Femvertising or Faux Feminism? A Critical Discourse Analysis of Sport Femvertising Campaigns

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Femvertising, “advertising that employs pro-female messages and imagery to empower women”, has been a growing trend in marketing (SheKnows Media, 2014, para. 2). Although the rhetoric of female independence and liberation has occurred in advertising since 1929 (Amos, & Haglund, 2000), the novelty of femvertising rests in its confrontation of female stereotypes perpetuated in advertising (Åkestam et al., 2017). Stereotypes, known as biased belief systems that guide information processing, affect perceptions of and interactions with marginalized groups (Fink & Kensicki, 2002). Advertising, as a potent cultural institution, can both mirror and mold social norms, regardless of being propitious or destructive (Holbrook, 1987). Given the gender-based stereotypes as well-anchored social mores, and the powerful role of advertising in embracing or challenging these ideologies, it is imperative to continuously examine female representation in advertising as a marketing strategy for brands.

Sport is clearly a gendered activity which makes it a logical setting for analysis of gender relations, stereotypes, and feminist theories (Dunning, 1986). Since the 1980s, sport scholars have examined how gender relations are reproduced by, resisted in, and transformed through sport (Acosta & Carpenter, 1985; Theberge, 1994). In 1988, Birrell identified media practices as one area of central concern through which dominant notions of women are reproduced. Moreover, she noted the application of gender in media messages as the primary category of oppression and exclusion for other categories such as class, race, sexuality, and age. Birrell (1988) believed “if the proper subject of feminist theory is women in diversity, then the proper project of feminist theory is theorizing that diversity” (p. 69). One robust site to observe these aspects of critical analysis is sport femvertising campaigns. Secret and Adidas are among the brands that have adopted femvertising approaches and that have a long history of consistently advocating for gender equality. Therefore, this study applies a critical feminist lens on representation of female athletes in Secret’s All Strength No Sweat (2020) and Adidas’s Reimagine Sport (2020) "femvertising" campaigns.

Thus, the following research questions are proposed:

What verbal-visual strategies have been applied to address gender relations?
What post-feminist elements exist in the representation of female athletes in the campaigns?
What diversity elements (class, race, age) appear in the representation of female athletes in the campaigns?

To address the research questions, a Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) will be conducted to analyze how advertising campaigns use semiotic resources to construct or challenge the ideology of gender discrimination in sport. Guided by Kress and van Leeuwen’s (1996) visual grammar approach to analysis, images, colors, and pictures also will be evaluated according to three major metafunctions (conceptual, interpersonal, and discourse). Theoretically, the study will expand knowledge on female representation from a critical standpoint to better reflect femvertising in sport, which challenges a broader range of female stereotypes. Practically, the results will help sport marketers who are seeking to leverage their platforms to empower women, increase brand favorability, and purchase intentions.