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# Empowering Women or Selling Empowerment to Women? :Young Consumers Response to Femvertising in the Japanese Context

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## Abstract

Although the phenomenon and importance of so-called femvertising, female empowerment advertising, are growing in recent times, little research has been done on how consumers react to it and what factors are related to the evaluation of femvertising in the Japanese context. This study investigates response to femvertising and the factors in the process, focusing on young consumers. Femvertising may bring positive brand awareness to consumers and play an important role in social change in gender awareness. However, it can receive backlash when it fails to show a clear message. The preliminary survey highlighted the high level of youth awareness of gender in advertising. Participants viewed that gender stereotypes in advertising remain prevalent, mentioning a specific body image and gender stereotypes of occupations and roles portrayed in advertising. Some participants evaluated favorably that some brands reverse the roles of men and women doing the housework in the ads. However, there were some opinions that those depictions are not about gender equality, leading to another gender stereotype. In the analysis of main survey respondents aged 18 to 29, the findings revealed that self-referencing, the degree of consumers relates advertising content to their personal experiences and memories, was an important factor in the femvertising effects: Respondents who can relate themselves to femvertising messages tended to show positive ad and brand attitudes, and purchase intention. Besides, the self-referencing and need for emotion were significant factors in the effects of femvertising on forwarding intention and social change in gender awareness. Respondents with egalitarian gender role attitudes were more likely to evaluate femvertising positively. It is also worth noting that discomfort with advertisements in general regarding gender portrayals was associated with femvertising preference.

**Keywords:** femvertising, gender portrayals in advertising, gender role attitudes

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## Introduction

Japan has a long history of gender stereotyping in advertising. Recently, many advertising campaigns came under fire on SNS for their stereotypical depictions of women. Meanwhile, as the public became more aware and vocal of gender misrepresentation, Japanese companies have experimented with female empowerment and diversity in advertising. For instance, the #HairWeGo campaign by Pantene, a hair shampoo brand of P & G (Pantene, n.d.), challenged hair-related school regulations or practices in job searching. The largest financial newspaper in Japan, Nikkei, has announced its first winner of the Nikkei Unstereotype Advertising Award, the #NoBagForMe PROJECT by Unicharm (Unstereotype Alliance, 2020, November 27). The campaign aimed to challenge the typical practice of store clerks putting feminine hygiene products in paper bags when purchased and the ingrained belief that menstruation is taboo in Japan. The response to the campaign and new package was generally positive, but negative views were also.

Femvertising, female empowerment advertising, garnered a great deal of attention since Dove's Real Beauty Campaign in 2004 and P&G Always' "Like a Girl" campaign in 2014. Femvertising is defined as "advertising that employs pro-female talent, messages, and imagery to empower women and girls" (SheKnows Media). Femvertising might play a significant role in bringing positive brand attitudes and social change. However, it can receive backlash when it fails to show a clear message. To take an example, department store Sogo and Seibu's campaign featured an actress along with a picture of her being hit by a cream pie and with copies such as "I am forced because I am a woman" and "What should come is my era created by each person...not women's era that is touted..." (Pouch, 2019, January 8; Casey, 2019, January 9). While some opinions supported the ad campaign, there were also views showing discomfort, criticizing that the problem is reduced to individual issues (Kira, April 8, 2021).

Although the phenomenon and importance of femvertising are growing recently, little research has investigated how consumers respond to it and which factors are related to the evaluation of femvertising in the Japanese context. This study explores consumers' attitudes toward femvertising. In addition, this study examines factors relating to attitude toward femvertising and effects of femvertising, focusing on ad and brand preference, purchase intention, and forwarding intention. Consumers' viewpoint on the role of femvertising in raising gender awareness in society is also examined.

## Gender Portrayals in Advertising

In advertising, people and groups from various categories appear as users and endorsers of the product. It is necessary to briefly convey product information and

images to people with diverse backgrounds through short TV commercials and limited space ads; hence advertising often uses social ideas and typical images widely shared in society (Lee, 2021). Among them is the stereotypical image of gender, which has been criticized for maintaining, strengthening, and reproducing biased gender views by repeatedly presenting intuitive and limited gender views (e.g., Muramatsu, 1997).

The literature has well documented the tendency of gender and gender role portrayals in advertising. According to the review of Grau and Zotos (2016), previous content analyses have investigated issues in advertising, including physical characteristics such as body size and height, occupational status, roles, and traits. They explained that previous research revealed women's decorative roles, family-oriented roles, fewer professional roles, and more demure roles. In contrast, advertising tended to portray men as more independent, authoritarian, and professional while did not much emphasize age and physical appearances.

This study investigates previous research on how gender roles, bodies, and beauty have been represented in media content such as advertising and magazines from a comparative perspective and how gender representation in advertising affects women's consciousness, self-image, and self-evaluation.

