



FEMVERTISING PRACTICES IN WELLNESS TOURISM: CASE OF RETREAT CENTERS IN THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract

Aim: This study scrutinizes femvertising practices in wellness tourism, in the context of equitable gender representations and neutralization of gender objectification.

Methods: Goffman's infantilization theory is employed.

Results: The results chronicle a shift towards egalitarian gender profiling, based on the majority of the coding points. To date, limited studies have scrutinized the concept of femvertising in wellness tourism spaces.

Conclusion: Altogether, this study advances the existing understanding of femvertising in the context of wellness spaces, reiterates prominent shift towards equitable representations of gender and reports

analogy in the promotional content and vision of the wellness centers, irrespective of the nature of ownership.

Keywords: Wellness Spaces, Yoga Retreat Centers, Stereotyping, Femvertising, Gender And Lifestyle Entrepreneurs

INTRODUCTION

Interest in wellness tourism has soared in the post-covid times as destinations develop rebranding strategies and elevate wellness and health to the top of their agenda (Backman, Huang, Chen, Lee & Cheng 2022; Karn & Swain 2017). There is a necessity to explore innovative and sustainable pathways to advance the dais of wellness tourism (such as agro-tourism, art tourism, and yoga tourism) (Escobar, 2018). From a holistic perspective, wellness travel typically coalesces elements of health care, exercise, and relaxation (Dillette, Douglas & Andrzejewski 2021; Karn & Swain 2017). For wellness tourism to be sustainable, it needs to embrace a responsible agenda and promote social welfare of tourists and the host community. The social justice aspect particularly draws attention towards a broad spectrum of issues associated with gender equity and equitable minority representations to promote pro-social/responsible behavior (Ramkissoon 2022). Retreat centers constitute a notable area of scrutiny. Therefore, it is important to determine if they adhere to social justice principles and promote gender equity. Yoga retreat centers are the topic of focus because popularity of yoga has soared in the west and number of yoga retreat centers have exponentially grown (Chhabra 2021; Dillette et al. 2021). In a nutshell, a key focus of this study is to scrutinize the manner in which women are visually depicted in the online marketing content of yoga retreat centers.

Extant literature has suggested that women have been showcased in “traditional stereotypical” roles; that is, they are portrayed as familial, uncompetitive, quiet, and timid (Chhabra, Andereck, Yamanoi & Plunkett 2011; Kumar & Taunk, 2013; Lawton, 2009; Pritchard & Morgan, 2000; Tortajada, Arauna, & Martinez, 2013). Several studies have argued that preferred features of collectively distributed and molded gender representations are portrayed by advertisers and these depictions continue to internalize socially concocted images of masculinity and femininity (Armendia-Muneta et al. 2020; Kyrousi, Panihyrakis & Panopoulis 2016). Selected postures and traits result in facsimiles and ‘hyperritualization’ (Aitchison, 1999; Sargent 2017; Scott, 1986; Tortajada et al. 2013). It is an established fact that marketing media plays an influential part by mirroring public views and enduring changes in

societal values and norms (Armendia-Muneta et al. 2020; Lawton, 2009; Sirakaya & Sonmez, 2000). For instance, Lawton (2009) argues that media representations via visual advertisements overwhelm the audience and shape views, as agents of social change. Advertisements, therefore, shape gender ideologies in society (Chhabra, Andreck, Yamanoi & Plunkett 2011; Chhabra & Johnston 2014; Lindner, 2004) and stereotype advertising can reinforce preferred beliefs and values, thereby damaging the social fabric of a community (Pritchard & Morgan, 2000).

Recent studies point out that women hold potential to be successful lifestyle entrepreneurs and can shift the social landscape towards a more equitable dais by toning down infantilization and stereotype images (Belinghari et al. 2021; Shanmugathas 2021). Aligned with this view, some scholars are taking the stand of femvertising to check stereotype representations of gender (Akstem et al. 2017; Feng, Chen & He 2019). Femvertising is an advertising practice that questions stereotype images in advertising and is geared towards promoting positive favorable self-views of women (Akstem et al. 2017). Several scholars have reported that femvertising lowers unfavorable reaction to advertising and positively sways intent to purchase in an ethical and inclusive manner (Akstem et al. 2017; Feng et al. 2019). Less stereotypical portrayal of women can prompt a more favorable response from consumers. Interest in femvertising has surged in the recent decade albeit this strategy has been sparsely applied in the travel and tourism field. It is important to inspect whether micro enterprises, such as the retreat centers, practice femvertising. Microenterprises are mostly managed by lifestyle entrepreneurs and can play a key role in fostering social capital (Karyotaki et al. 2022; Morrison 2006) and promoting sustainable practices (Wang, Li & Xu 2019; Wang, Hung & Huang 2019). They are usually small or medium sized and play a key role in generating benefits for the host home community through local purchases and employment of local people (Dias, Patuleia & Gonzalez-Rodriguez 2021; Jack and Anderson 2002).

Limited studies on retreat centers have explicitly scrutinized issues associated with inequality/gendered disparities (Deslippe 2018; Miller 2018; Sargent 2017). Ongoing scrutiny of advertising content is crucial to question/constrain prevailing social configurations and offer an update on transformational initiatives centered on social welfare in visited and visiting communities. To add to this sparse line of inquiry, this study scrutinizes the manner in which gender is showcased, by examining the marketing content of the signature websites of a stratified purposeful sample of retreat centers in the US. An effort is made to determine if they practice femvertising and are more mindful of the manner in which gender is portrayed on their signature websites. Signature websites and online marketing platforms are potent spaces for

deliberations, assessment, enlistment and transformation (Hoffman 2011).

