fit* occurs when the relationship between the social cause and the brand is obvious and clear to the viewer, therefore in the femvertising context this is verified when the female-focused social issue is associated with a brand that typically targets women, thus implying a clear conceptual match.

In other words, brands that are accustomed to talking to women as their main audience, that have a typically feminine image and that distribute products that mainly target women, can easily reach their audience and simultaneously promote women's emancipation social issues, which explains female oriented brands and female-focused issues are often combined together (Champlin, Sterbenk, Windels, & Poteet, 2019). This is also similarly explained in by Robinson, Irmak, and Jayachandran (2012) who state that, when engaging in cause-related marketing, a brand that exhibits a clear match with the social cause can be perceived as more competent and equipped to truly support the social issue. In the case of femvertising, female-focused brands might be seen as more likely to 'know' women and therefore be able to support them (Champlin, Sterbenk, Windels, & Poteet, 2019).

Indeed, this knowledge explains why previous successful femvertisements are often proposed by female-oriented brands directly targeting women (e.g. Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty) (Champlin, Sterbenk, Windels, & Poteet, 2019).

Following these assumptions is it clear that today femvertising practices are consolidated and wide spread among brands with female-oriented product categories and, considering the always increasing number of brands engaging in it, we could argue that nowadays femvertising can be considered as a *common practice, for brands with female-focused (i.e., high-fit) product categories*, to engage in.

Despite the increasingly inclusive and realistic representation of women through these initiatives has strongly spread among female-focused product category brands, is also important to highlight that this phenomenon is now also approaching brands that do not have female majority in their target audiences. One of the main reasons why lies in the important perspective that high brand-cause fit advertisements can be perceived as a form of *exploitation* by consumers, as they assume that this obvious conceptual

match is being pursued by companies only to increase bottom-line sales (Barone, Norman, & Miyazaki., 2007).

Therefore, it is important to further explore this emerging advertising practice, especially when it is proposed by brands with product categories for which the match with this type of social issue may not lead to a clear conceptual congruence (non-female oriented brands displaying a low-fit with this cause), as it emerged that this practice could be highly beneficial also for them (Hoeffler & Keller., 2002).

In this regard, we can further highlight that, despite femvertising is typically proposed to female audiences and applied to female-oriented product categories as its themes are considered more congruent and in line with the products sold by these brands and the connection between the two is obvious, nowadays more male or neutral product category brands, as cars and activewear ones, are embracing this type of brand activism. More in detail, these brands providing such product types emerged to be considered as having a *low-fit* with femvertising messages as their connection with the social issue of woman empowerment is not obvious or there is not a clear conceptual congruence between the two. This therefore implies that these brands are probably commonly associated to the use of different advertising message strategies, different brand image, themes, target and social issues, compared to those brands who typically target women and sell female-focused products.

Following these considerations together with the previously presented categorization theory, which is the ground for atypicality perceptions, we predict that the utilization of femvertising practices would be perceived as atypical (compared to traditional advertising of that same product category) when proposed by low-fit product category brands, namely non-female oriented brands that do not display a clear functional, image and target audience match, as proposed by Barone, Norman and Miyazaki (2007) and Nan and Heo (2007), with this feminine social issue.

Hence, I suppose that the categorization schemes in the mind of consumers associated with non-female oriented product categories (masculine and neutral orientation) are different from the ones associated with female oriented product categories. Being these consumers advertising category schemas different and being femvertising mainly proposed and used in relation to female oriented product categories, this study considers that femvertising would better match the advertising consumers schemas associated to female-focused categories, as consumers already experienced this type of advertising in such categories.

On the other hand, I assume that femvertising applied to non-female oriented product categories would be perceived as not in line (schema-incongruent) with the advertising schemes associated with these product categories and brands in consumers' minds. This is because femvertising applied to non-female oriented<sup>2</sup> (low-fit) product categories or brands is a new and emerging practice and therefore consumers

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<sup>2</sup> as Irish Spring, Old Spice, Right Guard, and Mountain Dew identified by Grohmann (2009) as masculine brands.



have no or little previous experience with this type of advertising related to these categories. Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

*H1: Consumers perceive femvertising as more atypical compared to traditional advertising for non-female oriented product categories.*

### **2.3. Attitudes toward the advertising**

Advertising literature defines attitude toward the advertising (Aad) as “*a predisposition to respond in a favorable or unfavorable manner to a particular advertising stimulus during a particular exposure occasion*” (Lutz, 1985). In other words, attitudes toward the advertisement specifically address the evaluations of consumers with regards to a given advertising or advertising type (Lee & Hong, 2016). Therefore, attitudes toward the advertising can be considered as a measure able to provide diagnostic information about an advertisement's attitudinal impact on consumers and accurately reflect subjects' evaluations of the overall advertising stimulus (Mitchell & Olson, 1981).

More in general, attitudes are defined as an individual's internal evaluation of an object and have been an important and strongly researched concept in the marketing field for the past 20 years. The reason behind this can be mainly explained by the fact that consumers' attitudes are often regarded as relatively stable and enduring behavioural predispositions and, consequently, should be useful predictors of consumers' behaviour toward a brand, product or service. Another plausible motivation for the extensive research on this construct, may lie in the fact that social psychology has provided several theoretical models of the attitude construct (Fishbein, 1963; McGuire, 1968; Rosenberg, 1956; Triandis, 1971; Wyer, 1974) and all these conceptual frameworks, especially the one of Fishbein, have strongly stimulated attitude research in marketing (Mitchell & Olson, 1981).

Articles from the 1970s like the one of Holbrook (1978) have suggested for the first time the importance of comprehending viewers' global evaluations of advertisements and later on, Mitchell and Olson (1981) and Shimp (1981) introduced and presented the relevance of the attitudes toward the advertising construct. From that moment researchers' interest in advertising attitudes appeared to be always increasing, indeed extensive theoretical and empirical research has been developed around this variable, and it seem to be still increasing nowadays.

Recent applied studies, in particular the Advertising Research Foundation's copy testing project of Haley and Baldinger (1991), have highlighted that ad liking may be the best indicator of advertising effectiveness. Similarly, Silk and Vavra (1974) summarized literature dating back to 1929 and found a causal and significant role between the 'likability' of advertising and the positive and negative sensational

responses evoked by it, also proposing the notion that attitudes toward the advertising mediate advertising effectiveness (MacKenzie, Lutz, & Belch, 1986). Furthermore, the various academic studies to date have mainly focused on the conditions under which advertising attitudes have relatively strong effects (Gardner, 1985; Park & Young, 1984) as the main determinants of these attitudes (MacKenzie & Lutz, 1989), the role of feeling responses toward these attitudes (Stayman & Aaker, 1988) and the different causal models on the role of advertising attitudes in determining the advertising outcomes (MacKenzie, Lutz, & Belch, 1986; Brown & Stayman, 1992; Homer, 1990; Burke & Edell, 1989; Miniard, Bhatla, & Rose, 1990).

Additionally, it is possible to highlight that advertisements aiming at creating a favourable attitude toward the advertising itself, usually are not directly focused on highlighting specific product attributes or benefits and their main object is not primarily to influence the consumer's perceptions toward the brand, but they have as main focus to leave the consumers with positive feelings after the processing of the advertising (Shimp, 1981).

It is also important to emphasise that the attitudes toward the advertising construct is characterised by a duality, meaning that it consists of two relatively different dimensions: a cognitive and an emotional one. In the former case, consumers' attitudes regarding the advertising are formed through the conscious elaboration of the executional elements that constitute the advertisement. In the second case, attitudes toward an advertisement may arise in consumers because the advertisement evokes an emotional response in them, like feelings of love, joy, nostalgia or sorrow, without involving any conscious processing of the executional elements (Shimp, 1981).

### **2.3.1. Schema incongruity theory**

As mentioned above in this chapter, categorization theory indicates that when making evaluations we tend to use organized prior knowledge related to a specific category. This theoretical knowledge has been later conceptualised through the Schema triggered affect (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990), which reflects individual's information about attributes and attitudes toward a specific category.

Categorization is therefore fundamental to attitude generation and concepts of cognitive categorization have been adapted to the advertising context. More in detail, concepts of prototypicality (or congruity) and schema incongruity associated to stimuli have been identified as important elements related to consumers expectations (Peterson & Malhotra, 2023).

These theories together explain that when exposed to a stimulus, *“the perceiver automatically attempts to match it with an evoked category description. When there is a match, the perceiver will evaluate the*

*stimulus on the basis of the affect stored in the category schema. When there is a mismatch, the evaluation is conceptualized to be piecemeal*“ (Goodstein, 1993, p. 88). Piecemeal processing indicates a detailed judgment process generally resulting from the presentation of schema-inconsistent stimuli (or category-atypical) (Stafford & Stafford, 2002). In this regard, Goodstein (1993) highlighted in its study that a television advertising discrepant from category expectations motivates relatively more elaborate advertising processing compared to an advertising that matches category expectations.

More in depth, empirical work has been conducted on this knowledge in association with communication messages and advertising (Fiske & Pavelchak, 1986; Goodstein, 1993; Sujan, Bettman, & Sujan, 1986). From these studies it emerged that cues considered as typical and exemplar of a category (as typical messages and typical message sources) are usually evaluated through category-typical judgments, thus default judgments automatically applied, which can be considered as very little objective and with low levels of processing. Consequently, when the stimulus is congruent with the schema-driven expectations about ads and advertised brands of a specific category (prototypical), decisions and processing of the advertising are often made with less labour-intensive methods, thus with little or no cognitive elaboration and attention (Hawkins & Hoch, 1992).

On the other hand, Fiske's work in psychology (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Fiske & Pavelchak, 1986; Fiske, 1982) and the studies extending from it (Goodstein, 1993; Houston, Childers, & Heckler, 1987; Sujan, Bettman, & Sujan, 1986; Sujan, 1985; Stafford, Leigh, & Martin, 1995) suggest that marketing stimuli which do not fit the category typical schema are processed and evaluated in an entirely different manner compared to the ones fitting it. Schema-inconsistent (or category-atypical) cues, hence those which do not display typical category characteristics, have been identified as eliciting and stimulating detailed, piecemeal and objective evaluation and judgment processing, together with increased attention (Stafford & Stafford, 2002; Folkes, 1988; Santos, Leve, & Pratkanis, 1994). This effect is usually referred to as the pique technique since these odd stimuli pique the perceiver's interest.

In relation to consumers expectancy, Berlyne (1971) explains that an unexpected stimulus creates an “*arousal jag*” in viewers. This arousal initially causes a tension, which leads individuals to cope with the unexpectedness by undertaking increased cognitive effort and intense processing in order to codify the unexpectedness element. Therefore, this supports the categorization theory and the assumption that when consumers face ads with unexpected information, they engage in greater cognitive elaboration compared to ads with expected information.

More importantly, such unexpectedness has been found to result in more favorable evaluations (Mandler, 1982; Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989; Taylor, Wilson, & Miracle, 1994). In this regard, Taylor et al. (1994) found that ads including different message from the one expected, lead consumers toward more favourable attitudes toward the advertising and the brand and higher purchase intention, compared to

ads with non-differentiating messages. Similarly, Meyers-Levy and Sternthal (1992) observed that when the overlap between two stimuli is low (i.e. unexpected), consumers who engaged in elaborate processing obtained more favourable evaluations (Ang & Low, 2000).

Therefore, much of the research cited to this point, derived from studies in psychology and extending these various techniques (schema triggered affect) to marketing and advertising field, have excellently proven the market advantages of atypicality (Sujan, Bettman, & Sujan, 1986; Goodstein, 1993). Indeed, *“existing literature provides support for hypothetical propositions that atypical advertisements might be more effective than typical advertisements in producing detailed thought and positive evaluations of key advertising variables, such as evaluations of the ad itself, the advertised product (i.e., automobiles) and the stated intention to purchase the product”* (Stafford & Stafford, 2002, p. 27).

With regard to positive attitudes towards the advertising or brand, the predictions of Stafford, Leigh and Martin (1995) were confirmed, as they showed that preventing consumers from making rash judgements on stereotypical sellers and product categories will usually be reflected in more positive evaluations of the variables being analysed. This is simply explained by the fact that when a message is atypical it is considered and analysed in more detail, as opposed to being ignored or poorly analysed during the heuristic judgement formation process as in the case of typical messages, and consequently this will have a better impact on the attitudes of the perceivers (Stafford & Stafford, 2002). In addition, they indicate that more complex processing towards stereotypical product categories may provoke different and conflicting judgements compared to those typically associated with the category, thus exploiting the advantages of distinctiveness may be very useful for those stereotyped categories with which negative perceptions are generally associated (Stafford & Stafford, 2002).

Going beyond the expectancy dimension, it is possible also to argue that the effect of cognitive elaboration is also affected by the emotional content of the unexpected information, indeed research shows that positive moods and emotions contained in the unexpected stimuli result in more favourable evaluations by receivers, while negative moods and emotions result in less favourable evaluations (Isen & Shalker, 1982; Laird, 1974; Veitch & Griffitt, 1976). Therefore, is possible to emphasise the role of the emotional content of an advertising, which can influence and generate an affective response that impacts attitudinal responses and determines advertising effectiveness. Together with this, Heckler and Childers (1992) proved that when consumers' process and assess information congruity with already existing schemas, other than expectation, also the dimension of relevance can be considered as a key factor as it emerged that the major benefits arise from incongruities created with unexpected but relevant information.

### **2.3.2. Advertising atypicality and attitudes toward the advertising**

Considering the schema incongruity theory and the schema triggered affect theory which indicate that advertising stimuli not fitting the consumers existing schemas (i.e. schema inconsistent) lead to more intense advertising processing and in some cases to positive attitudes toward the advertising, we want to test in this study if this is the case for femvertising application in non-female oriented and low-fit product categories, thus the ones with low conceptual congruence between the product category sold and the women empowerment social cause.

Following the first hypothesis stating that femvertising could be perceived by consumers as atypical if associated to non-female product categories as not fitting the advertising schema in consumers mind associated to that category (schema-inconsistent), I further suggest that together with the schema incongruity theory perspective, the atypicality perception of femvertising applied to low-fit product categories may lead consumers to form more positive attitudes toward the advertising. This can be further motivated by the fact that, as mentioned above, relevance and emotions are impactful for positive evaluations, and it is possible to note that femvertising messages generally carry relevant information usually conveyed through positive feelings and emotions.

Therefore, my second hypothesis would be:

*H2: The higher perceived atypicality of femvertising when applied to non-female-oriented product category, compared to traditional advertising, generates in consumers more favourable attitudes towards the advertisement.*

### **2.4. Attitudes toward the brand**

Previous studies indicated that (Aad) and (Ab) are not considered as one single variable but rather as two different ones which have been separately used in order to measure effects and constructs different from each other (Goldsmith, Lafferty, & Newell, 2000; Lafferty, Goldsmith, & Newell, 2002). Indeed, attitude toward brand (Ab) has a different definition compared to attitudes toward the advertising as it is defined as a predisposition to respond in a favourable or unfavourable manner to a particular *brand* after the advertising stimulus has been shown to the individual (Sallam & Algammash, 2016; Phelps & Hoy, 1996).

Mitchell and Olson (1981, p. 318) also define attitude toward the brand as an “*individual’s internal evaluation of the brand*”. This definition includes two different characteristics of attitudes: the first is

that an attitude is directed or focused at an object (in this case a brand); the second emphasises that an attitude is evaluative in nature, meaning that this process involves an “*imputation of some degree of goodness or badness*” to the attitudinal object (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993, p. 3). Another important component of Mitchell and Olson’s definition is the concept of internal evaluation, which suggests that an attitude is an internal state. Moreover, Eagly and Chaiken (1993, p.7) also state that an attitude is a state “*that endures for at least a short period of time and presumably energizes and directs behavior*”.

In this regard Spears and Singh (2004, p. 55) similarly define attitude toward the brand as “*a relatively enduring, unidimensional summary evaluation of the brand that presumably energizes behavior*”. In developing this definition, following several previous assumptions and studies on the field (Machleit, Allen, & Madden, 1993; Zanna & Rempel, 1988; Giner-Sorolla, 1999), they further emphasise that attitude toward the brand is not the same as feelings elicited by the brand. The difference lays in the fact that feelings are transitory, whereas attitudes are relatively enduring.

Attitude toward the Brand (Ab) have also been defined as the audiences' affective reaction to the advertised brand, which indicates to what extent audiences feel that purchasing the brand is good or bad (Lutz, MacKenzie, & Belch, 1983). In contrast with this affective definition of attitude, Martin Fishbein has given a more importance to the cognitive processes and brand related cognitive structures involved in attitude formation (Lutz, MacKenzie, & Belch, 1983; MacKenzie, Lutz, & Belch, 1986; Gresham & Shimp, 1985), which can be defined as the audiences' perceptions of the advertised brand (Lutz, MacKenzie, & Belch, 1983) or in other words, as the brand attributes and benefits perceived by consumers (Najmi, Atefi, & Mirbagheri, 2012).

Despite all these definitions is common knowledge that creating favourable attitudes toward the brand (Ab) can be done by designing ads that influence beliefs and evaluations regarding the desired outcomes of consuming the brand (Shimp, 1981) and that a favourable attitude towards the brand increases the likelihood of trying or repeating the purchase of the advertised brand (Shimp, 1981; Najmi, Atefi, & Mirbagheri, 2012).

