UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG
SCHOOL OF BUSINESS, ECONOMICS AND LAW

The Perception of Femwashing
A qualitative study of how women perceive femwashing

Master´s Degree Project in Marketing and Consumption, Graduate School
Authors: Anna Haggren, Jennifer Larsson & Julia Wigerdt
Supervisor: Lena Hansson

The Perception of Femwashing

A qualitative study of how women perceive femwashing

Anna Haggren, Jennifer Larsson & Julia Wigerdt
Master of Science in Marketing and Consumption, School of Business, Economic and Law at
the University of Gothenburg
Spring 2022

Abstract: Women and men are commonly seen in advertising and are frequently used to exaggerate products and encourage consumption. Studies show that such advertisements could include sexual objectification, unrealistic stereotypes, and unrealistic views of specifically women. Consequently, movements against this type of advertising have been made by empowering women through femvertising. However, more recent studies show that there are cases in which companies make marketing communication efforts that emphasize female empowerment, diversity, and equality, even though it might not reflect their actual practices, that is, they perform femwashing. Since femwashing is a relatively new phenomenon, a qualitative study with inspiration of a phenomenological approach was applied. This research examines how women perceive femwashing and thus, provides an understanding of the phenomenon. The research indicates that women perceive femwashing as negative since it makes them feel critical, skeptical, pressured, misled, naive and provoked. The results contribute to the currently relatively limited field of femwashing as it presents a conceptualization of femwashing from a consumer perspective through four dimensions. These dimensions are inauthenticity, non- transparency, inconsistency, and non- relatability.

Keywords: Femwashing, femvertising, authenticity, transparency, consistency, relatability, female empowerment, qualitative methodology

Introduction

Women and men are commonly seen in advertising (Varghese & Kumar, 2019) and are frequently used in order to exaggerate products and encourage consumption (Eisend, 2010). Especially women have been exploited in advertising to generate company profit (Fasoli et al., 2017). As portrayals of women are often characterized by sexual objectification, advertisements have actively contributed to negative and unrealistic stereotypes (Champlin et al., 2019) and thus generated criticism for reflecting an unrealistic view of women (Varghese & Kumar, 2019). This has motivated movements against sexist advertising which further have led to corporations engaging in campaigns with focus on female empowerment (Maclaran, 2015; Zawisza et al., 2018; Lima & Casais, 2021). Additionally, companies have increasingly started to implement a marketing strategy aimed to empower women and promote feminist values with the use of empowerment slogans and messages in order to generate greater brand engagement, something which is referred to as femvertising (Åkestam et al., 2017). However, not all femvertising is genuine

and made with the right intentions in mind. Recent studies made by Khoo-Lattimore et al. (2019) and Myambo (2020), show that occasionally, companies use questionable communications that emphasize gender, equity and cultural diversity (Myambo, 2020), to project a favorable public image when they, in reality, show no such efforts or the opposite of such efforts. This phenomenon is referred to as femwashing and is more specifically defined as using marketing as a tool to *capitalize women's rights and equality* (Urban Dictionary, 2017).

The phenomenon of femwashing has been especially highlighted and critically examined by the Swedish news site Breakit. According to Breakit (2021A), there are several large Swedish e-tailers targeting females through positive and female empowerment communication and messages. Such e-tailers promote females to become the best version of themselves and strengthen their self-esteem through marketing communication (Breakit, 2021B; Champlin et al., 2019) and have been accused of being a business strategy used by men to make profits (Breakit, 2021B). Furthermore, it has been found that corporations are portrayed as being founded by women, when in fact, it is men that are the founders and/or own the majority of the shares (Breakit, 2021B; Sterbenk et al., 2021).

There is a limited amount of research conducted within the research field of femwashing. The current research available highlighting femwashing explains how the strategy is used by companies (Myambo, 2020, Sterbenk et al., 2021, Khoo-Lattimore et al., 2019), and not to the same extent how it is perceived by consumers. There is seemingly only one study taking a consumer perspective on femwashing by collecting data through qualitative methods consisting of interviews, namely Hainneville et al. (2022). However, the study, which was made recently, highlights

femvertising but does not regard femwashing to the same extent. In the study, femwashing is used to distinguish authentic from inauthentic femvertising, rather than to examine the actual understanding of the phenomenon. This shows that an understanding of femwashing is currently limited, implying that further research is needed within the field. Additionally, as the majority of the research within the field takes a company perspective, a consumer perception is needed to achieve a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon. Therefore, a consumer perspective is taken by using a qualitative method, to provide women's perceptions of femwashing.

The aim of this study is to contribute with more knowledge to the limited theoretical field of femwashing. Moreover, the purpose of the study is to capture how women perceive femwashing by looking at companies' communication made online and thus, provide an understanding of the phenomenon. To fulfill the purpose, the following research question was formulated:

How do women perceive femwashing?

The context of this study contributes to previous research and literature which is currently relatively limited. Accordingly, the research contributes with an extended knowledge within the research field of femwashing. The findings provide a conceptualization of femwashing from a consumer perspective through four dimensions: inauthenticity, non-transparency, inconsistency, and non-relatability. Additionally, this study contributes with a new sociocultural approach to femwashing as it regards the Swedish market.

The paper follows the following order. Following this first section, the second section represents the theoretical framework within the field of femvertising

and femwashing as well as authenticity and transparency. The third section represents the methodology, presenting a qualitative study, taking phenomenological research as inspiration. The fourth section represents empirical data and analysis gathered from the consumer interviews. The last section concludes the research by presenting its findings, future research as well as implications.

Theoretical framework

To provide a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of femwashing, this section will include a theoretical framework involving an examination of previous findings on the research field of femvertising and femwashing, focusing on different interpretations of the phenomenon. In context to these previous research findings, a connection to authenticity and transparency will be provided to help draw new insights to the understanding of the femwashing phenomenon.

Femvertising and femwashing

To understand the notion of the harmful marketing strategy that is femwashing, one should consider the research field of truthful femvertising. According to Åkestam et al. (2017), femvertising is a marketing communication strategy aimed to empower women and promote feminist values with the use of empowerment slogans and messages in order to generate greater brand engagement. Varghese and Kumar (2019) argue that, as a result of the perception that femvertising is a successful way to target a female audience, the usage of the marketing strategy has increased significantly by brands. Sterbenk et al. (2021) follows this notion by stating that femvertising is a trend used by companies for equality. However, researchers have started to scrutinize the consequences and origins of the femvertising trend as it has been shown to reinforce stereotypes (McCleary, 2014), generate negative brand

feelings (Pérez & Gutiérrez, 2017) and portray unrealistic views of women (Varghese and Kumar, 2019). Thus, it suggests that the advertising trend, which is based on feminism (Åkestam et al., 2017), moves away from the actual ideology of the movement. This is argued in the critical studies made by both Goldman (1992) and Gill (2007) as it is suggested that when feminism is used for commercial and capitalist purposes, it erodes the very essence of feminism as a political and social movement and ideology. Goldman (1992) highlights the issue of exploiting women´s everyday situation by stating that feminism has been conquered by capitalism. Moreover, Gill (2007) argues that feminism is depoliticized when marketing links dependence, free choice and right to one´s own body to a specific product or the consumption of it as the focus lands on specific products, styles and appearances rather than the very significance of the women's movement. Repo and Yrjölä (2015) argues that this relates to postfeminism and a certain neoliberal governmentality where women are promised happiness, confidence, and fulfillment through consumption and that to express empowerment, women are encouraged to purchase commodities of different kinds. Consequently, instead of strengthening and empowering women, Gill (2007) claims that post-feminism led to another type of objectification, where the woman is devalued. Goldman et al. (1991) coined the term "commodity feminism" to explain the trend of using women-empowerment in marketing communication, something which Baxter (2015) further, more generally, referred to as "fauxactivism". By faux activism, Baxter (2015) more specifically mean that feminism is exploited as a legitimate source of activism in which the aim is to appear as passionate about the cause to the consumer, whilst no actual belief of the cause exists.