In summary, this study is guided by two key research questions: 1) How is gender is depicted on the signature websites of wellness-oriented MSEs such as the yoga retreat centers in the United States? Is there any difference in the promotional themes of retreat centers managed solely by women or with a male partner and those managed solely by men? Furthermore, based on the results, this study discusses the potential role of women, as lifestyle entrepreneurs, in changing the social landscape of their home communities. It offers insights on the extent to which femvertising practices are pursued.

To date, limited studies have used the concept of femvertising in wellness spaces. This study makes an important contribution in this regard. Furthermore, it identifies ways in which gender is objectified. It espouses that agencies and institutions, offering wellness programs, are important socializing agents and their advertising messages shape gender ideologies in the society. They can play a key role in defusing gender bias and devising inclusive pathways that hold potential to stimulate equitable social structures.

1. BACKGROUND

This section first offers a synopsis of existing research on gender representations. Secondly, it tracks progress, towards femvertising, in tourism spaces. An overview of studies scrutinizing women's role in the workplace is also offered. Several studies note that women, as lifestyle entrepreneurs of micro enterprises, can play a key role in dispelling gender myths and hold tremendous potential to contribute towards social welfare.

Numerous studies have offered insights on gender representations in tourism advertising. Kyrousi, Panihyrakis and Panopoulos (2016) note that women have been mostly ritualized in two roles: through the role of a dutiful wife, mother, or daughter, in a caring occupation or through a fictitious role as an object of glorified attraction (as a physical beauty, a sex object or in a similar decorative role) (Armendia-Muneta et al. 2022, p. 406). Most professional depictions of women have been targeted at women-dominated careers such as nursing and teaching. Men, on the other hand, have been portrayed in more mature, wiser and authoritative roles (Prieler, Ivanov & Hagiwara 2015; Lawton 2009; Sirakaya & Sonmez 2000). In 2011, Chhabra et al. (2011) looked at the pictorial content of vacation guides of state tourism offices across the US to ascertain the manner in which gender was portrayed. Goffman's (1979) framework was used. Both prominent and subdued visual signs portrayed the manner of relationships across gender. For some of Goffman's domains (for instance- physical size and

rank order of gender), objectified representations were noted while gender equity patterns (traces of femvertising) were evident in other dimensions. On the contrary, a perusal of other studies reveals that most media advertising has been slanted towards ritualizing females in subservient poses (Sirakaya & Sonmez, 2000; Lawton, 2009; Lindner, 2004; Tortajada et al. 2013). In other words, they have favored masculine points of view. This calls for a femvertising agenda to dispel gender myths.

Extant literature reports negative impacts of ritualizing females through biased marketing messages albeit very few studies have offered a pathway to treat this inequity pattern. Chhabra & Johnston (2014) use the Goffman framework in their analysis of gender advertisements by destination marketing organizations. They report subtle evidence with regard to the manipulation of visual imagery. Women are ritualized although equitable profiling, is also noted, based on several gender coding points. Employing the same framework, Sirakaya & Sonmez (2000) point to stereotypical portrayal of women in advertising, particularly in subordinate, submissive and dependent postures. A strategy to dispel the ritualized images is remiss in their study. Lindner (2004) also confirm similar stereotype patterns in her scrutiny of popular magazines in the United States. Similar results were reported by other studies (Kang 1997; Kay, Matuszek & Munson 2015; Nguyen 2021).

In view of the recurring of inequitable gender representations in several postures, several authors have signaled the danger of continued stereotyping. For instance, staring at gendered exhibits signal power and a sense of powerlessness is noted in the objects of gazing (Pritchard & Morgan, 2000b). Lawton (2009) writes that the gendered form of marketing, such as stereotype images in advertising materials, can have a reverse effect on the audience; that is, they can trigger annoyance and adverse reaction of some markets such as women travelers and diminish the attractive attributes of a destination. Along similar lines, Chhabra and Johnston point out that “some anticipated benefits of such stereotypical image promotions include stimulating customers with interesting and preferred messages to lure them to purchase products” (2014, p. 776). Infantilization of gender in online advertising can exaggerate ritualized depictions of both genders. Objectification can have far-reaching consequences. In fact, such objectified impressions can stress on gender differences and shape the manner in which perceptions and behavior of men and women and even generate illusory expectations for men (Ellemers 2018). For instance, stereotype images can barricade the type of career opportunities and spectrum of choices that exist for women (Massey 2007). According to Zalis

(2019), both genders can be impacted by bias and infantilization in that stereotyping can restrict the manner in which both genders perform and reprimand those who undertake roles outside the threshold of conventional rules.

Although recent literature increasingly highlights pitfalls of inequitable gender depictions in tourism, only a handful offer a solution to address these disparities. Rather than being susceptible to embrace one role or another, it is important to shape the archetypes to offer opportunities to both genders to succeed at home or in their profession (Aramendia-Muneta et al. 2022; Zalis 2019). On a positive note, a review of more recent literature unveils a parallel trend slanted towards femvertising. In other words, women are being portrayed in a more moderate and non-stereotype manner (Hatzithomas, Boutsouki, & Ziamou 2016; Kourtesopoulou & Chatzigianni 2021; Pan & Ryan 2007). Aramendia-Muneta et al. point out since the gender infantilization issue has been extensively examined over several decades, “the marketers have been suitably aware of gender stereotypical attributes and influences, one might expect to find awareness driven reform in this area” (2022, p. 406). To fortify this trend, it is important to convey socially mindful marketing messages (Aramendia-Muneta et al. 2022; Becherer, Helms & McDonald 2012).