### **2.4.1. Affect transfer theory**

Affect transfer theory describes a phenomenon in which people’s favourable attitudes toward components of an object (advertising in our case) can facilitate the development of their overall attitude toward the object itself (the brand).

In this regard, various models have been defined to describe and study the relationship between attitudes toward the advertising and attitudes toward the brand. One of the most important, as it received much

attention in the literature (Gardner, 1985; Mitchell & Olson, 1981; Park & Young, 1984; Shimp, 1981; Lutz, MacKenzie, & Belch, 1983; Moore & Hutchinson, 1983; Moore & Hutchinson, 1985; Lutz & MacKenzie, 1982), is the affect transfer hypothesis (ATH), which indicates a direct unidirectional causal flow from attitudes toward the advertising to attitudes toward the brand (MacKenzie, Lutz, & Belch, 1986). In other words, it has been proposed that emotional responses to a brand advertising, namely attitudes toward the advertising, can affect audiences' attitudes toward the brand without modifying their brand cognitions (Cb) (Najmi, Atefi, & Mirbagheri, 2012; Gresham & Shimp, 1985). Moreover, through a covariance analysis, Mitchell and Olson (1981) demonstrated that attitudes toward the brand significant variance is explained by attitudes toward the advertising, which also influences brand beliefs and evaluations, providing in this way further empirical support to the affect transfer theory (MacKenzie, Lutz, & Belch, 1986). Additionally, Moore and Hutchinson (1983, 1985) observed a positive linear relationship between attitudes toward the advertising and toward the brand. At the same time, they also found that the effect weakened over time (MacKenzie, Lutz, & Belch, 1986).

In general, past research has supported the affect transfer hypothesis (ATH) in that a direct positive relationship between attitudes toward the advertising and attitudes toward the brand exists and has been investigated (MacKenzie, Lutz, & Belch, 1986). Therefore, the ATH must be regarded as a plausible structure for the mediating role of attitudes toward the advertisement (MacKenzie, Lutz, & Belch, 1986).

Several different hypotheses have been developed regarding the way through which attitudes toward the advertising directly influences attitudes toward the brand. The literature in general presents two potential competing theories for this connection to be possible:

- Classical Conditioning.

This is the most widely discussed mechanism by which attitudes toward the advertising may directly influence attitudes toward the brand. This mechanism regards the simple transfer of affect, which was firstly suggested by Shimp (1981), and subsequently, other researchers mentioned above, also used it as explanation of their results.

The classical conditioning procedure implies attitudes toward the advertising's having a direct effect on attitudes toward the brand which causes the transfer of the advertising's affective responses to the brand. Thus, the advertisement (or its components) serves as the unconditioned stimulus and the brand, intended as the conditioned stimulus, eventually results in generating the same affective reaction as the one provoked by the advertising (Edell & Burke, 1984).

These authors explain that previous research suggests that classical conditioning may be operating, but the evidence in relation to that may be considered as not conclusive. This is because for classical conditioning to be effective, its required that the unconditioned and

conditioned stimulus would be paired repeatedly over time for the relationship to have durable effects and avoid extinction needs to be reinforced at least intermittently.

On the other hand, Redondo (2012) in a study on advergames theoretically indicates that classical conditioning posits that repeated pairing of an unconditioned stimulus (e.g. feeding a dog) with a conditioned stimulus (e.g. a ringing bell) will cause the conditioned stimulus to automatically elicit a conditioned response (i.e. salivation). It has been demonstrated that classical conditioning may occur in advertising, in which an unconditioned stimulus (i.e. a pleasant advertising component such as beautiful imagery or catchy music) is simultaneously presented with a conditioned stimulus (the brand), *even when there is only a single pairing of the stimuli* (Gorn, 1982; Stuart, Shimp, & Engle, 1987).

The specific capacity of classical conditioning to shape consumers' brand attitude is typically attributed to direct affect transfer, a mechanism by which the affect elicited by the unconditioned stimulus is automatically transferred to the conditioned stimulus (Allen & Shimp, 1990; Gorn, 1982; Stuart, Shimp, & Engle, 1987; Kim, Allen, & Kardes, 1996). This conditioning mechanism is widely accepted as an explanation for brand attitude changes produced by advertising (Allen & Janiszewski, 1989; Allen & Shimp, 1990; Baker, 1999; Gorn, 1982; Kim, Allen, & Kardes, 1996; Stuart, Shimp, & Engle, 1987; McSweeney & Bierley, 1984; Shimp, Stuart, & Engle, 1991). This well-documented conditioning has also been used as an appropriate theoretical framework for understanding the effectiveness of branded entertainment in general (McCarty, 2004; Schemer, Matthes, Wirth, & Textor, 2008).

- Salient Attribute.

This second hypothesis indicates that reason for the direct effect of attitudes toward the advertising on attitudes toward the brand lies in the advertising being a salient attribute of the brand itself. In relations to this, following Fishbein (1967) attitude formation framework, consumers develop the belief that the advertising is associated with the brand and this belief is combined with the evaluation of the advertising in influencing attitudes toward the brand in the same manner as any other brand attribute. Therefore, in this case the consumer's evaluation of an advertisement would simply represent another input into the attitude toward the brand per se (Shimp, 1981).

Conceptually this mechanism assumes that consumers consciously associate the advertising and the brand (Edell & Burke, 1984). Given the experimental methodologies and tests from earlier studies, the salient attribute explanation can be considered as a significant explanation (Mitchell & Olson, 1981; Edell & Burke, 1984; Lutz & MacKenzie, 1982).



## **2.4.2. Attitudes toward the advertising and attitudes toward the brand**

As just mentioned, an important research stream has investigated the influence of attitude toward the advertising (Aad) on brand attitudes (Ab) (Brown & Stayman, 1992).

Various experiments have offered evidence that consumers' brand specific attitudes, purchase intentions, and consequently purchase behaviour are influenced greatly by their attitudes toward the ads which engendered these effects. This is especially true when the advertising processing experience provides an evaluative basis whereas a particular brand is unfamiliar for the consumer. That is, in the absence of an alternative source for forming an evaluation of a brand, the consumer may simply transfer his feeling for the advertising to the brand (Shimp, 1981).

Different theories offer a theoretical rationale and a more elaborate explanation of how attitudes toward the advertising are transferred to attitudes toward the brand, namely, attitude conditioning (i.e., classical conditioning explanation) and salient attribute assumption (i.e., advertising is an attribute of the brand).

Therefore, it is common knowledge that attitude toward the advertisement (A), an affective construct representing consumers' feelings of favourability/unfavorability toward the advertising itself, has positive and significant effects on consumers attitudes toward brands as well as on their purchase intention.

Additionally, many studies considered attitude towards advertisement (Aad) as the main input of attitude towards brand (Ab), with both attitudes toward the advertising and attitudes toward the brand hypothesized to have an effect on consumers' purchase intention (PI) (Goldsmith, Lafferty, & Newell, 2000; Lafferty, Goldsmith, & Newell, 2002). Hence, it is widely accepted that feelings evoked by marketing communications (e.g. advertisements) have important effects on consumers' response to the brand (Kirmani & Campbell, 2009). In relation to this knowledge, it is possible to assume that the audience exposed to an advertising message builds up an attitude toward the advertisement (Aad) which in turn influences attitude toward the brand (Ab), purchase intentions (Lutz, MacKenzie, & Belch, 1983) and consumers' buying behaviour (Gresham & Shimp, 1985; Najmi, Atefi, & Mirbagheri, 2012).

More in depth, it is clear that findings imply the importance of advertisement in practitioners' strategic marketing as it helps in communicating positive brand image and influencing consumers' intention to purchase the advertised product (Sallam & Algammash, 2016).

Therefore, by applying to the context of our study this theoretical knowledge arising from attitudes toward the advertising and attitudes toward the brand stream of research, indicating the plausibility of the direct influence of attitudes toward the advertising on attitudes toward the brand, it is possible to propose the final connections for the development of the conceptual model of this study, which involves

a third and final hypothesis described in the following section, which merges together the previous assumptions and the attitudes toward the advertising-attitudes toward the brand relation just described.

*H3: The higher perceived atypicality of femvertising when applied to non-female-oriented product category, compared to traditional advertising, generates in consumers more favourable attitudes towards the advertisement, which in turn leads to more favourable consumers' attitudes toward the brand.*

## 2.5. Conceptual model

This therefore implies an indirect causal relationship between femvertising practices and attitudes toward the brand, where atypicality and attitudes toward the advertisement together explain how these are related between each other. Following this scheme, we can propose another final hypothesis:

After having dealt with the theoretical framework and from this having proposed the various hypotheses, it is possible to develop and present the overall conceptual model that represents the thread of the present research study:

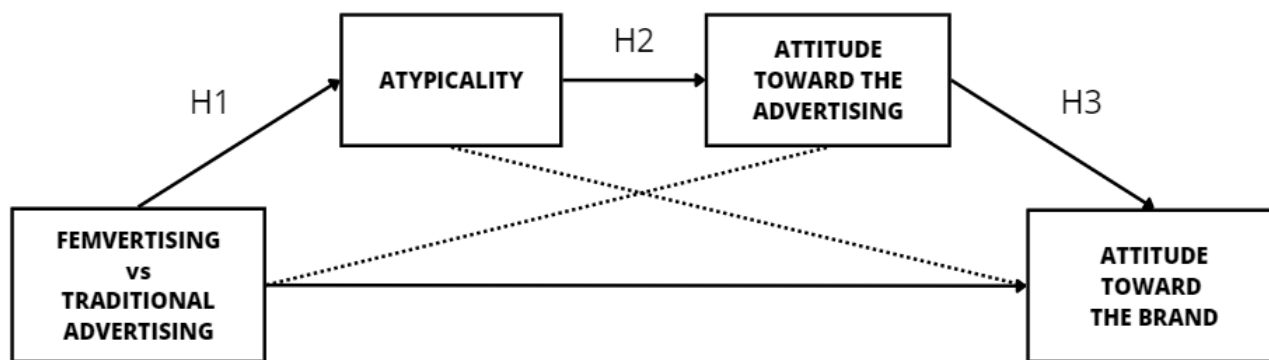


Figure 4: Conceptual model

## CHAPTER 3 – Empirical validation and studies

### 3.1. Pretest study

Before testing the hypotheses, a pretest study was conducted to identify a product category perceived as not female oriented.

In order to do so, the pretest study was presented to a sample of 70 Italian respondents ( $M_{\text{age}} = 34.96$ ,  $SD = 14.59$ ) and the sample included both males and females (43 females) (*Appendix B*).

The study consisted of a single factor five levels (product category: beer vs. car vs. shampoo and conditioner vs. tampons vs. sportswear) online experiment developed through the Qualtrics platform and in Italian language, for practical reasons, being the sample collected in Italy. More in-depth, the survey was conducted online, and respondents were personally contacted and sent the questionnaire through a link. The responses were collected in the arch of few days in the month of May 2023.

Hence, respondents were randomly assigned to one of five different scenarios each one presenting the image of one of the five different product categories. The categories presented were respectively: beer, car, shampoo and conditioner, tampons and sportswear, and were chosen by considering some of the major brands involved in femvertising practices and studied in this regard (Hsu, 2018; Åkestam, Rosengren, & Dahlen, 2017) like Always, Audi, Dove, Nike, Pantene and so on to understand on which product categories femvertising messages have been applied in recent years.

All the images depicted generic representations of the products under examination and were retrieved from Google Images and didn't include any name or known attribute of a specific brand (*see Appendix A*).

After looking at the image, respondents were asked to indicate on a two-item 7 points Likert to which extent they agreed (1= completely disagree, 7= completely agree) with two different affirmations stating:

- “The product category in question is masculine”
- “The product category in question is feminine”.

The scale used was translated into Italian and adapted from Douglas L. Fugate and Joanna Phillips (2010) study on product gender perceptions. More in depth, this scale conceptualises gender perceptions in terms of masculinity and femininity as two separate dimensions rather than opposite ends of the same continuum, as this approach has been widely applied in both product-gender and gender identity studies (Milner & Fodness, 1996).

Successively, the sample was similarly asked to evaluate the shown picture in terms of their perceptions of perceived fit between a specific product category and its congruence with the theme of women empowerment. In order to do so, respondents were presented with a three item 7 points Likert scale (1= completely disagree, 7= completely agree, Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.899$ ) (Barone, Norman, & Miyazaki., 2007). The items showed where the following:

- "I believe that the *product category* in question is compatible with the theme of women's empowerment"
- "I believe that the *image of the product category* in question is compatible with the theme of women's empowerment"
- "I believe that the *target consumers of the product category* in question are compatible with the theme of women's empowerment".

These three affirmations were built on the basis of what is mentioned above in Chapter 2, which reflects literature knowledge on the notion that the fit between a specific issue and a brand can arise from three different matches, namely an image, functional or target match.

In this regard, we translated and adapted to the context of product category and women empowerment the retailer-cause fit scale from Barone, Norman and Miyazaki (2007) study, which measured the fit between:

- 1) the brands' core product line and the cause
- 2) the images of the brand and the cause
- 3) the target markets of the brand and the cause

Consequently, their measurement approach was chosen and adapted for this study as it captures all three different match perspectives regarding the fit construct described above.

Therefore, in this second part of the pretest the focus was on measuring the consumer's perception regarding these matches between the proposed product categories and the social issue of woman empowerment in order to subsequently assess the *perceived fit* between these two. In other words, the measurement of these different variables was conducted with the aim of defining whether consumers perceive the five different product categories presented as having a high fit or a low fit with this female-focused social issue.

### 3.1.1. Results

In order to compute the analyses, some initial adjustments were applied to the dataset.

Firstly, the data related to the condition seen by each respondent was recodified into a categorical variable (IV) associating the shown stimulus to the five different product categories, namely beer, car, shampoo and conditioner, tampons and sportswear<sup>3</sup>.

Related to the second part of the study investigating the perceived fit consumers associated between the different product categories and the theme of women empowerment, a new mean variable (PF), comprehensive of all the measures of the three items measured in this scale, was computed in order to create one single variable indicating the average perceived fit associated to a specific category.

**Gender:** two separate one-way ANOVA were conducted including the consumer's perceptions of masculinity and femininity toward the different product categories.

Starting to interpret the data, is possible to notice from the descriptive results that the beer product category was considered as the one with lower levels of femininity and a slightly higher level of masculinity ( $M_{fem}=2.13$ ,  $SD=1.25$ ;  $M_{masc}=4.53$ ,  $SD=2.20$ ) compared to the other categories. On the opposite, the condition involving tampons resulted as the one evaluated with the highest levels of femininity and the lowest levels of masculinity ( $M_{fem}=5.77$ ,  $SD=2.09$ ;  $M_{masc}=1.54$ ,  $SD=1.39$ ) among all the different categories. Related to car ( $M_{fem}=3.27$ ,  $SD=1.67$ ;  $M_{masc}=4.40$ ,  $SD=1.72$ ) and sportswear ( $M_{fem}=3.15$ ,  $SD=1.73$ ;  $M_{masc}=4.00$ ,  $SD=1.58$ ) is possible to note that they both reported similar levels of femininity and very similar levels of masculinity between each other and compared to the beer category. Therefore, based on masculinity perceptions these categories are perceived almost as masculine as the beer, but at the same time, they present higher levels of femininity compared to it. Finally, the descriptive reports for the shampoo and conditioner product category show that it is perceived as the second category with the highest levels of femininity and lower levels of masculinity ( $M_{fem}=4.79$ ,  $SD=1.72$ ;  $M_{masc}=3.21$ ,  $SD=1.37$ ) after the one of tampons, indeed representing the second most feminine product category among five (*Table2; Appendix B*).

More importantly, the specific result of the two one-way ANOVA highlighted that the product category has a statistically significant differential impact on both masculinity ( $F(4,65)=7.134$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and femininity ( $F(4,65)=10.020$ ,  $p < .001$ ) perceptions of consumers (*Appendix B*).

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<sup>3</sup> The five product categories were recodified into the following numbers: beer=1; car=2; shampoo and conditioner=3; tampons=4; sportswear=5.

**Table 2. Descriptive gender perception of the five product categories<sup>4</sup>.**

CATEGORY	GENDER	MEAN	STANDARD DEVIATION
Beer	Fem.	<b>2.13</b>	1.25
	Masc.	<b>4.53</b>	2.20
Car	Fem.	<b>3.27</b>	1.67
	Masc.	<b>4.40</b>	1.72
Shampoo and conditioner	Fem.	<b>4.79</b>	1.72
	Masc.	<b>3.21</b>	1.37
Tampons	Fem.	<b>5.77</b>	2.09
	Masc.	<b>1.54</b>	1.40
Sportswear	Fem.	<b>3.15</b>	1.72
	Masc.	<b>4.00</b>	1.59

Following this mechanism is possible to state that beer, car and sportswear are perceived as masculine categories, being high on masculinity ( $>3.5$ ) and low ( $<3.5$ ) on femininity. While shampoo and conditioner and tampons were valued as collectively high on femininity and low on masculinity, therefore identified as feminine product categories. None of the product categories presented showed low levels or high levels on both the two dimensions at the same time, indeed indicating that none of them can be identified as undifferentiated or androgynous.

