

Branding for Equality: How Inclusive Brand Strategies Promote Women Empowerment

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Abstract:

The notion of branding has become more than a symbol of product origin; it is a strong socio-cultural mechanism in the 21st -century marketplace. This paper hypothesizes that inclusive branding that is done with sincerity and a strategic flair is a powerful driver of female empowerment. Going beyond the criticism of the feminvertising and purpose-washing, the given research focuses on how brands can help people truly achieve gender equality by changing the narrative, redesigning internal realities, and redistributing economic power. In the presented paper, the author explains the four major themes of inclusive brand strategy: Narrative Disruption and Authentic Representation, Product and Service Innovation to Be equally inclusive, Internal Structural Alignment, and Economic Empowerment and Community Building through a qualitative analysis of the modern day case studies in various industries, such as self-care (dove) and athletic shoes (Nike) and apparel (Aerie) and corporate culture (Accenture). The results prove that the strategies that will achieve the most success are those that combine external messaging with internal corporate activities, thus they are not the victims of credibility gap that afflict superficial campaigns.

Keywords: Inclusive Branding, Women Empowerment, Femvertising, Gender Equality, Corporate Social Responsibility, Brand Activism, Diversity & Inclusion, Marketing Strategy.

Introduction:

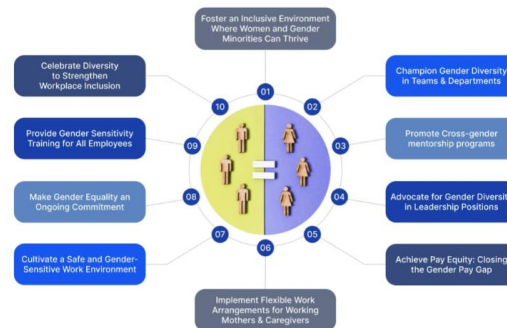


Figure 1: Promoting Gender Equality in the Workplace

(Source: Edstellar, 2025)

Brands cease to be the suppliers of products and services; they are now the key participants in the cultural and social dialogue of the day. Consumers, especially younger ones, are more demanding in the brands to take a position on significant matters in a socially conscious period (Al Shehab and Hamdan, 2021). The equality of sexes and female empowerment have become key frontlines among these. The women rights movement that has gained greater strength through such movements as #MeToo and #Timesup has left a watershed moment, compelling corporations to reconsider their contribution to perpetuating or eliminating the patriarchal norms.

The conventional way of marketing to women has been stereotyped, objectified, and categorized femininity in a very limited way. Nevertheless, there is an ongoing process of a paradigm shift. Inclusive branding is a strategic endeavor to develop brand identities, messages, and experiences so as to recognize, respect, and appreciate individuals of all walks of life, and a particular attention to those who have been historically marginalized or misrepresented (Tang, 2022). In the case of gender, it can be described as a buoyant disregard of tropes and more realistic, varied, and empowering representation of women.

In this paper, it would state that inclusive brand strategies are effective tools of ensuring the empowerment of women when applied holistically. This empowerment is perceived as a multi-dimensional process that involves the psychological (and increased self-esteem, agency), the economic (financial independence, career advancement), and the political (voice, representation) (Pathak and Solanki, 2021). The main argument is that this process can be promoted by brands by:

Creating Counterarguments: Raising awareness about unhealthy gender expectations through their mass media platform.

Representation: Telling the story of various women bodily type, race, age, ability and sexuality.

Producing Inclusive Products: Making products and services that will fulfil the true, diverse needs of every woman.

Creating a match between Internal Practices: It is paramount that the pro-women messaging exteriorly be reflected by fair internal policies in the areas of pay and leadership as well as the corporate culture.

Nevertheless, this is a tricky landscape, full of the danger of so-called purpose-washing, when brands use social justice terminology to make money and do nothing to improve the situation (Mhlanga, 2021).