Recent studies show that there are cases in which companies make marketing efforts

that emphasize gender diversity and equality, even though it might not reflect their actual practices (Khoo-Lattimore et al., 2019; Myambo, 2020). Several researchers have come to refer to this phenomenon as "femwashing" (Hainneville et al. 2022; Khoo-Lattimore et al., 2019; Myambo, 2020). According to Khoo-Lattimore et al. (2019), the phrase is derived from the sustainability phenomenon that is called greenwashing. The definition of greenwashing is understood to be about misleading people, through marketing communications, into thinking that a company's products, practices and/or performances are pro-environmental (Bramwell & Lane, 2002; De Freitas Netto et al., 2020). Thus, greenwashing is a practice adopted by companies that is based on misleading sustainable rhetoric used to shape desirable images (ibid). Similarly to greenwashing, femwashing is about companies giving the appearance of being something which they are not for capitalistic gains, essentially creating rhetoric-practice gaps (Khoo-Lattimore et al., 2019). However, contrary to greenwashing, which revolves around environmental sustainability, femwashing falls within the area of social sustainability. More specifically, Myambo (2020) interprets femwashing as a marketing approach implemented to make capitalistic gains on specifically women's rights and equality. Such capitalism often appears to give women more freedom in terms of consumer choice, independence from patriarchy and socio-economic autonomy when in reality, it constrains women's choices through collective exploitation of different genders, ethnicities, races and religious populations (ibid). In the study by Hainneville et al. (2022), femvertising is conceptualized through different dimensions and it is differentiated from femwashing by distinguishing the concepts as authentic respectively inauthentic. Accordingly, consumers' perception of authentic femvertising indicates that

inauthentic femvertising can be stated as femwashing (ibid).

Moreover, although the most frequently used term to explain the phenomenon of misleading female empowerment rhetoric in advertising is femwashing, Sterbenk et al. (2021) proposes another term, namely, "fempower-washing". Rather than defining the phenomenon as a tool for capitalistic gain, the researchers behind the latter term stresses the false use of gender-equality corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies as a way to reach successful corporate branding. Similarly to femwashing, Sterbenk et al. (2021) highlights that what makes the marketing strategy of fempower-washing false is the lack of actions taken towards reaching declared goals. Sterbenk et al. (2021) exemplifies this by arguing that companies that claimed to support gender equality by for instance promoting female representation in boards and leadership positions, in reality made no such commitments. Furthermore, Sterbenk et al. (2021) and Khoo-Lattimore et al., (2019) shows that some companies performing femvertising do not have women as majority on their boards and in their leadership positions. Several researchers such as Kim et al. (2015), Wagner et al., (2009) and Yoon et al. (2006) further argues that when it is discovered that a company who claims to support female empowerment causes in their marketing in fact lack in internal and external CSR-activities, a backlash in the form of a decrease in stakeholder trust and corporate reputation will most likely occur. However, the researchers Abitbol and Sternadori (2019) as well as Pope and Wæraas (2016) indicate that companies misleading consumers through marketing communication experience similar reputational and financial benefits as the ones making authentic efforts and advertising as consumers take all CSR-messages, used in marketing, at face value.
Authenticity

In Hainneville et al.´s (2022) study, femwashing is differentiated from femvertising in the sense that it constitutes of inauthentic femvertising. Thus, to understand the strategy of femwashing, one should take a closer look at the concept of authenticity. According to Melin (2008) and Dwivedi and McDonald (2018), companies can affect consumers´ perception by reaching consumers and making them aware about certain characteristics of the brand. Melin (2008) further argues that it is therefore important that the core values of a brand is permeated in all communication as it is the communicative link between the company and its consumers.

According to several researchers, there is an expectation on companies to commit to the causes that they explicitly support (e.g Hughes, 2013; Donia & Sirsly, 2016; Madrigal & Boush, 2008). Bruhn et al. (2012) further argues that because of consumers´ desire and wish for companies and brands to become more genuine, unique and original, that is, authentic, it has become increasingly important to possess a high level of authenticity. Hartmann et al. (2013) adds to this by arguing that consumers' perception of a brand is highly affected by the brand's authenticity. Sterbenk et al., (2021) supports this claim by arguing that if the motives of a brand are perceived as sincere by consumers, it will result in positive associations with the brand. According to He et al. (2021), such positive associations could be created through storytelling, that is, communication where companies tell their story directed to the receiver, as it increases the feeling of authenticity. Further, Fenger et al. (2015) argues that storytelling decreases the feeling of being skeptical. Dwivedi and McDonald´s (2018) as well as Sterbenk et al. (2021) state that motives perceived as insincere or unclear may lead to mistrust, and thus a negative association with the brand. Additionally, according to Wagner et al. (2009) as well as Donia and Sirsly

(2016), something that can cause negative association towards a company, which further can be referred as "corporate hypocrisy" (Wagner et al., 2009) or CSR-washing (Pope & Wæraas, 2016), is when companies´ actions and practices do not go in line with their CSR-messaging or statements.

Hainneville et al. (2022) explores the nature of authentic and inauthentic femvertising. The researcher states that when companies use a femvertising approach to their communication and advertising strategies, one of the most important factors to its success is authenticity in the sense that it depicts a truthful brand that is aligned with its core values (ibid). However, previous studies have shown that consumers have questioned the authenticity of femvertising (Lima & Casais, 2021). Hainneville et al. (2022) exemplifies this by arguing that consumers have discussed and denounced on social media platforms that femvertising is not authentic, something which the researcher argues is femwashing.

Transparency

Anderberg and Morris (2006) states that brand authenticity cooperates with the transparency a company has. Additionally, Hainneville et al. (2022) point out that corporations engaging with femwashing has been shown to have a lack of transparency. The result of the study stresses the importance for companies using femvertising as a marketing strategy to be transparent for them not to be accused of using inauthentic femvertising, that is, femwashing (ibid). Transparency refers to the disclosure of information (Christensen, 2002) which can be understood as the possibility for consumers to easily access information relating to the business activities, actions, and plans. Molleda (2010) emphasizes that consumers are to a larger extent expecting companies to act transparently in the sense of practices, actions, and values. Accordingly, due to

Author/-s	Research topic	Findings
Goldman (1992)	Commodity feminism	Feminism as a movement becomes conquered by capitalism as women´s everyday situation is exploited for commercial and capitalist purposes.
Gill (2007)	Gender and the Media	Feminism is depoliticized when marketing links consumption to dependence and free choice.
Repo & Yrjölä (2015)	Postfeminism and neoliberal governmentality	Women are encouraged to purchase commodities to express empowerment and are promised confidence, fulfillment and happiness through consumption.
Baxter (2015)	Faux activism in female-empowering advertising	Feminism is exploited as a legitimate source of activism to appear passionate about the cause, when no real belief of the cause exist.
Khoo-Lattimore et al. (2019)	Gender representation in knowledge production	Femwashing is failing to act on rhetoric-practice gaps, that is, not following said gender equality, diversity and female empowerment claims.
Myambo (2020)	Femwashing global capitalism	Femwashing as a marketing approach appears to give women freedom, independence and autonomy when it actually constrains women´s choice by exploiting genders, races, ethnicities and religious populations.
Sterbenk et al. (2021)	Femvertising, greenwashing and fempower-washing	Fempower-washing involves the use of gender-equality corporate social responsibility (CSR) claims to falsely declare goals in which no actions are taken.
Hainneville et al. (2022)	Femvertising and femwashing	Femwashing is differentiated from femvertising in that it constitutes of inauthentic femvertising.