Additionally, to better understand the gender perceptions of consumers for each product category a Bonferroni's post-hoc analysis was conducted. In this way, it was possible to define in more detail the comparison between each product type in terms of masculinity and femininity perceptions.

In terms of *masculinity* ( $F(4,65)=7.134$ ,  $p < .001$ ), the Bonferroni pot-hoc test revealed that the beer product category is associated to statistically significantly higher values of masculinity compared to tampons ( $\Delta=3.00$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and that there are no statistically significant differences between beer, car ( $\Delta=.13$ ,  $p=1.00$ ), sportswear ( $\Delta=.53$ ,  $p=1.00$ ) and shampoo and conditioner ( $\Delta=1.32$ ,  $p=.402$ ) product categories. In other words, the beer product category is perceived as more masculine compared to tampons and equally masculine compared to cars, sportswear and shampoo and conditioner.

<sup>4</sup> In this table the relevant statistical data have been reordered to make them clearer and easier to read and to highlight the comparisons the study focuses on. For the complete SPSS table see Appendix B

Following this lead is possible also to highlight that, related to masculinity perceptions, the tampons category is perceived by respondents with statistically significantly lower values of masculinity compared to cars ( $\Delta = -2.86$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and sportswear ( $\Delta = -2.46$ ,  $p = .004$ ), other than beer as just mentioned. In this case as well, there is no statistically significant difference between tampons and shampoo and conditioner ( $\Delta = -1.68$ ,  $p = .126$ ). These results indicate that tampons are perceived as less masculine than beer, car and sportswear product categories.

By looking at the other group's comparisons results posit that, in terms of masculinity, the shampoo and conditioner product category has no statistically significant difference with cars ( $\Delta = -1.19$ ,  $p = .644$ ) and sportswear ( $\Delta = -.79$ ,  $p = 1.00$ ) (*Appendix B*).

As for the masculinity variable, through the Bonferroni post-hoc analysis, the comparisons of the different conditions, namely the five product categories under study, in terms of consumers' *femininity* perceptions ( $F(4,65) = 10.020$ ,  $p < .001$ ), were also investigated.

In this case, in terms of consumers' femininity evaluations of each category, the one of tampons emerged to be statistically significantly higher compared to beer ( $\Delta = 3.64$ ,  $p < .001$ ), car ( $\Delta = 2.50$ ,  $p = .002$ ) and sportswear ( $\Delta = 2.62$ ,  $p = .002$ ) product categories, while having no statistically significant difference with the shampoo and conditioner category ( $\Delta = .98$ ,  $p = 1.00$ ). Therefore, these comparisons indicate that tampons are perceived by consumers as the more feminine product category among all, which can be considered in line with the masculinity perceptions comparisons between these same categories reported above.

In accordance with the results presented until now, the beer category was valued with lower levels of femininity compared to tampons and compared to the shampoo and conditioner ( $\Delta = -2.65$ ,  $p < .001$ ) category, while comparing it with cars ( $\Delta = -1.13$ ,  $p = .719$ ) and sportswear ( $\Delta = -1.02$ ,  $p = 1.00$ ), results show no statistically significant differences.

Finally, the shampoo and conditioner product category compared to cars ( $\Delta = 1.52$ ,  $p = .188$ ) and sportswear ( $\Delta = 1.63$ ,  $p = .150$ ), and cars compared to sportswear ( $\Delta = .11$ ,  $p = 1.00$ ), all showed no statistically significant differences between each other (*Appendix B*).

***Perceived fit:*** Going on with the analysis of the results of the pretest study, another one-way ANOVA was conducted in relation with the measurement of the perceived fit that consumers believe each product category had with the theme of women empowerment. This analysis revealed that the product category (IV) has a statistically significant differential impact on the consumer's perceived fit ( $F(4,65) = 7.628$ ,  $p < .001$ ) (*Appendix B*).

Specifically, in this case, the descriptive statistics emerged emphasises again that the beer product category was considered as the one with lower levels of perceived fit ( $M_{fit}=2.15$ ,  $SD=1.15$ ) compared to the other categories. Similarly, cars ( $M_{fit}=3.13$ ,  $SD=1.37$ ) and shampoo and conditioner ( $M_{fit}=2.93$ ,  $SD=1.53$ ) also showed low levels of perceived fit with woman empowerment issue, reporting alike values between each other, and differing little from the beer category levels. On the other hand, the tampons ( $M_{fit}=4.80$ ,  $SD=1.48$ ) product category obtained the highest levels of perceived fit among all the five different ones, followed by sportswear ( $M_{fit}=4.13$ ,  $SD=1.64$ ) (Table 3; Appendix B).

**Table 3. Descriptive perceived fit of the five product categories<sup>5</sup>.**

CATEGORY	PERCEIVED FIT MEAN	STANDARD DEVIATION
Beer	2.15	1.15
Car	3.13	1.37
Shampoo and conditioner	2.93	1.53
Tampons	4.80	1.48
Sportswear	4.13	1.64

Even for this variable, a Bonferroni analysis was conducted to compare the different categories between each other and better understand their differences in terms of the consumers' perceived fit with the women's empowerment theme. Here the data shows that the beer category is perceived by respondents with statistically significantly lower levels of perceived fit compared to tampons ( $\Delta= -2.64$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and sportswear ( $\Delta= -1.97$ ,  $p=.004$ ). In other terms, these data indicate that, compared to the beer category, respondents believe that tampons and sportswear are product categories that can be better associated, in terms of products, image and target, with the theme of female emancipation. Differently, there is no statistically significant difference between beer and cars ( $\Delta= -.98$ ,  $p=.597$ ) and shampoo and conditioner ( $\Delta= -.77$ ,  $p=1.00$ ). By looking at the tampons category, is possible to note that consistently with the beer results, it emerges to be perceived with higher levels of perceived fit compared to the beer, but also

<sup>5</sup> In this table the relevant statistical data have been reordered to make them clearer and easier to read and to highlight the comparisons the study focuses on. For the complete SPSS table see Appendix B



compared to cars ( $\Delta=1.66$ ,  $p=.026$ ) and shampoo and conditioner ( $\Delta=1.87$ ,  $p=.009$ ), while showing no statistically significant difference compared to sportswear ( $\Delta=.67$ ,  $p=1.00$ ). These results indeed, indicate that tampons are perceived as more in fit with woman empowerment compared to cars and shampoo and conditioner, and considered equal to sportswear. Finally, the shampoo and conditioner product category compared to cars ( $\Delta= -.20$ ,  $p=1.00$ ) and sportswear ( $\Delta= -1.20$ ,  $p=.293$ ), and sportswear compared to cars ( $\Delta=.99$ ,  $p=.647$ ), all showed no statistically significant differences between each other (*Appendix B*).

### 3.1.2. Discussion

The measurement of these different variables was conducted with the aim of understanding whether consumers perceive the five different product categories as female-oriented or non-female-oriented and in association to that, whether they have a high or low fit with the social cause of women empowerment. This is because from the literature it emerges the assumption that female-oriented product categories or brands are considered as having a high fit with female-focused social issues, while non-female-oriented ones are associated with low levels of fit.

In these terms, the results of the first two one-way ANOVA analyses conducted showed that beer, car and sportswear were the product categories perceived as more masculine and less feminine, while tampons and shampoo and conditioner were the ones perceived as more feminine and less masculine. More in-depth, even though in some cases the differences were small, it is possible to highlight from these analyses that the product category perceived as more masculine compared to the others is the one of the beer, since it shows the highest levels of masculinity and the lower levels of femininity. On the opposite, the most feminine category among all appeared to be the one of tampons, as it showed the highest levels of femininity and lowest levels of masculinity (*see Table 2*).

Together with these, also from the results obtained from the third one-way ANOVA studying the consumers' perceptions of fit between the different product categories and the theme of women empowerment, the beer appeared as the category with the lowest levels of perceived fit, followed in this case by cars and shampoo and conditioner. On the other hand, tampons and sportswear were considered by consumers as having the highest fit with women empowerment themes.

What is interesting to note here, is that in contrast with the gender perceptions, despite being considered as one of the categories perceived as masculine (beer, car and sportswear), sportswear is seen as having a great fit with the issue of women empowerment in consumers' minds. Similarly, shampoo and conditioner, considered as a feminine category, is at the same time associated with low levels of perceived fit with female emancipation themes.

This indicates that themes of female empowerment are perceived by consumers as fitting the five product categories presented at different levels and probably without a specific pattern based on gender perceptions, indeed this indicates that future research is needed in this direction. Adding to this is also possible to highlight that probably, having a high or low fit with this female-focused social cause, can be not always strictly related to the gender perceptions of the product category as, like in the sportswear and shampoo cases, is not assured that a masculine product category can't display a high fit with themes of women empowerment and that a feminine category will in every case have high fit with these type of female-focused themes. At the same time is also needed to mention that the levels of the gender dimensions and the perceived fit associated to these categories were not extremely high or extremely low but were evaluated on average around 3 and 4 out of 7, indeed close to the middle level.

What also emerges to be interesting from the analyses is that, comparing the Bonferroni analyses of the two dimensions of gender perceptions, it is possible to highlight that masculinity and femininity perceptions are not always proportional. Indeed, in the case of beer, it was perceived as more masculine only compared to tampons, while in terms of femininity, it was perceived as less feminine again toward tampons but also toward shampoo and conditioner, which is the same as saying that shampoo is perceived as more feminine but not as less masculine compared to beer.

This conceptualization is in line with the literature supporting the structure of this scale, in contrast to the limitation toward only the two main gender orientations, namely female and male, sees the two gender dimensions as two independent elements instead of two opposite values. Indeed, this measurement involves the possibility that results indicate appearing contrasting levels of gender perceptions, which may indicate undifferentiated or androgynous gender perceptions.

After all these considerations, the most important one recalls the first part of this paragraph, which, through the scores collected for each product category in all the different analyses, revealed which of them was the most representative of being more feminine or masculine and having a high fit or low fit among the different categories. From these results, the product category that emerged to be the most masculine among all the dimensions, together with having the lower fit with the theme of female emancipation, was selected for conducting the main study. The results show that the product category with the lowest levels of perceived fit and highest levels of masculinity and lowest levels of femininity is the beer. Additionally, even though in some cases this category had no significant difference compared with some of the other ones (as compared to car, sportswear and shampoo and conditioner for masculinity; car and sportswear for femininity; car and shampoo and conditioner for perceived fit), the beer category was still the one chosen for the development of the main study by looking at the mean differences which still indicated lower levels of masculinity and perceived fit compared to the other categories. Therefore, the beer product category was used for conducting the main study focusing on the

effectiveness of femvertising practices in the context of non-female-oriented and low-fit product categories.

## **3.2. Main study**

Starting from the results of the analyses conducted in the pretest study, the second part of the research focuses on testing the different hypotheses developed in accordance with the literature review in relation to the effectiveness of femvertising practices when applied to non-female-oriented and low-fit product categories. In this context, the main study involves the measurement of consumers' perceptions in terms of perceived atypicality, attitudes toward the advertising and attitudes toward the brand. More in detail a double mediation effect study is conducted.

### **3.2.1. Procedure**

In order to do so, the main study was presented to a sample of 150 Italian respondents with different demographics. The age range of respondents goes from 18 ( $MIN_{age}$ ) to 71 ( $MAX_{age}$ ) years old ( $M_{age} = 33.87$ ,  $SD = 13.24$ ), and the sample included both males and females (93 females) in accordance to the findings of the research gap, which highlight that future research needed to take into consideration and investigate also male consumers in relations to femvertising practices (*Appendix D*).

The study consisted in a single factor two levels (type of advertisement: femvertising vs. traditional advertising), developed through the Qualtrics platform and in Italian language for practical reasons, being the sample collected in Italy, and conducted online. More in-depth, the survey was conducted online, and respondents were personally contacted and sent the questionnaire as a link. The responses were collected in the arch of a week in the month of May 2023.

### **3.2.2. Stimuli development**

In this study, respondents were randomly assigned to two different scenarios representing in one case a traditional advertising and in the other one a femvertising, both associated to the beer product category, as it was identified through the pretest analyses as the one perceived as more masculine and having the lowest fit with women empowerment themes.

Together with the different scenarios, in both cases the respondents were initially introduced to a brand description. The brand in question is an invented brand representing the beer product category. More in

detail, the brand was named “Luften Beer” and was described as a German bottled beer company founded in 1947. After this introduction, depending on the condition randomly assigned, respondents saw a picture of one of the two advertisement types, which were presented together with a short description and the Italian translation of the slogan in the image and without mentioning any brand name.

In the case of the traditional advertising, the image depicted three men in a bar drinking beer, cheering and screaming, probably looking at an exciting sport match. Similarly, the femvertising condition depicted mostly women, also in this case at a bar drinking some beers and screaming and cheering all looking in the same direction, as if they were watching a game. In both scenarios, the images were presented together with the slogan “Cheers to all” (*see Appendix C*).

In order to develop these stimuli a Heineken commercial was used as starting point for the femvertising condition. This commercial indeed was the stimulus used for the study, but it was modified in order to eliminate every brand name or attribute of the specific brand. successively, a comparable stimulus was developed by using an image retrieved from Google image which was equal in all factors to the other but featuring only males. After finding the picture the same slogan used in the Heineken commercial was attached to it, namely “Cheers to all”.

### **3.2.3. Measures**

After reading and looking at the scenario, a manipulation check for the case of femvertising was conducted. Therefore, the respondents who were exposed to the femvertising condition, were asked to evaluate the stimulus in terms of female stereotyping, indeed indicating on a 7 point Likert scale to which extent (1=not at all, 7= very much) the communication message seen included a stereotyped image of women. This manipulation was therefore added to this condition in order to measure if the femvertising stimulus was effectively perceived by consumers as depicting a non-stereotyped representation of women.

Successively, all respondents were asked to indicate and rate the displayed randomized condition in order to measure their evaluations in terms of the advertising itself and in terms of the brand using that specific advertising.

Therefore, respondents were firstly asked to evaluate the communication message seen through a three-item semantic bipolar 7 points scale (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.940$ ) involving the following opposite ends:

- very unfavourable/very favourable
- very bad/very good
- dislike very much/like very much

This scale was translated into Italian and adapted from Peterson and Malhotra (2023) study on creative television ads.

The same scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.965$ ) was used also for the measurement of the consumers' evaluation of the brand. More in detail, respondents were asked to evaluate the invented brand "Luften Beer" previously presented and introduced to them at the beginning of the questionnaire.

Both the consumers evaluation of the advertising and the brand used to measure their attitude toward the advertising and attitude toward the brand, were proposed to respondents before asking them their atypicality perceptions related to the advertising seen, in order to not interfere and influence their evaluations.

Indeed, the atypicality construct was presented to consumers as the last part of the questionnaire, in which respondents were asked to express through a 3 items 7 points Likert scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.954$ ) to which extent they agreed (1= completely disagree, 7= completely agree) with the following affirmations referring to the communication message seen (Peterson & Malhotra, 2023):

- "Is in line with my expectations of typical beer brand advertising."
- "Uses themes that I expected from a communication message of a beer brand."
- "Made me feel sensations I was expecting to feel during a communication message from a beer brand."

Even in this case, the scale used was presented in Italian and adapted from the "Ad Match" scale developed in the study of Peterson and Naresh Malhotra (2023) used to measure advertising typicality judgments of creative advertising.

From this scale is possible to notice that the construct measured is the one of typicality perceptions toward the advertising and not directly the atypicality one. Indeed, this scale was selected inferring that consumers evaluations of low typicality would indicate consumers perceptions of high atypicality.

The measurement of these different variables was conducted with the aim of defining whether consumers perceive femvertising as atypical compared to traditional advertising and if the atypicality perceptions lead consumers to experience positive and higher attitudes toward the advertising and the brand compared to the traditional advertising, in the context of non-female oriented product categories.

### **3.2.4. Results**

In order to conduct all the statistical analyses needed to test, accept or reject the different hypotheses, the dataset was modified as follows. Firstly, from the 153 responses collected 3 were deleted as they

were incomplete, therefore the final sample was composed of 150 responses. Secondly, the independent variable was recodified into a dichotomous variable (IV) based on which condition (0=traditional vs. 1=femvertising) respondents were exposed to.

Successively, the various scales' reliability was measured and then the means of the three items constituting the scales of attitudes toward the advertising, attitudes toward the brand and atypicality were computed in order to create three new variables reflecting the average evaluations each consumer assigned to the stimulus seen in terms of these three different constructs. More in detail, in the case of atypicality, being the scale a reversed one since it was created to measure typicality perceptions, before computing the mean, the values were recodified in the same variable in order to have high values reflecting the case in which respondents perceived the communication message as atypical and low values for when consumers perceived the communication message as typical.

The first results studied through a one sample T-test analysis were the ones regarding the stereotyped representation of women in the femvertising condition, which revealed that the stereotype perception value ( $M_{\text{stereotype}}=1.67$ ,  $SD=1.22$ ;  $t(77)=-16.83$ ,  $p<.001$ ) (*Appendix D*) was lower compared to the midpoint scale comparable value ( $1.67<4$ ). Therefore, the data proved that the condition of femvertising was effectively perceived by consumers as depicting a non-stereotyped representation of women.