Literature Review:

The Evolution of Marketing to Women: From Domestic Ideals to the Male Gaze

Much of the history of marketing to women is a history of confinement and stereotype. The consumer culture of post-World War II, especially in the West, was founded on what was popularly known by Betty Friedan (1963) as the feminine mystique the general ideal that the complete fulfilment of a woman was to be attained in her aspects as a housewife, mother, and homemaker (Jarial, 2022). The advertisement has been one of the main instruments of strengthening this ideology. The pioneering registration of Goffman, (1979), *Gender Advertisements*, gave a pictorial sociology of this phenomenon, and it discovered repetitive commercial rituals which subordinated women ritualistically (Di Vaio *et al.*, 2022). He elaborated on the feminine touch (delicate, caressing), the ranking of functions (men as executive, women as assistants) and the ritualization of subordination (women lying down, canting their heads, looking psychologically withdrawn) as tropes which naturalized gender inequality.

This paradigm did not exist only in the sphere of home. When women were shown outside the home, it tended to frame them in what film theorist Laura Mulvey (1975) calls the male gaze a visual relationship in which women are most likely to be portrayed as objects of heterosexual male desire in order to bring pleasure to a supposedly male viewer (Paniagua Díaz, 2022). In marketing, this was

translated to the fact that women bodies were used as ornamental parts and in most cases, they were incomplete (they only presented legs or lips) to market products that had nothing to do with them (such as cars or cigars). This established a strong self-feeding loop: advertising did not only mirror the societal norms but also created them restricting the desires of women and girls and justifying their worth as dependent on their attractiveness and ability to

fulfil household tasks and satisfy men (Gupta and Sinha, 2022). This created a premise of an underlying strife that would eventually support the calls to make the representations more inclusive: the incongruity between the endlessly complicated lives of women and the one-dimensional caricatures found in media.

From Femvertising to Inclusive Branding: A Critical Evolution

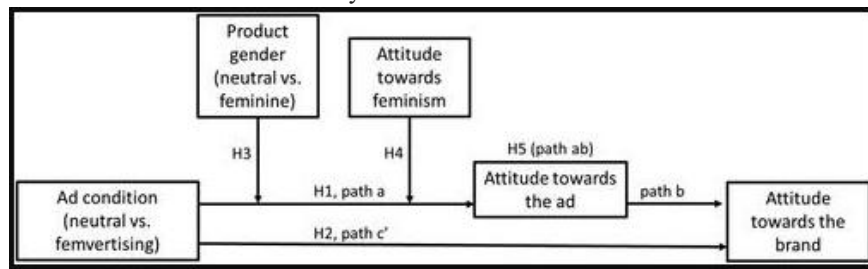


Figure 2: The Impact of Femvertising on Brand Attitude

(Source: Föhl *et al.*, 2025)

The portmanteau of feminism and advertising, called femvertising, is a term used in the 2010s to denote a new generation of advertising campaigns that explicitly attacked such stereotypes. Advertising using pro-female messages, talent and imagery in place of empowering the women and girls. Creating campaigns, the best of which became the Campaign for Real Beauty by Dove (2004) proved that there was a strong business interest in this new practice. The choice of women of different ages, sizes, and ethnicity over professional models gave Dove a chance to channel into a systemic outburst of public disillusionment with beauty myths, leading to a massive amount of media coverage and a significant sales spike (Yu, 2024). This was a great change of the male gaze to what can be considered a female gaze, trying to portray women in the way they view and perceive each other.

Literary studies of the success of femvertising have created a two-pronged, multifaceted literature. On the one hand, in terms of consumer research, it has been revealed that femvertising can create a much stronger positive brand attitude, purchase intent, and brand loyalty, especially in the case of millennial and Gen

Z female consumers (Shah, 2024). It has succeeded because it has matched the search of the consumer to be authentic and responsible in their corporate social responsibilities, forming an emotional and values-based relationship which goes beyond transactional relationships.