Shifting trends towards gender neutral representations have also fueled concerns for gender equality, from a leadership standpoint. In 2011, the UN-WTO distributed its first Global Report on Women in Tourism 2010 which spotted tourism as a sector with potential to empower women through a variety of initiatives and leadership opportunities. The report called for initiatives to promote gender equality worldwide; it notes that women are often offered “low-skill, low-paid, and precarious jobs,” and usually earn comparatively less money (almost 10-15% less) than their male colleagues. At the executive and middle levels, women have successfully demonstrated better social and teamwork skills than men (Bartol, Martin, and Kromkowski 2003); Style of leadership, based on gender, vary. For instance, according to Bartol, Martin, and Kromkowski (2003), women are more likely to demonstrate interpersonal skills.

Some studies have also noted that enterprises managed by women are comparatively smaller in size with lower debt and short-term accumulated debt (Vieru 2015). It cannot be denied, that leadership roles in tourism do not predominantly reflect gender equality; albeit, some studies indicate that women leaders dominate some sectors of the tourism industry such as travel agencies/tour operators (Sandybayev, 2015) and homestay accommodations (Ahmad

et al., 2014). Female entrepreneurs are better educated and comparatively younger in age than their male counterparts (Alonso-Almeida & Bremser 2014; Sandybayev 2015). Several studies have also noted that women managers are more likely to adapt to transformational leadership approach as they demonstrate immense talent to inspire others and hold potential to design value-generating activities (Kawira 2021; Kourtesopoulou and Chatzigianni 2021; Robinson & Beesley, 2010).

This study examines the manner in which gender is depicted on the signature websites of a purposeful sample of retreat centers across the United States. It is unique in that it also examines the gendered nature of ownership and its influence on the manner in which gender is portrayed in the mission statements. Goffman's paradigm of gender and media relations is used (Please see Table 1).

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Content analysis is conducted to determine the extent to which gender stereotypes exist in online advertising messages. This technique continues to be employed in a variety of settings (Armendia-Muneta et al. 2020; Prieler et al. 2015). Different phases of content analysis assist in data familiarization, generating initial codes (that is, coding relevant to aspects of the data in a systematic manner to ensure that all data is relevant based on the pre-determined themes (Braun & Clarke 2007)), and searching and reviewing relevant themes from the data. As pointed out by Sirakaya and Sonmez (2000), Goffman's framework is a valuable tool as it unveils the less obvious and subtle aspects of advertisements and uses images to investigate the relationship across gender by "offering simultaneous insights into the displays of both sexes (2000, p. 355). Extant literature has confirmed its credibility in ensuring a systematic and thorough scrutiny of gender visuals in advertising from the standpoint of power relationships and modeling of roles (Aramendia-Muneta, Olarte-Pascual & Hatzithomas 202; Bell & Milic 2002; Chhabra et al. 2011; Sirakaya & Sonmez 2000). In this section, first a description is offered of the manner in which Goffman's cues are employed. Next, sampling plan and data analysis procedures are described.

Goffman took an initiative to determine if there are traces of female infantilization; that is, whether women are portrayed in a manner that their posture and gesture signals proclivity towards their male counterparts (Bell & Milic 2002). Goffman's infantilization theory includes six dimensions: relative size, feminine touch, rank order of gender, gender depiction in the family, general forms of subordination, and gender detachment. Several studies have used his

dimensions to determine the extent to which women are infantilized in tourism and leisure/recreation-based advertisements, both online and in print. Table 1 presents a description of Goffman's items.

Table 1: Gender Dimensions

Dimension	Description
Relative size	Men are more likely to be presented as larger or taller than women
Feminine touch	In comparison with men who purposefully grasped objects, women are more likely to touch objects or themselves lightly or caress in a ritual manner or kept their hands close to the body. They also more often look downward rather than upward or straight ahead.
Rank order of gender	When depicted in a collaborative activity, men are commonly portrayed in an executive role whereas women are cast in a passive or supporting role. In images that represent women performing feminine tasks such as cleaning and cooking, men are depicted with no role at all.
Gender depiction in the family	Society norms are reflected in advertisement featuring the complete family. Goffman discovered that special camera techniques were employed to portray bonds between daughter and mother and father and son. In such cases, as described by Sirakaya and Sonmez (2000), "by positioning the father slightly outside the circle of other family members, male protective power and authority in the household are portrayed" (p. 356).
General forms of subordination	Bell and Milic (2002) narrate this dimension as "a tendency for women to be presented in inferior positions and poses. Women are found to be more often pictured as being under the physical care and protection of men and in spatially lower positions. They are also more likely to be portrayed performing submissive gestures such as canting head or body, bending one knee inward" (p. 205). It is implied that an erect body with the head held high is a sign of superior status.