In studying gender representation in advertising within the East Asian context, Prieler, Ivanov, and Hagiwara (2015) analyzed the advertisements featuring key figures from a cultural perspective, including Japan, Korea, and Hong Kong. The study denoted that prime-time commercials of the three countries showed stereotyped images, and Japan and South Korea had a stronger tendency than Hong Kong. Female models were more likely to be young, while most male models were middle-aged. Women often dressed suggestively, and men tended to wear casual clothes that were less revealing. Although the hypothesis that women often appear at home is not supported, women were portrayed as domestic and men as typical at work. Regarding narrators, men were more likely to appear as authoritative voices. The study argued that women in Japan, Korea, and Hong Kong are somewhat portrayed stereotypically, and these results are likely attributed to Confucian traditions common to these cultures.

Women's magazines also represent ideal women's bodies and beauty through models, and they have a particular influence on the self-evaluation and image of women as readers. Frith, Shaw, and Cheng (2005) argued that advertising allows us to examine how beauty is represented in various cultures. The study also pointed out that each culture has its way of thinking about beauty, culturally shaped. On the other hand, standardization and globalization are also progressing in advertising production and campaign development. The study focused on product categories and body descriptions of models for women in Singapore, Taiwan, and the U.S. The U.S. has maintained its Western culture and influence worldwide, while Singapore and Taiwan are East Asian countries with solid Confucian traditions. It has been shown

that ‘classical beauty’ has a universal aspect in the East and the West regarding the types of beauty.

On the other hand, ‘cuteness and intimacy’ were emphasized in Taiwan and Singapore. By product category, the magazine advertised beauty products often in Singapore and Taiwan and clothing in the U. S. The U.S. emphasizes sexual attractiveness such as sexiness and clothing, and physical beauty. In contrast, Taiwan put an emphasized cuteness as a type of beauty.

Iino, Iza, and Takeuchi (1989) analyzed fashion articles in women’s magazines in Japan. According to the age of the models, Japanese models were more likely to be young than in the U.S. The model’s expression, gaze, and posture contrasted as well: Japanese magazines emphasized cuteness, not as sexy, self-assertive, and provocative as American magazines. Likewise, Maynard and Taylor (1999) conducted a comparative analysis on the depiction of girlishness in terms of visual and linguistic information in Japanese and American magazine advertisements. When it comes to product categories, beauty and cosmetics accounted for the most in Japan and the U.S., and both countries had more product ads related to appearance and health. Overall, in Japan, the cuteness and girlishness of models are emphasized in terms of visual and linguistic information. In contrast, in the United States, models were portrayed as more independent, strong-willed, sometimes rebellious, and challenging.

Lee (2012) analyzed the image of Japanese and foreign models in magazine ads by age group. In the advertisements of teens and young-adult magazines for the early 20s, ‘Japan-oriented’ and ‘cute-oriented’ were conspicuous, and Japanese models of the same generation appeared to show off their cuteness. On the other hand, young-adult magazines for the late 20s and early 30s and middle age magazines for late 30s and 40s showed foreign orientation, and foreign models appeared more than Japanese models. The results are consistent with O’Barr (1994) argument that the image of white models in Japanese advertising is entirely different from that of Japanese models.

Arguing that anyone can access commercials and express their discomfort, which can easily gather support and spread quickly through the Internet, Sechiyama (2020) classified the advertisements that go flaming in the Japanese context from a gender perspective into four categories. The first one is a pattern that is received as a fixed and reinforced gender role, the second is a pattern that is considered sex discrimination in the depiction of appearance, the third is a pattern of strong sexual messages that have become the expression of men’s wishes, and the fourth is a pattern accepted as fixed and reinforced male gender role. In an interview article by Sendenkaigi (2021, May 31), the author has also stated that the difference between approval and disapproval is “catching up with the status quo” or “half a step ahead”, emphasizing that gender awareness and knowledge have become indispensable in advertising production.

Regarding media effects, people tend to believe that others are more susceptible to media than they are. This perception has been known as the third-person effect since Davison (1983) suggested that “people will tend to overestimate the influence that mass communications have on the attitudes and behavior of others” (p.3). Consumers may also underestimate the degree to which advertising affects them. Zawisza-Riley (2019) argued that advertising might be “a source of implicit learning and lead long-term attitudes that are resistant to change” (p.55), based on the cultivation theory, referring to long-term exposure to television results in cultivating viewers’ perception of reality, and low involvement persuasion model, which implies passive advertising exposure work.

Although there are few empirical studies on the effects of gender portrayals in advertising compared to gender representation studies, several studies have conducted surveys and experiments to address them.

First, according to a survey on female consumers by SheKnows Media, ninety-four percent of respondents think portraying women as sex symbols in advertisements is harmful. Ninety-one percent believe how women are portrayed in advertising directly impacts girls’ self-esteem. Eighty-one percent said ads that positively show women are important for younger generations (See Table1).

