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**BEING “LIKE A GIRL” IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: BRANDING AND
IDENTITY THROUGH CULTURAL CONVERSATION**

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Advertising is a pervasive part of life in modern consumerist economies. The industry is broad and diverse, ranging from the frontal assault of monstrous billboards to tiny digital QR codes to goofy, heavy handed corporate hashtags to product placement to seemingly innocuous logos to radio ads. Advertising is everywhere, mostly right out in the open, stalking us boldly, but sometimes it's hiding, waiting for us where we least expect it. Advertising, however, is always ready to attack.

Hundreds of billions of dollars are spent each year on advertisements and on conducting research to discover what the public wants and how to sell it to them in the most appealing and effective way. Total ad spending for the United States for 2014 comes in at about \$180.12 billion, a 5.3% increase from 2013 and this number is only projected to increase yearly (eMarketer). The statistics regarding the number of commercial messages the average person sees in the average day are staggering, with the average person exposed to nearly 700 ads per day (American Association of Advertising Agencies). Not only are we continually confronted by advertising, we are constantly under its influence whether we're aware of it or not.

Over the past few years, more and more companies are using discourses of female empowerment, celebrating femininity, womanhood, and all things "girly" to sell their products. And it seems to work. Ubiquitous household brand names like Nike, Verizon, Pantene, Under Armour, Dove, and Procter and Gamble's Always have joined the conversation, spiking sales, racking up millions of online views, and starting important conversations in the process (Zmuda). It's almost as if "marketers [have realized] that feminism is more than just a word with a lot of syllables: it's a great way to sell stuff" (Mahdawi). In this new batch of enthusiastic empowerment ads, women are increasingly depicted as smart, inspiring, independent and strong – a nearly unrecognizable transformation from depictions of women, hunched over piles of dirty

dishes and pushing a vacuum cleaners in sundresses in advertisements of the 1960s. How have advertisers come to adopt this newfound appreciation and shift in tone and representation? Why is it happening? And what kind of cultural work is it doing?

At the end of the day, companies want to make money. While this is not inherently problematic, the way companies try to make money can be. Brands, more and more commonly, are behaving as “lucrative avenues for social activism” hinging on “central goal of empowerment” (Banet-Weiser, 16-17). In an effort to make a profit, is promoting female empowerment problematic or pandering? Is it a way to simply capitalize on social issues, to make women feel good in order to earn their business and to create a positive brand image at the same time? A few years ago, as brands tried to become more eco-friendly, we were introduced to the marketing phenomenon of “greenwashing.” Is “pinkwashing,” the girling of the commercial market, really just the new “greenwashing”? I would like to look at which brands and products have embraced this new strategy most effectively and why I think it works for some and not others.

In my thesis I’m going to discuss how advertisers and the popular media, over the past few years, have changed the way they talk to and about women, with a particular focus on Procter and Gamble’s “Like A Girl” campaign for Always. I want to discuss the campaign in relationship to brand culture, images of young girls and self-esteem, and the legitimization and importance of younger girls’ voices within feminist scholarship and the broader feminist movement. The “Like A Girl” campaign, to me, creates a productive tension and way of thinking about both brand and buyer. When we see something we learn from it, and even though the “Like A Girl” campaign is motivated by profit, it provides a positive and powerful message that

flips the script on harmful gender stereotypes and challenges what it means to be “like a girl” by celebrating a uniquely female experience – menstruation.

The consumer market is increasingly girl-centric and historically, women and adolescent females have been most aggressively targeted as consumers. Women and girls are two of the most lucrative consumer markets, as the body, in popular media, has been presented as an ongoing project, always to be made prettier, thinner, healthier, or more appealing to men (Kearney, *Girls Make Media*, 4-9). The female body as a consumer is thought of as “a commodity that gains value through self-empowerment” (Banet-Weiser, 17). Promising females “agency and social value” in their purchase of various products, advertisers and retailers have hoped to attract women because of their “historically free-spending, trend-oriented shopping habits, as well as their strong influence on family purchases” (Munk, 132). Researchers and marketers are constantly attempting to understand how the “culture, fashion, and beauty industries create commodities for and about [women], how [femininity] is represented in such products, and how female[s] consume them,” for the sake of cultural understanding, but also for the purpose of selling more products (Kearney, “Coalescing,” 9). I would agree with Kearney when she states consumerism is “not an inherently negative activity that reinforces passivity and false consciousness [...] consumption has no intrinsically positive or negative value” (*Girls Make Media*, 4). Consumption of commercial products often aids in the development of personal identity and social relations and can be very beneficial for adolescents (*Girls Made Media*, 4). In other words, “girls’ self-esteem in the early 21st century [...] is remarkably brandable” (Banet-Weiser, 19). It is not the consumption or production of commercial products that is the issue; the issue lies in understanding exactly what we are consuming and why.