Gender detachment	According to Goffman, men generally act as surrogate parents for women in pictures, hence many times women are seen as socially distanced from the scene. Examples include being shown as gazing in an unfocused manner or being pre-occupied, thus removed psychologically from the social situation on the whole.
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Source: Chhabra et al. (2011, p. 117); After Goffman (1979)

Sampling Plan

Retreat centers, featuring yoga programs, are selected from spatially dispersed states in the United States and their websites were content analyzed in 2021/2022. To obtain a representative sample of retreat centers across United States, an amended grouping by National Geographic Society is used. National Geographic Society categorizes broadly US into five regions: the Northeast, Southwest, West, Southeast and Midwest (National Geographic n.d.). This grouping is modified by adding an ‘East’ region to the list as it is argued that socio-economic and demographic attributes of the ‘East’ region are distinct from the Northeast region (US Census Bureau n.d.). Based on the groupings, the following states are purposefully selected respectively: New York (NY) and Virginia (VA), Florida (FL), Iowa (IA), California (CA) and Washington (WA), and Arizona (AZ). Centers are identified using key words such as “yoga retreats” with ‘tourists’ and the name of the state from the grouping, using the Google search engine. Only those retreat centers are used which target tourists and visitors to ensure that their patronage extends beyond the local community. Next, using up to three clicks, gender imageries from approximately 105 retreat centers are identified. These are downloaded and labeled based on the state in which the retreat center is located. Approximately forty retreat centers are excluded because the images on the first page of their website did not simultaneously feature men and women. A total of 65 retreat centers are scrutinized with a total of 175 visuals.

Thematic Analysis and Coding Procedure

Drawing from Goffman’s technique, each image is numerically coded based on a predesigned codebook. Counter checking was conducted by using two researchers from different ethnic backgrounds. Thematic analysis is carried out to analyze visual content. This versatile content analysis tool has been “successfully used with visual material, taking intertextuality into account to facilitate a well-balanced interpretation of underlying cultural meanings” (Walters 2016, p. 107). The research objectives necessitated use of a technique that ensured capability

to capture deeper meanings using an interpretive rather than an explicit approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To ensure reliability of visual analysis, two coders are used. Several hours of training was given to make the coders conversant with the analysis procedure and Goffman's dimensions and its sub-categories. The second coder was tasked to randomly code different images, independent of the first coder. The codes were matched. To ensure academic rigor and validity, inter-coder reliability test was conducted and the agreement on different coding points was found to be robust (between 93% and 97%). Before coding the study images, a pilot test was conducted with twenty-five visuals to ensure the coders grasped accurate meaning of different categories and the coding process. Several researchers have implemented this technique and reported its robustness (Aramendia-Muneta et al. 2020; Walters 2016; Weber 1990).

Besides univariate analysis, cross Tabs (Chi Squared) are used to test statistical association between the retreat centers based on their location and their gender representations. Cross Tabs is popularly employed to analyze nominal data. Pearson Chi Square is a standard nominal level technique that has been used to determine if two categorical variables are associated with each other or are independent (Mertler & Vannata 2002). Next, a separate variable 'ownership' is used to segregate promotional themes of retreat centers based on different ownership categories: by woman only or more than one woman; both genders and; one man or men only. Furthermore, an inductive approach is employed to extract promotional themes from mission and vision statements shared on the websites. These themes are segregated based on the nature of ownership. In addition to manually identifying themes, ATLAS.ti software is used to generate word clouds to glean key themes and their sub-items. The word cloud themes are matched with those manually identified by the coders to ensure reliability.

3. FINDINGS

Results of Goffman's dimensions are summarized in Tables 2-4. Retreat centers are mostly frequented by adults, therefore images featuring children are almost non-existent on the websites. All images consisted of partial figure parts and/or whole body (Sirakaya & Sonmez 2000). Table 2 illustrates results on relative size, feminine touch, rank order of gender and gender depiction. Online promotional content at the retreat centers across the seven states suggests that approximately 42% of the women are depicted shorter in height than men. It is

also interesting to note that Iowa (at 63%) and Washington (at 58%) show the highest percentage of images with taller men. According to Lawton (2009), use of height, especially of men, suggests display of social power. Overall, 16% of the visuals depict similar heights of men and women across all states with New York portraying the highest percentage (22%) followed by California and Virginia. These differences are confirmed by the Chi Squared test ($X^2=14.492$ at a p value of $\pm .05$ level)

With regard to big size, 49% of the women (across US) are depicted as bigger in size than men; from a statewide standpoint, four states portray 50% (or slightly above) women in a bigger size. Only Iowa and Washington have close to 60% of the visuals that show men as bigger in size. It is worthy of note that a higher percentage of visuals depict women as taller and bigger in size; Chi squared tests do not report any statistical difference based on different regions. Several studies have postulated that online advertising of gender exaggerates stereotype portrayals of women (Kay et al. 2015; Nguyen 2021). The results suggest that the retreat centers depart from earlier studies, which predominantly showcase traces of more pronounced infantilization of women, in terms of size.