Table1. Main Findings of Attitudes toward Gender Portrayals in Advertising and Femvertising

91% believe the way women are portrayed in advertising has a direct impact on girls’ self-esteem.
51% like pro-female ads because they believe they break down gender-equality barriers.
81% said ads that positively portray women are important for younger generations to see.
71% think brands should be responsible for using advertising to promote positive messages to women and girls.
94% believe portraying women as sex symbols in advertisements is harmful.
52% have bought a product because they liked how the brand and their advertising portrays women.
46% have followed a brand on social media because they like what the company stands for.

n=628 (Female)

Source: SheKnows Media’s #Femvertising survey (survey period: late 2014); Stampler, L. (2014, October 14)

Jennings-Walstedt et al. (1980) showed interesting results from experiments on the effect of advertising on female college students’ self-consciousness, independent judgment, and confidence. Those female college students who watched non-stereotypical ads were more independent and more confident than those who watched stereotypical ads. Richins (1991) examined the effect of advertising on the

beauty standards and self-consciousness of young women. Preliminary interviews showed that female college students compared themselves with models, and some participants were rather optimistic about the negative emotions from the gap, including the appearance they could acquire through weight loss. The experiment also showed that respondents dissatisfied with their physical attractiveness tended to compare the advertising images with their own.

Halliwel and Dittmar (2004) showed that thin-ideal internalization is a significant moderator of media exposure. Their experiment revealed that exposure to thin models was associated with a high level of body-centered anxiety than exposure to average-size or no models among those who internalize the thin ideal. In addition, upward comparison, which refers to social comparisons with superior others, often leads to increased emotional distress and reduced self-esteem (Dittmar and Howard, 2004). Based on these results, Dittmar and Howard (2004) examined the effect of exposure to thin media models focusing on individual differences in the internalization of thin female ideals and social comparison with media models. As hypothesized, the analysis results showed that thin-ideal internalization and social comparison on appearance were moderators of media effects. Notably, internalization was likely to predict women's anxiety more than social comparison.

It is also worth noting that gendered messages in advertising might lead to negative attitudes toward advertising in general (AG), which has a significant implication to the advertising market. Huhmann and Limbu (2016) examined how the gender stereotype-related construct is related to attitudes toward advertising in general (AG), and the more consumers believe an ad depicts gender stereotypes, the less favorable the AG is.

### Femvertising: 'Empowering' Women or 'Selling Empowerment' to Women?

The advertising industry, which once relied heavily on the objectification of women in their ad content, has now turned to get women consumers to feel "understood and valued" by encouraging pro-female messages (Gupta, 2017, May 30). However, as Abitbol and Sternadori (2016) noted, femvertising messages contradict the feminist argument that women's empowerment lies in the enforcement of social and political practices, in terms that they encourage women consumption of their products, and Goldman, Heath, and Smith (1991) condemned the trend as "commodity feminism".

Arguing that brands have attempted to link the value and meaning of female emancipation to their marketing, Goldman et al. (1991) suggested "commodity feminism", the redefinition of feminism through consumerism and purchasing behavior: "Women's magazines attempt to redefine feminism through commodities, interpreting the everyday relations women encounter and negotiate into a series of

“attitudes” which they can then “wear” (Goldman et al., 1991, p.336). Goldman et al. (1991) also noted, “feminism has now been rehabilitated for the world of advertising—its primary meanings taken over by the system of fashion, and some of its most important alternative formulations translated back into the language of the Western male ethic of possessive individualism” (p.336). As explained by Becker-Herby (2016), this framework is one in which ideals of feminist independence, freedom, and sexual independence are ‘rehabilitated’ for advertising, and brands exploit the ideals in a bid to sell products to women.

As few enterprises have explicitly connected their businesses or missions to gender equality, corporate social efforts on women’s empowerment have been seen as insincere (Abitbol & Sternadori, 2016). In a content analysis of femvertising brands focusing on the authenticity of the claims, Becker-Herby (2016) suggested that femvertising brands need to improve their areas such as female leadership and employee benefits.

As for the consumer reception of femvertising, Abitbol and Sternadori (2016) showed participants’ conflicting views such as suspicion of the intent behind femvertising by large brands and support for their pro-social involvement in an in-depth interview with young adults.

Drake (2017) investigated the effectiveness of femvertising from a marketing perspective by an online survey on female participants aged 18 to 34, exposed to either a traditional television advertisement or femvertising for the same brand. The findings revealed that femvertising resulted in the positive ad and brand evaluation, purchase intentions, and emotional connection to brands. Likewise, Elhajjar (2021) showed that consumers positively assess the femvertising message in Lebanon. While the educational level and age do not affect the attitudes toward femvertising, gender, trust in ads, support of female rights, and feminist self-identification influenced consumer evaluation of femvertising.