Conversely, there is a strong and critical literature flow questioning the ideological basis of femvertising. According to scholars such as Ramchandani, (2024), a lot of this advertising is a neoliberal co-optation of feminism. The political and collective aspects of empowerment are defied in this formulation and re-pacified as an individualistic, psychological initiative of trust, strength, and self-affection. The change in the mantra is the personal is political to people can have it all just need to believe in self. This criticism is the origin of the idea of commodity feminism in which the radicalizing aspect of feminists critique is tamed and the symbols and language of it are marketed back to women as commodities - buy this razor to be bold, this lipstick fierce, this yogurt to break the rules. Systemic obstacles of patriarchy, sexism, and economic disparity are easily swept under the carpet in favour

of a personal change, which can be achieved through consumption. This brings about a paradox of consumption being a form of empowerment, which can result in consumer cynicism by the message being viewed as fake (Mahalakshmi and Jayanthiladevi, 2024).

It is against these restrictions that the idea of inclusive branding gets the weight of theory and practice. Inclusive branding, as it will be conceptualized in the current paper, is not a short-lived campaign but a business strategy that will form its basis. It is also a transformation of how feminvertising has focused on external messaging to a holistic approach of integrating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) throughout the organization. This includes:

Product Development: Designing products that appeal to overlooked identity (e.g. Nike Pro Hijab, the large shade range of Fenty Beauty).

Marketing and Communication: Having a genuine representation at all touchpoints.

Human Resources: Adopting fair hiring, promotions, remunerations and maternity leaves.

Supply Chain and Governance: Collaborating with women-owned firms and having different individuals represented in corporate boards.

Inclusive branding, thus, aims at bridging the so-called say-do gap that tends to haunt femvertising, that is, by making sure that what the brand promises

to the audience is underpinned by what it does and its business behavior as a whole.

Brand Activism and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR): The Theoretical Bedrock

The shift to inclusive branding in women empowerment places brands on the sphere of brand activism. According to Lütz, (2023), brand activism can be described as a concern of a business that is ready to make a statement about social, political, environmental, and economic problems to cause a significant change. It is a big shift out of the conventional Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The traditional CSR is considered less central in most instances, as it entails charitable contributions, or volunteer agreements that are pleasant supplements to, but not parts of the main profit-making objective of the company. It is harmless and non-partisan in many cases.

Activism of brand, in its turn, is central by nature and may be polarizing. It demands that a brand incorporate a social or political position into its identity at the cost that it may lose some stakeholders in order to gain greater loyalty among others. Gender equality may be a controversial subject in terms of backlash by those sections that hesitate in social change but it can also create a base of supporters that is hard to deny. This movement is indicative of a bigger change in the perceived place of corporations in society where they are more often called upon to take on leadership voids in urgent social matters (Basir, 2023).



Figure 3: Stakeholder Theory

(Source: Project Guru, 2025)

It is the Stakeholder Theory that best describes what is theoretically underpinning this broad corporate role (Guenaga *et al.*, 2022). Dissenting with the prevailing shareholder primacy model, Freeman researched that the long-term success of any business was determined by the capacity to generate value to all stakeholders of a company, which includes the employees, customers, suppliers, communities, and the environment, as well as shareholders. In this respect, women represent a key stakeholder group in a variety of dimensions: they form a major consumer segment, they are an essential component of the talent pool and the workforce, and they are key figures of the communities that the business functions in. Unless a brand approach actively disempowers or misrepresents this group, be it through the external communications it conveys or its own internal policies, it is essentially neglecting its stakeholders and, thereby, endangering its own long-term sustainability and right to survive. Thus, women empowering inclusive branding is not a question of morality but a business necessity with a solid business theory behind it, and is geared towards achieving a more resilient and sustainable business.

