

Femvertising: Who benefits?

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“Young women of the world, two things are lacking in your life: gender equality and shiny hair. And we can help you achieve at least one of those things.” - Claimed a shampoo company in 2016 to sell more bottles of the same shampoo that failed to reach its sales target 3 months back. Some leading magazines have also parroted ideals of “feminism” and forgot how they themselves are reinforcing myths of conventional beauty through their cover pages that display only a certain kind of women and photoshoots that objectify them. Behold! The advertising agencies typically criticised for using sexist and racist means of publicity are now selling empowerment to women. Thanks to them, ‘Femvertising’ is now a word that needs attention.

Hashtag Feminism

It all starts with a hashtag. In the age of social media posts dictating consumer decisions and heavily influencing their thoughts about a brand, all it takes is a marketing campaign with a powerful hashtag. Feminism and its implications were always difficult for a patriarchal society to fathom. But the advertising agencies with their faulty empowerment indicators made it impossible to distinguish it from the flawed ideas. Companies don’t just run contradictory marketing campaigns, many promote ideas of feminism in marketing while embodying the opposite. In 2015, KPMG, one of the world’s largest auditing companies, released a video titled “Glass Ceiling” with the slogan: Continuing our commitment to the next generation of women leaders. In August of 2019, KPMG became the subject of a \$400 million class-action lawsuit alleging a pattern of gender discrimination — including denying promotions to women and penalizing them for taking maternity leave. Femvertising has no real impact on the fight for women’s equality if the company isn’t practicing feminist ideals. Instead, they’re often dangerously redefining the meaning of feminism, diminishing it to a tagline and dumbing it down to a hashtag. **Commercializing a competitive mindset**

“Why should boys have all the fun?” is a tagline that clearly indicates a flawed concept of gender superiority

that indirectly promotes a competitive mindset. This clever attempt to turn the unconventional idea of femininity into an empowerment indicator has made scooties for girls very popular in the Southeast Asian region over the past decade. SO POPULAR that the scooty market in India alone generated a revenue of \$80.0 million in 2018.

Popular film actresses are likely to be role models for young women and adolescent girls. Decades ago movie stars used to portray cigarette smoking as an empowerment indicator on the screen. It influenced young girls’ attitudes toward the habit; making lung cancer an equal opportunity disease. Again, a wrong course of empowerment disguised as feminism was sneakily injected into the market. The market kept growing while feminism was misinterpreted.



To be a little fair though, back in the 60-70s when this was popular, women often considered smoking as a rebellion against the societal norms. Virginia Slims used the tagline “You’ve come a long way, baby” to promote smoking while making a sly connect to women’s liberation. They did go a long way with that till people realized smoking wasn’t what liberated women.

Opportunism over impact

In reality, these femvertisements have been rather using a watered-down, de-clawed idea of feminism that agitates little for actual social change. These companies actively convince that with the consumption of this product, we are supporting the feminist cause. Dove became the pioneer of femvertising in India in 2013 when they released “Real Beauty bottles”. It targeted the vulnerabilities and insecurities of women regarding the shapes and

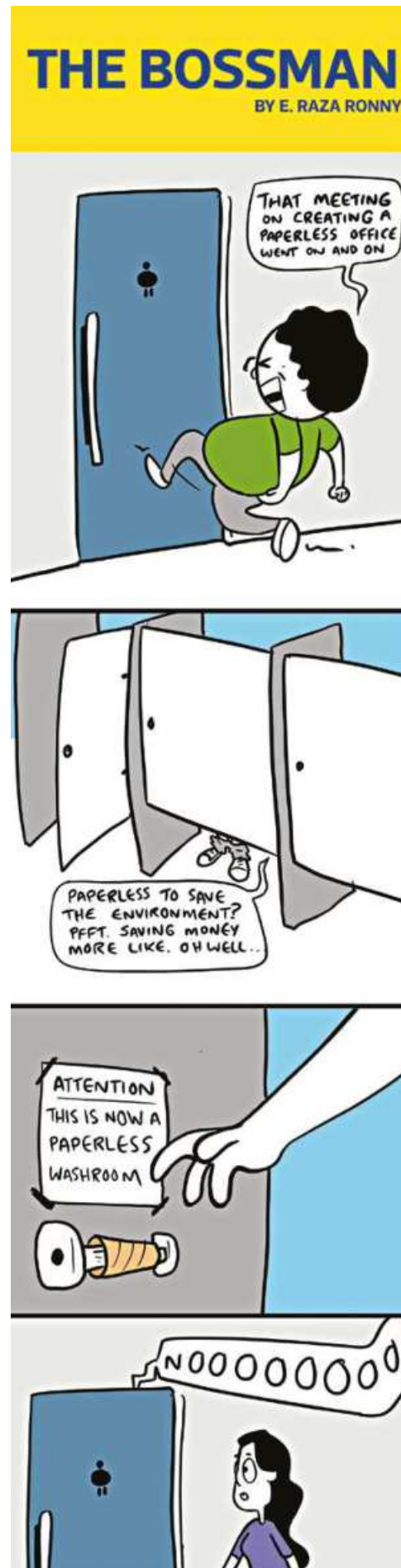
sizes of their bodies by launching 6 differently shaped bottles of shower gel imitating different body types. The actual intention of this campaign might have been to support women’s confidence about their bodies or to simply make money, but what they actually did was force women to seek self-confidence from a plastic bottle. The bottles, however, never went into production due to the major backlash it received from social media.

Digital manipulation

Femvertisements pop up on occasions like Mother’s Day and International Women’s Day. The brands appear to be participating in a race of ‘pink-vertising’ to put out their women-centric ads where they want their consumers to know that the brand believes in female empowerment. Companies don’t just run contradictory marketing campaigns, many promote ideas of feminism in marketing while embodying the opposite. According to a report published last year in The Independent, UK, “Girl Power” charity t-shirts were being sold in the UK on the occasion of women’s day. These t-shirts were made at an exploitative Bangladeshi factory with more than 100 impoverished workers, most of whom were women, claiming to have been sacked after striking in protest at their low wages.

This has been indirectly doing more bad than good due to the commercial representation of the cause itself. The idea of what feminism is and what it stands for has been distorted over the years by the media, so much that it is now ‘selling’ a gender along with the products instead of actually empowering it.

However, the actual intention of any brand is primarily to generate sales with advertisements. But the problem lies within the extreme practices of ‘what sells’. The tendency of the market to be more penetrable with the objectification of women is indicative of how society perceives a gender. Playing this card with female-driven content, brands bank on the idea of a rather commercial aspect of feminism. This particularly benefits mostly the companies, not the demography that actually needs it.





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