Based on previous research suggesting consumers’ preference of advertising congruent with their values and beliefs, Sternadori and Abitbol (2019) explored consumers’ perceptions of femvertising in terms of their worldview, focusing on support for women’s rights, feminist self-identification, political affiliation, and trust in advertising. A survey of U.S. adults sample showed that those who support women’s rights and self-identified feminists were highly receptive to femvertising. Likewise, Kim (2021) investigated attitudes toward femvertising between 20s and 40s in Korea, emphasizing consumer characteristics such as gender, age, and attitude toward feminism. The results showed a significant difference in attitudes toward femvertising according to the consumers’ gender, but no significant difference by age. Attitudes to feminism positively predicted for attitudes toward femvertising.

Kapoor and Munjal (2019) investigated the effects of femvertising, such as forwarding intention of ad and purchase intention of the advertised brand, focusing on the consumer’s public and private self-consciousness and need for emotion on



attitude towards femvertising. Findings showed that private and public self-consciousness and need for emotion influence their attitude toward femvertising.

Um (2021) examined antecedents and consequences of attitude toward femvertising among undergraduate students in Korea. The study focused on perceived congruence and perceived authenticity for the antecedents and examined attitude toward advertising and brand, purchase intention, and e-word-of-mouth intention for the consequences. Those who perceive that femvertising is congruent with the brand image and the message is authentic are more likely to have a positive attitude toward the ad. Also, attitude toward femvertising is positively associated with brand attitude, purchase intention, and e-word-of-mouth-intention.

Åkestam, Rosengren, and Dahlen (2017) predicted that femvertising would decrease ad reactance among female consumers, which leads to positive ad and brand attitudes. While previous studies on the effects of women's presentation have focused on social comparison and self-identity, this study examined the role of psychological reactance to stereotypical representation for explaining the impact. The experimental studies supported the hypothesis for femvertising challenging female stereotypes of physical characteristics and the roles and occupations used to depict females in advertising.

Although little empirical research on femvertising has been done in the Japanese context, International NGO Plan International (2019) examined youth attitudes on the advertisements that break gender stereotypes in their survey of gender and advertising among youth. Specifically, Plan International surveyed youth (15-24 years old) attitudes to how gender is portrayed in Japanese advertising and how advertising affects youth (Survey period: September 8 to 30, 2019). The survey was conducted as a part of the 2019 Girl's Leadership Girl Change Future, in line with the International Girls' Day, which calls for promoting girl rights and girl empowerment. Three hundred ninety-two respondents aged 15-24 completed the web survey. Although the survey had more female respondents than male ones (Male:  $n=54$ , Female:  $n=330$ , Others:  $n=8$ ), the findings showed interesting results.

Regarding advertising, 30.2% of the respondents said some ads left a good impression on them, whereas 41.8% said some ads made them uncomfortable. The most common reason for discomfort was gender stereotypes. As for the ideal appearance, youth viewed people who value 'individuality' as ideal, not the uniform 'masculinity' or 'femininity' depicted in advertising. Many of the advertisements cited by those who said they had seen advertisements that changed gender stereotypes showed men doing housework and childcare, and some youth cited advertisements from overseas companies. They proposed a "checklist for gender-conscious advertising by youth" (Plan International, 2019, October 8, See Appendix 1) and made recommendations to the Japan Advertisers Association Diversity Committee based on the results.

## Study1: Preliminary Survey

### ***Research Question and Method***

The preliminary survey explored how young consumers respond to gender portrayals in advertising. The online survey was conducted between December 1 and 24, 2021. Fifty-six students taking media courses at undergraduate and graduate schools completed the survey voluntarily (Male:  $n=25$ , Female:  $n=31$ , Age:  $M=20.12$ ,  $SD=1.063$ ). The survey includes open questions, such as views on how gender and gender roles are portrayed in Japanese advertising, experiences and opinions of advertising that got flamed, and ads intended by a domestic or foreign company to change gender stereotypes. See Appendix 2 for the questions of the survey. The study also measured to what extent young consumers experience biased gender portrayals based on the advertising regulations in the U.K., using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (absolutely). The scale was adopted from Plan International (2019). Details of the scale items are shown in Table 2.

### ***Findings***

Table 2 shows the self-reported degree of exposure to advertisements with gender stereotypes. The highest average was for the view on “ads that show in a way that stirs up anxiety about someone’s body, such as lean shape body is desirable ( $M=4.13$ ,  $SD=1.028$ ), followed by gender depiction concerning occupation and roles in advertising ( $M=4.04$ ,  $SD=1.078$ ). On the other hand, the average gender portrayals of making fun of someone’s behavior or appearance that does not conform to gender stereotypes was the lowest ( $M=2.54$ ,  $SD=1.334$ ). Overall, young consumers often see advertisements that depict certain body images or gender stereotypes of occupations and roles.