Table 2: Descriptives of Size, Feminine Touch, Rank and Gender Depiction (%)

	NY	IA	WA	FL	CA	VA	AZ	Across USA
Size								
<u>Height</u> (woman taller than man)								
yes	33.3	37.5	42.1	46.2	58.6	51.7	53.5	46
no	44.4	62.5	57.9	46.2	20.7	27.6	37.2	42
same height	22.2			7.7	20.7	20.7	9.3	16
<u>Big</u> (woman is bigger than man)								
yes	22.2	37.5	42.1	51.3	55.2	51.7	51.2	49
no	44.4	62.5	57.9	41.0	27.6	31.0	39.5	43
same size	33.3			7.7	17.2	17.2	9.3	16
Feminine Touch								
<u>Cradling object/person</u>								
woman cradling object/person	11.1	12.5	5.3	17.9	24.1	27.6	23.3	17
man cradling object/person	11.1		5.3	5.1	3.4	3.4	7	6
both cradling object/person		12.5	5.3	7.7	17.2	10.3	11.6	11
neither cradling object/person	77.8	75	84.2	69.2	55.2	58.6	58.1	68
<u>Self-touching</u>								
woman self-touching	11.1	25.0	31.6	17.9	10.3	17.2	14.0	18
man self-touching					10.3	3.4	7.0	7
both self-touching	11.1		26.3	12.8	6.9	13.8	2.3	12

neither self-touching	77.8	75.0	42.1	69.2	72.4	65.5	76.7	68
Rank Order of Gender								
<i>Act</i>								
woman passive & man active	11.1		10.5	2.6	6.9	3.4	4.7	7
woman active & man passive	11.1		15.8	5.1	6.9	6.9	4.7	8
neither active or passive	77.8	100	73.7	92.3	86.2	89.7	90.7	87
Gender Depiction								
<i>Protective</i>								
woman protective		12.5	5.3	7.7		3.4		7
man protective			5.3	7.7	6.9	6.9	9.3	7
both protective								
neither protective	100	87.5	89.5	84.6	93.1	89.7	90.7	91
<i>Peaceful Relationship</i>								
calmness of expression in woman	33.3	50.0	63.2	41	37.9	34.5	25.6	41
calmness of expression in man			10.5	5.1	6.9		7	7
calmness of expression in both	66.7	37.5	26.3	35.9	48.3	55.2	55.8	46
calmness of expression in neither		12.5		17.9	6.9	10.3	11.6	11

Feminine touch is represented by cradling of objects/persons. The findings reveal that more than half of the images across all retreat centers depict neither gender cradling an object or person. With regard to different states, Virginia, California, and Arizona show close to one-quarter of the visuals of women in a cradling posture. New York, Iowa and Washington had 75% or above of visuals showing none in that position. For the most part, infantilization of gender (particularly women) with regard to this domain, is not noted. Similar results were reported by Chhabra et al. (2011) although some previous studies have reported contrasting observations. Shift in the manner women are predominantly advertised, is noted in some cases (Sirakaya & Sonmez 2000). Aligned with the previous domain, somewhat marginal results on ritualization of women are noted for the self-touching item although Iowa and Washington show 25% of their visuals with women in self-touching postures. Subtle association between the two geographic regions and the coding point is also confirmed by Chi Squared value of 19.169 (with a p value of $\pm .05$). Across the USA, only 18% of the images portray women in a self-touching posture contrary to findings reported by some of the previous studies (Chhabra & Johnston 2014; Kay et al. 2015; Lawton 2009; Sirakaya and Sonmez 2000). Men in self-touching posture are either non-existent or marginal. Difference of portrayal across some states illustrate possible interplay of different dynamics, for instance, in political and socio-cultural contexts and gendered nature of ownership/leadership (Aramendia-Muneta et al. 2020; Chhabra et al. 2011, 2014). Similar positive shift is highlighted by Miller (2014) in his scrutiny of images

portrayed on museum websites.

With regard to rank order of gender, insignificant relationship (confirmed by insignificant Chi Squared tests) exists between rank order and location. The majority of the images show both men and women in similar (active) roles. This is in contrast with reports from previous studies which show men in a leading role and women in a more docile role such as watching, and passively observing or just being around (Lawton 2009). Sirakaya and Sonmez (2000) had also reported that women were portrayed as more dependent on men. On the next coding point: gender depiction, neither gender is featured in a protective posture across the US. In comparing the images across different states, the number of images in this ritualized position is marginal. On the contrary, Chhabra et al. (2011) had noted that most photos in vacation guides, portrayed men in protective gesture. Armendia-Muneta et al. (2020) had also reported that men continue to be portrayed as central figures in online advertising. Peaceful relationship is the next coding point and it refers to calm expression. Calmness of expression is noted in both genders in 46% of the visuals; in women, it is noted in 41% of the images across US. These results depart from previous studies (Kay et al. 2015; Lawton 2009). Chhabra et al. (2011) also noted that more than 75% of the photos featured women with calm expressions. Sirakaya and Sonmez had shown similar results (71% of the images depicting women with calm expressions). Having said that, data from some states supports ritualization of women in this domain, to some extent. For instance, Washington and Iowa portrays 63% and 50% of the women with a calm expression respectively, followed by Florida and California. And across gender, New York portrays the highest percentage of visuals (almost 67%) followed by Arizona and Virginia.

Table 3 presents descriptive results of postures associated with subordination, gender detachment, and expressions. This study reports a substantial number of images (27%) of women with a bent knee posture, particularly in California, Iowa and Virginia. California depicts more than 50% of neither gender in this ritualized posture. Contrary to these results which show more slant towards objectification of women, Sirakaya and Sonmez (2000) had reported more men in this posture. This stance was also supported by Chhabra et al.'s study. With regard to the next coding point, it is interesting to note that majority of the visuals portray both man and women standing or sitting together. The chi squares tests also report insignificant values.