Successively, from an independent T-test analysis, it emerged that atypicality perceptions of consumers toward the femvertising condition were higher than the atypicality perceptions of consumers toward the traditional advertising ( $M_{\text{fem}}=4.56$  ( $SD=1.52$ );  $M_{\text{trad}}=2.57$  ( $SD=1.29$ );  $t(148)=8.786$ ,  $p<.001$ ). These results provided full support to H1<sup>6</sup> indicating that femvertising condition is effectively perceived as more atypical compared to the traditional one.

Moreover, an independent T-test was also conducted related to the consumers' attitudes toward the advertising and the brand to provide further interesting insights. From the results attitudes toward the advertising emerged to be higher when the femvertising condition was seen compared to the traditional one ( $M_{\text{fem}}=5.78$  ( $SD=1.10$ );  $M_{\text{trad}}=4.04$  ( $SD=1.60$ );  $t(148)=7.705$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Additionally, data shows that consumers who were exposed to the femvertising condition also reported higher attitudes toward the brand compared to the ones who were exposed to the traditional advertising condition ( $M_{\text{fem}}=5.62$  ( $SD=1.38$ );  $M_{\text{trad}}=3.90$ , ( $SD=1.54$ );  $t(148)=7.239$ ,  $p<.001$ ) (*see Appendix D*). In other words, the femvertising condition was perceived by respondents as more atypical and leading to more positive attitudes toward the advertising and brand, compared to the traditional one.

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<sup>6</sup> H1: Consumers perceive femvertising as more atypical compared to traditional advertising for non-female oriented product categories.

Next, to test the mediation model and the various hypotheses of the study, a Model 6 of PROCESS MACRO (Hayes, 2017) analysis was conducted. The first step of the analysis showed that the independent variable of communication message type (femvertising=1; traditional advertising=0) significantly and positively influences the first mediator of the model, namely the atypicality perceptions of consumers ( $b=1.99$ ,  $t=8.59$ ,  $p=.000$ ). Therefore, these results are in line with the ones of the independent t-test and provide again full support to H1, showing that using femvertising instead of traditional advertising leads consumers to higher perceptions of atypicality in the context of non-female oriented product categories.

Successively, the results of the analysis revealed that the communication message type also positively and significantly influences the second mediator of the model, namely consumers' attitudes toward the advertising ( $b=1.70$ ,  $t=6.22$ ,  $p=.000$ ). On the other hand, despite the femvertising condition was perceived as both more atypical and with higher levels of attitudes toward the advertising, it interestingly emerged that attitudes toward the advertising is not significantly influenced by atypicality perceptions ( $b=.019$ ,  $t=.24$ ,  $p=.807$ ). Therefore, the data do not support the statement of H2<sup>7</sup> related to the positive influence of atypicality perceptions on consumers' attitudes toward the advertising in the context of femvertising versus traditional advertising for non-female product categories, indeed H2 was rejected.

In relation to the dependent variable of consumers' attitudes toward the brand, data shows that it is positively influenced only by consumers' attitudes toward the advertising ( $b=.912$ ,  $t=19.57$ ,  $p=.000$ ), i.e. the second mediator. The other variables, the independent one ( $b=.65$ ,  $t=.38$ ,  $p=.707$ ) and atypicality ( $b=.039$ ,  $t=.87$ ,  $p=.385$ ), emerged as not significant in influencing attitudes toward the brand (*see Figure 6 and Appendix D*).

In conclusion, the analysis indicated that the total effect of the communication type (IV) on consumers' brand attitudes emerged as positive and significant ( $b=1.73$ , boot standard error [SE]=.238, 95% [CI]=1.25;2.20), while the direct effect of the independent variable (femvertising vs traditional advertising) on the dependent one (Ab) resulted as not significant ( $b=.07$ , boot standard error [SE]=.173, 95% [CI]= -0.28;0.40).

Lastly, among the three different possible indirect effects of the model, the one that emerged to be statistically significant ( $b=1.55$ , boot standard error [SE]=.236, 95% [CI]=1.07;2.00) was the one explaining that femvertising (vs traditional adv) positively influences consumer's attitudes toward the advertising, which in turn positively influence consumers' attitudes toward the brand (*see Figure 7 and Appendix D*).

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<sup>7</sup> H2: The higher perceived atypicality of femvertising when applied to non-female-oriented product category, compared to traditional advertising, generates in consumers more favourable attitudes towards the advertisement.

These results indicate that data support only part of H3<sup>8</sup>, namely, the assumption that positive consumers' attitudes toward the advertising would positively influence consumers' attitudes toward the brand. Despite this, H3 was constructed in order to describe the full mediation model, therefore, other than assuming the influence of attitudes toward the advertising on attitudes toward the brand, it also included the rejected H2 assumption stating that atypicality perceptions would have significantly influenced attitudes toward the advertisement. For this reason, also H3 emerged to be not supported by the statistical results and therefore was rejected.

To sum up, the following images depict a representation of the relations and the effect resulted as statistically significant from the analysis conducted.

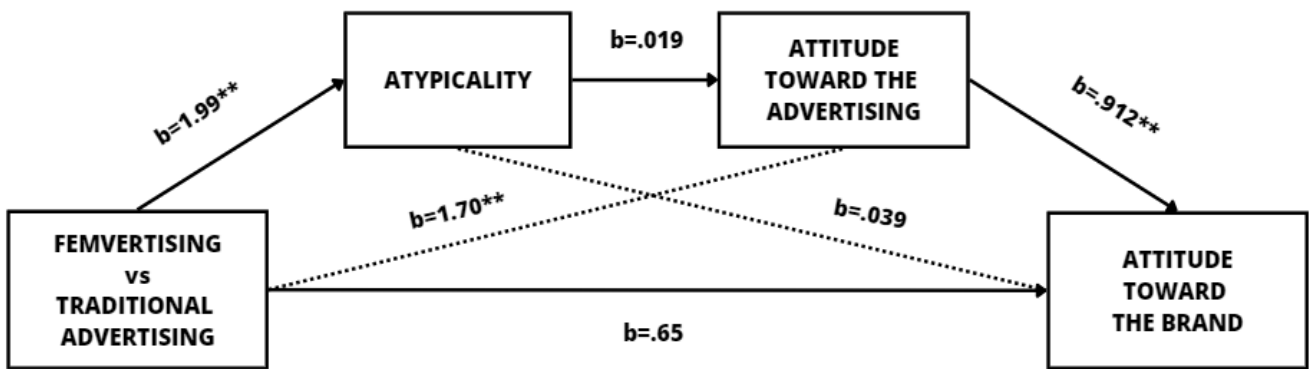


Figure 6: Significant interactions in the conceptual model

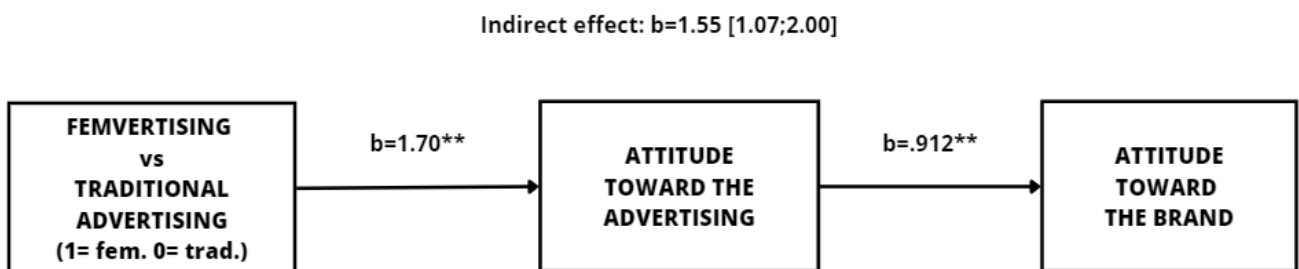


Figure 7: Mediation significant indirect effect

<sup>8</sup> H3: The higher perceived atypicality of femvertising when applied to non-female-oriented product category, compared to traditional advertising, generates in consumers more favourable attitudes towards the advertisement, which in turn leads to more favourable consumers' attitudes toward the brand.



### 3.2.5. Discussion

Based on the results emerged from the various analyses conducted in the main study is possible to highlight some interesting findings.

Firstly, is important to notice that all the different stimulus presented to respondents were perceived as expected. Indeed, the femvertising condition was evaluated as a non-stereotypical representation of women together with being perceived as more atypical compared to the traditional advertising stimulus. Additionally, femvertising also generally led consumers to report more positive and higher attitudes toward the advertising itself and toward the brand compared to the traditional one, as expected.

Although the stimuli were perceived in the manner theorised and led to the expected consumer reactions, the hypothesised model was not fully supported. Indeed, even if the femvertising condition was perceived as more atypical and led to more positive attitudes in consumers compared to the traditional one, the statistical results explained that the connection between atypicality perceptions and consumers' attitudes toward the advertising is not statistically significant.

More in detail, in accordance with the first hypothesis, data highlighted that femvertising applied to non-female-oriented (and therefore low-fit) product categories, significantly affected atypicality perceptions, indicating that when femvertising is involved, the advertising is perceived as generally more atypical compared to the traditional one.

This thus allows highlighting that, in accordance with the theories of categorisation and schema incongruence found in the literature, being the femvertising condition perceived as atypical, proves that femvertising applied to non-female-oriented product categories does not match the existing advertising schema associated with these types of product categories in the minds of consumers, thus indicating schema incongruence.

On the contrary, again in conjunction with the theories presented in chapter two, the traditional advertising condition emerged to be perceived by consumers as a more typical communication type for non-female-focused product categories compared to femvertising, thus indicating that this type of advertising better matches the advertising patterns associated with these types of product categories in the minds of consumers, pointing to schema congruence.

Nevertheless, even though the literature explains that schema incongruence can lead to better and more positive consumer attitudes, this study may be not the case as the statistical results show that atypicality and thus schema incongruence is not the reason why respondents have reported positive attitudes towards the advertising and the brand. In other words, although the condition of femvertising has been perceived as more atypical and more positively in terms of consumer attitudes towards the advertising and brand

compared to the traditional one, the statistical results explain that, in this case applied to non-female-oriented product categories, the atypicality construct does not explain and did not influence the positive attitudes reported by consumers, in contrast to what was hypothesized. This result indicates that in this case some other factors influenced the positive consumers' attitudes towards the advertising and the brand toward femvertising, indeed further research in this direction is needed.

The reason behind this could lie in the fact that, as the extant literature highlights, when an unexpected stimulus is encountered affective responses occur (Mandler, 1995). In relation to this, according to various streams of research, an unexpected stimulus activates associations in the memory network that can be both positive and negative (Gardner, Effects of mood states on consumer information processing, 1987). Either way, such emotional experience generated by an unexpected stimulus is likely to be more intense considering that more cognitive elaboration is applied to solve the unexpectedness encountered.

In line with this, a recent study from Peterson and Malhotra (2023) suggests a new conceptual model to better understand the important role of advertising typicality judgments in the construction of evaluative judgments in television advertising processing of creative ads. This model explains the relationship between advertising typicality and attitudes toward the advertising, but unlike previous studies that have shown only a positive relationship between the two, this study proposes a more complex advertising typicality – attitude toward the advertising relationship in which schema incongruity (atypicality) can have either a positive or a negative impact on viewers' attitudes toward the advertising.

Moreover, it is possible that the reason behind this result may lie in the fact that respondents did not fully understand the presented stimulus or scales and that this conceptual framework would work on different context involving for example advertisings as video commercials or different brand types, as luxury ones.

Although the relationship between atypicality perceptions and attitudes toward the advertisement emerged as not being statistically supported, the study did however confirm a very important relationship. The relationship in question, statistically explained as a positive and significant indirect effect, indicates that femvertising effectively leads consumers to develop positive attitudes toward this type of advertising itself (focused on social issues that affect the figure of women) when applied to product categories not typically feminine. In addition to this, this relationship is further strengthened and extended by the statistically significant connection explaining that positive attitudes of consumers towards this type of female-focused advertising applied to non-female and low-fit categories subsequently lead consumers also to experience and report positive attitudes towards the brands using them.

Indeed, the results of the study indicated that when applied to the beer category (i.e. a masculine and low-fit product category) the femvertising condition, compared to the traditional one, revealed more

positive attitudes towards the advertising and towards the brand, together with proving a mediation effect between the three. In other words, data demonstrated that, femvertising applied to a non-female-oriented product category, in this specific case the beer, leads to positive attitudes toward the advertising which in turn better explain the reason why consumers reported positive attitudes towards the brand using it.

## **CHAPTER 4 – Final discussion and conclusions**

### **4.1. General discussions**

The present research firstly focused on presenting and introducing the actual context and the main phenomena under study, namely brand activism and femvertising.

Briefly resuming the knowledge presented in the first chapter it is possible to highlight that femvertising and brand activism are two powerful approaches linked between each other that businesses have adopted to connect with consumers and make a positive impact on society.

More in depth, these two phenomena have widely spread and grown in recent years as today's consumers increasingly need to see companies' commitment and engagement toward the environmental and societal issues that characterize our society.

Therefore, femvertising and brand activism can be considered connected between each other as femvertising focuses on empowering women by challenging gender stereotypes, promoting diversity, showcasing women in positive and authentic roles and celebrating women's achievements, indeed addressing female-focused societal issues seeking to inspire and uplift women (Hsu, 2018); brand activism, on the other hand, involves companies taking a stand on social, cultural, or political issues, going beyond just promoting products and services, but aiming at making a difference and contribute to positive change in society. Following this lead, is possible to state that femvertising represents a form of social brand activism (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020; Dodd & Supa, 2014; Nalick, Josefy, Zardkoohi, & Bierman, 2016; Wettstein & Baur, 2016).

Both femvertising and brand activism aim at establishing emotional connections with consumers by getting in touch with consumers emotions, values, beliefs, and aspirations in order to build a strong and long-term relationship with them based on trust and loyalty, all this together with bringing significant impact on society, inspiring conversations and driving social change (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018; Eyada, 2020). However, is important to keep in mind that these practices can also generate controversy, particularly when brands take positions on divisive issues (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020). Companies must carefully evaluate the potential risks and implications of the activism practices they engage with and consider their potential impact on the reactions of their target audience and subsequently the brand reputation.

Therefore, femvertising and brand activism require authenticity and transparency in order to be effective, generate positive outcomes and avoid risks. Consumers can easily detect inauthenticity and tend to be sceptical of brands engaging in controversial causes which may use them merely as a marketing tactic,

hence, in order to make these approaches effective, they must be developed in a genuine way, backed by real actions and commitments, and aligned with the brand's core values (Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg, Spry, Kemper, & Kapitan, 2018; Brønn & Vrioni, 2001).

More in detail, managerial problems and academic knowledge on the field have highlighted that femvertising campaigns are often proposed by female-oriented brands providing typical female products and targeting women as their primary audience (Champlin, Sterbenk, Windels, & Poteet, 2019). However, it also emerged that these practices have recently been applied also to non-female focused brands and product categories as a way to attract broader audiences, including men and individuals who appreciate inclusive and diverse portrayals (Sternadori & Abitbol, 2019; Drake, 2017; Champlin, Sterbenk, Windels, & Poteet, 2019).

From this starting point this research has developed a study considering that the extant literature emphasises that femvertising practices are being embraced always more also by non-female-oriented brands together with the fact that existing studies have suggested that future research was needed to further investigate whether or how brands with different product categories, neither related to physical appearance (e.g. cars, beverages) nor oriented exclusively towards women, may induce different responses and effects on consumers (Teng, Hu, Chen, Poon, & Bai, 2021; Drake, 2017; Champlin, Sterbenk, Windels, & Poteet, 2019).

Following these paths, the aim of this study is to understand femvertising effectiveness (compared to traditional advertising) based on the product category it is applied to. More specifically, if and why femvertising (compared to traditional advertising) is effective when applied to non-female-oriented product categories communications, as this relationship has been understudied until today.

To fill this gap the present research utilised the constructs of consumers' perceived atypicality of the advertising and the subsequent consumers' attitude towards the advertising and brand, to measure the effectiveness of femvertising and traditional advertising. To test and measure these perceptions two different studies and various statistical analyses were conducted. The resulting data uncovered interesting findings.

First, the pretest study conducted provided further knowledge on the consumers perceptions of different product categories. Indeed, the results confirmed that consumers associate gender perceptions to product categories. These gender perceptions are based on different levels of masculinity and femininity, which can be intended as two separate and independent dimensions and therefore not always proportional.

In these terms, the findings provide additional knowledge on consumers' gender perceptions of the specific product categories of beer, cars, shampoo and conditioner, tampons and sportswear, indicating that beer, cars and sportswear are perceived as masculine categories, being high on masculinity and low

on femininity, while shampoo and conditioner and tampons emerged to be perceived as feminine product categories as they were associated to high levels of femininity and low levels of masculinity. More in detail, the beer product category emerged as the one perceived as the most masculine among all the five categories, followed by cars and shampoo and conditioner, while tampons were perceived as the most feminine product category followed by the one of shampoo and conditioner (*Table 2*).