It is because advertising is such an accepted part of American culture, infiltrating almost every aspect of our daily lives, that its presence often seems harmless and inconspicuous. We often fail to give ads, their ideas and images, a second thought, or really even a thought at all, because they are so familiar. Unless we are directly confronted with an advertisement, its influence seems to be almost just lurking in the background, as we are aware of its presence but not directly or explicitly thinking about it. However, advertising exerts an enormous influence on our thoughts, attitudes, perceptions and actions. Some might argue that this is one of the industry's greatest achievements – being able to influence consumers without their awareness.

Advertisements are not always straightforward or overt. The approach at influencing our choices and behavior is often far more subtle, but no less effective, pervasive or profound. Advertisers want us to improve, compete, succeed, and be our best selves, and, of course, they want us to achieve this by purchasing the endorsed products. However, the messages of the ads often have little to do with the product and more to do with mainstream cultural and social values, as advertisers appeal to these values, trends and current events to sell their products. In the United States, the “twenty-first century is an age that hungers for anything that *feels* authentic” and consumers desire products with a purpose (Banet-Weiser, 3). We, as a culture, want to purchase products that will improve our status within in society, or contribute to our personal brand, often measuring ourselves against others, and advertisers attempt to motivate this desire within us.

Advertising strategies and trends have evolved over the years. Advertising is changing constantly in response to “changes in the economy, technology, fashion and social relations” in addition to political, aesthetic, and cultural concerns and trends (Gill, 39). Advertisements today are less informational and are more expressive of conceptual ideas in their interaction with the

audience. Ads are no longer black and white – literally and figuratively – simply providing facts and information about the product up front. As audiences have become more aware and skeptical of the advertising image, companies today are increasingly pressured to “stand for something beyond the sell,” an interesting and complicated social and “political” trend within the industry (Zmuda). The advertisement is frequently less about the product, and more about its representation to the audience, their perception of the product, its place in their life, and their place in society. In an age of transparency, people ask, “What’s this company all about? What does it stand for? Are its values aligned with my own?”

Answers to these questions can typically be found when thinking about branding. We all have our own preferences and relationships with certain brands for one reason or another. Sometimes preference is directly related to the product and sometimes preference is more of a political purchasing play. Brands, today, are “about culture just as much as they are about economics” (Banet-Weiser, 4). Branding has “extended beyond a business model” and has jumped to the forefront of marketing (Banet-Weiser, 4). Branding is “reliant on and reflective of our most basic social and cultural relations” and brands, to a certain extent, have the capacity to create culture (Banet-Weiser, 4). For the purpose of this project, I am going to use Sarah Banet-Weiser’s definition of branding as a “complex economic tool, a method of attaching social or cultural meaning to a commodity as a means to make the commodity more personally resonant with an individual consumer” (4). A brand is a “perception,” “the essence of what will be experienced,” “a symbolic structure for crafting selves, creativity, politics and spirituality” and it is a “promise as much as a practicality” (Banet-Weiser, 4-5). Basically, branding is a big deal in corporate America.

Many products on the market are virtually identical aside from their branding, creating urgency and importance for developing a unique and relevant story and identity. When a brand story is successful “it surpasses simple identification with just a tangible product; it becomes a story that is familiar, intimate, personal, a story with a unique history” (Banet-Weiser, 4). Building a brand is very much like building a relationship. When executed effectively, branding can bring a product beyond store shelves into the lives of consumers.

I chose to focus on the “Like A Girl” campaign for a number of reasons. For one, I really like the advertisement and what I believe it is doing culturally. As a regularly menstruating student of a women’s college I have a particular interest in women’s issues and identities and how they are portrayed and normalized in mainstream media. You could say it’s a part of my personal brand. I also have a particular interest in advertising. Over the summer of 2014, I held an internship with Leo Burnett Chicago, the global headquarters of the Leo Burnett corporation and the creative power behind the “Like A Girl” campaign. I worked within the company’s Reputation and Communications department, and one of my responsibilities as an intern was to monitor the agency’s clients and campaigns in the news and on social media. When the “Like A Girl” campaign debuted, the responses and discussions surrounding the campaign were overwhelmingly positive. People of all ages, races, and genders were backing Always and joining the brand in “championing girls’ confidence.” The video quickly went viral and, in my opinion, went from being more than just an advertisement, but took on a cultural life of its own in a much larger conversation about girls’ voices, self-esteem, and feminism.