With regard to the next dimension, recline, both genders are shown as standing or sitting and women are not portrayed in a stereotype position. On the contrary, several studies show a substantial percentage of men standing next to sitting women (Armendia-Muneta et al. 2022;

Chhabra et al. 2011; Sirikaya and Sonmez 2000). Few studies have also reported similar posture by both genders (Chhabra and Johnston 2014). Approximately 26% of the images portray women in an erect and head held high pose although percentage of men in this dominating posture is much lower (at 13%). Almost 41% show neither gender in a dominating pose. Although statistically non-significant, the Washington State depicts the highest percentage of women in a domineering pose followed by Florida, California and Virginia. With regard to gender detachment, association between type of location and this coding point is found to be insignificant. That is, 95% of the images show neither sex nuzzling or hiding their mouth with their fingers. With regard to the lying deeper coding point, insignificant Chi Squared tests are noted. Equitable imageries are portrayed by Chhabra and Johnston (2014).

Table 3: Descriptives of Subordination, Gender Detachment and Expressions (%)

	NY	IA	WA	FL	CA	VA	AZ	Across
Subordinate								
<i>Bent Knee</i>								
of woman	22.2	25	21.1	17.9	37.9	24.1	18.6	27
of man					3.4	3.4	4.7	4
of both		12.5		23.1	6.9	18.8	14	14
of neither	77.8	62.5	78.9	59	51.7	58.6	62.8	64
<i>Recline</i>								
woman standing while man sits	11.1			5.1		3.4	4.7	6
man sitting while woman sits				5.1	6.9		4.7	6
both standing	33.3	50	36.8	23.1	55.2	37.9	53.5	41
both sitting	55.6	50	63.2	66.7	37.9	58.6	37.2	53
<i>Body Erect & Head High</i>								
woman	11.1	12.5	42.1	30.8	31	31	25.6	26
man			5.3	17.9	10.3	3.4	25.6	13
both	44.4	12.5	15.8	12.8	27.6	31	23.3	24
neither	44.4	75	36.8	38.5	31	34.5	25.6	41
<i>Pictured on ground/floor/bed</i>								
woman	22.2	25	15.8	35.9	20.7	17.2	20.9	23
man				5.1	6.9	3.4	4.7	6
both	22.2	25	31.6	23.1	17.2	31	11.6	23
neither	55.6	50	52.6	35.9	55.2	48.3	62.8	51
Gender Detachment								
<i>Hiding the mouth with hands</i>								
woman		12.5	5.3				2.3	27
man						3.4	2.3	4
both				2.6				14
neither	100	87.5	94.7	97.4	100	96.6	95.3	64

<i>Lying Deeper</i>								
woman	11.1	12.5	10.5	38.5	17.2	13.8	23.3	6
man					3.4	6.9	2.3	6
both		25	10.5	2.6	3.4	10.3	2.3	41
neither	88.9	62.5	78.9	59	75.9	69	72.1	53
<i>Nuzzling</i>								
woman nuzzles man							2.3	26
man nuzzles woman								13
both nuzzling	11.1				3.4		4.7	24
neither nuzzling	88.9	100	100	100	96.6	100	93	41

Next, as illustrated in Table 4, neither of the sexes are portrayed as smiling together in 57% of the visuals across the US and only 21% of the images show women as smiling followed by both smiling at 19%. Chi squared tests confirm significant association in smiling expressions based on the host state (Chi Squared value of 20.038 at $p = \pm .05$ level). Different social dynamics prevail at retreat centers as these are not family socialization spaces and are patronized for retreat programs that predominantly feature yoga and other wellness sessions/classes. Previous studies have noted that almost 50% or more of the examined images portray men and women smiling together thereby signaling a sense of connectedness between them (Chhabra et al. 2011; Chhabra and Johnston 2014; Sirakaya & Sonmez 2000). In viewing this coding point from a statewide perspective, evidence of connectedness is partially visible and the Washington State portrays the highest percentage (though not substantial) of smiling in the presence of men. Men alone pictures with a smiling expression are miniscule (Lawton 2009; Sirikaya & Sonmez 2000). While reporting majority of the women with smiling expressions, in their photos, Sirikaya and Sonmez write that “tourism advertisers may be using smiling female figures to lessen the tension inherent in selling, by displays of connection with others in the frame as well as with the implied reviewer” (2000, p. 358).

The next coding point is “serious expression” signaled by either men or women or both. This study shows that across the US, only 29% of the images signal women with a serious expression and 23% of the images show both with a serious expression. The remaining percentage of images portray neither gender in a serious demeanor. Contrary to this finding, Sirikaya and Sonmez (2000) had reported 66% of the photos of men carrying a serious expression. Further, a closer look at statewide results shows that Iowa and Washington portray a substantial percentage of women with serious expressions, followed by New York and Florida (almost one-third of the images). Arizona followed by Virginia and California signal majority

of the images with neither sex with a serious expression. Meager support, for serious expression by both genders, was reported by Chhabra et al. (2011) and Chhabra & Johnston (2014). Finally, with regard to mocking, 9% of the visuals across US show neither gender carry a mocking expression. As explained by Sirikaya and Sonmez, “depiction of individuals mocking one another includes chasing the other person (as if to show what one could do to the other)” and their study reported mockery by men in all the examined images (2000, p. 358). In this study, statewide comparison notes only a small percentage of serious expressions (11%) in men in the States of Arizona and New York (11%).

