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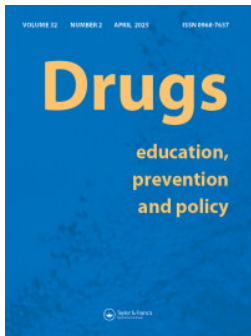
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'It's T-shirt feminism': exploring women's perceptions of the appropriation of feminist messaging in alcohol brand marketing

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ABSTRACT

Background: Alcohol brands are appropriating feminist messages as a marketing tactic. Understanding how women perceive such marketing is critical to policy responses aimed at reducing gendered alcohol harms.

Methods: Semi-structured, in-depth individual and group interviews were conducted with 117 women aged 17–38 who participated in nights out drinking alcohol in the city of Liverpool in the North West of England, UK. Data were analysed using thematic analysis.

Results: Four interlinked themes are presented that provide insight into the different ways women viewed and interpreted alcohol brand marketing that draws on gender equality and empowerment messages. These are; (i) the perception of feminist messages as a form of brand responsibility and 'doing good'; (ii) questioning the authenticity and purpose of feminist messaging; (iii) debating the appropriateness of using alcohol to address gender based issues; and (iv) rejecting commercial feminist messaging and brands in the feminist movement.

Conclusion: In the context of contemporary feminism, in which (young) women are more readily endorsing feminist identities, women's perceptions of feminism influences their attitudes to alcohol brands and marketing, and their intentions to purchase, consume or reject alcohol products, within their own identity making and drinking practices.

Introduction

In the UK, alcohol use and related harms are more prevalent amongst men, but a narrowing of the gender gap in drinking levels and alcohol-attributable harms has been observed in recent decades (NHS Digital, 2019; Office of National Statistics [ONS], 2020, 2021; Slade at al., 2016). Women's drinking has been considered in relation to long-term shifts in social positions and status within an unequal, patriarchal, and consumerist society, with their active participation in drinking culture and public drinking spaces reflecting (economic) independence gained from entering the world of education and work, as a result of second wave feminism (Atkinson, Meadows, et al., 2021; Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Griffin et al., 2013; Nicholls, 2019, 2020; Schmidt, 2014). Once an activity dominated by men, from the mid twentieth century onwards, drinking as a consumption and leisure practice began to be promoted and accepted as an example and expression of women's independence and empowerment (Atkinson et al., 2019; Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Griffin et al., 2013; Nicholls, 2019, 2020).

Within a neo-liberal capitalist and supposed 'post-feminist' society, where gender equality is assumed and consumption forms the basis of identity making, women have been regarded as 'having it all' (i.e. work, leisure, economic ability to consume, sexual freedoms), in ways that have been claimed to make feminism redundant (Gill, 2008, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). From this perspective, drinking and the night time environment (NTE) provide opportunities for the expression of (sexually) agentic and assertive femininities, and the right to consume, choose, express and enjoy within discourses of individualism, choice and empowerment (Gill, 2008; Gill & Scharff, 2013; Griffin et al., 2013; Nicholls, 2019, 2020). This earned 'right to drink' with less restraint means that norms around women's drinking have debatably grown less restrictive (Schmidt, 2014). It is against this background that the alcohol industry responded to women's increased purchasing power and independence. Whilst once targeting women as the purchasers of alcohol for men within their domestic roles, brands now target women as consumers of alcohol in their own right (Atkinson et al., 2019).

Most sociological research exploring women's drinking has employed a post-feminist critique (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Griffin et al., 2013; Nicholls, 2019), yet a recent resurgence in (young) women identifying as feminist and an increased visibility and acknowledgement of feminism in popular culture

marks a departure from assumptions of a post-feminist society (Atkinson, Meadows, Hobin, et al., 2024; Atkinson, Meadows, et al., 2021; Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). Relative to past decades, women are now more readily adopting feminist identities, and although contemporary examples of collective political feminist action exist, the feminism which dominates media and marketing has been conceptualised as a 'neo-liberal', 'commodity', 'popular' or 'choice' feminism, which can be labelled 'corporate friendly' (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Gill, 2016; McRobbie, 2020; Otnes & Fischer, 2022; Retallack et al., 2016; Rivers, 2017; Schraff, 2020). Feminist slogans and messages have thus become commodified, and issues that affect women are utilised to sell products. Rather than transcending the characteristics of equality and empowerment defined by post-feminism, such content reproduces them under a feminist label in ways that benefit the market (Gill, 2016; McRobbie, 2020; Otnes & Fischer, 2022; Retallack et al., 2016; Rivers, 2017; Schraff, 2020). For instance, this new feminist discourse can resemble and reproduce neo-liberal, individualistic and capitalistic sentiments of individual, rather than collective, empowerment that are characteristic of post-feminism (Gill, 2016; McRobbie, 2009).

At a time when political and social issues are at the forefront of every facet of our lives and youth culture, including consumption and (youth) identity, companies are not only expected to sell products, but to also weave goodwill and ethical behaviour into their commercial practices through 'brand social responsibility', 'brand advocacy' and 'social cause' marketing (Abitbol & Sternadori, 2019; Champlin et al., 2019). This includes the use of 'femvertising' (i.e. combining the ideas of feminism with advertising goals; Buckley et al., 2024) or 'commodity' feminism, which has become increasingly prevalent in recent years (e.g. Dove's "real beauty" campaign,[1] see Feng et al., 2019). Femvertising involves brands appropriating feminist issues in their marketing such as challenging gender stereotypes, inequality and disparities, emphasising their support for women and their empowerment, hinting at feminist sentiments, and using feminist iconography (Abitbol & Sternadori, 2016; Buckley et al., 2024; Champlin et al., 2019; Gill, 2016; Kapoor & Munjal, 2019; Sobande, 2019). Such marketing aims to improve a company's economic performance by strengthening brand relevance to current sociopolitical, and environmental issues, while appearing to help worthy causes (Abitbol, 2016; Buckley et al., 2024; Schamp et al., 2023). It further helps generate positive attitude towards marketing content, campaigns and brands, which in turn can positively affect consumer purchasing decisions (Abitbol & Sternadori, 2016; Buckley et al., 2024; Kapoor & Munjal, 2019). Whilst there is evidence that these strategies are generally well received by audiences, they may particularly resonate with younger consumers (i.e. Millennials and Gen-Z) who demand more marketing authenticity and honesty (Champlin et al., 2019). However, consumers are often sceptical and question brand authenticity (i.e. the degree to which a consumer perceives an advert as genuine, sincere, real, open, honest and congruent) (Becker et al., 2019; Buckley et al., 2024; Campagna et al., 2023). Research on femvertising specifically suggests that it is perceived differently by consumers, with mixed and conflicting results on whether it leads to positive brand image, purchase

intentions and actual sales (Abitbol, 2016; Abitbol & Sternadori, 2019; Champlin et al., 2019).