Table 1. Summarizing table outlining the key sources and their core findings related to femwashing.

consumers´ increasing awareness and engagement regarding businesses unethical practices, the concept of transparency is becoming increasingly important (ibid). According to Singh et al. (2008), this type of information is of high importance and a prerequisite for many to obtain and can further be crucial in terms of finding a company authentic. Moreover, as stated by Kitchin (2003), the degree of transparency is crucial for establishing relationships with consumers and corporations. Furthermore, Sodhi and Tang (2019) resonate that due to consumers´ possibility to find information online, through for instance social media, the importance is even higher for corporations to disclose transparency information to be perceived as genuine and authentic.

There are positive effects in terms of how a company is viewed externally related to being outspoken about taking social responsibility (Sodhi & Tang, 2019). However, Swaen and Vanhamme (2005) as well as Singh et al. (2008) propose that the possible consequences in terms of reputation are worse if the company would be found to, or even accused of, enact unethical practices.

To create an overview of the research used in the theoretical framework, femwashing and concepts closely related to femwashing, based on prior theory, are summarized in Table 1.

Methodology

Data collection

Since the purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of femwashing and how women perceive femwashing by looking at companies' communication made online, qualitative interviews were suitable for the chosen research topic (Bryman & Bell, 2013). In-depth interviews were chosen as a primary tool of data collection as it provides detailed responses and thus a deep understanding of the studied phenomenon. Furthermore, the chosen method suited the research context as it helped tap into the image of femwashing, something which Colaizzi (1978) suggests is grounded in informants´ personal experience.

Since femwashing is a relatively new phenomenon, a qualitative study with inspiration of a phenomenological approach was applied as it enables the understanding and interpretation of the phenomenon of interest (Creswell, 2007;

Bryman & Bell, 2013). A qualitatively conducted study was also suitable since it emphasizes a phenomenon that has not been researched before (Patel & Davidson, 2019), which is the case of femwashing, where the current research is limited. Thus, phenomenological research was implemented as inspiration as it helped in examining the relatively unexplored phenomenon and the informants´ perception of the phenomenon (Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

The study consists of an abductive approach, implying a combination of inductive and deductive (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008), which provides a more complete understanding of the studied topic. This involved a literature examination of femwashing and research areas adjacent to the subject, which was conducted to create an understanding of prior research within the field. Furthermore, descriptions and meaning of the phenomenon were gathered and categorized from theory in order to reach an understanding of how the phenomenon is explained (Eriksson & Kovalinen, 2008), which further was put in context with the interviews. Due to the lack of theory within the field of femwashing, a combination of prior research and interviews was vital to create an understanding of the phenomenon.

Since it has been shown that females are increasingly used for marketing purposes online (Hainneville et al., 2022), the research only examines the online shopping made by women and not shopping in general. Moreover, the majority of women performing online shopping are within the age range of 20 to 30 years, meaning the higher range of generation z and the lower range of millennials (ibid). Hence, women of this age range could be considered to be more exposed to femwashing and are therefore suitable participants for the study. Thus, the research is limited to individuals identifying themselves as women.

Furthermore, the geographic area was limited to Sweden since it has been found that Swedish e-tailers are performing femwashing (Breakit, 2021A).

The interviews were conducted with 14 informants in total, as recognizing patterns proved that a saturation had been achieved (Guest et al., 2006). This is also supported by Creswell (2007) who argues that the number of interviews should range between 5 to 25 within phenomenological studies to be sufficient. The participants' names (fictitious), gender, age and occupation are shown in Table 2.

In this study, a convenience sampling was used, where individuals in the researcher's surroundings (Bryman & Bell, 2013), specifically friends of each researcher, were chosen to participate in the interview. Each interview was held individually, meaning the researcher and the individual informant. A disadvantage of using a convenience sampling, could be that the results might become biased due to an unknown accuracy and a low representativeness (Bryman & Bell, 2013). However, the setting where the researcher and informants where acquaintances enabled truthful and reliable answers. Since the studied research area can be perceived as a relatively sensitive subject, due to its political nature, the convenience sampling was considered to be appropriate sources of data to collect from as it enabled the researchers to reach the informants´ deeper thoughts and feelings. This, whilst offering the researchers a sufficient number of participants within the chosen target group (Jager et al., 2017). According to Bryman and Bell (2013), a convenience sampling provides low external validity which implies that the result cannot be generalized towards a total population. However, this study does not aim to generalize statistical results towards a whole population.

Name (fictitious)	Gender	Age	Occupation
Stina	Female	28	Marketing student
Sofia	Female	28	Marketing student
Kajsa	Female	28	Hairdresser
Therese	Female	27	Project engineer
Cornelia	Female	24	AD/copy student
Martina	Female	24	Preschool teacher
Nina	Female	27	Audit associate
Josefin	Female	27	Accounting consultat
Ida	Female	24	Recruiter
Emma	Female	24	Law student
Malin	Female	27	Nurse
Klara	Female	23	Marketer
Moa	Female	24	Psychology student
Viktoria	Female	27	Marketer

Table 2. Overview of the informants participating in interviews. To protect the participant's integrity and anonymity, fictitious names are used.

The interviews were conducted virtually through Zoom since it was requested by the majority of the informants. To provide the informants the same prerequisite, each interview was therefore held through Zoom. Virtual interviews were regarded as beneficial since it ensured that the informants were comfortable, being in their safe space, and willing to disclose certain opinions, feelings, and thoughts (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Moreover, the interviews followed a semi-structured interview guide where a set of core questions were made prior to the interview and then adapted to each informant by implementing follow-up questions that were not predetermined. This provides comprehensive material (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008) and the opportunity to create a deeper understanding of the informant's thoughts. Semi-structured interviews enabled open-ended communication and responses, something which added depth to the information provided by the informants, whilst allowing the interviewer to guide the informant using leading questions, something which yielded the specific perspective necessary for answering the research questions (Bryman & Bell, 2013; Flick, 2014). The time range of the interviews was around 40-60

minutes, which was enough to achieve informational saturation (Mason, 2010).

To outline the interview guide the theoretical framework was taken into consideration. The researchers began the interviews with background questions regarding the informants, including their age and their current occupation, to get an idea of who they are as a consumer. Moreover, general questions regarding the informant´s perception on transparency and authenticity in marketing communication were asked, such as what trustworthy marketing is to them and how they distinguish it. Furthermore, the interviewee was asked more specific questions regarding their perception on using women in marketing, in terms of for instance how women are portrayed in marketing as well as their thoughts on diversity and gender equality efforts made by companies.

Moreover, two case companies were presented to get a more comprehensive understanding about the phenomenon. The companies are typical examples of companies performing femvertising respectively femwashing. Both companies are successful Swedish e-tailers selling products aimed towards women. To not expose the companies, as it could have negative consequences, the company names are not disclosed. The first case company, in this study referred to as "the femvertising company", uses femvertising as their marketing strategy and is founded as well as designed by women. The second case company, in this study referred to as "the femwashing company", uses, according to Breakit´s (2021B) study, femwashing as their marketing strategy, since they portray themselves as being founded by women when it in reality is founded by men, information which is nowhere to be found on their company website (ibid). To decrease the risk of biased results, a prerequisite was that the informants were familiar with both brands. However, it was taken into consideration

that some bias could occur depending on if the informant prefers one brand over the other.