Table 4: Descriptives of Expressions (%)

	NY	IA	WA	FL	CA	VA	AZ	Across
Expressions								
<i>Smiling</i>								
woman	11.1	25	31.6	12.8	20.7	20.7	23.3	21
man					6.9	3.4	4.7	5
both	22.2	12.5	5.3	15.4	20.7	20.7	34.9	19
neither	66.7	62.5	63.2	71.8	51.7	55.2	34.9	57
<i>Being Serious</i>								
woman	33.3	37.5	36.8	33.3	24.1	20.7	16.2	29
man	11.1		5.3	7.7	6.9		11.6	8
both	22.2	25	26.3	17.9	24.1	31	11.6	23
neither	33.3	37.5	31.6	41	44.8	48.3	60.5	41
<i>Mocking the Other</i>								
woman								
man								
both					3.4			3
neither	100	100	100	100	96.6	100	100	99

Promotion Themes (overall and by gender of owners)

Based on the signature websites, overall promotional content is identified. Content analysis is used to glean recurring themes. Word clouds were generated with the help of ATLAS.ti software. The following themes emerge across US: healing, health, wellness, love, spiritual, harmony of body and mind, peace, focus on self, life enhancement through nature, close to nature and earth, relaxation, mindfulness, journey, community and us. Promotional content based on the gendered nature of ownership (female only, both genders, males only, and more than one female) is also segregated and content analyzed.

Approximately 55% of the retreat centers are owned and managed by women only, 19% are owned/managed by both genders and 26% are managed solely by a man. Evidently, women

play an important role in the management and showcasing of gender in 74% of the retreat centers. Based on the word cloud generated for centers owned/managed by women, key emerging themes are noted to be feelings, knowledge, femininity, and health. Feelings are related to a sense of connection, love, joy, divine, harmony, relaxation and a sense of purpose. Focus on learning is evidenced through the use of terms such as students, programs, practice, education, accreditation, helping and guiding. Focus on the feminine side of women, emphasizing powerfulness and beauty, is evident from the use of words such as goddess, divine and beautiful. Health is stressed through use of terms such as cancer, body, movement and fitness.

Recurrent themes emerging from centers owned/managed by men focus on health, alternative medicine, and spiritual/religion. Health refers to use of terms such as diet, movement, body, improvement and wellness. Advocacy of alternative medicine is evidenced through use of terms such as body work, ayurveda (a traditional Hindu system of medicine centered on the idea of harmony/balance in the body and use of appropriate diet, herbal remedies, and yogic breathing) and anahata (the heart chakra). The spiritual/religious theme is drawn from terms such as Buddhist, Sanskrit (ancient classical language of Hinduism in India) ashram (solitary abode of a Hindu priest; also refers to a religious or spiritual retreat), chakra (a Sanskrit term referring to a wheel or cycle), ceremonies and Dalai Lama (head monk of Tibetan Buddhism).

The following themes are gleaned based on the scrutiny of the word cloud from the centers owned/managed by both genders: nature, community, meditation/reflection, and the spiritual aspects of yoga. Nature is represented by terms such as air, garden, canyon, mountain, cliffs, fire, organic, granite, tree, beachfront, cliffs, fruit, land, river, earth, and lawn. Community refers to family, people, connectedness, and celebrations. Meditation/reflection theme is related to personal development, counseling, contemplation, and enlightenment. Spiritual aspects of yoga refer to chakras, connectedness, shamanic (beliefs and practices of indigenous people mostly belonging to Siberia and far-north parts of Europe), crystal healing, energy and awakened consciousness. These results suggest harmony between both yin and yang aspects of gender.

In comparing the themes based on ownership by one gender or both genders, it is noted that the promotional content of solely women owned retreat centers draws on emotional appeal, femininity (by stressing on beautification, a sense of powerfulness and superiority), learning and health. Health also features on the retreat centers which are solely owned by men. Also,

spiritual growth and alternative medicine options are promoted by male-owned centers. It is interesting to note enriching promotional content featured on the websites of centers owned jointly by both genders. Evidence of harmonious blend of yin and yang is noted such as promoting a sense of community, closeness to nature, meditation and other spiritual enrichment techniques.

It is likely that the nature of ownership has influenced the manner in which gender is profiled and portrayed. As discussed earlier, majority of the retreat centers are owned and managed by lifestyle entrepreneurs, that is, women entrepreneurs. For the most part, based on content analysis of promotional themes used at all retreat centers, strong traces of femvertising can be evidenced. It is noted that emphasis is more slanted towards promoting healthy lifestyles in a gender neutral manner. This can be attributed to the gender of the ownership: predominantly women alone, with a group of women or with a male partner. Programs in women-owned retreat centers also showcase messages that convey a sense of divinity, power and beauty. A balance of promotional content is noted in centers jointly owned by both genders; themes include gender mindfulness, appreciation of nature, building a sense of community, and spiritual enrichment. Given the strong role of women in the retreat centers, subtle objectification of women on websites of female-owned centers is surprisingly noted. Another key finding is that the centers owned by both genders are more likely to promote femvertising practices than their counterparts.

3. DISCUSSION

Demand for wellness tourism is soaring in the post-pandemic times. Top emerging trends suggest that the wellness industry is transforming into a booming industry with surging demand for restorative wellness programs that focus on preventive therapies, stress management, emotional harmony, and mindfulness (Hospitality Insights 2022). This study chronicles a shift towards gender equity in the online marketing content of retreat centers across several states in the United States, based on most of the coding points. Statistically significant differences based on location are noted with regard to height and smiling expression. In fact, the State of Iowa has been signaled for this slant towards gender bias in previous studies (Cayton & Gray 2001; Chhabra et al. 2011; Rice and Coates 1995).