Companies have long promoted and celebrated women in their advertising, including in the marketing of 'unhealthy' commodities. An early example includes the United States tobacco industry's 1929 *Torches of Freedom* campaign which paid women to march in the New York Easter Sunday Parade while smoking their 'torches of freedom' (cigarettes). This strategy, aimed to link cigarettes to women's freedom, emancipation and rebellion, and to promote a consumption practice that at the time was deemed masculine and stigmatised for women (Amos & Haglund, 2000). These strategies continued to be used internationally until the 1990s when restrictions on tobacco marketing intensified. In recent years, attempts to associate consumption with equality and empowerment have increased, including by alcohol marketers, who promote brands and products to women through the appropriation of 'feminist' messaging (Atkinson, Meadows, et al., 2021; Atkinson et al., 2024; Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). For example, a recent analysis of alcohol marketing content on the social media sites Facebook and Instagram by 20 brands over an 18 month period, found that marketing-associated alcohol use with both traditional (e.g. motherhood) and newer social roles (e.g. independent consumer, worker) that women occupy in contemporary society, alongside the continued use of gender stereotypes (e.g. 'pinking' of products, commodification of appearance). At the same time alcohol brands were promoted through connotations of women's empowerment (Atkinson, Meadows, et al., 2021; Atkinson, Meadows, Hobin, et al., 2024) (e.g. marketing coinciding with International Women's Day), feminist iconography (e.g. raised fists) and content that acknowledged gender inequality (e.g. sexual consent, gender representation), which may hold appeal to a new generation of consumers who are more feminist aware (Atkinson et al., 2021; Buckley et al., 2024). For example, brands endorsed and sponsored real life events that celebrated women's achievements and representation in various fields (e.g. Echo Falls' 'Amazing Women Awards', Baileys' 'Women's Prize for Fiction'), in ways that framed alcohol use as an expression of solidarity and support for women's achievements. Some brands went beyond a celebration of women to create specific campaigns that attempted to address and raise awareness of gender inequality, such as Smirnoff's 'Equalising Music Campaign' that intends to raise awareness of the underrepresentation of women in the music industry and women's experiences of live music venues to promote the need for 'safe spaces'.

Previous research has provided insight into women's perceptions of alcohol marketing (e.g. Atkinson, Meadows, Hobin, et al., 2024; Atkinson, Meadows, et al., 2021, 2024), and the current work extends this by examining how women relate to and perceive the recent appropriation of feminist messages by alcohol brands for commercial purposes. Moreover, it extends research that has situated women's drinking within the context of post-feminism in which women reject feminism (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Griffin et al., 2013), and acknowledges the changing social context and gender relations outlined above in which (young) women are increasingly adopting feminist identities (Atkinson, Meadows, Hobin, et al., 2024).

It is important that women's relationship with such messaging is explored for a number of reasons. First, as alcohol marketing influences alcohol-related attitudes and behaviours (including those that may be harmful), it contributes to a culture where regular alcohol consumption is considered normal and desirable, and integrated in the gendered lifestyles and identities of consumers (Atkinson, Meadows, et al., 2021; Banet-Weiser et al., 2020; Critchlow et al., 2015, 2019; Jernigan et al., 2017; Purves et al., 2018). Second, alcohol is a product that causes gendered harms, and marketing messages that target women are of concern in the context of increases in the negative health impacts of alcohol use experienced by women, and a rise in health harms that disproportionally affect them such as breast cancer (Choi et al., 2018; Key et al., 2006; Slade at al., 2016). 'Feminist' marketing expands the presence of alcohol into new contexts, in ways that are gendered, and in ways that contradictorily associates the consumption of a potentially harmful product with notions of gender equality and empowerment. This existence of potential harms alongside messages of empowerment highlights the mixed and contradictory messages women receive in relation to their drinking (Atkinson et al., 2021; Foley et al., 2024a, 2024b). Third, such marketing has been accused of reproducing personal responsibility narratives that shift the responsibility for alcohol harms away from the industry, to the individual. This use of feminist messaging by the alcohol industry is an example of a 'dark nudge', whereby the positive associations held by consumers' towards alcohol and women's empowerment and equality are exploited to encourage consumption, and which serve to mask the harms alcohol can cause (Petticrew et al., 2020). Last, such feminist branded messaging has been accused of harming feminism more generally, by diluting messages, and reproducing a feminism that benefits the market through framing feminism as an individual act consumption and expression, rather than a collective social movement for positive social change (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020). With such concerns in mind, the paper presents findings that sheds light on how women relate to, interpret and perceive alcohol brand marketing content that appropriates the messages and imagery of feminism and gender equality and empowerment, to promote brand image and encourage the sale and use of alcohol to women.

Methods

Recruitment and sample

Semi-structured, in-depth individual and group interviews were conducted with women (13 identified as non-binary but also female and feminine (i.e. she/they))[2] aged 17–38 who participated in nights out drinking in the city of Liverpool in the North West of England, UK. Data collection was part of a larger programme of work examining representation and targeting of women in alcohol marketing. The city is known (inter)nationally as a 'party' city and is a popular night time and holiday destination. The study was advertised as a project exploring gender and alcohol marketing, and recruitment took place between July 2021 and March 2022 through a number of means. This included researcher networks, snowballing, a project Instagram page, flyers in public spaces such as bars, cafes and work places, and advertising to university and college students and societies, and community groups (e.g. sports, arts and music groups; welfare and leisure groups and organisations targeted at key groups, including women, LGBTQ+ people, and people of colour).

The sample consisted of participants who were diverse with regards sexuality (32% (n = 37) LGBTQ+) and ethnicity (84% (n = 98) white, 16% (n = 19) people of colour (Black, West and East Asian)). Participants were not requested to self-identify their social class position albeit some elected to. Considering a resurgence of feminism in public and media discourse in recent years, we were also interested in whether women identified as 'feminist' and whether their perceptions of feminism influenced their perceptions of alcohol marketing that endorses feminist and gender equality messaging. When asked, would you call yourself a feminist?, the majority (80%, n = 93) identified as feminist, 14% (n = 16) did not, and 7% (n = 8) weren't sure or didn't know what feminism was, but stated that they agreed with 'gender equality'. Although they were not directly asked about their participation in feminist action, some divulged information on their involvement without being prompted, and a number were currently active in relevant university societies (e.g. feminist and LGBTQ+ society).

Data collection

Participants were given a choice of being interviewed individually, or in their friendship groups, with 39 individual interviews, and 24 group interviews with 79 participants being conducted. It is important to note that individual and group interviews provide different contexts in which data is produced and constructed. It may be the case that women withheld certain viewpoints and experiences in a group context, and worked with their friends to co-produce accounts, but no obvious differences were observed between data produced in individual compared to group interviews. Women were also given a choice of being interviewed in person or online via Microsoft Teams, with the majority choosing the online option (four interviews and 11 focus groups were conducted in person). Participants were asked about their drinking practices including what they drank and why; what they did not drink and why; their experiences of drinking including in the NTE, and the pleasures and risks involved; their views and experiences of alcohol brand marketing, and how it targets and represents women, including through the use of feminist messaging.

Following initial discussions of alcohol marketing, all participants were shown examples of marketing collected from an analysis of alcohol brands' social media marketing posts (Atkinson, Meadows, et al., 2021). This included varied messages related to gender representation and gender equality, celebrating women's empowerment (e.g. 'Girl Power', 'Girl's Can do Anything', International Women's Day), the use of iconography (e.g. raised fist), and campaign-based marketing that involved brands taking action to raise awareness of gender inequalities and raise money for women's organisations. For example, they were shown images of the Smirnoff Equalise campaign[3] that aimed to encourage consumers to

listen to more women and non-binary music artists; Brew Dog's Pink IPA campaign,[4] which aimed to draw attention to the strategy of 'pinking' as a gender stereotype in marketing and the gender pay gap in the beer industry; Brew Dog's limited edition beer that addressed the issue of menstrual poverty[5]; Absolut Vodka's campaign that addressed alcohol use and sexual consent[6]; and images of brands using feminist iconography in their marketing to promote the role of women in brewing.[7] Participants were asked to discuss their general views on these, including whether they would and wouldn't purchase and consume them and why, how they felt about how women were being targeted and depicted, and the feminist messages being used. Discussions were recorded (Online discussions using Microsoft Teams, in-person discussions audio recorded) and lasted between 24 min and 2 h and 5 min (mean 69 min). This resulted in 70 h of recorded discussion. Microsoft Teams transcriptions were used as a guide and recordings were listened back to and the transcription amended to provide a verbatim account. In person discussions were transcribed verbatim by the researchers, and a professional transcription service.