Including cases in the interview enabled the researchers to collect data on how women perceive femwashing, which further resulted in developing the femwashing dimensions. By putting the two different cases in relation to each other, it enabled the informant to distinguish the phenomena and thus clarify their understanding on specifically femwashing. During the case section, the informant was asked to navigate through the companies´ "About us"-pages in order to create their own perception of the companies. Moreover, the informant was directed to each company's Instagram, which is a social media platform used by both companies, to get an understanding of how they market themselves towards women through pictures. After navigating through each company's pages, the informant was asked to differentiate the company's communication and what they thought the companies did well respectively poorly. This, to get an understanding of how the informant perceive femwashing. Accordingly, the study focuses on online communication such as messages made through the media of Instagram and websites. Thus, the consumer perception of femwashing is based on women's perception of the female empowerment messages communicated by companies. Finally, the informant was asked whether they know what femvertising respectively femwashing is and if they would purchase from a company if they were aware that the company used misleading communications marketed towards women.

Processing and analyzing the material
Each interview was recorded and immediately after each interview was completed, the recording was transcribed (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The collected data which has been presented as citations was translated into English as the interviews were conducted in Swedish since all the informants had Swedish as their native language. For validating the results, a two-step analysis was conducted. Firstly, Thompson et al. 's (1989) explanation of a phenomenological analysis method was considered, which implied that an understanding of each individual interview was created. Secondly, it was examined if there were any clear common patterns among the interviews by relating them to each other to interpret themes and become able to code the data (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). Based on this, recurrent words and perceptions mentioned were pinpointed, according to Crewswell's (2007) directive, which resulted in addressing a common thread among the informants' responses. This was made by highlighting specific repetitive words and common opinions that were used by several informants and marked sentences that excelled and could be used as quotes. This process was compiled into a coding scheme, as shown in Table 3. Additionally, based on the empirical data and analysis as well as by taking inspiration from Hainneville et al.´s (2022) study of femvertising, an analysis model of femwashing was developed. Inspiration was taken from the study by incorporating the same understanding that inauthentic femvertising equals femwashing and that this finding moreover should be a part of the core of the phenomenon. Furthermore, similarly as Hainneville et al. (2022), dimensions are used to conceptualize women's perception of femwashing, without defining it, as a clear definition of the phenomenon could be difficult to provide.

Main themes	Sub-themes	Description
Inauthenticity	Excessively positive and optimistic tone	When the sent message is unrealistic in the sense that no challenges and only possibilities are portrayed
	Excessive amount female empowerment messages	When there is an effort to produce as much female empowerment messages as possible
Non-transparency	Stressing positives and excluding negatives	When companies lift and praise themselves without admitting their flaws
	Making claims without evidence	When no information or certification to legitimize the female empowerment effort is available
Non-relatability	Non-diverse	When companies make certain body types, looks and ethnicities a clear minority
	Gender inequal	When men as founders of female supporting companies earn money on women
Inconsistency	Reinforced stereotypes	When companies regard women as shallow, weak and easily persuaded into different purchasing behaviors
	Reinforced objectification	When the female body is sexualized and used for the male gaze and to sell

Table 3. Overview of the coding of the interviews made to distinguish women´s different perceptions of femwashing.

Quality and ethical aspects of the study

With a phenomenological approach it is essential to consider the qualitative measures which include the criteria of reliability as interpretative awareness and communicative and pragmatic validity (Sandberg, 2000). Reliability in the form of interpretative awareness was established by forming and asking "how" and "what" questions as well as follow-up questions which indicated informants to elaborate their thoughts and answers (Sandberg, 2020; Bryman & Bell, 2013). The communicative validity was ensured by conducting the interviews in a dialog form, where each informant´s individual experience and perception was interpreted (ibid). It is argued, by Creswell (2007), that the validity of these phenomenological interpretations could be challenging to ensure since the researcher needs to decide whether and why certain individual understandings should be mentioned in the study. Thus, to maintain an objective view of each informant´s perception, the researchers had to disregard their own understanding and perception of femwashing and its connection to transparency and authenticity. Furthermore, pragmatic validity was ensured by incorporating the testing of

interpretations in relation to real-life actions (Sandberg, 2020). This meant that the researcher asked the interviewee questions that allowed them to give their own concrete examples and gave them examples which they could use to help them distinguish different signs and understandings of transparency and authenticity in femwashing. These considerations, for reaching reliability and validity, have been applied throughout the whole process of establishing the interview guide, conducting the interviews, and analyzing the empirical material.

Within business research, ethics are an important cornerstone for collecting data (Eriksson & Kovalinen, 2008; Bryman, & Bell, 2013). In this study, anonymity and confidentiality, claimed to be two of the most priority ethics (ibid), was taken into consideration. The recorded data was only available for the researchers and the informants were ensured that they were anonymous. Moreover, confidentiality was reached by ensuring that only the researchers were aware of who participated in the study (Eriksson & Kovalinen, 2008). Additionally, the informants were given the choice of agreeing to be recorded before the interview started. All informants were informed of the purpose of the interviews and recordings, in line with Eriksson and Kovalinen's (2008) advice for conducting interviews in an ethical way.

Empirical data and Analysis

The collected data is divided into four different parts, where each part represents one dimension of how women perceive femwashing, namely, non-transparent, inauthentic, non-relatable and inconsistent. To extract the different perceptions of femwashing, the following section will present the similarities, differences, and contributions to previous research. Within each dimension part, two subthemes (Table 3) are presented (in cursive). Lastly, the section introduces an analysis model showing the different dimensions of

femwashing.

Inauthenticity

According to the informants, companies that use female empowerment to achieve women's attention, for commercial purposes and exploit it to target more women and do not commit to it, are inauthentic. This supports Hainneville et al.'s (2022) suggestion shown in Table 1, that inauthentic femvertising signifies femwashing. Accordingly, inauthentic femvertising is assumed to be a synonym to femwashing. From looking at how women view authenticity in female empowerment communication, it becomes clear that the concept is a building stone for consumers' overall perception of a company. This becomes evident as the informants express that authenticity relates to the level of trust and loyalty the consumer has for a company (Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018; Sterbenk et al., 2021).

Amongst the informants, it is highlighted that what exaggerates the feeling of inauthenticity is that companies use an *excessively positive and optimistic tone* in their communications, something which adds to prior theory stating that insincere or unclear motives generate negative associations (Dwivedi & McDonald, 2018; Sterbenk et al., 2021). This is partly done by focusing on the inspirational aspect of female empowerment and the opportunities while excluding the actual challenges with achieving an equal society for women and men. Moreover, when asking how they notice this inauthenticity, some of the informants explain that an *excessive amount female empowerment message* can be perceived as unnecessary and that one therefore questions the credibility. The following two excerpt from the interview with two informants clarifies that consumers might react negatively to when companies use quantitatively too much female empowerment claims and do so with an excessively positive and optimistic tone,

thus making them question the authenticity of the company:

"Spontaneously, I think that you almost exaggerate the marketing with women and then female empowerment. Companies push it practically as much as possible, so it is almost an abundance, and it feels a little fake." - Sara

"I probably think that much of what companies write about themselves in terms of their support for female empowerment online is often very positively angled and opportunistic, which also makes me a little suspicious since everything cannot be positive." - Sofia

When asking the informants about whether they could distinguish between which of the two case companies that uses femvertising respective femwashing, they express that it is difficult to determine. The informants go for their initial thoughts when they decide which of the companies are most trustworthy and genuine. It is highlighted that the femvertising company stresses the importance of inspiring and empowering women to "believe in themselves and their potential". Essentially, this is related to a positive storytelling strategy since it increases trust and the feeling of authenticity (Fenger et al., 2015; He et al., 2021). Moreover, the majority of the informants notice that the femvertising company is founded by women, as they state "made to women by women" on their "About us"-page. Contrary to the femvertising company, it is noted by the consumers that there is no information regarding the founders of the femwashing company, something which makes several skeptical. This adds to the theory by He et al. (2021) and Fenger et al. (2015) as it shows that consumers can negatively associate storytelling if it creates a sense of skepticism towards the brand. According to the informants, the femwashing company's marketing is interpreted to be more persuasive, since the focus lies on changing women instead of empowering who they really are. Thus, the women distinguish inauthentic femvertising, that is,

femwashing, by looking at how companies´ female empowerment efforts are communicated through text and storytelling.