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations for Views on Gender Portrayals in Japanese Advertising among Young Consumers

	<i>M (SD)</i>			<i>t (df)</i>
	Overall	Men	Women	
Ads that describe occupations and roles associated with a particular gender	4.04 (1.078)	3.72 (1.242)	4.29 (.864)	-2.022 (54)*
Ads that depict the characteristics and behaviors associated with a particular gender	3.96 (1.159)	3.68 (1.376)	4.19 (.910)	-1.605 (39.939)
Ads that make fun of someone's behavior or appearance that does not conform to gender stereotypes	2.54 (1.334)	2.36 (1.381)	2.68 (1.301)	-.883 (54)
Ads that portray a person as a sexual object	3.48 (1.321)	3.36 (1.469)	3.58 (1.205)	-.618 (54)
Ads that portray with a focus on one's body or part of one's body	3.71 (1.187)	3.72 (1.173)	3.71 (1.216)	.032 (54)
Ads that show in a way that stirs up anxiety about someone's body, such as lean shape body is desirable	4.13 (1.028)	3.96 (1.098)	4.26 (.965)	-1.080 (54)

\* $p < .05$

Table 3. Most Frequent Words of View on Gender in Advertising

Male		Female	
Term	Frequency	Term	Frequency
役割 (role)	7	最近 (recent)	10
社会 (society)	6	料理 (cooking)	7
最近 (recent)	5	洗濯 (laundry)	6
洗剤 (detergent)	5	イメージ (image)	6
家庭 (home)	3	役割 (role)	5
家事 (housework)	3	意識 (awareness)	5
洗濯 (laundry)	3	ステレオタイプ (stereotype)	4
料理 (cooking)	3	家事 (housework)	4
シーン (scene)	3	固定 (fixed)	4
仕事 (work)	3	仕事 (work)	4
		起用 (using)	3
		差別 (discrimination)	3
		価値観 (value)	3
		家庭 (home)	3
		使用 (use)	3
		表現 (expression)	3
		商品 (product)	3

*Note.* The result is based on the analysis of the text mining website of *User Local* (<https://textmining.userlocal.jp>). The study excluded the terms such as “advertisement”, “CM”, “male”, “female”, “gender” and “portrayals” in the analysis.

Three or more in the frequency in the analysis of free answers to Q1 (see Appendix2) were listed.

The study also analyzed free answers on how gender and gender roles are portrayed in Japanese advertising quantitatively and qualitatively.

Table 3 displays and compares the most frequently used words for male and female respondents. The top three most frequently used terms were “role”, “society”, and “recent” among male respondents. For female respondents, “recent”, “cooking”, “laundry”, and “image” were most frequently used. The term “recent” was related to the change in gender role portrayals in recent advertising. Overall, terms such as “home”, “housework”, “laundry”, and “cooking” were the fourth most frequently mentioned, indicating household chores and advertising. It is also interesting to note that the terms among male respondents centered on housework such as detergent, laundry and cooking, while the terms of women respondents were more diverse, including other than words related to housework.

Next, I would like to examine the free responses in more detail. Considered as a whole, both male and female participants pointed out that gender stereotypes in advertising are still pervasive, mentioning that there is still underlying sexism (Male, 20s), unequal advertising for men and women, and some things that women find offensive at times (Female, 20s). A participant also pointed out, although brands consciously depict strong images of women, there is still “an image of women as pretty and men as cool” (Female, 20s).

However, a male participant said that the situation is changing, saying that Japan is becoming relatively sensitive to such themes, and many promotions are cautious about drawing gender (Male, 20s). Similarly, a male participant mentioned that recent ads show a sense of the role not bound by gender, making society better (Male, 20s). A female participant pointed out that male actors have come to do laundry in laundry detergent commercials, but still, many cosmetics commercials express ‘beauty’ (Female, 20s).

On the other hand, some participants have a critical view on some advertising that “reverse” the role of males and females in doing laundry and cooking in commercials for detergents and frozen food, saying that “still, rather it may be a kind of reverse discriminatory image that ordinary men are branded “impossible” if they cannot wash and cook properly” (Male, 20s). Similarly, a female participant mentioned that more and more male actors are advertising for cooking recently, but it seems that advertisers are only thinking about replacing the role that females have been doing with men (Female, 20s). A female participant even mentioned that commercials with only women using laundry and washing products are rare, which she feels rather uncomfortable (Female, 20s).

Some participants criticized advertisers saying that there is the impression that they consider gender from the point of view of “not being criticized” rather than emphasizing diversity (Female, 20s), and it is a good thing that consumers respond firmly to the stereotyped advertising and flame out against it. Regarding the

experiences and opinions of advertising that got flamed and femvertising, several respondents mentioned Sogo and Seibu's campaign and #HairWeGo campaign introduced in the introduction of this study.

Overall, participants viewed that gender stereotypes in advertising remain prevalent, mentioning a specific body image and gender stereotypes of occupations and roles portrayed in advertising. Some participants evaluated favorably that some brands reverse the roles of men and women doing the housework in the ads. However, there were also opinions that those depictions are not about gender equality, leading to another gender stereotype.

Based on the previous study and discussion above, this study conducted a main online survey in the next section.

