



# THE POWER OF FEMVERTISING

A closer look at how marketing constructs ideas of 'self-care' and female empowerment.

By Vivian Nguyen

## WHAT IS 'FEMVERTISING'?

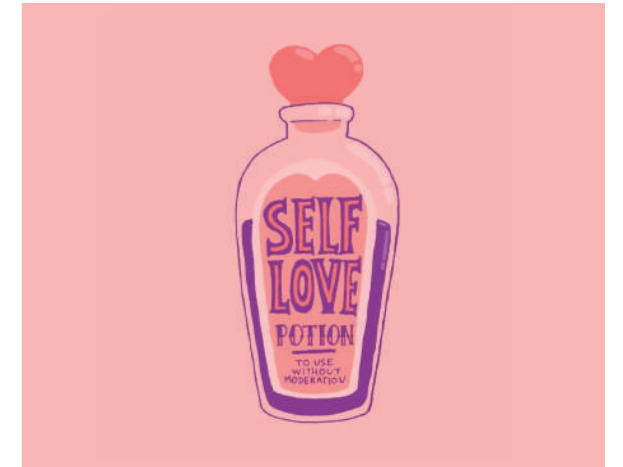
From self-care products to sex toys, marketing and 'femvertising' has spun feminism into a \$450 billion industry for women's 'wellness.' What does this say about the power of social marketing in society?

'Femvertising' is short for 'feminist advertising' and broadly refers to the 'feminist-washing' of marketing strategies that co-opt feminist ideas and images for the promotion of products.

### The problem with femvertising

It's the hottest way for advertisers to use **cause marketing strategy** and make big money in the industry right now.

So the question remains about whether the move toward more nuanced female representation is a great one, or if it's a hugely manipulative way to cash in on rising feminist ideas.



It's hard to scroll through my Instagram feed nowadays without seeing 'self-care' and 'self-love' being sold to me through a new fruity face mask or an 'empowering' deodorant for women.

On one hand, it's great to see feminist ideas visible in mainstream media, and to see *advertisers (slowly) depart from the sexist 'sexy-super-model-selling-you-a-shiny-thing' trope* that has characterised women's advertising for so long.

On the other hand, I feel uncomfortable at how commoditized the whole thing is. *Does buying a #GirlBoss lotion and getting softer skin = empowerment?* I am not empowered here to do anything other than spend a few more dollars.



Liked by aysesav07 and others

bathandbodyworks.au 🍷 Self-care routine check  
🍷 What's in your recipe for 🍷 glowing 🍷 skin?!

Exhibit A: Bath and Bodyworks promoting 'self-care' through pink bottles of skin care.



## Self-care's success

This industry, which encompasses a range of products from cosmetics to nutrition and lifestyle, was *valued at \$10 billion during its growth in 2014.*

*In 2021, it is valued at \$450 billion* largely thanks to marketing strategies which founded this new product category.



Exhibit B: Popular womens' publications Marie Claire and Teen Vogue marketing brand sponsored products as 'ultimate self care' items.

## The history of self-care

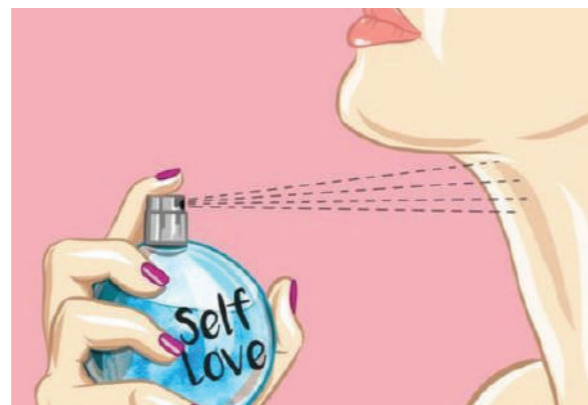
In researching this article, I was surprised to find that 'self-care' as a concept has a deeply political history.

It is a *complex and powerful idea historically rooted in marginalised communities* - queer people, people of colour, women etc - who used self-care as an act of reclaiming the right to pleasure and autonomy of choice where it was denied to them by prejudiced systems.

## How marketing created an industry based on feminism

Constrastingly, the 'self-care' we see advertised now *convinces women that self-care can be bought* through indulging in home pampering or a makeover, preaching ideas of total patriarchy-defying badassery whilst simultaneously asking women to improve their appearance *under the all-empowering guise of 'self-love'.*

# THE SELF-CARE INDUSTRY



This marketing has created **commodity feminism**. Commodotising feminist ideas weaponises the social movement and *shifts the onus onto consumers* to do and feel better through greater consumption.

It *relies on ambitious individuals and consumption, rather than collective action and systemic change*, which renders 'femvertising' not very feminist, at all.

## But...it worked?

Despite criticism, its massive success as an industry proves that the marketing is working, and reveals how *marketing strategies can have a monumental impact on the ways we discuss, understand and participate in social activism.*

# BRAND CULTURES IN THE SELF-CARE INDUSTRY

**Brand cultures** are on the rise in marketing. Brand cultures move away from being a static name we attach to a product, and instead are creating brand values, narratives and lifestyles that are sold to us too.