For instance, Chhabra et al. informed of stereotype images in the Midwest regions with regard to the following dimensions: reclining posture and smiling expression. Cayton and Gray (2001) had reported sluggish steps towards progress in women rights and higher status jobs.

Today, approximately 50% of the population in Iowa comprises of females. However, their year-round median earnings (\$40,681) continue to be lower than men (\$52,070) (Iowa Data Center 2022). In contrast, predominantly gender-neutral images are noted in eastern states such as Virginia and Florida. These states have made rapid progress in advocating for human rights and status jobs for women (Cayton & Gray 2001) and two decades later, this continuing trend is evidenced in the promotional content of the studied MSEs.

In scrutiny of the promotional content, which was delineated based on the owner's gender, egalitarian messages are commonly conveyed irrespective of ownership type; however, the centers owned solely by women promote femininity through expressions associated with divinity, beauty, and nurturing. They appear to celebrate womanliness, that is, attributes unique to women. Based on existing data, it is not possible to conclude that these expressions convey gender bias. A future study can conduct a survey for a deeper probe and examine femininity representations from a stereotyping standpoint. In summary, emerging trends show progress towards femvertising practices across United States and this study corroborates this point (Armendia-Muneta, Olarte-Pacual & Hatzithomas 2022). To some extent, the socio-economic changes and progress of women in their role as owners and managers/leaders can be attributed towards this prominent shift. Future studies need to explore if the nature of tourism spaces has an influence on how gender is portrayed; that is, whether all wellness spaces practice femvertising and egalitarian practices.

Implications

Scholarly work offering a critical gendered appraisal of tourism advertising materials is required in an ongoing manner (Chhabra et al. 2011; Chhabra & Johnston 2014; Sirakaya & Sonmez, 2000). A plethora of wellness and spiritual growth opportunities exist in retreat centers by mindfully and innovatively embracing femvertising attributes, both genders can become vehicles of social change (Becherer et al. 2012). Prosocial initiatives can reduce communication barriers and stimulate a sense of belonging and wellbeing which in turn holds potential to stimulate economic growth (Dias, Silva & Patuleia 2020).

Different dynamics shape the vision and marketing agenda of commercial businesses and government agencies in comparison to that of the microbusinesses; in fact, the microbusinesses are increasingly managed and/or owned by lifestyle entrepreneurs (particularly women).

Furthermore, wellness-centered microbusinesses possess more flexibility to effectively pursue femvertising practices. By embracing mindfulness and inclusive strategies, they can foster healthy and supportive social welfare practices (Franco & Prata 2019). This study is one of the few studies, in the tourism field, to draw comparisons between femvertising practices by ownership type and location. It examines some of the key features of femvertising such as showcasing women as equals, reducing objectification, and promoting them as leaders. The different coding points, employed in this study, mirror these facets. The principles of femvertising resonate with the notion of fair marketing practices such as reducing infantilization of women, thereby promoting unbiased social structures and holistic wellbeing.

Most studies on femvertising have focused on traditional media. In fact, research scrutinizing femvertising practices in different settings is at its infancy stage in the tourism and hospitality field. Wellness spaces offer a valuable context for scrutiny and identification of femvertising practices and gaps in wellness spaces can offer useful suggestions for pursuing responsible marketing strategies. As pointed out by Bhagwat, Warren, Beck & Watson (2020), Femvertising is a type of brand activism; this strategy can facilitate the retreat centers to use their wellness brand to express support for a social issue. Brands can carry meanings and inspire consumers to question stereotype expressions and values (Bhagwat et al. 2020).

Support mechanisms, such as women in leadership positions, are needed to foster femvertising practices. Women have been recognized as effective and fair leaders if they are offered access to support tools such as knowledge and other support resources (Kawira 2021; Shanmugathas 2021). They can flourish with male partners as this partnership holds potential to harmonize both genders, from social and health/wellness standpoints. Like other studies, this study has limitations. For the most part, the findings are descriptive. Although a stratified sampling technique was employed, based on selection of states from different geographic regions, sample was drawn from the list that appeared on the first three pages of the Google search engine. Undeniably, search engines are a key gateway to locate content; however, several studies have pointed to their biased structure (Eijk 2009). Manipulation of search can also occur, “either by the search engine or the informational providers who boost their ranking in the search results. Some search engines offer the opportunity of ‘buying’ a high position on the list of search results” (2009, p. 146). Future studies should employ multiple ways of locating wellness centers using, both

traditional methods and multiple search engines. Furthermore, onsite surveys/interviews of owners of retreat centers can offer deeper insights into their view, initiatives, and barriers associated with gender neutrality. These can help validate key findings and identify specific patterns with regard to barriers associated with femvertising.

Nevertheless, this study conveys some important messages. By examining the gendered nature of ownership from a femvertising standpoint, it makes an important contribution and can be used as a stepping stone to scrutinize other wellness spaces or settings. Ongoing scrutiny of promotional content (both visual and textual) offers deep insights into the manner the social structures are shifting and trending towards more ‘egalitarian societal roles’ (Aramendia-Muneta et al. 2019, p. 415). By opening up the wellness centers for scrutiny, this study can be used as a starting point to develop a femvertising model that offers a mindful and ethical pathway to eliminate gender bias.

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