Data analysis

Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis in NVivo to develop patterns, themes and sub-themes using both pre-determined and emerging coding, that involved identifying commonalities and differences within and then across interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2014). Deductively, a list of potential pre-determined codes were considered and applied where appropriate to the data, whilst allowing flexibility for new codes that had not been envisaged to be identified. Predetermined codes were firstly applied to the data to organise discussions into broad categories to establish whether women supported or rejected feminist messages (e.g. support, reject, undecided), and then themes reflecting the reasons underpinning these were inductively created. For example, the concept of authenticity was observed in the data that was coded as being in support, as well as rejecting, feminist messages. Rather than present broad themes of support and reject, we developed the theme of authenticity to highlight the nuances in the perceived authenticity of the brands alignment with feminism, and how it influenced whether women supported or rejected examples. An integrative approach to thematic analysis was used, with new codes identified being included into the pre-determined frame and then applied to previously and yet to be coded transcripts. We then re-read each theme to establish whether the participant who fell within each theme defined themselves as feminist or not. Coding and analysis was predominately carried out by the lead author, with code checking from the second.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted by Liverpool John Moores University ethics committee and informed consent gained from each participant. The participant names reported are pseudonyms. Exposing participants to alcohol marketing is a method commonly used in alcohol studies. Whilst the ethics committee did not express any concerns that exposing participants to examples of alcohol marketing may encourage the sale and consumption of alcohol, it is important to acknowledge the risk that such exposure may have generated positive brand image among some. However, no participants expressed increased interest in consuming alcohol and few recalled intentions to purchase specific products following the interview. Women who had experienced problems with alcohol use were given the option of not viewing the images. All wished to view them and some discussed how viewing marketing actually reinforced their wish to abstain from alcohol as it reinforced their objection to industry messaging more generally. Participants were also provided with information on alcohol support services to ensure that those who wished to seek support were aware of the services available. They received a £15 retail voucher in recompense.

Researcher positionality'

Interviewers were women aged 38 and 26, and whilst from working class backgrounds had experienced social mobility within the University system. These characteristics supported rapport with all women regardless of their background. All appeared eager to share their views and experiences openly and enthusiastically. Further, the researchers position as women helped make it comfortable for women to discuss sensitive issues (e.g. many discussed experiences of being in 'vulnerable' and 'unsafe' situations in drinking environments). To reduce bias (e.g. a reluctance among women to present opposition to feminist thinking), we did not overtly present our positions as feminists unless asked, and when declaring our feminist position we expressed that we understood why some women may not identity with the label. We asked participants in a non-judgemental and neutral manner if they identified as feminist themselves, were sensitive to the intersectional experiences of participants, and as white women, were sensitive to questioning and discussions related to race. However, we acknowledge that these discussions are the outcome of interactions between individuals from majority and minority groups. Similarly, discussions related to sexuality were discussed sensitively, and the inclusion of a queer researcher aided the approach and interactions. Alcohol can be a sensitive topic of discussion, particularly among women who may feel judged for their drinking behaviours. We openly declared our positions as women who consume alcohol, and clarified that there was no judgement regarding their drinking and views on alcohol. This was also the case when interviewing women who did not drink, and some non-drinkers requested our drinking status. As with drinkers, we declared our drinking status and expressed an interest in all views and experiences, and an eagerness to learn from them as women who do not drink. We feel that a rapport was quickly developed with all women regardless of their identities and relationship with alcohol, with all participants being keen to share their experiences of drinking and non-drinking.

Results

Four interlinked themes are presented that provide insight into the different ways women viewed and interpreted alcohol brand marketing that draws on gender equality and empowerment messages that could be labelled 'feminist' (i.e. as an example of 'femvertising', 'commodity feminism' of or 'social cause marketing'). These are; (i) the perception of feminist messages as a form of brand responsibility and 'doing good'; (ii) questioning the authenticity and purpose of feminist messaging; (iii) debating the appropriateness of using alcohol to address gender based issues; and (iv) rejecting commercial feminist messaging and brands in the feminist movement. We consider how women's views affected their intentions to purchase and consume alcohol products, and how their views and opinions were affected by their perceptions of feminism.

'It's actually doing something positive': Social responsibility

Many women, including those who did and did not identify as feminist, held positive views towards this type of marketing, and believed that all forms of marketing should have a function beyond that of brand image enhancement and profit making. Alcohol brands were considered as having a social '*responsibility*' to draw attention to, and raise awareness of social issues such as gender inequality, and in promoting equality and women's empowerment. For example, Emily discussed alcohol brands as:

> *Extract 1*
>
> a platform to share these causes, which is good because these causes need to be brought into awareness, everybody has a responsibility to raise awareness and brands have got a huge following and they can reach out to quite a lot of people, and so that is an opportunity for those causes to be heard.
>
> (Late 30s, white, heterosexual, feminist)

This social responsibility role is further exemplified in Extract 2 from Nat (early 20s, Black, bisexual, feminist) below, who discussed Absolut Vodka's '*Sex responsibly*' campaign that aimed to raise awareness and encourage reflection on issues surrounding sexual consent in nightlife drinking contexts. She interpreted the campaign as the brand acting positively by promoting '*good*' messages around sexual consent to a large group of people, and this created a positive view of the brand by suggesting it is '*actually doing something*' beyond its purpose of selling alcohol.

> Extract 2
>
> The message behind Absolut Vodka- 'buying someone a drink doesn't buy you a yes'- that's just a great mantra to have. I guess the more people that hear that the better, that is a good reinforcer. If you're going to put any message on your brand, that's a good message, it's actually doing something positive.
>
> Nat (Early 20s, Black, bisexual, feminist)

Discussing the same campaign, Amy (30s, white, heterosexual, not feminist), similarly interpreted this example as alcohol brands using their public reach to '*do good*' when stating that '*it's good that they're using the platform that they have, they're trying to promote the right messages, so I think they're doing the right thing here*'. Such campaigns improved brand image, and some discussed '*buying into*' campaigns and purchasing products as a result. For example, Sophie (20s, white, heterosexual, feminist) discussed how brands '*engaging in hot topics in the news and all big and topical things that have blown up on the internet makes me want to drink their drinks more*.' These women generally felt that given the '*popularity*' of alcohol and brands' wide audience reach, alcohol was a useful product to promote messages and increase awareness - '*Alcohol is so popular, brands are able to bring attention and recognition to any issues through the sale of alcohol, and that's a good thing. I wouldn't have known about it if the alcohol brand wasn't promoting it*' (Gabby, 30s, white, heterosexual, feminist).