"It feels like they exaggerate it so much that it becomes irrelevant and lacks meaning. One becomes unsure whether the company actually does what they say, or if it is just empty words." – Cornelia

Non-transparency

It is understood to be a subconscious process in which one is affected by inauthentic communication to different degrees and that it is when the awareness increases consumers become more critical towards it. According to the informants, inauthentic femvertising is therefore also closely related to non-transparency, something which supports Anderberg and Morris´ (2006) claim that authenticity and transparency cooperate. The concepts interrelate and are key in that non-transparency in female empowerment communication is something which the consumers perceive as unreliable and insincere, that is, inauthentic femvertising, also referred to as femwashing (Hainneville et al., 2022).

Similarly to authenticity, the informants express that they distinguish transparency in female empowerment communication by looking at how the message is presented. According to them, companies which are not open in regard to their negative sides but rather only focus on the positive aspects when communicating on their channels, are perceived as non-transparent. That is, they are *stressing positives and excluding negatives*. This supports Molleda's (2010) argument regarding consumers expecting companies to act transparently in the sense of practices, actions, and value, regardless of whether it is positive or negative aspects. This notion is discovered by several informants, and is exemplified through the following excerpt from the interviews:

"I would rather trust a company that is honest and admits their flaws. I mean, it is better that they are transparent and for example say that "we are not one hundred percent sustainable, or we do not have a totally equal workplace." - Therese

Initially, consumers propose that there is a certain risk that they process what is claimed by companies and blindly trust it, something which coincides with researchers´ explanation regarding consumers taking CSR-messages at face value (Abitbol & Sternadori, 2019; Pope & Wæraas, 2016). As can be seen in Table 1, such CSR-messages could fall under the category of fempower-washing, that is, femwashing. In the following excerpt, Martina highlights how, when reading female empowerment statements, it is easy to naively trusts them:

"I take for granted that well-known brands and websites have truthful information. I also think that I automatically think that they are genuine and authentic, but it is for sure that I am a bit of a naive consumer." - Martina

However, a few states that due to them learning about transparency in marketing through their education, their knowledge and awareness have increased in terms of noticing unethical practices. Thus, some informants have no difficulties noticing that some companies claiming that they support pro-female movements in fact make no such efforts. Moreover, for these consumers, distinguishing the femwashing company out of the two case companies is relatively easy, something which can be considered from the following interview excerpt:

"I think that if companies are quite opportunistic in their marketing, for example now as when it was International Women's Day, then there were very many companies that were very open with their support for women, various women's issues and women's salaries and so on, while on other days of the year, they maybe do not care that much." - Stina

Several of the informants follow this observance by emphasizing the fact that it is important that female empowerment companies are transparent about what they actually do to contribute to the strengthening of women:

"I would very clearly like to see what they do with the money that is actually supposed to strengthen women. For example, donate large parts to the education of women or aid organizations for women." - Moa

Accordingly, although some consumers risk taking non-transparent messages at face value, others still realize non-transparent female empowerment communication by following their instinctive feeling, which is based on prior knowledge, when assessing a company's transparency. However, for consumers that have a low level of knowledge regarding transparency it could be challenging to be observant to non-transparent female empowerment messages, implying that they could need some guidelines. It is highlighted by one informant that, contrary to environmental sustainability efforts legitimized through certifications, no benchmark for legitimized female empowerment efforts exists, meaning companies are *making claims without evidence*. Accordingly, non-transparency in femwashing is also found when claims are made without any actual facts or information available to support that claim.

"I saw they have their sustainability labels and as soon as I see sustainable and eco-friendly without any certification, you get a little skeptical and want to check what they mean by that. It is almost better to not say anything about it. [...] I would still say that it is important to purchase from companies that support female empowerment, but I think it is hard to know who actually does it and does it in a good way and there is no real index, at least not that I am aware of." - Sofia

This notion indicates that companies should be held accountable for their claims by establishing certifications for social sustainability in terms of pro-female support. By doing so, consumers would be able to make more informative choices. Moreover, female empowerment supporting companies that do not implement certifications should clearly state where the profit goes and how they work with female empowerment to be perceived as transparent and authentic.

Non-relatability

When asking the informants about the importance of a company's authenticity, several of the informants mention that it is important to be able to relate to the values a company possesses. Mainly, this argument seems to stem from the fact that the consumers do not want to support or be associated with companies that use femwashing strategies as it does not resonate with their personal image. This is especially highlighted by the women that explicitly support female empowerment.

"If you feel that a brand is genuine, it feels like you can stand for what you have bought and you feel more proud as a customer. You are associated with that, you become associated with the brand. [...] If a brand were not genuine towards its customers, then they could really lose their image and you might not want to be associated with that company." - Klara

Many highlight that the femwashing company is *non-diverse* as it has no real body diversity, seeing that only a few plus size models are portrayed. This is perceived as suspicious as the company highlights body positivity in their texts and quotes. This goes in line with Khoo-Lattimore et al., (2019) and Myambo (2020), presented in Table 1, who emphasize that companies portray themself to be working with gender diversity and equality, even though it does not reflect their actual practices, that is, there are rhetoric-practice gaps. Essentially, some informants argue that companies that portray themselves to be inclusive but still have distinct majorities and minorities, in

the sense of body diversity, fall within the area of femwashing.

Several informants express that it becomes apparent that the femwashing company consciously includes bodies and looks which they believe do not fall within the ideals and norms of what a woman should look like, implying that they exploit these differences to appear as inclusive and supportive of all women (Myambo, 2020). According to the consumers, it becomes apparent that companies are non-diverse when they include only a minority of women who do not fall within the scope of what they portray as beautiful or feminine, rather than including differences to an extent that would make it normalized. In the interview excerpt below, Therese exemplifies how it becomes evident that the company makes certain body types a clear minority, or uses women that are supposedly not the "model norm" but who still achieves set beauty standards and ideals:

"I think that those who are actually ´bigger´ are ideally very ´nice looking´. For example, no one has a big butt but no breasts or vice versa. They are typical plus size models where the whole body is curvy, in the right places as well." - Therese

When asking the informants how they distinguish whether a company actually does support respectively does not support gender equality and diversity, several informants express the thought that much of the marketing efforts made by companies to portray a diverse and gender equal business becomes too obvious. According to them, and following Myambo´s (2020) explanation, companies are evidently falsely working with diversity and equality in the sense that the only aim is to project a favorable image, since it is only practices claimed externally towards customers. The following two excerpts from the interviews illustrates how two informants exemplifies this understanding:

""I really support diversity, but sometimes it can be very obvious that you have to bring them in." - Kajsa

"If you want to show different skin tones and body types, you can at least make it a little smooth, I think. It does not have to be so heavenly obvious. It feels like ´we bring in some other body types, some a little bigger´, in for example training, and then it becomes so obvious that you take in those models just to show other body types. It feels better if it had come a little more natural so that the focus is not just that ´here is a bigger body´." - Cornelia

The informants argue that there is a clear minority and majority in terms of ethnicity found when examining the femwashing company. It is emphasized by several informants that for a company to be perceived as diverse, they should have as many foreign ethnicities as domestic. These informants commonly express the following:

"I think it is important to include all different ethnicities in marketing, especially if you state that you support female empowerment and use such messages. But if you look at the second company, you can see that it is more white dominated for example. [...] I think that it is important in marketing in general to be inclusive because there is a lot that indirectly affects how we look at life and things like that." - Sofia