## Study2: Main Survey

### *Research Question and Method*

This study explores how young consumers respond to advertising in general and femvertising, and what factors are related to the effect of femvertising, focusing on self-referencing, need for emotion, and gender role attitudes.

Self-referencing refers to how much consumers relate advertising content to their personal experiences and memories, and it "occurs when information is processed by relating it to aspects of oneself (e.g., one's own personal experiences)" (Burnkrant & Unnava, 1995, p.17). Need for emotion is defined as "the tendency to pursue or enjoy emotional or affective situations" (Raman, Chattopadhyay, & Hoyer, 1995, p.537). Based on the definition, this study refers to the need for emotion as "the tendency to pursue and enjoy emotional or affective situations, and the tendency to prefer to use emotions as a means of interacting with the world".

The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: How do young consumers respond to advertising in general and change in gender portrayals in advertising?

RQ2: How do young consumers respond to femvertising and perceive the effect of femvertising?

RQ3: What factors are related to the effects of femvertising among young consumers?

Study 2 is based on an online survey from January 28 to 29, 2022. The survey was conducted among the panel of an Internet research company, and the sample size was assigned by age and gender ( $n=1,800$ ). The study focused on young consumers' attitudes toward gender in advertising and femvertising, analyzing the

sample of younger respondents aged 18 to 29 (Male:  $n=270$ , Female:  $n=270$ , Age:  $M=23.65$ ,  $SD=3.678$ ). The sample included respondents aged 22.2% between 18 and 19, 32.6% between 20 and 24, and 45.2 % between 25 and 29.

This study defined femvertising as “ads that change gender stereotypes and empower women” in the survey. Table 4 shows attitudes toward advertising in general and changes in gender portrayals in Advertising. Some items were based on the preliminary study (Item 6 to 8), modified from Murata (2018) (Item 9 to 11), and the other items were self-developed (Item 1 to 5, 12).

The self-referencing scale was adapted from Martin, Lee, and Yang (2004). The study combined three items into the self-referencing scale ( $\alpha= .812$ ). The scale of need for emotion was modified from Raman, Chattopadhyay, and Hoyer (1995). The following three items were combined into the need for emotion scale ( $\alpha= .738$ ): “I value my emotions and moods”, “I often wish there was something that could move me”, and “I am influenced by my mood and emotional state when making decisions”. The gender role attitudes scale was modified from García-Cueto et al. (2015), considering the Japanese context and expressions (See Appendix3). The study combined ten items into gender role attitudes ( $\alpha= .901$ ). The scale of effects of femvertising was self-developed, and the details of scale items are displayed in Table 5. All variables were measured with a 5-point scale.

### **Findings**

The research question addressed young consumers’ attitudes toward advertising in general (Hereafter referred to as AG) and changes in gender portrayals in advertising. Table 4 presents the young consumers’ awareness and AG. Overall, respondents showed high awareness in consumer behavior and AG, such as “I think shopping is an expression of my will as a consumer” ( $M=3.41$ ,  $SD=1.102$ ) and “I think advertising reflects the way companies and brands think and value” ( $M=3.40$ ,  $SD=1.076$ ). Although respondents showed favorable AG, and positively evaluated the recent tendency in advertising, there was a negative attitude toward the way gender is depicted in the ad “in terms of not being criticized rather than emphasizing diversity” ( $M=3.15$ ,  $SD=1.052$ ).

Table 4. Means and Standard Deviations for Attitudes toward Advertising in General and Changes in Gender Portrayals in Advertising

Items	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. I am more sensitive to the description of women in advertising than I used to be	2.58	1.101
2. There are many unpleasant descriptions of women in advertising	2.67	1.091
3. Overall, the description of women in advertising is getting better	2.96	0.977
4. Recently, I have seen ads that support and empower women	3.05	0.992
5. I have come to see ads depicting gender-independent self-expression	3.03	1.063
6. It is good that the public is responding strongly to sexist advertising	3.22	1.084
7. It is a good thing that people started flaming up against sexist advertising	2.95	1.106
8. I have the impression that the way gender is depicted in the ad in terms of not being criticized rather than emphasizing diversity	3.15	1.052
9. I want to support and agree with a company and brand, so it is okay to buy products from that company and brand	3.15	1.016
10. I think it is okay to stop buying the company's products because advertising is unpleasant or has a bad reputation	3.14	1.108
11. I think shopping is an expression of my will as a consumer	3.41	1.102
12. I think advertising reflects the way companies and brands think and value	3.40	1.076
13. Companies should consider diverse gender values in advertising	3.21	1.113