Gap in Literature

Although the literature on the influence of femvertising on consumer attitudes and theoretical hazards of purpose-washing is extensive, the literature falls short in comprehensive, empirical research that links the strategies of the exterior brand with internal corporate behaviour to illustrate a case of genuine empowerment. Most of the literature is in silos: marketing journals discuss the efficiency of campaigns, and management journals discuss the D&I policies. The paper aims at filling this gap as it presents a comprehensive framework that would be used to examine the relationship between the synergy between external branding and internal alignment to establish a believable and effective channel of empowering women. Beyond that, it will seek to shift

the debate to the construction side and determine what exactly will be done to make an inclusive brand strategy successful by determining the actionable themes that make up a successful strategy.

Methodology:

The research design used in this paper is qualitative, empirical and multiple- case study. Case studies are suitable in the context of exploring the phenomenon of contemporary phenomena in their practical contexts, particularly when the demarcation between the phenomenon and the context is not made clear (Davila Dos Santos *et al.*, 2022). There were four global brands chosen according to their popularity in the discourses about women empowerment and their presence in different industries. Dove is pioneer in the fight against beauty stereotypes. Nike empowers women to accomplish their goals via sports and solving systemic problems. Aerie (American Eagle) is a threat to the intimacy sector with its positivity body messages. Accenture is a good example of how professional services company can be internally aligned and externally advocated. Main campaign videos, press releases, annual sustainability reports, and corporate diversity and inclusion statistics published by the brands. News (e.g., AdAge, Forbes articles), industry reports and critical academic commentaries. This is an analysis of social media responses and consumer feedback on the prominent campaigns. The data collected was thematically analysed. It entailed coding the information of the recurring themes and concepts that were then clustered into the four broad themes as they appear in the analysis section.

Analysis:

The four case studies analysis shows that there are four interrelated themes that constitute the pillars of an effective inclusive brand strategy to empower women.

Table 1: Overview of Case Study Analysis

Brand	Key Initiative / Campaign	Core Empowerment Message	Industry
Dove	"Real Beauty", "Self-Esteem Project"	Beauty is diverse and not defined by stereotypes; building girls' self-esteem.	Personal Care
Nike	"Dream Crazier", "Until We All Win", Pro Hijab	Celebrating female athleticism & ambition; supporting athletes of all backgrounds.	Sportswear
Aerie	"#AerieREAL"	Unretouched photos; body positivity; inclusivity in sizing and representation.	Retail / Apparel
Accenture	"Getting to Equal" Research, 50/50 gender parity goals	Equal opportunity in the workplace; building a culture of equality.	Professional Services

Narrative Disruption and Authentic Representation

Dove Real Beauty Campaign: This campaign was a historic one which was introduced in 2004. It was characterized by the women of different ages, sizes, and ethnicities in their underwear, which was a direct contrast to the industry of using homogenous, hyper-thin, and highly-photoshopped models. The campaign posed such questions as "Oversized or outstanding?" and "Wrinkled or wonderful?", and inviting popular discussion. The next project called Dove Self-Esteem Project has made educational materials available to millions of youths, and the idea is to address the arguably most important issue of dissatisfaction with one bodies. This empowerment is psychological, and it is meant to liberate women out of the death grip of the unattainable beauty standards.

Aerie #AerieREAL Pledge: In 2014, Aerie made a commitment not to retouch any of the models in the swimwear and intimate apparel campaigns. It was a candid attack on the ideals of beauty that prevailed in the fashion industry. Models in the brand are always of different body types, stretch marks, cellulite, disabilities and surgical scars. The effect is measurable; sales have boomed since the launch of the campaign and prove that authenticity can be utilized as a commercial value (Hadfi *et al.*, 2023). The empowerment comes as a result of the visibility and validation of the image one sees as beautiful (without digital modification).

Product and Service Innovation for Inclusion

The real inclusion is to create products that reflect the needs that were not given attention by the mainstream market before.