"There should not be any clear majorities and minorities in a company. A company should reflect what it actually looks like in society, and have employees who come from different socio-cultural backgrounds, gender, religion and education. Also, that you as a company target yourself and your advertising to a larger audience and for example not just to white women or straight men or just to a certain religion or so. That you target a larger audience and are more inclusive." - Moa

When revealing that one of the two case companies, that is, the femwashing company, is founded by men only, the interpretation varies amongst the informants. Most of the informants have a

negatively strong reaction and think that it is a fraud since the company uses female empowering messages, making the consumers believe that it is founded by women. This notion follows Sterbenk et al.´s (2021) reasoning that companies that claim to support gender equality could be performing femwashing by making no commitments of having sufficient female representation in their boards and leadership positions. This understanding can be interpreted from the following excerpt from the interview with Moa:

"It is awful that being a man is used by taking advantage and making money through pretending to strengthen women, while in fact they do not. What do they mean by empowering women if they are not founded by, at least partly, women and for women? Do they think they can empower women with a few quotes?" - Moa

Other informants argue that it is typically based on the unequal society where men earn more than women when performing the same job but highlights that it is even worse when men earn money on women. Several informants stress that it is sad and provocative and that one becomes angry over the fact that femwashing companies hide their *gender inequality* behind a false facade of female empowerment as men do not have the right to tell women what female empowerment is about. A few mention that it is especially provocative when specifically men use women for-profit purposes, indicating that the consumers indirectly are aware of femwashing.

Inconsistency

From the interviews, and as suggested by Sterbenk et al. (2021) and Goldman et al. (1991), a pattern can be found where several of the informants indicate that there is a trend of using women for marketing purposes, suggesting that *reinforced stereotypes* of women indirectly become apparent. Two informants emphasize how

companies use women for purposes that do not belong to the product or the situation itself, such as when selling water bottles or advocating taking vaccines, and that it in that sense is misleading and that it contributes to the stereotypization of women. In addition, one of the informants express that there is a difference in how products are portrayed for men respectively women. The informant suggests that the difference is that men´s performances are based on quality and functionality of the clothes, whereas women´s performances are superficially based on looks of the clothes and quotes that the company uses. According to the consumer, this realization becomes especially noticeable when examining the femwashing company´s website and Instagram.

"If it were a brand with training clothes for men, it would have been about quality and functions. But women do not need to know that. Women only need quotes like 'live your best life'. In that way, it feels like it is still more about design and how you look than the actual functions of the clothes." - Stina

Moreover, one of the informants goes as far as suggesting that one must consume to be a feminist, something which goes in line with Goldman´s (1992) explanation that commodity feminism is related to femwashing. Consequently, it is interpreted that femwashing indirectly enhances the current female stereotypization as companies use women to create new ideals and norms, where the consumers are put under further pressure. This follows McCleary´s (2014) notion that advertising trends where feminism is emphasized reinforce stereotypes. This notion is indicated by Moa, who draws parallels between female empowerment in marketing and the pressure as well as importance that women should be portrayed as female supporters through their consumption behavior:

"I think that they use a lot of girl power in the form of marketing, as if it would be feminist-

angled to shop from this particular company because it is girl power. Such as menstrual advertising lately, that women are portrayed as "strong" and if you do not support that company, you do not want women to be strong. [...] It gets a little misleading and pressing, that if you are a feminist, you shop and if you do not shop, you are suddenly not a feminist. You cannot be a feminist and not choose to support a company as well. [...] Either women are used as objects, or as pressure, that you must support in order to not portray women as objects. For example, ´we think of women's best and therefore you have to support us because if you do not you do not think of women´s best´."
- Moa

According to this informant, companies could use female empowerment to pressure women to support by purchasing, making them believe that they are both the culprit and the solution, but not the victim. Thus, it can be interpreted that companies are utilizing that generation z or millennial women are more prone to online shopping (Hainneville et al., 2022), something which can add to the current stereotypes since it indirectly implies that women are weak and easily persuaded, especially into different purchasing behaviors. This also adds to Repo and Yrjölä´s (2015) understanding, presented in Table 1, that happiness, confidence, and fulfillment are promised through consumption, as negative outcomes such as being portrayed as weak or non-supportive of women also could be motivating factors to consume.

Additionally, the informants suggest that, whilst it is important to tribute women as strong, there is for companies a fine line between empowering women and objectifying women. Generally, seeing that the consumers might take female empowering messages at face value, as stated by Abitbol and Sternadori (2019) as well as Pope and Wæraas (2016), it could be hard for them to discover or distinguish this difference. However, although the interview context might make them more critical, some of the informants notice how

companies´ communication indeed could lead to *reinforced objectification* of women behind a canvas of what appears to be a pro-female company. This thought is expressed by Therese, who argues that companies´ way of showing their distancing from female objectification is dishonest as they instead enhance it by sexualizing the female body. Although the texts and quotes portray one message by emphasizing female independence, worth and strength, the pictures portray another by focusing on the typically sexualized attributes of a woman, namely, body parts such as breasts, buts and general nudity. This notion is suggested by several informants:

"I see, among other things, a naked body, which I think is a bit unclear. I mean, why is there a naked body there when the company is selling clothes? I do not understand why nudity should be linked to clothing. [...] It seems like they believe that it is what sells." - Moa

"The last picture there when they are completely naked feels a bit... unnecessary. I do not really know what they want to get out of it. [...] It feels like they believe that women only want to look good for the man, and that one needs to be naked to achieve that."- Cornelia

Essentially, many of the informants suggests that the sexual objectification of women is unnecessary but maintained due to the so-called male gaze and that it is believed to be what sells best. It is argued that companies that are femwashing in that sense are inconsistent as they, rather than reducing and counteracting, are contributing to the objectification of women trough sexualized messages. This follows Gill's (2007) claim, that a new type of objectification occurs where woman is devaluated. Several consumers indicate that, although nudity and sexualization could sell, it could also have the opposite effect on one's willingness to buy as they question why the selling of, specifically women's, clothes is linked to nudity.

Analysis model of femwashing

Figure 1. Women's perception of femwashing shown through four dimensions

Above model is an analysis model of femwashing where inauthentic femvertising is in the core of the model. This is based on the finding that femwashing is inauthentic femvertising, also stated by Hainneville et al. (2022). It illustrates the four dimensions of how women perceive the phenomenon of femwashing extracted from prior theory on femwashing and concepts closely related to femwashing as well as findings from the interviews. These dimensions are inauthenticity, non-transparency, inconsistency, and non-relatability. The dimensions are not mutually exclusive, as they can be combined, which further would result in the cumulative effect where for each dimension fulfilled, the negative feeling is reinforced. Additionally, it is implied that although one dimension could suggest that femwashing is performed by a company, it is not absolute in the sense that one dimension fulfilled equals femwashing. Thus, the women's perception is built on an overall perception of the four dimensions of femwashing, when evaluating a female empowering company. Moreover, since consumer perception is personal, it could also differ largely between individuals. Furthermore, this also suggests that no clear definition of femwashing can be made, hence the different dimensions.

Conclusion

This research provides an understanding of how women perceive femwashing by looking at companies' communication made online and thus contributes to the limited research available on femwashing (Khoo-Lattimore et al., 2019; Myambo, 2020; Sterbenk et al., 2021; Hainneville et al., 2022). The current research on femwashing mainly takes a company perspective and focuses on gender representation in knowledge production (Khoo-Lattimore et al., 2019), femwashing global capitalism (Myambo, 2020), femvertising and fempower-washing (Sterbenk et al., 2021) as well as distinguishing femvertising by relating it to femwashing (Hainneville et al., 2022). Accordingly, this research offers a nuanced understanding of femwashing by taking a consumer perspective.