Table 5. Means and Standard Deviations for Self-Reported Effects of Femvertising

Items	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. I like ads that change gender stereotypes and empower women	3.04	1.042
2. I like advertised products and brands in ads that change gender stereotypes and empower women	2.95	1.030
3. I favor companies of ads that change gender stereotypes and empower women	2.99	1.046
4. I want to buy products and use service of ads that change gender stereotypes and empower women	2.84	1.005
5. I like to seek information when seeing the ads that change gender stereotypes and empower women	2.67	1.056
6. I hope that ads that change gender stereotypes and empower women will spread further	2.91	1.024
7. If I see ads online that change gender stereotypes and empower women, I can press the like button	2.87	1.083
8. If I see ads online that change gender stereotypes and empower women, I can share them	2.74	1.063
9. If I see ads that change gender stereotypes and empower women, I will skip them	2.77	1.019
10. More ads that change gender stereotypes and empower women would be good	3.05	1.060
11. Society's consciousness will gradually change through ads that change gender stereotypes and empower women	3.11	1.049
12. Ads that change gender stereotypes and empower women are a good representation of a company's attitude	3.04	1.022
13. Ads that change gender stereotypes and empower women are all about corporate advertising anyway	3.03	1.018

Research question two posed how young consumers respond to femvertising and perceive the effect of femvertising. As presented in Table 5, while young consumers tend to evaluate femvertising positively, such as “ads that change gender stereotypes and empower women are a good representation of a company's attitude” ( $M=3.04$ ,  $SD=1.022$ ), there were also severe opinions such as “ads that change gender stereotypes and empower women are all about corporate advertising anyway” ( $M=3.03$ ,  $SD=1.018$ ). Still, respondents anticipate seeing more ads that change gender stereotypes and empower women ( $M=3.05$ ,  $SD=1.06$ ). Regarding the effects of femvertising on social change, young consumers tend to anticipate society's consciousness will gradually change through advertising that changes gender stereotypes and empowers women ( $M=3.11$ ,  $SD=1.049$ ). On the other hand, overall effects of femvertising on attitude toward ad, brand and company, purchase intention, and forwarding intention were below the midpoint of three (See Table 5).

Table 6. Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Femvertising Effects on Ad and Brand Attitude, and Purchase Intention

	Ad attitude	Brand attitude	Purchase intention
Gender	.035	.113***	.052
Age	.066*	.019	.018
Ad discomfort	.075*	.043	.120***
Self-referencing	.498***	.532***	.580***
Need for emotion	.071	.057	.103*
Gender role attitudes	.179***	.163***	.029
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.414***	.442***	.458***

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$

Note. Gender was coded: male=0, female=1.

Research question three investigated what factors are related to the effects of femvertising. Table 6 summarizes the results of the multiple regression analyses predicting femvertising effects, including attitude toward ad, brand and company, and, purchase intention. Ad discomfort ( $\beta = .075$ ,  $p < .05$ ), self-referencing ( $\beta = .498$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and gender role attitudes ( $\beta = .179$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were statically significant predictors of attitude toward ad that change gender stereotype and empower women. Regarding attitude toward brand of femvertising, self-referencing ( $\beta = .532$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and gender role attitudes ( $\beta = .163$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were statically significant predictors. Ad discomfort ( $\beta = .120$ ,  $p < .001$ ), self-referencing ( $\beta = .580$ ,  $p < .001$ ), and need for emotion ( $\beta = .103$ ,  $p < .05$ ) were positively associated with purchase intention.



Overall, self-referencing, the degree of consumers relating advertising content to themselves, was strongly related to the ad and brand preference and purchase intention. Respondents with egalitarian gender role attitudes were likely to evaluate ad and brand positively. It was also interesting that discomfort with advertisements in general regarding gender portrayals was slightly related to femvertising preference.

Table 7. Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Femvertising Effects on Forwarding Intention and Social Change

	Forwarding intention	Social change
Gender	-.038	.004
Age	-.012	.027
Ad discomfort	-.024	.096**
Self-referencing	.653***	.382***
Need for emotion	.107*	.146***
Gender role attitudes	-.058	.248***
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.430***	.406***

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$

Note. Gender was coded: male=0, female=1.

The study also conducted multiple regression analyses predicting femvertising effects on forwarding intention and social change in gender awareness (See Table 7). Self-referencing ( $\beta = .653, p < .001$ ) and need for emotion ( $\beta = .107, p < .05$ ) were statically significant predictors of forwarding intention. Ad discomfort ( $\beta = .096, p < .01$ ), self-referencing ( $\beta = .382, p < .001$ ), need for emotion ( $\beta = .146, p < .001$ ), and gender role attitudes ( $\beta = .248, p < .001$ ) were statistically significant predictors of social change in gender awareness by femvertising. Overall results showed that respondents who perceived a high level of self-referencing and need for emotion were likely to forward pro-women messages and believe that femvertising leads to social change in gender awareness.

## Discussion

The phenomenon and importance of femvertising are growing; however, little research has examined how consumers respond to it and which factors are related to the evaluation of femvertising in the Japanese context. This study explores young consumers' attitudes toward gender in advertising and femvertising. In addition, this study examined factors in the reception of femvertising. The study also investigated

consumers' viewpoint on the role of femvertising in bringing social change in gender awareness.