Another positive social function of marketing that participants labelled as brands '*doing good*' in relation to gender equality, was the creation of content that allows consumers to '*feel represented*' (Gabby, 30s, white, heterosexual, feminist) by depicting women in more progression, representative and positive ways. For example, discussing alcohol marketing content that depicts diversity in the women represented, Chloe (20s, Black, heterosexual, not a feminist) expressed how she '*really likes it, I think it's wicked. There should always be showing that women are diverse, that they accept all different genders, races, sexualities*'. Comparisons were made between more positive and diverse representations of women in recent alcohol marketing content to the usual stereotypical targeting (e.g. pink marketing, appearance-based marketing) of women with gendered content (Atkinson et al., 2024), as well as the history of some brands sexualising and objectifying women to target the male market. For instance, Lee (20s, white, heterosexual, feminist) discussed a preference for gender equality based marketing as it '*had a cause*', relative to stereotypical marketing such as '*images of women drinking a pink gin, that doesn't have any depth in it*'. Reflecting on the impact of these differing marketing styles, she suggested that through social cause marketing, brands can have a positive impact on public awareness raising and believed it would encourage her to engage in the issue and take action to learn more when stating that she'd '*probably try to read and learn more about that issue after seeing the campaign*'.

Marketing that highlighted issues that affect women, and promoted gender equality, women's empowerment and diversity, was also regarded as a departure from the typical representation of women in advertising as mere objects and luxurious items for male pleasure (Sirr, 2015), and as being '*better than*' this content. For example, Laura (white, 20s, not a feminist) discussed how beer brands had appeared to have '*swapped*' the use of content that sexualized women with content that presents women beer consumers as equal to men, and perceived brands that had begun to depict women employees working in male dominated roles such as brewing in their marketing content positively. She regarded this as '*a really good thing, especially as beer is such like a heavily male*

dominated [industry].' Yet, most were aware that there was an economic need for brands to move away from content that degraded women in the context of contemporary feminism, in which increased awareness and action was being taken to address gender inequalities. For example, Sara (20, white, heterosexual, feminist) stated that 'the *Me Too movement was a massive shift in the way that society places pressure on brands to respect women*.' It was the contrast between the previous objectifying and the more empowering and diverse content that appeared to reinforce positive perceptions and purchase intentions (Abitbol, 2016), with brands that had responded to growing beliefs about the unacceptability of gender stereotyping and the sexualising and objectifying women being perceived positively regardless of the economic reasons for such change. Overall, for these women, feminism was compatible with commercialism and market forces, and brands were regarded as having an awareness raising role in informing and educating the public on gender equality issues, and in creating images of women that are more representative of diversity. Brands that used such strategies were perceived positively and has having a role to play in the feminist movement. In turn, these women were more likely to find such content appealing, and more likely to become potential consumers.

'*I question how genuine it is*': brand authenticity

While the use of feminist messaging in brand marketing often initially evoked positive responses, many women (mostly feminists but also some non-feminists) engaged in further reflection regarding the sincerity and authenticity of these strategies, which elicited more critical perspectives. A sense that brands were acting genuinely was important to many, and the degree to which brands were considered authentic influenced whether they supported and engaged with marketing and products. Perceptions of inauthenticity led to many criticising marketing strategies and products as mere public relation attempts to portray brands as '*responsible*' and '*caring*' with the aim of benefitting the bottom line. Many were adamant that brands '*don't care*' about the social causes such as gender equality that they endorse, and discussed '*ulterior motives*' for using feminist messaging (Gabby, 30s, white, heterosexual, feminist). As shown in Extract 3 below in response to being asked if brands have a role to play in promoting such issues, the main reason brands were considered as using this marketing was felt to be economic, and this led to brands being viewed as inauthentic. Women also questioned the timing of such marketing, and whilst brands were regarded as '*having moved in with the times*' (Laura, 20s, white, not a feminist), the belief that brands were following a trend led to many questioning brand authenticity- '*I question how genuine it is. Why are you doing this now? You're just doing it because you want to make money. How could you not see this as an issue before? It's just to me a move to make money*' (Laura, 20s, white, not a feminist).

Extract 3

Jo: It's a bit of a funny one, because on one hand it's great to draw attention to these issues but on the other hand they're trying to make money off of them (Non-binary, white, queer, 20s, feminist)

Kerry: Like the issues are trendy. (20s, white, heterosexual, feminist)

Jo: Exactly.

Nadine: Like to them it's just an advertisement, they don't care, they just want to make money. (20s, white, queer, feminist)

Women described feeling '*sceptical*,' '*suspicious*' and '*cynical*', and framed feminist messaging in marketing as '*disingenuous*' (Kerry), '*soulless*' (Nadine), '*tick box exercises*' *(Tasha, 20s, Black, bi-sexual, feminist) and '*ploys*' that '*lacked meaning*' (Jess, 20s, white, heterosexual, feminist). They regarded brands as '*having jumped on the band wagon*' (Jo) and as acting out of '*tokenism*' (Tasha,), and as such were less inclined to engage with marketing and buy the products being promoted. As a result some rejected this marketing, and the endorsement of gender equality messages had the opposite effect to the marketers' aim of creating positive brand image and sales, and instead generated negative views towards brands. For example, Maggie (20s, white, heterosexual, feminist) stated that brands who used feminist messages were '*really parasitic by using whatever is popular at the time to promote themselves and make money*'. Similarly, Evy (20s, white, heterosexual, feminist) provided a capitalist critique when explaining her lack of interest in engaging with, and consuming such brands- '*I tend to be very suspicious of corporate gestures like this. Just because right now we know what capitalism is about. It's just about making money rather than actually helping*.' However, others explained that feminist marketing was '*on trend*' as consumers now '*expect more*' from brands in terms of social responsibility. As such brands had '*no choice*' but to engage in social cause marketing given these consumer expectations, but were open to criticism with regards the authenticity of their actions. Developing this type of marketing was thus described as '*a double-edged sword*' in that '*if brands didn't do anything, there'd be called out on social media, but when they do do things, it just seems fake*' (Poppy, 30s, white, bi-sexual, feminist).

Whilst brands were viewed as '*jumping on the bandwagon*' (Heather, 30s, white, heterosexual, feminist) to stay relevant by '*show*[ing] *they're with the movement of the moment*' (Chloe, Black, 20s, heterosexual, not a feminist) and associating themselves with '*the social causes people are engaging in*' (Chloe), some women nonetheless felt that they should continue to use their platform and wide audience reach to '*do good*' by raising awareness of '*very important social causes*' (Emily, see previous theme). For example, Chloe recalled how despite believing some campaigns were '*disingenuous*', she '*always thinks it's better for them to put out messages*', concluding that '*if they're raising awareness then great, good for them*'. The economic motives for this type of marketing did not appear to prevent these women from holding positive perceptions of brands, and regardless of being aware of the economic motives they were praised for acting '*responsibly* ' and '*using their power to do something good*' (Gabby). For example, Katy (Late 30s, white, heterosexual feminist) described how despite such campaigns '*obviously being marketing and about profit, it's still bringing good to these issues, so it's still a good thing, regardless of whether they're profiting from it or not*'. Similarly, discussing the Smirnoff Equalizer campaign which encourages consumers to listen to women and non-binary music

creators, Becca (20s, white, heterosexual, feminist) described how despite being '*slightly cynical as it* [gender equality campaigns] *will of course increase their sales at least from particular people*', she was willing to ignore her scepticism as the brand's actions were likely to '*have positive impacts on the communities and individuals by promoting women*'. Despite doubting whether the campaign was '*genuine*' by following '*trends*', Lee also expressed that authenticity did not matter as long as the campaign '*helps the cause and does no harm, to me personally, or anybody else*'.