The findings of the study are presented through four dimensions of femwashing, namely, inauthenticity, non-transparency, inconsistency, and non-relatability. From the research, it became evident that there is sometimes a fine line between what makes a company authentic, transparent, relatable, and consistent respectively not, and thus also what is classified as femwashing. Furthermore, this can be problematic for consumers to discern. Although the research provides no definite definition of femwashing, the dimensions help establish an overall understanding of the phenomenon.

Moreover, the results indicate that the dimensions of femwashing are not mutually exclusive, as they can be combined, which further would result in the cumulative effect where for each dimension fulfilled, the negative feeling is reinforced. It is implied that although one dimension could suggest that femwashing is performed by a company, it is not absolute in the sense that one dimension fulfilled equals femwashing. Thus, the consumer perception is built on an overall perception of the four dimensions of femwashing, when evaluating a female empowering company.

From the research, two sub-themes for each dimension portraying the women's perception of femwashing were distinguished. In terms of inauthenticity, an excessive amount of female empowerment messages as well as an excessively positive and optimistic tone was shown to be two of the main sub-themes. These are moreover explained as companies showing a clear effort to produce as much female empowerment messages as possible as well as sending messages that are unrealistic in the sense that no challenges and only possibilities are portrayed. Furthermore, the sub-themes of non-transparency that arose was stressing positives and excluding negatives as well as making claims without evidence. The sub-themes are described as companies lifting and praising themselves without admitting their flaws as well as without using no information or certification to legitimize the female empowerment effort.

The non-relatability dimension was separated into the sub-themes non-diverse and gender inequal. These sub-themes are understood as companies making certain body types, looks and ethnicities a clear minority as well as when men as founders of female supporting companies earn money on women. Lastly, the inconsistency dimension was found to have reinforced stereotypes and reinforced objectification as two sub-themes. The two sub-themes are described as companies regarding women as shallow, weak, and easily persuaded into different purchasing behaviors as well as when the female body is sexualized and used for the male gaze and to sell.

The findings from this study indicates that women perceive femwashing as negative. Several negative feelings arise in association with the phenomenon, some of which are that it made consumers feel critical, skeptical, pressured, misled, naive and provoked. The results show that consumers do not appreciate female empowerment statements if the company cannot fully account for it, since they become empty promises used by companies as a marketing strategy to gain profits at the expense of women. Moreover, consumers have an especially negatively strong reaction towards female empowerment companies founded by men. Essentially, using female empowering messages and making the consumers believe that a company is founded by women, when this is not the case, is seen as a fraud. According to the consumers, it is of high importance to be able to relate to the values portrayed through text and pictures. Accordingly, consumers do not want to support or be associated with companies that use femwashing strategies as it does not resonate with their personal image or core values.

Future research

Even though this research provides a deep insight within the field of femwashing through women's perception and the dimensions of the phenomenon, there is still room for further knowledge based on the findings. Since this research is limited to Swedish women's perception, it would be interesting to gain understanding and knowledge if the phenomenon is perceived in the same way for women in different countries. This would provide the possibility to draw conclusions that better depict society on a global level. Another suggestion for future research would be to widen the study by including other genders. It would be interesting to study whether there are differences in how men perceive the phenomenon, and it would serve as guidance for future research as well. Moreover, future research may also be conducted with a wider age range, not only including the higher range of generation z and the lower range of millennials which was the case in this study. Extending the research geographically, would also provide a broader range of consumers' perceptions on the phenomenon, implying that the extracted dimensions in this study could be developed even further in order to

create a deeper understanding and in-depth knowledge. Moreover, there may also emerge more dimensions of femwashing than this study resulted in, which may show that there are social and cultural differences when it comes to the phenomenon.

Furthermore, it would be appropriate to complement the qualitative method by implementing a quantitative method as it could help draw better generalizations on consumer perceptions and to ensure that the dimensions are applicable, thus extending the currently limited research field of femwashing further.

Implications

The findings made by this research could be helpful for companies, particularly marketers, as it provides an understanding on how women perceive femwashing. Hence, this could be especially useful for female supporting companies and how they want to be perceived by consumers through their marketing communication. Companies should be made aware of the negative impact femwashing could have on consumers and thus, the company's reputation and image, to decrease customer turnover and increase customer retention. Companies should be required to openly show who the owners are and the distribution of gender, in the same way as retailers' supply chains should be completely transparent. According to the findings, a suggestion would be to establish a certification to legitimize female empowerment efforts such as CSR. This would enable consumers to access all information about the company, facilitating their decision making whether to purchase a certain product or not.

Additionally, the research holds implications for consumers as it extends the current knowledge on the research field, that is, femwashing. This extended knowledge could be helpful for consumers in their decision-making process by making them more aware and critical towards communication using inauthentic, non-transparent, non-relatable and inconsistent female empowering messages. In this way, consumers can make more informative purchase decisions, which are in line with their core values.

By increasing the general awareness regarding the new and relatively unknown phenomenon of femwashing, the research could also be useful for society as it could help combat ignorance which in itself may lead to inequalities, portrayed through marketing communication, being allowed to continue. Such inequalities include the skewed distribution of women in leading positions and as founders in companies that are claimed to be female supporting.

References

Abitbol, A., & Sternadori, M. (2019). Championing Women's Empowerment as a Catalyst for Purchase Intentions: Testing the Mediating Roles of OPRs and Brand Loyalty in the Context of Femvertising. *International Journal of Strategic Communication, 13*(1), 22-41.

Anderberg, J., & Morris, J. (2006). Authenticity and transparency in the advertising industry. *The Journal of Management Development*, 25(10), 1021-1023.

Baxter, A. (2015). Faux activism in recent female-empowering advertising. *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications*, *6*(1).

Bramwell, B., & Lane, B. (2002). The Journal of Sustainable Tourism: The First Ten Years. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism,* 10(1), 1-4.

Breakit (2021A). *Dashl-grundaren om femwashing: "Investerarna är väl medvetna om detta".* Available at: https://www.breakit.se/artikel/29126/dashl -grundaren-om-femwashing-investerarna-ar-val-medvetna-om-detta [Accessed 2022-01-28].

Breakit (2021B). *Männen bygger miljardbolag på feminism- kvinnor kammar hem noll.* Available at: https://www.breakit.se/artikel/29080/mann en-bygger-miljardbolag-pa-feminism-kvinnor-kammar-hem-noll [Accessed 2022-01-28].

Bryman, A. & Bell, E. (2013). *Företagsekonomiska forskningsmetoder.* 3. uppl., Malmö: Studentlitteratur.

Bruhn, M., Schoenmüller, V., Schäfer, D., & Heinrich, D. (2012). Brand Authenticity: Towards a Deeper Understanding of Its Conceptualization and Measurement. *Advances in Consumer Research*, 40, 567.

Champlin, S., Sterbenk, Y., Windels, K., & Poteet, M. (2019). How brand-cause fit shapes real world advertising messages: A qualitative exploration of 'femvertising'. *International Journal of Advertising, 38*(8), 1240-1263.

Christensen, L. (2002). Corporate communication: The challenge of transparency. *Corporate Communications, 7*(3), 162-168.

Colaizzi, P.F. (1978). Psychological research as the phenomenologist views it. In: Vale, R., King, M. (Eds.), *Existential Phenomenological Alternatives for Psychology*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 48–71.

Creswell, J. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry & research design : Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks: SAGE.

De Freitas Netto, S., Sobral, M., Ribeiro, A., & Soares, G. (2020). Concepts and forms of greenwashing: A systematic review. *Environmental Sciences Europe, 32*(1), Vol.32 (1).