Study 1 highlighted youth's high awareness of gender depiction in advertising, and participants tended to criticize desirable body image depicted in advertising and gender depiction concerning occupation and roles in advertising. Although gender stereotypes in advertising are still pervasive, some ads "reverse" the role of males and females in doing laundry and cooking in commercials for detergents and frozen food. However, there were also opinions that those gender-role portrayals are not about gender equality, leading to another gender stereotype. Besides, participants criticized advertisers only thinking about replacing the role between men and women and considering gender issues from the viewpoint of not being criticized by consumers. It is also worth noting that several participants mentioned that consumers can respond to gender stereotypes by going flaming on the internet.

In Study 2, although respondents showed favorable AG, and highly evaluated the recent tendency in advertising, there were still negative attitudes toward how gender is depicted in the ad. Respondents tend to evaluate femvertising positively, but there were also severe opinions on the company's marketing purposes and overall effects of femvertising on attitude toward ad, brand and company, purchase intention, and forwarding intention were not that high. Still, respondents anticipate seeing more ads that change gender stereotypes and empower women. Also, young consumers tend to anticipate society's consciousness will gradually change through advertising that changes gender stereotypes and empowers women.

Furthermore, the findings of Study 2 revealed that self-referencing, the degree of consumers relating the advertising content to themselves, was strongly associated with ad and brand preference, and purchase intention. Those Respondents with egalitarian gender role attitudes tended to evaluate femvertising and advertised brands positively, as expected. It is also worth noting that discomfort with advertisements in general regarding gender portrayals led to femvertising preference. The individual difference in processing information such as need for emotion was also a significant factor in forwarding intention and social change in gender awareness.

Further study into the reception of femvertising is necessary, including experimental studies, using specific pro-women messages and portrayals in advertising in the Japanese context.

## Note

The study assessed multicollinearity in the multiple regression model using variance inflation factor (VIF, less than 4), and there was no multicollinearity between independent variables in the model.

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## Appendix 1. Checklist for Gender-Conscious Advertising Proposed by Youth

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- Does the ad portray the character positively, not as a sexual object, but as an individual with personality and ability?
  - Does the ad portray a variety of lifestyles?
  - Does the ad include a message that men and women can exercise leadership?
  - Does the ad affirm diverse body images?
  - Does the ad consider diverse values regarding gender?
- 

*Source.* “The checklist has been developed with reference to the guidelines of local governments and the U.K. Advertising Standards Authority” (Plant International, 2019, October 8).

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## Appendix 2. Questions of the Preliminary Survey on Undergraduate and Graduate Students (Study1)

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### 1. View on how gender and gender roles are portrayed in Japanese advertising (RQ1)

Please write what you feel about how gender and gender roles are portrayed in Japanese advertising.

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### 2. Experiences and opinions of advertising that got flamed

Have you ever seen an advertisement for a domestic or overseas company that got flamed due to gender issues? Or have you heard of such ads? Please write it down briefly and feel free to write down how you felt. In some cases, it does not have to be accurate. If not, write “No”.

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### 3. Experiences and opinions of ads intended by a domestic or foreign company to change gender stereotypes (RQ2)

Have you ever seen an ad intended by a domestic or foreign company to change gender stereotypes? Or have you heard of such ads? Please write it down briefly and feel free to write down how you felt. In some cases, it does not have to be accurate. If not, write “No”.

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### 4. The United Kingdom has restrictions on advertising expressions. Do you see the following expressions in Japanese advertising expressions? (RQ1)

- Ads that describe occupations and roles associated with a particular gender
  - Ads that depict the characteristics and behaviors associated with a particular gender
  - Ads that make fun of someone’s behavior or appearance that do not conform to gender stereotypes
  - Ads that portray a person as a sexual object
  - Ads that portray with a focus on one’s body or part of one’s body
  - Ads that show in a way that stirs up anxiety about someone’s body, such as lean shape body is desirable
- 

\* The scale was adopted from Plan International (2019).

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## Appendix 3. Scale Items of Gender Role Attitudes (Study2)

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Items\*

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1. SFT People can be active, considerate and kind to others regardless of sex
  2. SFT People should be treated equally regardless of sex
  3. SFT We should stop thinking about whether people are men or women and focus on other characteristics
  4. EFS Both men and women can demonstrate their abilities regardless of the type or content of work
  5. EFS Both men and women can hold responsible positions
  6. EFS There is no inappropriate job just because you are a man or a woman
  7. EFS I think both home and occupational activities are important
  8. FFT Household chores should not be allocated by sex
  9. FFS I think boys and girls should be brought up the same way
  10. FFS Mothers and fathers should be equally involved in raising children
- 

*Note.* Social Function Transcendent (SFT); Employment Function Sexism (EFS); Family Function Transcendent (FFT); Family Function Sexism (FFS). Two items of Social Function Sexism (SFS) were not included (“I think it is worse to see a man cry than a woman”; “Girls should be more clean and tidy than boys”).

\* The scale items were modified from García-Cueto et al. (2015).