For example, if you are environmentally-conscious, you might hope to endorse a brand that fits into this lifestyle and image.



Exhibit C: Dove uses feminist ideas of diversity and body positivity, whilst promoting a 'skin firming' (which, BTW, is not a thing) product that shames womens' natural skin.

Just looking back at this past year of global crises in health, race, gender inequality and climate, we've seen a *greater expectation on brands to speak out about social issues in solidarity of change.*



Exhibit D: Pantene uses ideas of 'inner strength and beauty' whilst suggesting that perfect hair is the way to attain this, all whilst using a perfectly retouched image of Selena Gomez.

## Marketing influences thought and conversation

Marketing messages can therefore have significant social influence.

Femvertising can convince consumers that the cause of their struggles are rooted in their own self-confidence and love, not the patriarchal systems that make it challenging to possess those things in the first place.

*And when marketing tells us a new product is the antidote, they are cashing in on feminism, big time.*



# SO, CAN FEMVERTISING DO ANY GOOD?

Given the power of advertising and marketing, bringing feminist discourse into the mainstream can be a real game changer when done well.

The narratives that advertisers present can give much *needed nuanced representation to women everywhere.*

## Femvertising and sexual self-care

The growth of **'sexual wellness'** products interestingly really comes to mind when I consider the positive impacts of femvertising.



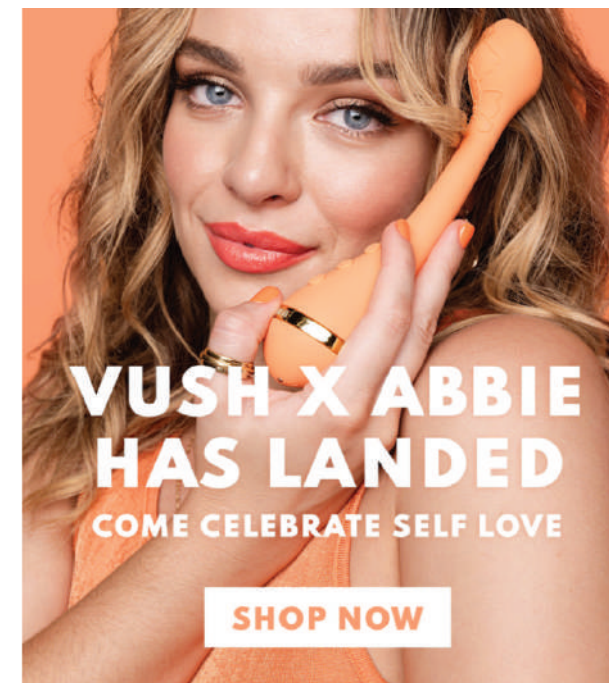
This Durex condom advertisement makes a pointed statement about women's sexual pleasure that encourages conversation about their sexual wellbeing and pleasure in a challenging and impactful way.

My initial thoughts when I saw 'wellness' attached to selling sex toys were cynical – is it another form of capitalizing on the whole self-love, self-care, girlboss mumbo jumbo?

It uses the semantics of the self-care femvertisements and attaching ideas of confidence, empowerment and autonomy to products that have *typically had a taboo or slut-shaming narrative created by the media.*

## Marketing is helping change the narrative around vibrators

A recent example that caught my eye is the brand Vush, who launched their new vibrator in collaboration with popular Australian influencer, Abbie Chatfield.



Abbie Chatfield is an Australian reality TV star turned feminist influencer and podcaster. As the face of this new vibrator, she pushes messages of sexual wellness into the mainstream, creating space mainstream shifts in thinking.

We're a wellness brand, creating change by transforming the conversation around female pleasure, wellbeing, and self love. Over half a million followers. 5000 reviews. One very good reason to join our movement: embrace more self love with Vush.

Statement from Vush about their new vibrator launch.

It markets the vibrator as the ultimate act of self-love and an important part of women's wellness, standing in stark contrast to previous narratives and in increasing visibility, too.

**Celebrity endorsement** enables the femvertisement to take space in mainstream conversation in a totally trendy and positive way.

It creates an open dialogue and avenue for women to discuss sex and pleasure without shame, *opening the possibility for real changes in attitude.*

And when *marketing can use feminist ideas to positively affect the way we think about women's autonomy*, that there is truly empowering.



Thanks for Reading!  
**Vivian Nguyen**  
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## How can femvertising be used impactfully for the future?

It is a great example to follow in how femvertising and *marketing strategy can use its socio-cultural capital and platform to create meaningful, positive social change.*

Ultimately, I believe that femvertising has really amazing potential because of our awareness of gender inequality in our day to day lives. We aren't mindless consumers after all.

Marketing strategies that *go beyond feminist jargon and do something to tackle causes* of gender inequality can be powerful actors in platforming feminism - for good.