Advertisements and brands, with their incredible and increasing social influence, have the opportunity to change the way women view the advertising industry and the way they view and think about themselves – as consumers and more importantly as people. For this reason, I think it

is important to resist reducing “media friendly feminism” to the “authentic vs corporate” binary (Banet-Weiser, 43). Brand culture is characterized by ambivalence, and occupies a grey cultural/economic/political area where individuals, through their purchases, can behave as consumers, activists or both (Banet-Weiser, 37-43). Female empowerment messages in commercial media are not necessarily “ultimately feminist or ultimately co-opted,” and create tension in this ambiguous existence (Projansky, 68). The #LikeAGirl campaign occupies a unique space in that it is an advertisement for pads, but pads are never shown; the ad is about the essence of girlhood and what it means to do things and be “Like A Girl” and in buying Always’ products, Always wants their customers to feel as though they are buying the mission to support and champion girls’ confidence.

If someone says you do something “like a girl,” they’re probably not giving you a compliment. The derisive playground phrase, used as an insult to put down both boys and girls, means you don’t quite measure up – that you’re somehow weaker, slower, sillier or inferior. The phrase, in company with feminine, emasculating insults like “sissy” or “pussy,” attempts to “reorient [...] unconvincing performances of masculinity” (*Girls Make Media*, 6). Even when you identify as a girl, you cannot escape the taunts of not being “masculine” or strong enough, and through the “logic of binary oppositions, [girls] learn that girls are both not boys and not masculine,” and therefore not quite good enough (*Girls Make Media*, 6). From a young age, girls are encouraged to abandon masculinity and achieve femininity.

The “Like A Girl” advertisement, created by Leo Burnett offices in Chicago, Toronto, and London and directed by award-winning documentarian Lauren Greenfield, shows what happens when a group of people of varying ages, ethnicities, and genders are asked to run like a girl, throw like a girl, and fight like a girl. The results are unsettling but not wholly unsurprising.

There was a striking discrepancy in the way older men and women and a young boy demonstrated what it meant to do something “like a girl” compared to how young girls acted out the phrase. The adults, both men and women, and the young boy ran with their knees locked, their arms flailing and with exaggerated concern for their hair. To “throw like a girl” meant to throw with limp wrists and faces contorted in goofy, faux expressions of agony. They put up a sad excuse for a “fight.” When the pre-pubescent girls were asked to perform the same actions, they all made serious, concentrated and confident efforts to perform their best, one saying that “run like a girl” means “run as fast as you can.” At the beginning of the clip, the ad asks “When did doing something ‘like a girl’ become an insult?” and the short video answers its own question – puberty.

For young girls, puberty is largely synonymous with first menstruation – the gushy, glorified, and mysterious entrance into womanhood. Menstruation is both a biological and cultural event (Kissling, 481). By the time a young girl receives her first period, typically between the ages of 10 and 15, she is likely familiar with the social rules and taboos associated with menstruation though is maybe not formally or thoroughly educated (Kissling, 483). “Girls in the USA receive mixed messages about menarche: menarche is traumatic and upsetting – but act normal: menarche is an overt symbol of sexual maturity – but also a mysterious, secret event” (Kissling, 481). Social menstrual attitudes and “rules are intricately linked with feelings of shame and social discomfort [...] evidenced in the measures women take to conceal not only menstrual blood but knowledge of menstruation” (Kissling, 483). Puberty can be embarrassing and highly confusing for young girls – and boys – leading to a drop in confidence and self-esteem.