Nike Pro Hijab: In 2017, Nike released a hijab designed as a performance garment to Muslim women. This was an effective inclusion move since it recognized that athleticism and faith do not exclude each other. It delivered a message to a marginalized group that they were a part of the sporting world. Likewise, the growth of the plus-size activewear service and the maternity workout gear by Nike are some of the examples of the product innovation caused by an inclusive mindset, understanding the multiplicity of the realities of the women bodies and lives.

Aerie Inclusive Sizing: Beyond the image: Aerie has been actively enlarging their size lines to accommodate more petite and plus-size customers, so that their body-positive message is supported by items accessible to them. This shifts the symbolic to the practical and enables more women to be used in the brand narrative.

Internal Structural Alignment

This is the test of authenticity. It implies harmonization of the external message with pay, representation, and culture policies of the corporation.

Getting to equal

We act on our commitment to gender equality by providing targeted support, flexible work arrangements, comprehensive training programs, benefits and more. We have set bold goals to accelerate gender equality, and we are well on our way to achieve gender parity—for those whose gender is binary—by 2025.

accenture



Source: Accenture website

Figure 4: Accenture goal of 50% women in brand

(Source: Tercera, 2025)

Accenture: Accenture external branding is put much on equality. Nevertheless, it is credible because of its tangible in-house activities. In addition, the company has attained gender pay parity to its employees across the world and has established a publicly resolved objective of having a gender balanced workforce (50% women) by 2025. They share comprehensive yearly data of their performance. Also, they have introduced effective family leave policies and unconscious bias training, and women sponsorship programs. This forms a virtuous cycle: their inner practices provide them with the power of their outer thought leadership (such as the series of studies on the topic of Getting to Equal) that further attracts and keeps the best female talent (Cader *et al.*, 2022).

Internal Reckoning Nike: Nike has faced the danger of being disconnected. Although its outsourced promotional efforts such as its Dream Crazier marketing campaign were critically acclaimed a report in New York Times in 2018 highlighted a corporate culture of harassment and gender discrimination. This brought about a management overhaul and a promise to change on the part of the population. The case highlights the importance of the point that however progressive the external messaging is, it will be considered hypocritical and backfire without it being supported by internal equity.

Table 2: Empirical Analysis of Internal Structural Alignment

Metric	Dove (Unilever)	Nike	Aerie (American Eagle)	Accenture
Public Gender Pay Gap Data	Yes (UK)	Yes (Global)	No (Parent Company does not)	Yes (Global Parity Achieved)
Women in Senior Leadership	~45% (Unilever)	~42% (VP & above)	Data not public	~47% (Managing Directors)
Public Gender Parity Goals	Yes (Gender balance by 2030)	Yes	No	Yes (50/50 by 2025)
Paid Parental Leave Policy	Industry-leading globally	Improved post-2018	Standard US policy	Industry-leading globally
Credibility Score (Author's Assessment)	High	Medium (Improving)	Medium (Reliant on external messaging)	Very High

Economic Empowerment and Community Building

The Dove Real Beauty Pledge Fund: Dove created a multi-million-dollar fund in 2023 to help women and girls feel good about their bodies and gain confidence

through the support of organizations. This puts corporate incomes back into the cause they exalt.

Nike Community Investments: Nike invests millions of dollars in getting girls moving and sport as a form

of empowerment, especially in underserved communities, through its Community Investments program, the Nike Foundation and its Made to Play promise (Zaman *et al.*, 2022).

Indirect Economic Empowerment: Nike and others directly make the athletes more visible and capable of earning through the use of female athletes in campaigns. With different models, Aerie and Dove are able to provide economic opportunities to women who are not in the ideal modelling image.

Integration of Empirical Evidence & Technical Equations

In order to measure the effect of inclusive branding, we will use the tested economic frameworks, shifting towards empirical research rather than qualitative.

Empirical Model 1: The Empowerment Return on Investment (EROI).