Successively, results of the pretest study also contribute to further the knowledge and advance the literature on the consumers' perceived fit between these five product categories and the social issue of women empowerment, highlighting that the beer appeared as the category with the lowest levels of perceived fit, followed by cars and shampoo and conditioner, while tampons and sportswear were the categories considered by consumers as having the highest fit with women empowerment themes (*Table 3*).

What is interesting to note here, is that in contrast with the gender perceptions, the sportswear product category was perceived as having a great fit with the issue of women empowerment in consumers' minds, even if it was classified as a masculine product category. Similarly, shampoo and conditioner, classified as feminine category, was associated by consumers with low levels of perceived fit with female emancipation themes. Interpreting these results is possible to highlight that probably, having a high or low fit with female-focused social cause, can be not always strictly related to the gender perceptions of the product category as demonstrated by the sportswear and shampoo cases. In other words, is not assured that a masculine product category can't display a high fit with themes of women empowerment and that a feminine category will in every case have high fit with these types of female-focused themes.

From these results, the product category that emerged to be the most masculine among all the dimensions, together with having the lower fit with the theme of female emancipation, was the one of beer, which consequently was selected for conducting the main study.

Successively, the main study results indicated that the femvertising condition applied to the non-female-oriented and low-fit product category of beer, was perceived by respondents as depicting a non-stereotypical image of women and that it statistically significantly affected the atypicality perceptions of consumers, making them perceive this type of advertising as more atypical compared to the traditional one, providing full support to H1.

This represents one of the most important findings of this study because, as the categorization theory explains advertising schemas do exist in the mind of consumers, indeed the atypicality perceptions of consumers toward femvertising indicate that advertisements with these features do not fit consumers' advertising schemas associated to non-female product categories, and therefore are perceived as schema-inconsistent (or category-atypical).

Unfortunately, the subsequent assumption of H2 implying that high atypicality perceptions of femvertising would have led to positive attitudes toward the advertising was not statistically supported, even if the femvertising condition was still associated with positive and higher levels of both attitudes toward the advertising and attitudes toward the brand compared to the traditional one.

This finding indicates that the femvertising condition was perceived as atypical (or schema-inconsistent), thus not matching the non-female-oriented product categories advertising schemas in the mind of consumers, therefore, following the schema incongruity theory, probably lead consumers to a more detailed (or piecemeal) processing and objective evaluation and judgment of the advertising together with increased attention (Stafford & Stafford, 2002; Folkes, 1988; Santos, Leve, & Pratkanis, 1994), compared to the traditional advertising stimulus.

Despite this, in contrast with various studies in the extant literature (Mandler, 1982; Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989; Taylor, Wilson, & Miracle, 1994; Meyers-Levy & Sternthal, 1992), in this study the unexpectedness of the atypical stimulus did not represent the reason why or explanation of the consumer's favourable evaluations toward the advertising neither the brand advertised.

Nevertheless, the atypicality construct didn't explain the favourable attitudes toward the advertising and attitudes toward the brand of consumers, the present research provides the additional and relevant finding highlighting that femvertising practices applied to non-female-oriented and low-fit product category led consumers to report more positive and higher attitudes toward the advertising itself and toward the brand, compared to the traditional one.

In these terms, despite the hypothesised mediation effect (atypicality of femvertising influences attitudes toward the advertising which in turn influences attitudes toward the brand) was not supported, the indirect effect emerged as statistically significant, thus the one in which femvertising leads to positive attitudes toward the advertising which in turn influence and mediate consumers' positive attitudes toward the brand, still provides relevant and useful additional knowledge to the field.

More in detail, this indirect effect additionally supports the direct influence that consumers' attitudes toward the advertising exercise on consumers' attitudes toward the brand, giving further support to the affect transfer theory.

Therefore, even if not exactly as predicted, the significant indirect mediation effect emerged from the study answers the research question initially proposed indicating that when femvertising is applied to non-female product category campaigns, consumers perceive it in a more positive way compared to the traditional advertising, as they reported more positive attitudes toward the advertisement and more positive attitudes toward the brand, hence providing an important contribution.

## 4.2. Managerial and academic contributions

The different findings arising from the studies of the present research propose various important contributions that further both academic and managerial knowledge on the context of femvertising.

Firstly, from an academic perspective it is possible to highlight that the various investigations and results of the study provide support to the theoretical framework proposed in developing the various assumptions developed.

More in detail, the study provides further knowledge on the gender perceptions of consumers toward the five product categories investigated, demonstrating which of them was perceived as masculine (beer, car, sportswear) and which of them was perceived as feminine (tampons and shampoo and conditioner).

Moreover, the fact that the shampoo and conditioner category obtained different evaluations in terms of masculinity and femininity in the gender comparisons of the Bonferroni analysis, indicates that the independent measurement of the two dimensions of gender perceptions, namely masculinity and femininity, is effectively useful as in some cases consumers could have apparently contrasting perceptions for the same product category.

Together with that, the contributions on consumers' gender perceptions of the five product categories presented are significant in understanding consumer behaviour, market segmentation, and marketing strategies. This is because, from an academic point of view, gender identity is a factor impacting consumer behaviour, therefore this additional understanding contributes to shed light on how gender stereotypes shape consumers' perceptions of product categories, focusing on the extent to which certain products are associated with specific genders and how these associations affect consumer attitudes, preferences, product evaluations, and purchase intentions across different product categories, starting from psychological and social factors (Kervyn & Malone, 2014).

Furthermore, this contribution on gender perceptions of product categories is also relevant, both academically and managerially. In terms of market segmentation strategies development and implementation it helps identify distinct consumer segments based on gender preferences and enables marketers to more effectively tailor their marketing efforts to better reach and engage these specific segments (Gupta & Gould, 1997; Yankelovich & Meer, 2006). Understanding consumers' gender perceptions of product categories also allows brands to strategically position their products and create effective brand strategies and messaging. Together with providing useful insights to guide product development and innovation strategies in accordance with consumers' gender expectations, this knowledge can help managers identify opportunities to challenge traditional gender stereotypes, develop inclusive product offerings, and create marketing campaigns that resonate with changing gender



norms in order to enhance brand relevance and resonance (Aaker, 1997; Welter & Smallbone, 2011). By addressing gender-related preferences and perceptions, brands can create more personalized and relevant marketing messages to build stronger connections and relationships with their target audience (Kumar & Shah, 2004). In these terms, it is essential, however, that marketers and companies approach gender perceptions with sensitivity and avoid reinforcing stereotypes. It is therefore crucial for them to be aware and stay updated on evolving societal norms and attitudes in order to effectively incorporate gender perceptions into marketing strategies.

Together with the gender perceptions, also the perceived fit respondents reported among the different product categories in terms of women empowerment themes, revealed some interesting aspects that can be added to the contrasting findings highlighted in the extant literature on the field. In this study, different product categories are not perceived as all having a good and high fit with the theme of women empowerment, on the contrary, results indicated that only some products categories are considered by consumers as displaying a high fit with this theme.

Moreover, it also interestingly emerged that a product category perceived as masculine (sportswear) was at the same time associated to high fit levels with the theme of women empowerment and, in the opposite way, a feminine product category (shampoo and conditioner) was associated by consumers to low fit levels in relation to the female-focused social cause. Therefore, perceived fit findings indicated that in general masculine product categories are associated to low fit perceptions while female ones are associated with high fit perceptions, but they also highlighted that this association may not always be the case. This knowledge surely creates the need for further analyses but also demonstrates that the levels of perceived fit between the social cause of women empowerment and a specific product category can vary and can be different for each category. This suggests new academic knowledge together with useful information for managers, who when considering the idea of developing a femvertising campaign, should not be discouraged by their category being non-female oriented, as this study showed that even masculine product categories can be considered as fitting the theme of women empowerment in the mind of consumers, and at the same time, they should not be always sure that a female product category would be considered as a good match with this female-focused theme.

Most importantly, the study results proved that femvertising applied to masculine and low-fit product categories is perceived by consumers as more positively, in terms of attitudes toward the advertising and attitudes toward the brand, compared to the traditional advertising campaign. This crucial finding, as mentioned above, answers the presented research question and provides new academic implications that contribute to the closing of the gap identified in the literature. Moreover, it provides very important contributions as it explains that managers should implement femvertising practices across different product categories and brands as this communication type can be successful even if applied to a non-

female oriented product categories or to brand perceived by consumers as having a low-fit with the women empowerment theme. More importantly, it was shown that embracing femvertising in teies product category types is not only successful, it even brings higher effectiveness compared to a traditional advertising.

Another most relevant result arising from the present study is the one related to the atypicality perceptions that consumers associated with femvertising. Indeed, even if atypicality did not resulted as significantly influencing respondents' attitudes toward the advertising, it is still crucial to highlight that the femvertising condition was associated with more positive and higher levels of atypicality compared to the traditional one. This result, other than providing further academic support to the categorization and schema incongruity theory, also represents a completely new relationship and knowledge never investigated before in this context, which opens a new academic path for very interesting future research.

Together with that, this new insight provides useful information for managers that are willing to engage in femvertising practices as atypicality is considered an important element indicating that the advertising (or stimuli) doesn't match the existing category schemas of the consumers (Boush & Loken, 1991) leading them to higher attention and more detailed and elaborated processing of the advertising (Stafford & Stafford, 2002; Goodstein, 1993). This mismatch and thus atypicality is also considered aligned with advertising factors of novelty, divergence and originality (usually different definitions of the same concept) which, together with relevance, constitute the main dimensions of advertising creativity (Rosengren, Eisend, Koslow, & Dahlen, 2020; Smith, MacKenzie, Yang, Buchholz, & Darley, 2007).

Atypicality is also relevant because, when the stimulus is congruent with the schema-driven expectations about ads and advertised brands of a specific category (prototypical), decisions and processing of the advertising are often made with less labour-intensive methods, thus with little or no cognitive elaboration and attention (Hawkins & Hoch, 1992), while atypicality, on the other hand, leads viewers to more intense and elaborated processing.

Moreover, atypicality can be considered as a way for brands to embrace new market segments and target audiences that have been traditionally underrepresented or overlooked, allowing companies to connect with diverse consumer groups and expand their customer base. Using atypical representations in advertising can help brands stand out from competitors by challenging the status quo, offering a fresh perspective and allow them to differentiate themselves in the market and position themselves as inclusive, unique and forward-thinking.

Therefore, this construct represents a relevant factor generating positive value and outcomes, which is something that managers should keep in mind and take into consideration when developing their advertising.

Successively, the statistically significant indirect effect emerged from this research (namely, femvertising positively influencing A<sub>ad</sub> which in turn lead to positive A<sub>b</sub>), provides useful and important contributions both academically and managerially speaking.

Looking at the academic perspective is possible to highlight that this indirect effect implies the statistical significance of the direct effect between attitudes toward the advertisement and attitudes toward the brand providing further support to the affect transfer theory.

From a managerial perspective, this indirect effect is crucial as it demonstrates that femvertising can be effective when applied to non-female-oriented and low fit product categories like the beer one, being the effectiveness measured through the attitudes toward the advertising and attitudes toward the brand constructs.

More in depth, attitudes toward the advertising and attitudes toward the brand are presented in the extant literature as being the primary predictors of consumers behaviour and purchase intentions (Gresham & Shimp, 1985; Najmi, Atefi, & Mirbagheri, 2012; Lutz, MacKenzie, & Belch, 1983; Goldsmith, Lafferty, & Newell, 2000; Lafferty, Goldsmith, & Newell, 2002), therefore they represent important and useful indicators proving femvertising effectiveness that managers need to keep in mind.

Moreover, proving that femvertising is positively perceived also in the case of non-female oriented and low-fit product categories further provides useful insights aiming at inducing managers and companies to engage more in this female-focused practices.

In this regard, it is extremely useful for manager to know that femvertising can be successfully applied to non-female oriented and low-fit product categories as embracing feminist values and promoting gender equality can be a successful strategy to differentiate their brands by appealing to consumers who value gender equality and empowerment, together with helping them in establishing strong emotional connection with customers and create a unique brand image. Moreover, since femvertising aligns with the principles of CSR and allows companies to showcase their commitment to gender equality and social progress, brands that engage in it have the opportunity to enhance their reputation by being seen as socially responsible and progressive. Therefore, by incorporating femvertising into non-female product categories, brands can expand their target audience beyond traditional gender boundaries and can appeal to consumers who value gender equality, empowerment, and inclusivity, regardless of their gender identity, which can result in increased market share. Moreover, in this way managers can aim at building positive brand associations and loyalty among consumers who value gender equality.

Findings further support academic knowledge and managerial contributions highlighting that, other than its effects on consumer attitudes and behaviours, femvertising can provide strong cultural impact as it represents a crucial tool that can be used in order to influence societal norms, challenge traditional gender

roles, contribute to more realistic representation in marketing, equality, and women's rights. In this way, it is possible to say that femvertising can be a way for companies to contribute to the improvement of the society and we live in and to play an active role in shaping societal perceptions and attitudes toward the stereotypes faced every day, thus contributing to the common good.

In this terms, the extant literature also highlights that is possible that if the inclusion of feminist narratives and gender empowerment messages is presented by traditionally non-female product categories brands this can lead to even more resonance and impact on consumers, and brands can result as even more competent or inclusive if they deal with a topic which is not directly related to their products (Hoeffler & Keller., 2002) in comparison to the female oriented ones.

### **4.3. Study limitations and future research**

Despite the present research provides interesting and useful academic and managerial contributions it is also needed to highlight the limitations of the studies conducted in order to also provide suggestions for future research in this context.

Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that the findings may be limited to the specific cultural context in which the study was conducted as the participants of the study were recruited from a single country, and their responses may be influenced by cultural factors unique to that country. Therefore, caution should be exercised when extrapolating these results to other cultural contexts. Future research could replicate this study in different countries or include a more diverse sample to examine the cross-cultural variations in consumer responses to femvertising. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness and generalizability of femvertising across different cultural backgrounds.

Successively, by taking into consideration the first study conducted (pretest), it only took into consideration five different product categories when investigating consumers' category gender perceptions and perceived fit with the woman empowerment theme, therefore it will be even more useful to replicate the study with more product categories under analysis, in order to provide additional useful knowledge for managers working with other product types.

Relating to the pretest study, insights further suggest that themes of female empowerment are perceived by consumers as fitting the five product categories presented at different levels and probably without a specific pattern based on gender perceptions, indeed this indicates that additional future research is needed in this direction.

Focusing on the main study, it is important to mention that it has been conducted analysing just one single product category that emerged from the pretest study to be perceived by consumers as non-female-

oriented and having a low-fit with the theme of women empowerment, namely the beer one. The choice of this product category was guided by the results of the pretest analysis, but it could also be interesting and convenient to replicate the present study among other product categories that still emerge as non-female oriented and low-fit, in order to prove that these results are effectively applicable to various categories of this type. Similarly, the present study could also be replicated among the same product category, but presenting different stimuli, in order to define if different features of the advertisements proposed could lead to different outcomes. Furthermore, these replications could also be done in order to investigate if under different conditions, the relationship between atypicality perceptions and consumers' attitudes toward the advertising emerges to be significant as initially hypothesised.

In order to study the relationship between atypicality and attitudes toward the advertising, which from this research emerged as not significant, future studies could conduct different analyses among different product categories, with different stimuli or with different brands (as luxury ones instead of mass market ones), in order to understand if with different elements, the interaction between atypicality and consumers' attitudes together with the whole conceptual model initially hypothesised, can results as significant.

For example, it might be useful to replicate the study also by using different effectiveness variables instead of attitudes toward the advertising and attitudes toward the brand, such as the one of willingness to buy, which is nevertheless a very important factor for measuring the effectiveness of communication practices and has already been studied and proved to have a positive relation with atypicality perceptions in the context of sustainability and luxury products (Amatulli, De Angelis, & Donato, 2021).

Moreover, although some reasons of why atypicality was not found to have a significant direct effect on attitudes toward the advertising have already been hypothesised in the previous chapter, future studies should analyse and study in more detail why this result occurred and try to understand which can be the underlying factors that may have led to this outcome.

In addition, this research proposes future studies to investigate the mechanism whereby there is this positive significant indirect effect between femvertising, consumers' attitudes towards the advertising and attitudes towards the brand.

To further support the findings of the present study, future research should also investigate and demonstrate that the perceived atypicality emerged from the femvertising condition in this research is only valid for non-female oriented and low-fit product categories and not for female-oriented and high-fit ones. In other words, future studies should focus on proving if femvertising is effectively perceived as typical when it is applied to female-oriented and high-fit product categories.

Lastly, to further fill the gap identified in the literature related to the effectiveness of femvertising practices based on the different product categories it is applied to, future researches could also analyse this relationship through a different conceptual model, having as independent variable the same of the present study, hence the type of advertising (femvertising versus traditional), as dependent variable consumers attitudes toward the advertising, and introducing different moderators or mediators. In this way it could be possible to understand which factors could moderate and which factors could better explain this relevant relationship.

#### **4.4. Conclusions**

The present study had the aim of investigating if the inclusion of feminist narratives and gender empowerment messages in traditionally non-female product categories, can be effective. More in detail, the present research analyses the effectiveness of femvertising in non-female and low-fit product categories, providing an opportunity to understand how consumers respond to gender empowerment messages where the connection between the product and feminist narratives may not be immediately clear. This study explores this dimension in terms of the impact on consumers' advertising and brand attitudes, within this specific context of femvertising.