Marketing campaigns that were regarded as going one step further than those that merely disseminated messages and slogans, by persuading consumers to take action (i.e. listening to women artists, donating money), were perceived more positively and authentic, including by some feminists. Thus, for some there were conditions on whether they supported and engaged with these campaigns as potential consumers, and an assessment as to whether brands were '*doing the work*' in addition to marketing messages, was an important factor in creating positive and supportive perceptions. For instance, Claire (20s, white, heterosexual, feminist) discussed how she was supportive of alcohol brands engaging in feminist issues '*if they were actually supportive, rather than just doing it as a social media campaign, if they're not doing anything to actually help, then it's pointless. But if they are donating to charities, and they are giving some support to them, then yeah*'. Similarly, discussing social cause-based marketing as a '*marketing ploy*', Maya (20s, white, heterosexual, feminist) also distinguished between brands who simply promote messages through marketing straplines, to those '*who do the work behind closed doors*'. This included enhancing women's representation and diversity in their own sector, and giving or raising money to support causes and social change through philanthropy. Without action, campaigns were regarded as merely '*virtue signalling*', '*performative*' and '*inauthentic*' (Poppy). Hayley (30s, white, heterosexual, feminist) nicely explained the importance of brands taking action beyond slogans in shaping her perception of authenticity when stating how she believes this marketing '*is a good idea if it is authentic. As long as it's not a tick box exercise so the brand can be like 'Oh yeah, we've done our social responsibility thing now. So we're all good'. So as long as they follow through with action I'm on board, it shouldn't stop at the advertising*'.

A campaign by a beer brand that released a limited edition product (BrewDog's '*Bloody Good Cause*' beer, Lake, 2020) to raise money for a feminist charity that addresses menstrual poverty (i.e. having insufficient access to menstrual products due to a lack of economic means) in the UK, generated debate regarding the importance of donations as philanthropic action, and how campaigns such as this were marketing exercises designed to target a particular demographic. Despite being a feminist who disliked the campaign, Megan (20s, white, heterosexual, feminist) suggested that by engaging with a social issue that women cared about such as menstrual poverty, brands were able to appeal to particular groups of women (i.e. feminists) by '*tapping into an issue without actually having to do much about it [but] get all the feminists on board*'. Yet not all feminist participants had a negative

view of such campaigns. In a discussion between a group of feminist women, there was a general consensus that brands supporting gender-based causes was beneficial if money was being directly given to charities and organisations to ensure actions were implemented to instigate change, as opposed to profits being fed back into marketing campaigns. Zara (17, West-Asian, lesbian, feminist), stated that she was '*glad the charity is getting money, because that could actually cause change. As long as the money is not being spent on these adverts, because then it just counteracts itself*', whilst Nel (20s, white, heterosexual, feminist) declared that she '*would definitely buy the Bloody Good Cause beer because of the donation*'.

Others debated the importance of donations, for example Maya stated that whilst she felt it was '*good that the brand donated proceeds to the charity* [they were] *profiting off other people's vulnerabilities and other people's inequalities*'. Despite expressing an '*understanding that they've got to make money*', she concluded that '*it just doesn't seem like a genuine agenda*'. The amount of money being donated was also considered by some when assessing the authenticity of campaigns, including Rosie (30s, white, bi-sexual, feminist) who stated that brands who '*gave at least 50% or even more*' of profits from sales could be assumed to be genuine, and that she would be more likely to '*contribute to that brand versus to the brand that doesn't donate* [as much]'. Her framing of purchasing the product as a '*contribution*', suggests that for some women, consuming such products allowed them to gain a sense of '*doing good*' themselves through their purchasing decisions.

'It's like, well, you're the problem!": appropriateness/alignment between brand and cause

The extent to which the product (i.e. alcohol) was considered as fitting the cause (i.e. gender equality issues), influenced how women engaged with feminist marketing and their intentions to purchase. 'Brand-cause fit' (Champlin et al., 2019) was debated by many, and some expressed concern with gender equality being endorsed by organisations that promote the sale and use of alcohol, which was considered an inappropriate consumer product to promote certain gender issues.

Firstly, some mostly feminist women, highlighted a contradiction between the gender equality messages some brands promoted and media coverage of women's experience of working within the companies that produced them. Some brands in-house working culture and environments were discussed as being inconsistent and unaligned with marketed messages (e.g. equal pay). As such they labelled this marketing as '*hypocritical*' (Rachel, 20s, white, heterosexual, not a feminist) and rather than the brand's image being improved, they were perceived more negatively and were less likely to be purchased or consume. As shown in the extracts (4 and 5) below, women felt that despite such marketing having the potential to make a positive impact, the promotion of gender equality messages by organisations who have been accused of sexism and misogyny was regarded as a '*juxtaposition*' (Chella, 20s, white, heterosexual, feminist), and this was felt to compromise brand authenticity (as above).

Extract 4

Presumably this marketing had at least some positive impact. If it was giving money to that cause, and then that will have had a positive impact, but then it seems very sort of two faced to then have the organisation be misogynistic and creating that environment

(Becca, 20s, white, heterosexual, feminist)

Extract 5

They have a reputation for being especially difficult for women who work there, so it's especially two-faced. The image doesn't match what they're really like.

(Mary, 20s, white, queer, feminist)

One particular brand was widely discussed as an organisation whose social cause marketing was at odds with public perception of their treatment of women employees, and some women discussed boycotting the brand as a result. The negative image of the brand was an outcome of accusations of unequal treatment by women and other minority groups, and this overshadowed the brand's attempt to '*look good*' through social cause based marketing. As summarised by Chella, engaging in gender-based messaging given such negative public perception had the unintended effect of creating negative brand image—'*They're putting themselves out as ethical, when they have been alleged to be doing harmful practice, makes them looks worse because they've made such an effort to look so good*'. Stating that the brand was '*trying so hard to look like they're supporting women, rather than just supporting* women', she concluded that their attempt to endorse gender equality was '*a little bit embarrassing*', and she had made the decision to no longer consume the brand.

Secondly, some mostly feminist women, expressed disapproval towards producers of a product that causes health and social harm, including gendered harms, addressing issues such as sexual violence and consent in their marketing. They felt there was an inherent contradiction between a product that affects decision making and risk behaviour, and contributes to sexual violence, with the promotion of safe sex and women's safety in nightlife drinking settings. Using these issues to enhance alcohol brand image, and to encourage the purchasing and consumption of alcohol, was regarded as inappropriate. This is expressed by Fiona and Nel below (Extract 6 and 7), who described the Absolut Vodka campaign promoting sexual consent as '*making no sense*' given the role alcohol plays in women's vulnerability in drinking settings. In the extract we can see how despite women considering sexual consent as an important issue that requires public messaging to inform and raise awareness, alcohol was regarded as an unsuitable product to disseminate such messages. Josie further highlighted the contradiction at play through a comparison with environmental social cause marketing, stating that '*It's like Shell oil, and they do all these green eco issues. It's like, well, you're the problem!*'. As a result, for these women, the promotion of such messages was '*undermined through it being by an alcohol brand*' (Ellie, 30s, white, heterosexual, feminist).

Extract 6

It just doesn't make sense really, because, especially when it's targeted at women, because then women are more vulnerable anyway under the influence of alcohol and then that's essentially what it's promoting women to drink more

(Fiona, 30s, white, heterosexual, not a feminist)

Extract 7

It's a good message and obviously it's really important to raise issues around consent. But then it's on bottle of vodka. Alcohol is generally what's most used in sexual assaults and drink spiking.