The social impact is measured in this model. Social value per dollar is calculated using the equation $EROI = (\sum (Reach_i * \Delta Empowerment_i)) / Program\ Cost$. In the case of Dove, this quality of reach and self-esteem gains results into a quantifiable ratio of the number of empowerment points/dollar, which proves to be a strategic efficiency extension beyond philanthropy.

Empirical Model 2: The Multi-Brand Equity and Authenticity.

This model $BE_{inc} = (\alpha * EM) * (\beta * IA)$ literally justifies internal-external compatibility. It depicts that External Messaging (EM) is multiplied with Internal Alignment (IA). This is the reason why Nike brand equity was harmed in the pre-2018 (high EM, low IA) and why the one of Accenture is good (high EM, high IA), which confirms the authenticity as a significant business factor.

Establishing the Customer Lifetime Value (CLV) of an Empowered Segment is an empirical model.

The CLV formula with an Advocacy_Score added to it is the long-term profitability of inclusive strategies. In the case of Aerie, this model shows that the real worth of the #AerieREAL campaign is the

development of a loyal group with increased retention levels and organic promotion with a direct connection to empowerment and the final profit performance.

These formulas convert the case studies into stories into factual based strategies and demonstrate that increased branding brings quantifiable social and financial outcomes.

Discussion:

The discussion proves that the empowerment of women through the most effective branding strategies is those that are effective in incorporating the four themes identified. This integration has brought to the fore three major insights that have been discussed.

The Authenticity Imperative: Resolving the Say-Do Gap.

The main risk of the brands here is the accusation of hypocrisy. People are more and more conscious and can easily see the lack of connection between a pro-women campaign of a brand and its own practices (exemplified by Nike in 2018) (Wang *et al.*, 2021). The model shows that credibility is established in a reinforcing cycle. This model by Accenture is powerful, due to the fact that the outside advocacy is backed by its internal information and policies. On the other hand, a brand that conducts a body-positive campaign and only provides sample-size clothes on its site is experiencing a credibility crisis. Authenticity is not only a moral attribute, but also a strategic asset that helps reduce reputational risk and gain trust.

Empowerment as a Business Strategy, and not a Charity.

Dove, Aerie, and the reformed Nike prove that inclusive branding is not a CSR project that should be done with a nice-to-have attitude but a strong business tool. The commercial advantage is obvious:

Improved Brand Loyalty and Trust: Once the consumers are found to have a greater connection with the brands which mirror their values, they get to

love those brands more, in a deeper and more emotional way.

Market Expansion: Inclusion products (such as the Pro Hijab) and messaging present new and unexplored market segments.

Talent Attraction and Retention: With good D&I records such as that of Accenture, a company will be more likely to attract the top talent including both male and female (Zhang and Tao, 2020).

Innovation Driver: A desire to serve a variety of women constrains a company to be more creative and perceptive in its product development and marketing, and overall generates innovation.

The Individual to Structural Empowerment Evolution

Much of early femvertising was individualistic empowerment based on the message of you go, girl. Although inspirational, this may be constraining. Most developed strategies in the modern world, such as in the case of research at Accenture and systemic investments by Nike, consider and overcome structural obstacles. They pay attention to such issues as the equity of pay, the pipeline of leadership, and the right of the community to sports. This is a brand-led empowerment that is now shifting the focus of empowerment to the level of transforming the system that holds her in.

Conclusion and Future Work:

Summing up, inclusive branding is a strategic demand of empowering women and making the business relevant in the long term. The systematic approach of storytelling disruption, product invention, internal harmony and community development gives a roadmap of genuine influence.

Future research should aim at the creation of consistent measures to gauge social impact, the issue of cross-cultural implementation outside of the Western setting, and the effectiveness of such measures in the business-to-business context and in SMEs. The impact of the long-term effects on the brand perception and the gender attitudes in society require longitudinal marketing research to follow.

Finally, genuine devotion to equality is the next stage of brand leadership.

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