In this regard, findings answered the research question and proved that, compared to the traditional one, femvertising applied to non-female-oriented product categories displaying a low fit with woman emancipation themes emerged to lead consumers to experience positive and higher attitudes toward the advertising itself and consequently toward the brand advertised.

This indirect effect proved that there is no reason for marketers to be sceptical about using femvertising for this type of product category, because even though this type of advertising might seem to be in contrast with the categories in question, femvertising turns out to have even more positive effects than the traditional one. Therefore, the study of the application of femvertising campaigns (the ones that challenge and reshape traditional gender roles, influence societal perceptions of gender and consumption) in relation to non-female product categories contributed to the ongoing discussions on gender equality and feminism and to the understanding of the broader academic, managerial and social implications.

In conclusion, managers and marketers operating with different product categories should strive to ensure that femvertising is also offered by non-female-oriented and low-fit brands because, if done in the right way, it would lead to positive effects for both companies and society.

It is always necessary to remember that when dealing with such controversial topics it is crucial for brands to approach femvertising with sensitivity and authenticity, considering the potential for unintended consequences and the need for genuine alignment between the message and the product.

Additionally, continuous evaluation and research can provide insights into consumer responses and guide future innovative campaigns in this domain.

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# Appendix

## Appendix A

Stimuli product categories pretest:



Stimulus 1: Beer



Stimulus 2: Car



Stimulus 3: Tampons



Stimulus 4: Shampoo and conditioner



Stimulus 5: Sportswear

## Appendix B

Pretest SPSS outputs

### Statistiche descrittive

	N	Minimo	Massimo	Media	Deviazione std.	Varianza
In quale identità di genere si riconosce?	70	1	4	1,74	,674	,455
Quanti anni ha?	70	18,00	64,00	35,0286	14,49135	209,999
Numero di casi validi (listwise)	70					

Gender:

Legend: 1=beer; 2=car; 3=shampoo and conditioner; 4=tampons; 5= sportswear

### Descrittive

la categoria di prodotto in questione è mascolina

	N	Medio	Deviazione std.	Errore std.	95% di intervallo di confidenza per la media		Minimo	Massimo
					Limite inferiore	Limite superiore		
1,00	15	4,53	2,200	,568	3,32	5,75	1	7
2,00	15	4,40	1,724	,445	3,45	5,35	1	6
3,00	14	3,21	1,369	,366	2,42	4,00	1	5
4,00	13	1,54	1,391	,386	,70	2,38	1	6
5,00	13	4,00	1,581	,439	3,04	4,96	1	7
Totale	70	3,59	1,974	,236	3,11	4,06	1	7

### ANOVA

la categoria di prodotto in questione è mascolina

	Somma dei quadrati	df	Media quadratica	F	Sig.
Tra gruppi	82,064	4	20,516	7,134	<,001
Entro i gruppi	186,921	65	2,876		
Totale	268,986	69			

### Confronti multipli

Variabile dipendente: la categoria di prodotto in questione è mascolina

Bonferroni

(I) IV	(J) IV	Differenza della media (I-J)	Errore std.	Sig.	Intervallo di confidenza 95%	
					Limite inferiore	Limite superiore
1,00	2,00	,133	,619	1,000	-1,67	1,93
	3,00	1,319	,630	,402	-,51	3,15
	4,00	2,995*	,643	<,001	1,13	4,86
	5,00	,533	,643	1,000	-1,33	2,40
2,00	1,00	-,133	,619	1,000	-1,93	1,67
	3,00	1,186	,630	,644	-,65	3,02
	4,00	2,862*	,643	<,001	,99	4,73
	5,00	,400	,643	1,000	-1,47	2,27
3,00	1,00	-1,319	,630	,402	-3,15	,51
	2,00	-1,186	,630	,644	-3,02	,65
	4,00	1,676	,653	,126	-,22	3,57
	5,00	-,786	,653	1,000	-2,68	1,11
4,00	1,00	-2,995*	,643	<,001	-4,86	-1,13
	2,00	-2,862*	,643	<,001	-4,73	-,99
	3,00	-1,676	,653	,126	-3,57	,22
	5,00	-2,462*	,665	,004	-4,39	-,53
5,00	1,00	-,533	,643	1,000	-2,40	1,33
	2,00	-,400	,643	1,000	-2,27	1,47
	3,00	,786	,653	1,000	-1,11	2,68
	4,00	2,462*	,665	,004	,53	4,39

\*. La differenza della media è significativa al livello 0.05.

### Descrittive

la categoria di prodotto in questione è femminile

	N	Medio	Deviazione std.	Errore std.	95% di intervallo di confidenza per la media		Minimo	Massimo
					Limite inferiore	Limite superiore		
1,00	15	2,13	1,246	,322	1,44	2,82	1	5
2,00	15	3,27	1,668	,431	2,34	4,19	1	7
3,00	14	4,79	1,718	,459	3,79	5,78	1	7
4,00	13	5,77	2,088	,579	4,51	7,03	1	7
5,00	13	3,15	1,725	,478	2,11	4,20	1	7
Totale	70	3,77	2,093	,250	3,27	4,27	1	7

### ANOVA

la categoria di prodotto in questione è femminile

	Somma dei quadrati	df	Media quadratica	F	Sig.
Tra gruppi	115,319	4	28,830	10,020	<,001
Entro i gruppi	187,024	65	2,877		
Totale	302,343	69			

### Confronti multipli

Variabile dipendente: la categoria di prodotto in questione è femminile

Bonferroni

(I) IV	(J) IV	Differenza della media (I-J)	Errore std.	Sig.	Intervallo di confidenza 95%	
					Limite inferiore	Limite superiore
1,00	2,00	-1,133	,619	,719	-2,93	,67
	3,00	-2,652*	,630	<,001	-4,48	-,82
	4,00	-3,636*	,643	<,001	-5,50	-1,77
	5,00	-1,021	,643	1,000	-2,89	,85
2,00	1,00	1,133	,619	,719	-,67	2,93
	3,00	-1,519	,630	,188	-3,35	,31
	4,00	-2,503*	,643	,002	-4,37	-,63
	5,00	,113	,643	1,000	-1,76	1,98
3,00	1,00	2,652*	,630	<,001	,82	4,48
	2,00	1,519	,630	,188	-,31	3,35
	4,00	-,984	,653	1,000	-2,88	,92
	5,00	1,632	,653	,150	-,27	3,53
4,00	1,00	3,636*	,643	<,001	1,77	5,50
	2,00	2,503*	,643	,002	,63	4,37
	3,00	,984	,653	1,000	-,92	2,88
	5,00	2,615*	,665	,002	,68	4,55
5,00	1,00	1,021	,643	1,000	-,85	2,89
	2,00	-,113	,643	1,000	-1,98	1,76
	3,00	-1,632	,653	,150	-3,53	,27
	4,00	-2,615*	,665	,002	-4,55	-,68

\*. La differenza della media è significativa al livello 0.05.

Perceived fit:

Legend: 1=beer; 2=car; 3=shampoo and conditioner; 4=tampons; 5= sportswear

**A una via**

### Descrittive

PF

	N	Medio	Deviazione std.	Errore std.	95% di intervallo di confidenza per la media		Minimo	Massimo
					Limite inferiore	Limite superiore		
1,00	15	2,1556	1,15378	,29791	1,5166	2,7945	1,00	4,00
2,00	15	3,1333	1,37321	,35456	2,3729	3,8938	1,00	5,00
3,00	14	2,9286	1,53132	,40926	2,0444	3,8127	1,00	5,33
4,00	13	4,7949	1,48161	,41092	3,8995	5,6902	2,33	7,00
5,00	13	4,1282	1,44362	,40039	3,2558	5,0006	2,33	7,00
Totale	70	3,3762	1,64373	,19646	2,9843	3,7681	1,00	7,00

### ANOVA

PF

	Somma dei quadrati	df	Media quadratica	F	Sig.
Tra gruppi	59,555	4	14,889	7,628	<,001
Entro i gruppi	126,872	65	1,952		
Totale	186,427	69			

### Confronti multipli

Variabile dipendente: PF

Bonferroni

(I) IV	(J) IV	Differenza della media (I-J)	Errore std.	Sig.	Intervallo di confidenza 95%	
					Limite inferiore	Limite superiore
1,00	2,00	-,97778	,51015	,597	-2,4603	,5047
	3,00	-,77302	,51918	1,000	-2,2818	,7357
	4,00	-2,63932*	,52940	<,001	-4,1778	-1,1009
	5,00	-1,97265*	,52940	,004	-3,5111	-,4342
2,00	1,00	,97778	,51015	,597	-,5047	2,4603
	3,00	,20476	,51918	1,000	-1,3040	1,7135
	4,00	-1,66154*	,52940	,026	-3,2000	-,1231
	5,00	-,99487	,52940	,647	-2,5333	,5436
3,00	1,00	,77302	,51918	1,000	-,7357	2,2818
	2,00	-,20476	,51918	1,000	-1,7135	1,3040
	4,00	-1,86630*	,53811	,009	-3,4301	-,3025
	5,00	-1,19963	,53811	,293	-2,7634	,3641
4,00	1,00	2,63932*	,52940	<,001	1,1009	4,1778
	2,00	1,66154*	,52940	,026	,1231	3,2000
	3,00	1,86630*	,53811	,009	,3025	3,4301
	5,00	,66667	,54799	1,000	-,9258	2,2591
5,00	1,00	1,97265*	,52940	,004	,4342	3,5111
	2,00	,99487	,52940	,647	-,5436	2,5333
	3,00	1,19963	,53811	,293	-,3641	2,7634
	4,00	-,66667	,54799	1,000	-2,2591	,9258

\*. La differenza della media è significativa al livello 0.05.

**Appendix C**

Main study stimuli:



Stimulus 1: traditional advertising



Stimulus 2: Femvertising

## Appendix D

Main study Spss outputs:

### Statistiche descrittive

	N	Minimo	Massimo	Media	Deviazione std.
In quale identità di genere ti riconosci?	150	1	4	1,64	,522
Quanti anni hai?	150	18,00	71,00	33,8667	13,23949
Numero di casi validi (listwise)	150				

One sample T-test stereotype manipulation check:

### Statistiche campione singolo

	N	Media	Deviazione std.	Errore standard della media
Indica in quale misura, su una scala da 1 (per nulla) a 7 (molto) il messaggio di comunicazione che hai appena visto mostra un'immagine stereotipata delle donne:	78	1,67	1,224	,139

### Test a campione singolo

Valore di test = 4

	t	gl	Significatività		Differenza della media	Intervallo di confidenza della differenza di 95%	
			P unilaterale	P bilaterale		Inferiore	Superiore
Indica in quale misura, su una scala da 1 (per nulla) a 7 (molto) il messaggio di comunicazione che hai appena visto mostra un'immagine stereotipata delle donne:	-16,838	77	<,001	<,001	-2,333	-2,61	-2,06

Independent T-test Atypicality:

Legend= 1= femvertising; 0=traditional advertising

### Statistiche gruppo

	IV	N	Media	Deviazione std.	Errore standard della media
Atypic	1,00	78	4,5556	1,52200	,17233
	,00	72	2,5694	1,28971	,15199



**Test campioni indipendenti**

		Test di Levene per l'eguaglianza delle varianze				Test t per l'eguaglianza delle medie				Intervallo di confidenza della differenza di 95%	
		F	Sign.	t	gl	Significatività		Differenza della media	Differenza errore std.	Inferiore	Superiore
						P unilaterale	P bilaterale				
Atypic	Varianze uguali presunte	3,586	,060	8,586	148	<,001	<,001	1,98611	,23131	1,52902	2,44320
	Varianze uguali non presunte			8,643	146,952	<,001	<,001	1,98611	,22978	1,53200	2,44022

Independent T-test attitudes toward the ad and attitudes toward the brand:

Legend= 1= femvertising; 0=traditional advertising

**Statistiche gruppo**

	IV	N	Media	Deviazione std.	Errore standard della media
AAD_m	1,00	78	5,7735	1,10161	,12473
	,00	72	4,0370	1,59278	,18771
AB_m	1,00	78	5,6239	1,38155	,15643
	,00	72	3,8981	1,53788	,18124

**Test campioni indipendenti**

		Test di Levene per l'eguaglianza delle varianze				Test t per l'eguaglianza delle medie				Intervallo di confidenza della differenza di 95%	
		F	Sign.	t	gl	Significatività		Differenza della media	Differenza errore std.	Inferiore	Superiore
						P unilaterale	P bilaterale				
AAD_m	Varianze uguali presunte	16,267	<,001	7,815	148	<,001	<,001	1,73647	,22219	1,29738	2,17555
	Varianze uguali non presunte			7,705	125,060	<,001	<,001	1,73647	,22537	1,29043	2,18251
AB_m	Varianze uguali presunte	1,803	,181	7,239	148	<,001	<,001	1,72578	,23839	1,25470	2,19686
	Varianze uguali non presunte			7,208	143,007	<,001	<,001	1,72578	,23941	1,25254	2,19903

Model 6 Process:

```
*****
Model   : 6
  Y     : AB_m
  X     : IV
  M1    : Atypic
  M2    : AAD_m
```

Sample  
Size: 150

```
*****
OUTCOME VARIABLE:
  Atypic
```

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
,5766	,3325	2,0032	73,7271	1,0000	148,0000	,0000

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	2,5694	,1668	15,4045	,0000	2,2398	2,8991
IV	1,9861	,2313	8,5865	,0000	1,5290	2,4432

Standardized coefficients

	coeff
IV	1,1503

```
*****
OUTCOME VARIABLE:
  AAD_m
```

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
,5407	,2924	1,8602	30,3737	2,0000	147,0000	,0000

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	3,9873	,2593	15,3741	,0000	3,4747	4,4998
IV	1,6980	,2728	6,2236	,0000	1,1588	2,2372
Atypic	,0194	,0792	,2445	,8072	-,1372	,1759

Standardized coefficients

	coeff
IV	1,0543
Atypic	,0208

\*\*\*\*\*

OUTCOME VARIABLE:

AB\_m

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
,8926	,7968	,5935	190,8090	3,0000	146,0000	,0000

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	,1174	,2366	,4962	,6205	-,3502	,5849
IV	,0652	,1732	,3762	,7073	-,2772	,4075
Atypic	,0390	,0448	,8722	,3845	-,0494	,1275
AAD_m	,9117	,0466	19,5689	,0000	,8196	1,0037

Standardized coefficients

	coeff
IV	,0385
Atypic	,0398
AAD_m	,8679

\*\*\*\*\* TOTAL EFFECT MODEL \*\*\*\*\*

OUTCOME VARIABLE:

AB\_m

Model Summary

R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
,5114	,2615	2,1276	52,4099	1,0000	148,0000	,0000

Model

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
constant	3,8981	,1719	22,6766	,0000	3,5584	4,2378
IV	1,7258	,2384	7,2395	,0000	1,2547	2,1969

Standardized coefficients

	coeff
IV	1,0202

\*\*\*\*\* TOTAL, DIRECT, AND INDIRECT EFFECTS OF X ON Y \*\*\*\*\*

Total effect of X on Y

Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	c_ps
1,7258	,2384	7,2395	,0000	1,2547	2,1969	1,0202

Direct effect of X on Y

Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI	c'_ps
,0652	,1732	,3762	,7073	-,2772	,4075	,0385

Indirect effect(s) of X on Y:

	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
TOTAL	1,6606	,2269	1,2167	2,1221
Ind1	,0775	,0896	-,0782	,2733
Ind2	1,5480	,2350	1,1030	2,0140
Ind3	,0351	,1608	-,2596	,3669

Partially standardized indirect effect(s) of X on Y:

	Effect	BootSE	BootLLCI	BootULCI
TOTAL	,9816	,1233	,7412	1,2265
Ind1	,0458	,0527	-,0455	,1601
Ind2	,9151	,1342	,6563	1,1764
Ind3	,0207	,0951	-,1583	,2161

Indirect effect key:

Ind1 IV	->	Atypic	->	AB_m	
Ind2 IV	->	AAD_m	->	AB_m	
Ind3 IV	->	Atypic	->	AAD_m	-> AB_m

## Summary

The concept of brand activism has emerged as a response to the changing expectations of consumers and their growing interest in environmental and socio-political issues. In today's society, consumers are increasingly politically active and have a progressive loss of trust in institutions (Kotler & Sarkar, 2019). As a result, companies are now seen as entities capable of bringing change and improving people's lives. Therefore, customers expect brands to be politically active and to focus not only on leading the economy but also on leading social change (Aarons-Mele, 2017; Kotler & Sarkar, 2019).

Following this lead, brand activism is defined as “a company’s declaration [...] to take some social responsibility to advance the Common Good” (Kotler & Sarkar, 2019).

This is particularly important considering that consumers now view their purchasing decisions as a form of political and social action and an opportunity to make an impact and exercise power. They feel connected to the brands they consume and consider the products they buy as an extension of their views, values, beliefs, and lifestyles (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018). The concept of marketing has thus evolved and has led to the emergence of Marketing 3.0, where companies aim to “create a deep connection with their audience through transparency and social responsibility” (Eyada, 2020, p. 33). Over time, this relationship evolves into a strong and highly valuable bond that extends beyond product quality and price, providing brands with a significant competitive advantage (Eyada, 2020).