(Nel, 20s, white, heterosexual, feminist)

Becca further highlighted how '*a lot of these problems are related to people drinking alcohol in the first place, but here they're aggressively marketing their products*'. She went onto suggest that brands '*are trying to fix the problem from the wrong end*', by promoting their product whilst encouraging people to act responsibly under the influence of alcohol, rather than addressing the role of alcohol and intoxication in sexual consent itself. Stating that '*they're putting the responsibility on the people themselves who are drinking or are around those who are drinking, but then not really recognising the responsibility of themselves in that people are actually using their products to get to that point*', she suggested that the example placed responsibility onto the consumer in what she labelled '*victim blaming*'. This concept, a common discussion within popular cultural accounts of sexual violence (Bolton et al., 2024), aligned with her identity as feminist, and like others, despite acknowledging the role of alcohol use in vulnerability, she worked to shift the responsibility from women to men's behaviour. The same unease was expressed by Suzy (20s, Black, lesbian, feminist) who stated that '*brands are still flogging something that causes people to be disinhibited, and/or even pass out*'. However, she was also eager to emphasise that despite alcohol use being commonly implicated in sexual consent and violence, and generally thinking that brands should not have a voice in addressing the problem, women '*should be able to drink as much as they want and pass out and not be sexually assaulted*'. As such she placed responsibility onto the perpetuator, and in turn inadvertently mitigated the role of alcohol and brands- '*So in that way, it's not Absolut Vodka's fault, it's not the woman's fault. It's always the rapists fault*'. Again in line with their identities as feminist, others were keen to contest a focus on men's alcohol use contributing to sexual violence, as it was felt to 'excuse' perpetrator behaviour and diminish their responsibility. As a result some were less concerned by gender and social issues being promoted by alcohol brands, as it was men and not the product alcohol itself, that was viewed as causing harm. This focus on perpetrator rather than brand responsibility, is also highlighted in a discussion on the appropriateness of Absolut Vodka promoting sexual consent messaging, in which Claire concluded that '*at the end of the day, it's people, isn't it? It's people that are causing harm? It's not that they can blame the drink*'. In contrast, a small number felt that given alcohol has a role in creating gendered harms such as sexual violence,

brands have a responsibly to invest in addressing the issues as part of their social responsibility actions- '*I think it's definitely important for them to send out messages like that, purely because obviously the link between alcohol and sexual violence and stuff like that is massive*' (Laura, white, 20s, not a feminist).

There was also unease with alcohol brands promoting gender equality and empowerment messages given that alcohol contributes to other gendered harms such as intimate partner violence. For example, when reflecting on the appropriateness of alcohol brands promoting gender equality, Nel stated that she *'was thinking about the fact that alcohol causes people to beat up their partners'*. Women also raised concern regarding the health harms associated with alcohol use more generally. In Extract 8 below, Ruby discusses how the societal costs of alcohol are often overlooked, and that this was testament to the effectiveness of marketing in presenting alcohol as a positive and normal aspect of everyday life.

Extract 8

What we said about the role alcohol plays in causing some of these social issues, I never considered that and I think that is testament to how good the advertisers are. But we just forget that alcohol is alcohol. That it is not a neutral thing, it does play a role in societal issues and well because they end up promoting so many like other things, I've forgotten that they're an issue of themselves. The thing isn't a camera or shoes or a phone. This is a product and I've forgotten that's the product even whilst talking about it, that's how good the messaging is.

Ruby (20s, white, heterosexual, feminist)

Comparing alcohol to other consumer products such as '*a camera, or shoes, or a phone,*' she suggests that alcohol is therefore '*not a neutral thing*' and thus, no ordinary commodity (Babor et al., 2022). Like her, others suggested that rather than alcohol marketing addressing social harms in their marketing, given the negative effects alcohol causes in society, its promotion and marketing should thus be further restricted rather than promoted ('*Given it has such devastating effects on everything, I think personally like the alcohol marketing s should be way more restrictions involved*', Michelle, 20s, white, heterosexual, feminist).

'It's T-Shirt feminism': compatibility of commercial messages with feminism

Finally, there was a group of women, all feminist and some active in collective feminist action, who outwardly dismissed and rejected this type of marketing, not only for the reasons given above regarding authenticity and lack of brand cause fit, but also as feminism was felt to be incompatible with capitalism and profit making. Such marketing was regarded as '*commercialising feminism*', and as doing harm to the movement by diluting important messages to marketing straplines that encouraged women to consume (alcohol) as an expression of individual empowerment. For example, Maggie (20s, white, heterosexual, feminist) expressed how she '*disliked the type of 'girl boss*[8]*' feminism*' promoted by brands and nightlife venues, as it suggests women can achieve anything if they '*work hard*' and consume, in a way that ignores social inequalities and barriers, and lacks '*class consciousness*'. As a working class woman, she did not relate to such content, which she summarised as expressing an '*individual, aspirational feminism, instead of looking at it as more of a collective, it's very self-centred*'. These women felt that when feminist messages are incorporated into marketplace activities, the term loses meaning, thus making it a false ('*fauxminist*') attempt to convey a brand's investment in women's equality and empowerment for economic purposes. For example, Ruby (20s, white, heterosexual, feminist) stated that '*we don't need brands* [in the feminist movement]*, sometimes they can be more damaging* [by] *diluting messages and values*'. Like others, she highlighted how brands never use the word '*feminism or feminist*' in their marketing content, instead choosing to use the words '*equality*' and '*empowermen*t'. Like Maggie above, she described how the use of language that promotes the need for equal treatment between men and women, '*undermines*' feminist arguments that aim to highlight the many socio-economic factors that prevent equality itself- '*we can't just have equality in the sense of just treating everybody the same and equal because that forgets the point that we're not all equal, we're all starting from different points*'.

In extract 9, Chella also rejects the overly simplistic commodity feminism used by alcohol brands, defining it as '*T-Shirt feminism, if feminism was summed up in one sentence*'. She rejects the role of brands as useful to feminism and instead suggests that incorporating capitalism into feminism is '*harmful*' and not '*real feminism*', and distances herself from the women that she associates with this type of feminism. Whilst her friend Evy (20s, white, heterosexual, feminist) agreed that these messages lacked meaning, she expressed that brands could help normalise feminist messages, stating that '*the more we get used to hearing it the more it's going to become, I'm sort of on the border*'.

Extract 9

It's T-shirt feminism isn't it, if feminism is summed up in one sentence, which I don't think is ever helpful to anyone, because that's the same reason you get lot of women being like 'Oh yeah, I'm a feminist' and then they blurt out their one sentence that they summarize their feminism with. But then you actually ask them about their opinions and there's a lot of harmful, unconsidered things there. I think when you bring capitalism into feminism it isn't real feminism like, it's quite harmful in a way.

(Chella, 20s, white, heterosexual, feminist)

Similarly, Toni (30s, white, heterosexual, feminist) expressed that like other brands, alcohol products may have a positive role in creating a '*narrative where feminist messages are accepted as not being extreme feminism*' and may contribute to making feminism more palatable, in turn engaging to more women. However, as discussed (see theme, *questioning brand authenticity*), she concluded that such marketing was '*coming from a disingenuous place*', but acknowledged that at as '*we live in a capitalist society*' brand involvement was unavoidable ('*there's no getting away from it*'). Like those that outwardly rejected such brands as an example of neo-liberal capitalist

feminism, these women would not engage with or consume these brands themselves.