Donia, M., & Tetrault Sirsly, C. (2016). Determinants and consequences of employee attributions of corporate social responsibility as substantive or symbolic. *European Management Journal, 34*(3), 232-242.

Dwivedi, A., & McDonald, R. (2018). Building brand authenticity in fast-moving consumer goods via consumer perceptions of brand marketing communications. *European Journal of Marketing, 52*(7/8), 1387-1411.

Eisend, M. (2010). Explaining the joint effect of source credibility and negativity of information in two-sided messages.

Psychology & Marketing, 27(11), 1032-1049.

Eriksson, P., & Kovalainen, A. (2008). *Qualitative methods in business research.* London: SAGE.

Fasoli, F., Durante, F., Mari, S., Zogmaister, C., & Volpato, C. (2017). Shades of Sexualization: When Sexualization Becomes Sexual Objectification. *Sex Roles, 78*(5-6), 338-351.

Fenger, M., Aschemann-Witzel, J., Hansen, F., & Grunert, K. (2015). Delicious words – Assessing the impact of short storytelling messages on consumer preferences for variations of a new processed meat product. *Food Quality and Preference, 41*, 237-244.

Flick, U. (2014). *An Introduction to Qualitative Research.* 5th Edt. Sage Publications: London.

Gill, R. (2007). *Gender and the media.* Cambridge: Polity.

Goldman, R. (1992). *Commodity Feminism*, Reading ads socially. London: Routledge. S. 130-154.

Goldman, R., Heath, D., & Smith, S. (1991). Commodity feminism. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication, 8*(3), 333-351.

Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough? An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field methods, 18*(1), 59-82.

Hainneville, V., Guèvremont, A., & Robinot, &. (2022). Femvertising or femwashing? Women's perceptions of authenticity. *Journal of Consumer Behaviour,* Journal of consumer behaviour, 2022-01-03.

Hartmann, B., & Ostberg, J. (2013). Authenticating by re-enchantment: The discursive making of craft production. *Journal of Marketing Management, 29*(7-8), 882-911.

He, A., Cai, Y., Cai, L., & Zhang, Y. (2021). Conversation, storytelling, or consumer interaction and participation? The impact of brand-owned social media content marketing on consumers' brand perceptions and attitudes. *Journal of Research in Interactive Marketing, 15*(3), 419-440.

Hughes, D. (2011). This ad's for you: The indirect effect of advertising perceptions on salesperson effort and performance. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science,* 41(1), 1-18.

Jager, J., Putnick, D., & Bornstein, M. (2017). More than Just Convenient: The Scientific Merits of Homogeneous Convenience Samples. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 82(2), 13-30.

Khoo-Lattimore, C., Yang, E., & Je, J. (2019). Assessing gender representation in knowledge production: A critical analysis of UNWTO's planned events. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism, 27*(7), 920-938.

Kim, H., Hur, W., & Yeo, J. (2015). Corporate Brand Trust as a Mediator in the Relationship between Consumer Perception of CSR, Corporate Hypocrisy, and Corporate Reputation. *Sustainability (Basel, Switzerland),* 7(4), 3683-3694.

Kitchin, T. (2003). Corporate social responsibility: A brand explanation. *The Journal of Brand Management*, 10(4), 312-326.

Lima, A., & Casais, B. (2021). Consumer reactions towards femvertising: A netnographic study. Corporate Communications, 26(3), 605-621.

Madrigal, R., & Boush, D. (2008). Social responsibility as a unique dimension of brand personality and consumers' willingness to reward. Psychology & Marketing, 25(6), 538-564.

Mason, M. (2010). Sample size and saturation in PhD studies using qualitative interviews. *Forum, Qualitative Social Research,* 11(3), 19-11:3<19.

Maclaran, P. (2015). Feminism's fourth wave: A research agenda for marketing and consumer research. *Journal of Marketing Management,* 31(15-16), 1732-1738.

McCleary, C. M. (2014). A not-so-beautiful campaign: A feminist analysis of the Dove campaign for real beauty. Honors Thesis Projects. University of Tennessee.

Melin, F. (2008): *Varumärkesstrategi. Om konsten att utveckla starka varumärken.* (Upplaga 1:4) Kristianstad: Liber AB.

Molleda, J. (2010). Authenticity and the construct's dimensions in public relations and communication research. *Journal of Communication Management (London, England), 14*(3), 223-236.

Myambo, T. M. (2020). The spatial politics of chick lit in Africa and Asia: Sidestepping tradition and fem-washing global capitalism? *Feminist Theory, 21*(1), 111-129.

Patel, R., & Davidson, B. (2019). *Forskningsmetodikens grunder: Att planera, genomföra och rapportera en undersökning* (5th ed.).

Pérez, R. M., & Gutiérrez, A. M. (2017). "Femvertising": Estrategias de empoderamiento femenino en la publicidad española. *Investigaciones Feministas, 8*(2), 337.

Pope, S., & Wæraas, A. (2016). CSR-Washing is Rare: A Conceptual Framework, Literature Review, and Critique. *Journal of Business Ethics, 137*(1), 173-193.

Repo, J., & Yrjölä, R. (2015). 'We're all princesses now': Sex, class, and neoliberal governmentality in the rise of middle-class monarchy. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 18(6), 741-760.

Sandberg, J. (2000). Understanding Human Competence at Work: An Interpretative Approach. *Academy of Management Journal*, 43(1), 9-25.

Sterbenk, Y., Champlin, S., Windels, K., & Shelton, S. (2021). Is Femvertising the New Greenwashing? Examining Corporate Commitment to Gender Equality. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 177(3), 491-505.

Singh, J., De los Salmones Sanchez, M., & Del Bosque, I. (2008). Understanding Corporate Social Responsibility and Product Perceptions in Consumer Markets: A Cross-Cultural Evaluation. *Journal of Business Ethics,* 80(3), 597-611.

Sodhi, M., & Tang, C. (2019). Research Opportunities in Supply Chain Transparency. *Production and Operations Management*, 28(12), 2946-2959.

Starks, H., & Trinidad, B. S. (2007). Choose Your Method: A Comparison of Phenomenology, Discourse Analysis, and Grounded Theory. *Qualitative Health Research*, 17(10), 1372-1380.

Swaen, V., & Vanhamme, J. (2005). The use of corporate social responsibility arguments in communication campaigns: Does source credibility matter? *Advances in Consumer Research*, 32, 590-591.

Thompson, C., Locander, W., & Pollio, H. (1989). Putting Consumer Experience Back into Consumer Research: The Philosophy

and Method of Existential-Phenomenology. *The Journal of Consumer Research,* 16(2), 133-146.

Urban Dictionary. (2019) *Femwashing.* Available at: https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=femwashing [Accessed 2022-01-25].

Varghese, N., & Kumar, N. (2020). Feminism in advertising: Irony or revolution? A critical review of femvertising. *Feminist Media Studies*, 1-19.

Wagner, T., Lutz, R., & Weitz, B. (2009). Corporate Hypocrisy: Overcoming the Threat of Inconsistent Corporate Social Responsibility Perceptions. *Journal of Marketing,* 73(6), 77-91.

Yoon, Y., Gürhan-Canli, Z., & Schwarz, N. (2006). The Effect of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Activities on Companies With Bad Reputations. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 16(4), 377-390.

Zawisza, M., Luyt, R., Zawadzka, A., & Buczny, J. (2018). Cross-Cultural Sexism and the Effectiveness of Gender (Non)Traditional Advertising: A Comparison of Purchase Intentions in Poland, South Africa, and the United Kingdom. *Sex Roles,* 79(11/12), 738-751.

Åkestam, N., Rosengren, S., & Dahlen, M. (2017). Advertising "like a girl": Toward a better understanding of "femvertising" and its effects. *Psychology & Marketing*, 34(8), 795-806.