More in depth, brand activism is rooted in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which involves corporate social actions aimed at satisfying social needs (Angelidis & Ibrahim, 1993). It encompasses various activities such as cause promotion, cause-related marketing, corporate social marketing, corporate philanthropy, community volunteering, and socially responsible business practices (Kotler & Lee, 2005). Among them, especially cause-related marketing and corporate social marketing are key instruments for enabling brand activism (Kotler & Sarkar, 2019).

Brand activism differentiates itself from other CSR practices by being value-driven and by focusing on “*justice and a fundamental concern for the biggest and most urgent problems facing society*” (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018). It goes beyond mere advertising and involves impactful practices aligned with the brand's purpose and values. It aims to support causes, raise awareness, change behaviour, and encourage socio-political change. Brand activism involves both intangible and tangible commitments from companies, including corporate practices, organizational policies, monetary donations, and partnerships (Dodd & Supa, 2014; Nalick, Josefy, Zardkoohi, & Bierman, 2016; Wettstein & Baur, 2016; Kapitan, Kennedy, & Berth, 2019; Crimmins & Horn, 1996; Duane & Domegan, 2019; Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020).

To make the distinction clearer, brand activism engages in *controversial* socio-political causes and issues and is focused on making a difference in the world (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020). It represents the highest level of corporate social responsibility, combining external impact with internal behavioural changes and social causes support (Kotler & Sarkar, 2019). In doing this, it serves as a signal of a firm's position on socio-political issues and delivers high brand equity outcomes (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020).

To implement brand activism effectively, several key boundary conditions should be considered. The brand must be purpose- and values-driven, address controversial socio-political issues, and contribute to supporting these issues through messaging and practice simultaneously (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020). The implementation of brand activism should prioritize social and environmental benefits over economic interests (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018; Wettstein & Baur, 2016; Bocken, Short, Rana, & Evans, 2014).

Overall, brand activism represents a strategy and tool for companies to mobilize progress and bring about social change among issues of different nature as social, legal, economic, political and environmental ones (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017). It builds a special relationship between the brand and its customers, based on loyalty and emotional connection, provides brands with a significant competitive advantage and differentiation, and contributes to the improvement of the common (Eyada, 2020).

It has also positive effects on brand equity and brand reputation, attracting new customers and increasing consumer awareness and attribution, as consumers are more likely to choose socially responsible brands and develop a long-term bond with them based on shared values and beliefs, leading to increased customer loyalty (Eyada, 2020; Brønn & Vrioni, 2001). It enhances brand differentiation, allows companies to charge higher prices, attract better candidates and investors, and build brand image (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Brønn & Vrioni, 2001). Moreover, the impact of brand activism is amplified through social media and online platforms, where consumers engage with and share brand advertising and content expressing their values related to activism (Brønn & Vrioni, 2001; Duncan & Moriarty, 1997; Bain, 2018; Eyada, 2020).

At the same time is also important to keep in mind that, to achieve the positive effects of brand activism, managers need to ensure that a crucial and essential condition in their activities is met, namely *authenticity*. Brands need to ensure that their actions, values, and messaging align with the socio-political cause they support as authenticity is able to build brand image, equity, and consumer trust (Farquhar, 1989; Keller, 1993; Eyada, 2020). It leads to positive associations and influences consumer attitudes, purchase decisions, and brand loyalty.

In contrast, since consumers tend to be sceptical of brands' motives and to scrutinize their authenticity, inauthentic brand activism can damage brand equity, loyalty, and trust, can lead to negative perceptions

and alienate core customers (Holt, 2002; Brønn & Vrioni, 2001; Eyada, 2020). More in detail, inauthentic brand activism, also known as "woke washing," misleads consumers with claims that are not aligned with a brand's purpose, values, and practices, resulting in inconsistency and potential harm to brand reputation, and social change (Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg, Spry, Kemper, & Kapitan, 2018). Failed campaigns can also lead to backlash, boycotts, and damages to brand image, reputation, sales and also damages to the general potential social change that they could have brought (Klein, Smith, & John, 2003; Kapitan, Kennedy, & Berth, 2019). Therefore, managers must ensure that brand activism is authentic to avoid harmful consequences. It is essential for brand managers and marketers to understand the factors that make brand activism authentic and successful in building brand equity and fostering social change while avoiding controversy and consumer distrust (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020).

Closely interconnected to brand activism in the realm of marketing and advertising there is the concept of femvertising. The connection between brand activism and femvertising lies in their shared objective of promoting social change and addressing societal issues, as both concepts involve using the platform of advertising to advocate for causes and challenge existing norms, highlighting the importance of brands using their influence and resources to make a positive impact on society.

More in-depth, femvertising is a marketing phenomenon that combines feminism and advertising. It has gained attention in recent years as a form of brand advocacy and corporate social responsibility and reflects the pressure companies feel to take stances on social and political issues (Sternadori & Abitbol, 2019; Teng, Hu, Chen, Poon, & Bai, 2021). It focuses on gender equality aiming at empowering women and challenging stereotypes by employing pro-female talent, messages, and imagery (Skey, 2015).

The concept of femvertising is considered as originated with Dove's "Real Beauty" campaign in 2004, which challenged traditional beauty standards and depicted normal women instead of models (Dan, 2017) and its strong success led to the emergence of the #Femvertising Awards (Sternadori & Abitbol, 2019; Monllos, 2015). Following this example, while some companies still use stereotypical representations of women, there has been a shift towards portraying independent, empowered women in advertising, with the aim of breaking traditional female portrayals and weaken gender stereotypes (Drake, 2017).

Stereotypes in advertising can be related to gender biases and female stereotypes. Gender stereotypes reflect societal values and roles associated with men and women (Eisend, 2010; Knoll, Eisend, & Steinhagen, 2011; Pollay, 1986), while female stereotypes focus on women's physical characteristics, roles, and occupational status (Knoll, Eisend, & Steinhagen, 2011). Advertising has contributed to the proliferation of female stereotypes and sexist views of women (Champlin, Sterbenk, Windels, & Poteet, 2019; Plakoyiannaki & Zotos., 2009; Gill & Elias, 2014; Grau & Zotos., 2016). However, with the rise

of women to key leadership positions and the increasing global gender revolution, there is a growing backlash against objectification and a need for more realistic representations of women in advertising.

More in detail, femvertising can be said to be characterized by five pillars aiming at creating empowering and inclusive advertisements that resonate with women (Becker-Herby, 2016): the use of diverse female talent, the presence of pro-women messages, the challenge of gender norms and stereotypes, the intention to diminish sexualization, and the authentic portrayal of women. Moreover, these advertising usually include themes as promoting body confidence with realistic images of women, championing women's confidence beyond appearance, encouraging women to overcome societal barriers in sports, acknowledging women's athletic prowess and inner strengths, celebrating women's achievements and contributions, challenging gender roles and expectations, inspiring women to break boundaries and pursue their dreams, addressing women's health issues, promoting female leadership and entrepreneurship, and supporting women's rights and social causes (Hsu, 2018).

Overall, femvertising represents a shift in advertising towards empowering and realistic portrayals of women, challenging gender stereotypes, and promoting gender equality, that serves as a reminder that brands can play a role in advocating for social change and supporting women's emancipation.

Moreover, femvertising has been found to have a positive impact on various factors: studies have shown that femvertising can change attitudes toward brands and women's empowerment, increase awareness of stereotypes, and generate concern for women (Abitbol & Sternadori, 2016). It has also been found that femvertising can lead to increased brand and advertising attitudes, higher purchase intent, and stronger emotional connections to brands (Drake, 2017). Empowering ads have been particularly effective in reaching millennial women and gaining visibility through viral sharing (Baek, Holton, Harp, & Yaschur, 2011; De Matos & Rossi., 2008; Eckler & Bolls, 2011).

However, there are managerial problems and risks associated with femvertising. Brands can be accused of "*pinkwashing*" if their marketing campaigns are seen as inauthentic or insincere (Stanley, 2016). Consumers' reactions to femvertising practices remain still equivocal in some domains and aspects (Hainneville, Guèvremont, & Robinot, 2022), and scepticism exists regarding the authenticity of such advertising (Feng, Chen, & He, 2019; Lima & Casais, 2021). Consumers are critical of brands that engage in empowerment marketing without implementing real changes within their organizations (Duffy, 2010). Indeed, consumers value authenticity and are able to discern false marketing efforts, especially millennials (Dan, 2017).

Therefore, the success of femvertising depends on effectively differentiating between authentic femvertising and inauthentic "femwashing." For this reason, to succeed with femvertising, brands need to present sophisticated and authentic messages that align with their values (Ruiz, 2017).



Regarding this overall context presentation, it is possible to highlight in the extant literature the presence of a research gap on the understanding of consumers' perspectives (Abitbol & Sternadori, 2016; Drake, 2017; Kapoor & Munjal, 2019) and the marketing effectiveness of femvertising (Drake, 2017; Hainneville, Guèvremont, & Robinot, 2022), indicating that more research is needed to explore how different audiences perceive and interpret femvertising and to understand its benefits for marketers of various industries (Vredenburg J., Kapitan, Spry, & Kemper, 2020). More specifically, further research is needed to understand its effectiveness and consumer perceptions in various contexts, especially there is a need to study not only women perceptions of femvertising but also men's one (Champlin, Sterbenk, Windels, & Poteet, 2019; Teng, Hu, Chen, Poon, & Bai, 2021; Drake, 2017; Kapoor & Munjal, 2019; Hainneville, Guèvremont, & Robinot, 2022) and to investigate the impact of this practice on non-female-oriented product categories (Sternadori & Abitbol, 2019; Drake, 2017; Champlin, Sterbenk, Windels, & Poteet, 2019; Teng, Hu, Chen, Poon, & Bai, 2021).

The present study has the objective to fill the above mentioned gap emerged from the extant literature by answering the following question: *how do consumers perceive femvertising, compared to traditional advertising, when it is applied to non-female product category campaigns?*

To answer this question, the study focuses on the possibility that femvertising may be more effective than traditional advertising in non-female product categories due to its atypicality. More in detail, this study assumes that the perceived atypicality of femvertising when applied to non-female-oriented product categories, can generate more positive attitudes toward the advertising and the brand, making it more effective compared to the traditional ones.

In order to do so and close the identified research gap, the present research provides a theoretical framework and various hypotheses for the study of femvertising and its effectiveness across different product categories. Therefore, previous research on the relationship between femvertising and product categories focusing on the fit between the social cause and the products sold by brands, is discussed. In this regard, studies have shown that when there is a misalignment between the social cause and the product category, consumers may perceive the advertising as inauthentic (Lima & Casais, 2021). However, existing research is unclear about whether femvertising practices are effective across various product categories. Several studies have examined the effectiveness of femvertising across different product categories. Some of them suggest that femvertising is effective for both female-oriented and non-female-oriented brands and product categories (Castillo, 2014; Drake, 2017; Abitbol & Sternadori, 2016). For example, research has shown that femvertising reduces consumers' advertising reactance and leads to positive advertising and brand attitudes across various product categories (Åkestam, Rosengren, & Dahlen, 2017). Other studies suggest that female-oriented brands may be criticized for exploiting femvertising practices (Champlin, Sterbenk, Windels, & Poteet, 2019; Zeisler, 2016; Hoeffler & Keller.,

2002), while non-female-oriented brands that embrace social issues unrelated to their products can be perceived as inclusive and competent (Hoeffler & Keller., 2002).

By trying to make this issue clearer, the present study aims at investigating the relationship between product category and femvertising through the lens of atypicality, thus this construct and its relevance in the relationship between product category and femvertising is presented. In this regard, atypicality perceptions applied to the advertising context are introduced and explained as the consumers' perception of an advertisement as different from the traditional advertising commonly used in a specific product category (Veryzer & Hutchinson, 1998; Peterson & Malhotra, 2023). Together with that, the fact that judgments of atypicality play an important role in consumers' processing and evaluation of advertising is highlighted (Poels & Dewitte, 2019). More in detail, perception of atypicality implies that the advertising (or stimuli) doesn't match the existing schemas of the consumers advertising category (Boush & Loken, 1991) leading them to higher attention and more detailed and elaborated processing of the advertising (Stafford & Stafford, 2002; Goodstein, 1993). The atypicality relevance in this context is also theoretically supported by the categorization theory (Fiske, 1982; Sujan, 1985), which explains that consumers have schemas or mental structures for ads, organized around product types (Sujan, 1985; Stayman, Alden, & Smith, 1992; Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989; Stoltman, 1991). Therefore, highlighting that Advertising-related schemas exist in consumer's minds and that consumers use them to judge advertising originality and creativity, supports the notion that an advertising can match or do not match (schema-incongruence) these schemes in consumers' mind, thus generating typicality or atypicality perceptions (Peterson & Malhotra, 2023).

Successively, the study discusses the differences between female-oriented and non-female-oriented product categories in the context of femvertising, emphasising that female-oriented brands that align with women empowerment issues are seen as having a high fit with the theme of women empowerment (Champlin, Sterbenk, Windels, & Poteet, 2019), while non-female-oriented brands embracing social issues unrelated to their products can be identified as displaying a low-fit with these female-focused social issue (Hoeffler & Keller., 2002). In this regard it is further highlighted that high-fit product category brands can be perceived as in line with this social issue but also as exploiting it (Champlin, Sterbenk, Windels, & Poteet, 2019; Zeisler, 2016), on the other hand, low fit product-category brands that do not display a clear connection with the theme of female empowerment can obtain benefits and be perceived as competent and inclusive (Hoeffler & Keller., 2002). Therefore, it is important to further explore this emerging advertising practice, especially when it is proposed by brands with product categories for which the match with this type of social issue may not lead to a clear conceptual congruence.

These notions together provide a theoretical foundation for understanding the relationship between femvertising, product categories and atypicality, and sets the stage for the development of the first hypothesis of the conceptual model under study:

*H1: Consumers perceive femvertising as more atypical compared to traditional advertising for non-female oriented product categories.*

The construct of attitudes toward advertising (Aad), together with its significance in evaluating the impact of advertisements on consumers, is then presented as a key indicator of advertising effectiveness (Haley & Baldinger, 1991). Indeed, attitudes toward the advertising is described as the consumers' predisposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to an advertising (Lutz R. J., 1985). More in general, attitudes are explained as internal evaluations of an object and have been extensively studied under various domains (Fishbein, 1963; McGuire, 1968; Rosenberg, 1956; Triandis, 1971; Wyer, 1974; Mitchell & Olson, 1981).

In association with Aad and the previously introduced atypicality, the Schema Incongruity Theory is also presented as it explains how individuals use prior knowledge and categorization when evaluating stimuli. Schema congruity, or prototypicality, is associated with typical judgments and low levels of cognitive elaboration (Hawkins & Hoch, 1992). In contrast, schema-inconsistent stimuli elicit detailed and objective evaluation, attracting increased attention (Goodstein, 1993; Houston, Childers, & Heckler, 1987; Sujan, Bettman, & Sujan, 1986; Sujan, 1985; Stafford, Leigh, & Martin, 1995) (Stafford & Stafford, 2002; Folkes, 1988; Santos, Leve, & Pratkanis, 1994). Unexpected stimuli create arousal and tension, leading to greater cognitive effort and favorable evaluations (Berlyne, 1971). Atypical ads have been found to stimulate detailed thought and positive evaluations (Mandler, 1982; Meyers-Levy & Tybout, 1989; Taylor, Wilson, & Miracle, 1994).

Considering the Schema Incongruity Theory and the Schema Triggered Affect Theory, this study aims to explore whether femvertising applied to non-female-oriented and low-fit product categories (categories not typically associated with women empowerment) would be perceived as atypical and subsequently result in positive consumers' attitudes toward the advertising. Therefore, the second hypothesis presented suggests the potential positive impact of atypicality perceptions when femvertising is applied to certain product categories, as follows:

*H2: The higher perceived atypicality of femvertising when applied to non-female-oriented product category, compared to traditional advertising, generates in consumers more favourable attitudes towards the advertisement.*

A third variable is then discussed, namely attitudes toward the brand (Ab) and how they are influenced by attitudes toward the advertising (Aad) in the context of advertising. In this regard, previous studies

have explained that attitudes are evaluative in nature and endure for a certain period, potentially influencing behavior (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993) and that Aad and Ab have been treated as separate variables with distinct definitions (Goldsmith, Lafferty, & Newell, 2000; Lafferty, Goldsmith, & Newell, 2002). Aad refers to an individual's predisposition to respond favorably or unfavorably to a brand after being exposed to advertising, while Ab represents an individual's internal evaluation of the brand itself after a specific stimulus have been shown (Sallam & Algammash, 2016; Phelps & Hoy, 1996). Even if these are two different variables, the affect transfer theory suggests a strong connection between the two, explaining that favorable attitudes toward the components of an advertisement can contribute to the development of positive attitudes toward the brand itself (MacKenzie, Lutz, & Belch, 1986). The affect transfer hypothesis proposes a direct unidirectional causal flow from Aad to Ab, indicating that emotional responses to an advertisement can influence attitudes toward the brand without necessarily altering brand cognitions (Najmi, Atefi, & Mirbagheri, 2012; Gresham & Shimp, 1985).