They considered such commodity feminism as not overtly 'feminist', and brands choosing to steer away from this term was regarded as '*softening*' messages to attract a wider audience for commercial gain. Omitting these terms was also viewed as an attempt to prevent alienating potential consumers, including men '*who would see it as "urgh feminism"*' (Nel, 20s, white, heterosexual, feminist) and be put off by feminist messages given the historical negative connotations attached to it, and feminists themselves (Champlin et al., 2019). For example, Annie (20s, white, non-binary, feminist) stated that '*brands don't use the word feminist itself because some people dislike feminists*', and Josie (30s, white, heterosexual, feminist) suggested that '*people aren't comfortable with feminism*', meaning that brands were reluctant to fully commit '*especially if they've got a very large male audience*'. This lack of commitment led to women questioning brand authenticity (see theme, *questioning brand authenticity*) ('*That's why it's kind of like 'Is it really genuine?'*', Josie), and rejecting these campaigns and content as marketing strategies that '*want the best of both worlds, to interest feminists while not committing enough that they polarise. They just want the bits of feminism that sell and are trendy*'. With economic gain being regarded as the main objective, these women believed this marketing to be ineffective in making change that could positively impact the lives of women, and as such they were unwilling to engage in it as consumers. For example, Harper (20s, white, heterosexual, feminist) questioned the impact of such marketing when stating that she didn't '*know how effective it is to enact change into the future*', as did Flo when asking whether '*it is really going to make a difference, putting a hashtag on a bottle?*' (17, white, heterosexual, feminist). Thus, brands and profit making were regarded as incompatible with these women's definition of feminism and their identities as feminists, making such campaigns ineffective in creating positive brand image and in encouraging product purchasing.

Discussion

In the current context of contemporary feminism, brands, including alcohol brands, have begun to incorporate content that incorporates 'feminist' messages into their marketing strategies to target, engage and appeal to women (and arguably others), who identify as feminist and are sympathetic to feminist causes (Atkinson, Meadows, Hobin, et al., 2024; Buckley et al., 2024). This strategy is an example of a 'dark nudge', whereby women are persuaded to consume a potentially harmful product, whilst harms are masked (Petticrew et al., 2020). It is also an example of 'neo-liberal' 'commodity' feminism, or 'femvertising', through which brands commoditise feminism to sell products by weaving goodwill and ethical behaviour into their commercial practices through endorsing social causes (Abitbol, 2016; Abitbol & Sternadori, 2019; Banet-Weiser et al., 2020;; Gill, 2016; McRobbie, 2020; Retallack et al., 2016; Rivers, 2017; Petticrew et al., 2020; Schamp et al., 2023; Schraff, 2020). To date, little empirical research has explored how consumers interpret such marketing (Atkinson, Meadows, et al., 2021, 2024; Lunnay & Foley,

2024), and to the best of our knowledge, this was the first study to explore women's views on the use and appropriation of 'feminist' messaging by the alcohol industry to promote brands, products and consumption.

The research is significant and novel in highlighting how despite similarities in views of feminist and non-feminist women, there was evidence that what women think about such tactics is dependent on how they relate to feminism, and their views on the role of brands within the movement more generally. Some women, including those who did and did not identify as feminist, considered alcohol brands (and brands more widely) as having a social responsibility to draw attention to, and raise awareness of, social issues such as gender inequality, and in promoting equality and women's empowerment. As potential consumers, these women interpreted brand attempts at feminism as ethical examples of brands acting in the public interest and evidence of them '*doing good*' and acting responsibly by addressing social causes (Babor & Robaina, 2013; Fooks et al., 2013; Fooks & Gilmore, 2013; Yoon & Lam, 2013). In keeping with commodity feminism (Banet-Weiser et al., 2020), for these feminist women, feminist causes were viewed as compatible with capitalism, and brands were assigned an awareness raising role in disseminating gender equality and empowerment messages to a public (consumer) audience. As with other forms of alcohol industry social cause or Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) marketing (see Atkinson et al. (2021) for an analysis of alcohol industry COVID-19 CSR activities, and Whiteley et al. (2024) for a commentary of LGBTQ+ alcohol marketing), such strategies were effective in enhancing positive brand image and reputation among some, in turn increasing the likelihood of product purchasing and consumption.

Like other studies exploring women's attitude to femvertising, generally, women agreed with brands' stance and the messages being promoted, but many still disregarded such marketing as inauthentic and this resulted in cynicism (Buckley et al., 2024). The concept of brand authenticity held importance to many non-feminist and feminists who valued and sought out a sense that brands were acting out of a genuine care for the causes they promoted (Abitbol & Sternadori, 2019; Buckley et al., 2024). The degree to which brands were considered as acting authentically influenced whether women supported and engaged with such marketing and products, and this was influenced by a number of factors. Some purported that so long as awareness-raising was successful, a lack of authenticity due to the driving force being economic gain and not gender equality, was tolerable (Buckley et al., 2024). However, given the ever-present nature of femvertising, many perceived brands to be '*jumping on the bandwagon*' or following a '*trend*' for economic gain, which led to many rejecting campaigns and products as inauthentic. Brands that were considered as producing more tangible strategies and '*doing the work*' by moving beyond the use of marketing messages to raise consciousness (e.g. endorsing International Women's Day and using feminist iconography (i.e. raised fist)), to philanthropy campaigns that raised money for causes, were regarded as more authentic. These more tangible actions were received more positively, and were more acceptable to some feminists than other examples, as they were considered as more likely to lead to social change than the use of simple

marketing straplines. As a form of 'cause-related marketing' (Schamp et al., 2023), donation based campaigns, involve brands linking corporate donations to consumer purchases, for example, when a beer brand donates a percentage of a products proceeds to a women's charity. For some, consuming these products allowed them to gain a sense of '*doing good*' themselves through their purchasing decisions, in turn meeting the criteria of the ideal neo-liberal consumer-citizen (Nicholls, 2019). Similarly, for some, buying and using feminist products more generally provided an opportunity for them to 'display' and perform their feminism and/or empowered identifies through 'commodity activism', by purchasing and consuming commodities as a perceived solution to a larger social problem (i.e. gender inequality) (Atkinson et al., 2021; Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012; Schamp et al., 2023).

Among other, mostly feminist women, the concept of 'brand cause fit', a term commonly used in marketing studies to refer to how a brand and a social issue 'pairs' together conceptually (Champlin et al., 2019), was also (unknowingly) considered and critiqued. Many questioned the relevance, congruence and appropriateness of alcohol as a consumer product to promote gender equality and empowerment, and these women held more critical and considered perspectives on the use of commodity feminism by the alcohol industry. A number of contradictions led to the perception that brand efforts were simultaneously inauthentic and unacceptable. Some noted a functional match (Champlin et al., 2019) between alcohol and particular causes; for example they discussed the appropriateness of alcohol brands taking responsibility for addressing issues such as sexual violence given that alcohol use is often implicated in such cases. Among feminists, a discourse of responsibility was at play when debating the role of brands in addressing these issues, with some purporting that given alcohol contributes to the problem of sexual violence, brands have a social '*responsibility*' to draw attention to, and raise awareness of it. Others critiqued how brands at times reproduced individual responsibility narratives, and the promotion of products alongside encouraging people to act responsibly under the influence of alcohol, rather than addressing the role of alcohol and intoxication in implicating sexual consent itself. Whilst holding women responsible for their own victimisation (e.g. based on their alcohol use and dress for example) is a common societal response to sexual violence (Bolton et al., 2024), the women interviewed rejected this, and those who actively identified as feminist, rejected notions of blame that contradicted their feminism, and as such placed full responsibility onto perpetrators (i.e. men), and not the actions of women (i.e. alcohol use).