Two competing theories explain the direct influence of Aad on Ab. The classical conditioning theory suggests that affect transfer occurs through repeated pairings of an unconditioned stimulus (the advertisement) and a conditioned stimulus (the brand). This mechanism involves the automatic transfer of affect from the unconditioned stimulus to the conditioned stimulus (Edell & Burke, 1984) (Shimp, 1981). The salient attribute hypothesis posits that the advertising itself serves as a salient attribute of the brand, with consumers consciously associating the advertising and the brand. Both theories have been supported by previous research (Mitchell & Olson, 1981; Edell & Burke, 1984; Lutz & MacKenzie, 1982).

Therefore, attitude toward the advertising (Aad) has been found to significantly affect attitudes toward the brand (Ab), purchase intentions, and purchase behavior, together with being a key factor influencing consumers' responses to marketing communications. Following this lead, the conceptual model of the study proposes that femvertising (vs traditional advertising) can affect attitudes toward the brand through perceived atypicality and attitudes toward the advertising. The mediation effect suggests that femvertising practices in non-female-oriented and low-fit product categories lead to high perceived atypicality, which, in turn, generates positive attitudes toward the advertising, ultimately influencing attitudes toward the brand. Hence the third hypothesis presented is the following:

*H3: The higher perceived atypicality of femvertising when applied to non-female-oriented product category, compared to traditional advertising, generates in consumers more favourable attitudes towards the advertisement, which in turn leads to more favourable consumers' attitudes toward the brand.*

After presenting the various hypotheses of the conceptual model and the theoretical framework supporting them the research focuses on the empirical validation and the presentation of the research methodology and results of the various analyses conducted.

The analyses begin with a pretest study conducted among 70 Italian respondents (male and female) to assess the assumption that certain product categories are perceived as either female-oriented (high-fit with women empowerment) or non-female oriented (low-fit). In this study respondents were randomly assigned to one of five different scenarios (images) representing five different product categories: beer, car, shampoo and conditioner, tampons, and sportswear.

After viewing the randomised image, respondents were asked to rate the masculinity and femininity of the product category using a two-item 7-point Likert scale (1= completely disagree, 7= completely agree) Douglas L. Fugate and Joanna Phillips (2010). They were also asked to assess the perceived fit between the product category and women empowerment using a three item 7 points Likert scale (1= completely disagree, 7= completely agree, Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.899$ ) (Barone, Norman, & Miyazaki., 2007). Two one-way ANOVA were conducted highlighting that the product category has a statistically significant differential impact on both masculinity ( $F(4,65)=7.134, p <.001$ ) and femininity ( $F(4,65)=10.020, p <.001$ ) perceptions of consumers toward the different product categories. Descriptive results showed that the beer category was perceived as less feminine and slightly more masculine compared to other categories ( $M_{fem}=2.13, SD=1.25; M_{masc}=4.53, SD=2.20$ ). Tampons were perceived as the most feminine category ( $M_{fem}=5.77, SD=2.09; M_{masc}=1.54, SD=1.40$ ), while shampoo and conditioner was perceived as the second most feminine. Car and sportswear had similar levels of femininity and masculinity between each other and compared to the beer category. Following this mechanism is possible to state that beer, car and sportswear are perceived as masculine categories, being high on masculinity ( $>3.5$ ) and low ( $<3.5$ ) on femininity. While shampoo and conditioner and tampons were valued as collectively high on femininity and low on masculinity, therefore identified as feminine product categories.

The Bonferroni post-hoc analysis provided more insights into the masculinity and femininity perceptions for each category. For example, the beer category was perceived as more masculine compared to tampons but equally masculine compared to cars, sportswear, and shampoo and conditioner. Tampons were perceived as less masculine than beer, car, and sportswear. The shampoo and conditioner category showed no significant difference in masculinity compared to cars and sportswear. About the femininity perceptions tampons were perceived as more feminine than beer and sportswear, the beer was perceived as less feminine compared to tampons and shampoo and conditioner.

Regarding perceived fit, another one-way ANOVA analysis ( $F(4,65)=7.628, p <.001$ ) revealed that the product category had a significant impact on consumers' perceived fit with women empowerment. The beer category was perceived to have the lowest level of fit ( $M_{fit}=2.15, SD=1.15$ ), while cars ( $M_{fit}=3.13,$

SD=1.37) and shampoo and conditioner ( $M_{fit}=2.93$ ,  $SD=1.53$ ) had slightly higher levels. Tampons ( $M_{fit}=4.80$ ,  $SD=1.48$ ) and sportswear ( $M_{fit}=4.13$ ,  $SD=1.64$ ) were instead the two product categories with the higher perceived fit. These findings suggest that consumers perceive certain product categories as having a higher fit with women empowerment than others.

Overall, the pretest study provided valuable academic and managerial insights into gender perceptions and perceived fit for different product categories. What emerges to be interesting from the analyses is that, comparing the Bonferroni analyses of the two dimensions of gender perceptions, it is possible to highlight that masculinity and femininity perceptions are not always proportional. Moreover, it was interesting also to note that in contrast with the gender perceptions, despite being a masculine product category, sportswear was seen as having a great fit with the issue of women empowerment in consumers' minds. Similarly, shampoo and conditioner, considered as a feminine category, is at the same time associated with low levels of perceived fit with female emancipation themes. This indicates that themes of female empowerment are perceived by consumers as fitting the five product categories presented at different levels and probably without a specific pattern based on gender perceptions, indeed this indicates that future research is needed in this direction. Moreover, the results laid the foundation for the main study.

The main study builds upon the findings of the pretest study and aims to test the hypotheses developed based on the literature review regarding the effectiveness of femvertising practices in non-female-oriented and low-fit product categories. The focus is on measuring consumers' perceptions of atypicality, attitudes toward the advertising, and attitudes toward the brand. To achieve this, a double mediation effect study is conducted. The main study involved a sample of 150 Italian respondents ( $M_{age} = 33.87$ ,  $SD = 13.24$ ). The sample included both males and females in order to align with the research gap identified, which emphasized the need to investigate also male consumers' reactions to femvertising practices.

In this study, respondents were randomly assigned to two different scenarios representing traditional advertising and femvertising, both associated with the beer product category as the pretest analyses identified it as the product category perceived as more masculine and having a low fit with women empowerment themes. Each scenario was accompanied by an invented brand "Luften Beer" and its description. Participants were initially introduced to the brand description, and then, depending on their randomly assigned condition, they viewed a picture of one of the two advertisement types.

The traditional advertising scenario depicted three men in a bar drinking beer, cheering, and screaming, possibly while watching an exciting sports match. The femvertising scenario also showed people at a bar, but mostly women, drinking beer, and cheering in the same direction, as if they were watching a game. Both scenarios were accompanied by the slogan "Cheers to all." To develop these stimuli, a

Heineken commercial served as a starting point for the femvertising condition. The commercial was modified to remove any specific brand names or attributes. Subsequently, a comparable stimulus was developed using an image retrieved from Google Images, featuring only males. The same slogan used in the Heineken commercial, "Cheers to all," was attached to the male image.

After viewing the scenario, a manipulation check was conducted for the femvertising condition where participants were asked to evaluate the stimulus in terms of female stereotyping, indicating the extent to which the communication message included a stereotyped image of women on a 7 point Likert scale (1=not at all, 7= very much). This manipulation check aimed to measure if the femvertising stimulus was perceived as effectively depicting a non-stereotyped representation of women and the results later confirmed it.

Following the manipulation check, all participants were asked to rate the displayed scenario in terms of the advertising itself and the brand presented in the scenario. The evaluation of the communication message was measured using a three-item 7-point scale, adapted from a study on creative television ads by Mark Peterson and Naresh K. Malhotra (2023). The scale included the items "very unfavorable/very favorable" and "very bad/very good" and "dislike very much/like very much". The same scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.965$ ) was used also for the measurement of the consumers' evaluation of the brand.

Both the consumers evaluation of the advertising and the brand used to measure consumers attitudes and advertising effectiveness were proposed to respondents before asking them their atypicality perceptions related to the advertising seen, in order to not interfere and influence their evaluations. The atypicality construct was presented in the last part of the questionnaire and respondents were asked to express through a 3 items 7 points Likert scale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.954$ ) to which extent they agreed (1= completely disagree, 7= completely agree) with the following affirmations referring to the communication message seen (Peterson & Malhotra, 2023): "Is in line with my expectations of typical beer brand advertising."; "Uses themes that I expected from a communication message of a beer brand."; "Made me feel sensations I was expecting to feel during a communication message from a beer brand.".

To test the mediation model and the various hypotheses of the study various descriptive analyses, an independent t-test and the Model 6 of PROCESS MACRO (Hayes, 2017) analyses were conducted.

Based on the results emerged from the various analyses conducted, it is possible to highlight some interesting findings.

Firstly, it is important to notice that all the different stimuli presented to respondents were perceived as expected. The femvertising condition was evaluated as a non-stereotypical representation of women ( $M_{\text{stereotype}}=1.67$ ,  $SD=1.22$ ) and was perceived by respondents as more atypical compared to the traditional advertising stimulus ( $M_{\text{fem}}=4.56$  ( $SD=1.52$ );  $M_{\text{trad}}=2.57$  ( $SD=1.29$ );  $t(148)=8.786$ ,  $p<.001$ ).

Therefore, the results of the independent T-test fully supported H1. These results were also supported by the ones of the Model 6 of PROCESS which indicated that the independent variable (communication message type: femvertising=1; traditional advertising=0) significantly and positively influences the first mediator of the model, namely the atypicality perceptions of consumers ( $b=1.99$ ,  $t=8.59$ ,  $p=.000$ ). Additionally, femvertising also generally led consumers to report more positive and higher attitudes toward the advertising itself ( $M_{\text{fem}}=5.78$  ( $SD=1.10$ );  $M_{\text{trad}}=4.04$  ( $SD=1.60$ );  $t(148)=7.705$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and toward the brand compared to the traditional one ( $M_{\text{fem}}=5.62$  ( $SD=1.38$ );  $M_{\text{trad}}=3.90$ , ( $SD=1.54$ );  $t(148)=7.239$ ,  $p<.001$ ), as expected.

In accordance with the first hypothesis, data highlighted that when femvertising is applied to non-female-oriented (and therefore low-fit) product categories advertising is perceived as generally more atypical compared to the traditional one. This finding aligns with the theories of categorization and schema incongruence found in the literature explaining that femvertising applied to non-female-oriented product categories does not match the existing advertising schema associated with these types of product categories in the minds of consumers, indicating schema incongruence (atypicality). On the contrary, the traditional advertising condition emerged to be perceived by consumers as a more typical communication type for non-female-focused product categories compared to femvertising, thus indicating that this type of advertising better matches the advertising patterns associated with these types of product categories in the minds of consumers, pointing out the schema congruence.

Nevertheless, even though the literature explains that schema incongruence can lead to better and more positive consumer attitudes and although the stimuli were perceived in the manner theorized and led to the expected consumer reactions, the hypothesized model was not fully supported. Even if the femvertising condition was perceived as more atypical and led to more positive attitudes in consumers compared to the traditional one, the statistical results explained that atypicality perceptions did not have a significant influence on consumers' attitudes toward the advertising. Therefore, the second hypothesis was rejected. These results can be explained through the Peterson and Malhotra (2023) perspective, who in their study indicated that atypicality may lead to both positive and negative attitudes towards the advertising.

Regarding consumers' attitudes toward the brand, the data shows that it is positively influenced only by consumers' attitudes toward the advertising ( $b=.912$ ,  $t=19.57$ ,  $p=.000$ ), which acts as the second mediator. The independent variable (communication message type) ( $b=.65$ ,  $t=.38$ ,  $p=.707$ ) and atypicality ( $b=.039$ ,  $t=.87$ ,  $p=.385$ ) do not have a significant influence on attitudes toward the brand. These results indicate only partial support for the third hypothesis, which assumed that positive consumers' attitudes toward the advertising would have positively influenced consumers' attitudes toward the brand. However, since the hypothesis also included the rejected assumption of atypicality



perceptions significantly influencing attitudes toward the advertising, the third hypothesis is not supported by the statistical results and is rejected.

In conclusion, the analysis indicates that the total effect of the communication type (independent variable) on consumers' brand attitudes emerged as positive and significant ( $b=1.73$ , boot standard error [SE]=.238, 95% [CI]=1.25;2.20), while the direct effect of the independent variable (femvertising vs. traditional advertising) on the dependent one (attitudes toward the brand) was not significant ( $b=.07$ , boot standard error [SE]=.173, 95% [CI]= -0.28;0.40).

The results of the mediation analysis, proved the significance of the indirect effect ( $b=1.55$ , boot standard error [SE]=.236, 95% [CI]=1.07;2.00) suggesting that femvertising (vs. traditional advertising) positively influences consumers' attitudes toward the advertising, which in turn positively influences consumers' attitudes toward the brand. Therefore, the findings contribute to answering the research question and fulfil the research gap through the understanding of the effectiveness of femvertising practices when applied to non-female-oriented and low-fit product categories. More in detail, the results indicate that femvertising applied to this product category type are perceived as more atypical and can lead to more positive attitudes toward the advertising itself compared to the traditional one, which in turn translate into more positive attitudes toward the brand.

Overall, this study provides insights on the potential effectiveness of femvertising in non-female-oriented and low-fit product categories suggesting that femvertising can generate positive attitudes toward the advertising itself, which in turn mediate consumer attitudes toward the brand. In this regard, further research is needed to gain a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underlying this indirect effect.

Considering the academic contributions of the research, the study expands knowledge on consumers' gender perceptions of different product categories and the fit between these categories and women empowerment themes. It provides insights into consumer behaviour, market segmentation, and marketing strategies and further support to the several theories of the theoretical framework.

From a managerial standpoint, the research offers guidance for brands to strategically position their products and develop effective brand strategies and messaging. While shedding light on their complexities, it emphasizes the importance of considering gender perceptions and product category fit when implementing femvertising campaigns. Moreover, it is useful for managers to know that femvertising leads to atypicality perceptions by consumers as this construct is associated to detailed and elaborated processing of the advertising (Stafford & Stafford, 2002; Goodstein, 1993) together with being one of the main dimensions of advertising creativity (Rosengren, Eisend, Koslow, & Dahlen, 2020; Smith, MacKenzie, Yang, Buchholz, & Darley, 2007), therefore emphasising positive outcomes for marketers. Most importantly, the research contributes to closing the gap in the literature

demonstrating that femvertising can be successful in non-female-oriented product categories, providing valuable insights for brand managers in developing impactful and more personalised advertising campaigns allowing brands to build stronger connections with their target audience (Aaker, 1997; Welter & Smallbone, 2011) and to induce them to engage more in this female-focused practices.

The present research has provided valuable contributions to academia and managerial practices. However, there are certain limitations that need to be acknowledged, which also provide opportunities for future research.

Firstly, the generalization of the study's results may be limited due to the different nationality of the participants, therefore further research is needed to replicate the findings across different cultural contexts and diverse populations.

More in depth, the first study (pretest) examined only five product categories in terms of consumers' gender perceptions and the fit of these categories with women empowerment themes. Replicating the study with a larger number of product categories and studying the effects of femvertising in even more various contexts would provide additional knowledge for managers working with different types of products. The pretest also indicated that consumers perceive different levels of fit between female empowerment themes and product categories. Future research should explore this relationship further to understand if there are any patterns or inconsistencies in consumers' perceptions.

Regarding the main study, it focused on the beer category, which emerged as non-female-oriented and low-fit in the pretest study. Replicating the study with other non-female-oriented and low-fit categories would help validate the findings across different product types. Similarly, conducting the study with the same product category but using different stimuli would provide insights into the influence of different advertising features on the outcomes.

The present study did not find a significant direct effect between atypicality perceptions and consumers' attitudes toward the advertising (Aad). Future research should investigate why this result occurred and explore underlying factors that may have contributed to it. Additionally, using different effectiveness variables, such as willingness to buy, it could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of atypicality perceptions on femvertising effectiveness.

To support the findings of the present study, future research should investigate if femvertising is perceived as typical when applied to female-oriented and high-fit product categories, providing a more comprehensive understanding of consumers' perceptions of femvertising across different category types.

Future research could also explore the relationship between femvertising, atypicality perceptions, and product categories using a different conceptual model. This model could set the type of advertising as

the independent variable, atypicality perceptions as the dependent variable, and the product category type as the moderator.

In conclusion, when applied to non-female-oriented product categories displaying a low fit with woman empowerment, the present study successfully investigated the effectiveness of femvertising as findings demonstrated that, compared to traditional advertising, this practice leads to atypicality perceptions and more positive attitudes toward the advertising and the brand. This indirect effect highlights the potential of femvertising even in product categories that may seem incongruent, therefore managers should consider incorporating femvertising in their campaigns as it can have positive effects on both companies and society.

It is crucial for companies to approach femvertising with sensitivity and authenticity, ensuring genuine alignment between the message and the product, indeed continuous evaluation and research in this area can provide valuable insights for future campaigns and further contribute to discussions on gender equality and feminism.