Relatedly, many mostly feminist women accused alcohol brands of contributing to the existence of gender inequality and harms (e.g. sexual and domestic violence), and harm to consumers more generally, through the health and social harms caused by alcohol consumption (Champlin et al., 2019; Zeisler, 2016). Here, women appeared to resist such messaging, and were highly aware of the paradox of feminist messaging that endorses women's empowerment being used by brands to promote the use of a product that contributes to specific harms to women. Moreover, they discussed a lack of congruence between gender equality messages and alcohol (and other) brands who's in house working practices were perceived, and publicly discussed in media discourse, as being sexist and misogynistic (Buckley et al., 2024). This led to the belief that their campaigns for women based issues were inauthentic and inconsistent, and mere attempts to correct public perceptions of themselves and prevent public awareness of their alleged treatment negatively effecting the bottom line. Many women thus made informed judgements based on their awareness of brands in house working culture and environment as feminists, and evaluated the authenticity, fit and appropriateness of messaging against company working practices. For those who did see alcohol brands as having a role to play in the feminist movement, organisational culture had to be perceived as equal and fair in order for them to buy into brands and products (Buckley et al., 2024).

Another group of feminist women, outwardly rejected alcohol brand's use of feminist messaging as 'faux feminism'. For them, commodity feminism was not feminist, and they regarded it as an inauthentic attempt to target feminist aware consumers for economic gain. Although, definitionally these women could see that some may regard these strategies as being broadly 'feminist', given the prime purpose of encouraging the sale and consumption of alcohol products, messages of empowerment were felt to contradict feminist critiques that equality lies beyond an individualised and post-feminist sense of empowerment (through consumption) rather than addressing structural inequalities (Abitbol, 2016; Abitbol & Sternadori, 2019; Gill, 2016; McRobbie 2009). Some brands were regarded as moving beyond simple messages of empowerment to promote equal gender and sexual representation (i.e. Smirnoff's Equalizer, Absolut #SexResponsibly) and raise awareness of the broader inequalities women experience, but they nonetheless regarded these as examples of 'commodity' feminism that failed to acknowledge the underlying structural causes of inequality (Banet-Weiser, 2020; Gill, 2016). These feminist women criticised how individual consumer actions were presented as a solution, in a way that allowed brands to promote alcohol use whilst advancing brand image by presenting themselves as ethical and morally aware organisations. As well as overlooking collective action and the need for structural change, this marketing was felt to potentially harm the feminist movement through diluting messages. They were further angered by the nature of such marketing as not overtly 'feminist' and how brands steered away from using the term (Atkinson et al., 2021) due to the risk of alienating some sections of their consumer base (including men), and thus restricting their appeal (Champlin et al., 2019).

The paper has important implications. It is particularly useful in highlighting the importance of considering women's perceptions of feminism to how they perceive, relate and buy into alcohol marketing, and how women hold differing and varied views according to their stance on the role of brands in the feminist movement. The importance of feminist identities and women's attitudes to feminism to their views on marketing has only recently begun to be studied in the alcohol field (see Atkinson et al., 2024a, Atkinson, Meadows, Hobin, et al., 2024), and given that more (young) women,

who are now drinking less than before, are identifying as feminist, it is vital that feminist views and identity making, and how these intersect with sexuality, class and race, are considered when studying alcohol marketing and alcohol related practice more generally. It also has theoretical implications in highlighting the importance of considering women's drinking and the marketing of alcohol within this shifting social-political climate in which post-feminist and new fourth wave feminist rhetoric co-exist. The research also adds to the limited understanding of consumer responses to femvertising more generally, and provides further evidence of the importance of the concept of authenticity in mediating consumer responses and producing more critical perspectives (Buckley et al., 2024). Despite such contributions, it is important to acknowledge a number of limitations. Although the study recruited a large sample of women from varied backgrounds, the view points and perceptions discussed are unlikely to be representative of all women's views. More research is needed that considers intersectionality in women's views and experiences, as well as research that moves beyond one geographical location. Given the global nature of alcohol marketing and the differing roles feminism, women's empowerment, and gender equality play in different countries (Buckley et al., 2024; Jalakas, 2016), research in this area that makes international comparisons is needed.

Conclusion

The article makes an original and significant contribution to the literature on women's perspectives on alcohol marketing, and is novel in providing detailed insight into how they perceive the use of what debatably could be referred to as 'feminist' messaging by the alcohol industry to promote the sale and use of alcohol products. Women's views varied, but were influenced by their attitudes to feminism. Despite some women holding positive responses to such marketing, feminist messages were criticised and held little appeal among both feminist and non-feminist women. Generally, feminist women had more to say and debate then those who rejected the label as part of their identities.

Some feminist and non-feminist women held positive views and regarded brands as having a social responsibility and a role in disseminating gender equality and empowerment messages as part of the feminist movement. For these feminist women, capitalism and profit making were considered compatible with feminism. However, many were critical and regarded this strategy as inauthentic and an attempt by brands to stay relevant in the context of contemporary feminism to benefit the bottom line. In many cases, marketing content of this nature were criticised with reference to the product, alcohol, and the cause, gender equality, failing to pair together conceptually (Buckley et al., 2024) and for promoting individual responsibility, which for feminist women reproduced victim blaming narratives. Moreover, there was evidence that women received alcohol as 'no ordinary commodity' given the social, health and gendered harms is causes (Babor et al., 2022). Some feminists rejected

this marketing as examples of commodity or faux feminism, and dismissed brands' role in the movement due to economic motives, the diluting of messages, and an unease between a product that causes gendered harm promoting gender equality. These feminist women further asserted that such messages often overlooked structural issues and causes in ways reminiscent of neo-liberal and post-feminist messaging.

Overall, whilst some feminist and non-feminists believed such marketing enhanced positive brand image, most women did not express a desire to purchase these products purely as a result of the use of feminist messaging. This general lack of appeal should be viewed positively from a public health perspective that aims to address the negative impact alcohol and its marketing has on women, and society more generally. Public health campaigns that aim to counteract the promotion and normalisation of alcohol use through marketing could focus on highlighting the incompatibility of alcohol use with feminist identities and women's health.

Notes

1. The campaign promotes the message that unique differences in the physical appearance of women should be celebrated, and that women deserve body confidence in their physical appearance rather than viewing the body as a source of anxiety.
2. We acknowledge the complexities of non-binary participants in a sample of individuals who define as 'women'. Due to our non-binary participants experiences of being socialised as women and previously identifying as such, and many still presenting a feminine gender expression including wearing pink, we felt their contributions on the topics were still valid. All of our non-binary participants were happy to be included alongside cis women in this way, which is consistent with some (though not all) non-binary experiences where despite their gender not being female, their socio-cultural life still interacts with womanhood.
3. ads.spotify.com/en-US/inspiration/equalizing-music-smirnoff-case-study/.
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8. A term used to refer to an ambitious and successful woman in business or female entrepreneur. It is a popular example of the concept of individual empowerment that has become commercialised to sell products.

Ethical approval

Disclosure statement

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