One cultural element that the advertising industry draws heavily on is the construction of gender, and the “Like A Girl” campaign addresses this issue in a fresh, genuine way. In popular Western cultural representations, members of the female sex have well-defined feminine social roles and characteristics. Also, it is traditionally understood that members of the male sex possess specific masculine roles and traits. This traditional role upholds that girls like shopping, looking in the mirror and taking care of their physical appearance and boyfriends but aren’t very good at math or sports. Boys like video games and beer, hate housework and tend to be somewhat sloppy overall. Advertisers frequently reinforce these stereotypes and try to make these traits, clichés and tropes as easily recognizable as possible, using what Judith Williamson calls the “referent system” in order to sell their products (19). Advertising operates within a profoundly heteronormative framework and renders social laws and understandings of gender explicit through performance (Banet-Weiser, 23). Working within the confines of 30-second increments or even simply within a single image, advertisers often take advantage of the inherent shortcuts these accepted “norms” provide and manipulate them to appeal to the audience, perpetuating and reinforcing the stereotypes – often exaggerating them to create a more impactful, efficient and powerful piece of communication.

This understanding of gender presents a serious problem for women, particularly young girls. Much has been documented about the difficult experiences that young girls face during puberty “particularly low self-esteem, negative body image, poor school performance, and aggressive behavior,” and being constantly bombarded by images of “perfect” women in the media doesn’t make anything much easier (Kearney, “Coalescing,” 10). Media scholar and queer theorist Jack Halberstam, born female, poignantly recalls, “I personally experienced adolescence as the shrinking of my world” (*Girls Make Media*, 7). It is during adolescence that young people

develop their sense of self and identity, and if teenage girls are regularly presented with the images of over-sexualized, highly domesticated, passive women, they'll only continue to model themselves this way. The sexual objectification of women in the media sends the underlying message to women and girls that the most important part about themselves is the way they look, causing many women to believe that their self-worth is dependent upon their attention from men and their ability to reproduce, a belief that is also championed by a variety of other social institutions, from sexual education seminars to religious practices. The "self" has been increasingly removed from the concept and conversation of self-worth, as self-worth is determined by how we perceive the way others perceive us.

The standards for beauty are unrealistic and unattainable, causing serious self-esteem problems, eating and mood disorders among other setbacks and illnesses. "Feminine adolescence" as it is presented to us in popular media is a "virtually impossible identity to achieve and maintain" (*Girls Make Media*, 5). Supermodel Cindy Crawford has been quoted as saying "I wish I looked like Cindy Crawford" (Kilbourne, *Killing Us Softly*). Understandably, a lot of girls wish they looked like her too, but they aren't clued into the charade. The falseness and inherent impossibility of the image is particularly troubling as it sets young women up for inevitable "failure" at a young age.

A recent *Onion* headline reads 'Women Now Empowered by Everything a Woman Does,' with the article claiming, "Today's woman lives in an almost constant state of empowerment." Women are invited by advertisers "to purchase everything from bras to coffee as signs of their independence (from men)" (Gill, 36). The first satirical target is, more obviously, the growing contemporary advertising trend marketing "empowerment" to women. The second, subtler target is the larger feminist academic community, and their confusion about how to deal

with and interpret this shift (Gill, 36). This postfeminist economic discourse for empowerment, though presented in a satirical manner in the *Onion* article, is very much a reality in contemporary advertising tactics. Marketing a product as a way for a woman to assert her autonomy implies that empowerment can be bought. However, this is certainly not the case if you were to ask most feminists. Other industry critics complain of “feminist fatigue,” defined as a “debilitating condition that starts with mild exhaustion in the face of recurring debates about reproductive rights and discrimination and escalates to a crippling inability to decide whether the length of your pubic hair is reactionary or revolutionary” (Mahdawi). Future headline reads: growing appropriation of feminist discourse in advertisements reaches epidemic proportions. But really, how can companies participate in this discussion but still maintain a unique brand mission and identity without getting drowned out in the sea of pink power?

Women aren't the only ones who identify as feminist, and it is important to acknowledge that while these discourses of empowerment are about and directed toward females, the message is more widely accessible. Colleen DeCourcy, Global Co-Executive Creative Director at American ad agency Wieden & Kennedy, says that, "Just saying you're pro-woman shouldn't be enough to make me buy your product over another one" (Zmuda). She also notes, "Trying to convince me to buy something by just acknowledging I'm a woman almost plays into the older problem. I want messages that play to my interests, not just my gender" (Zmuda). Authenticity and insight remain the most important qualities in creating a meaningful piece of work and help create distinction within the larger discussion.

Over the last few decades, changes in advertising have been particularly significant. The industry has been forced to adapt to new communication and information technologies that have produced a more media-savvy consumer market (Gill, 39). Women's increasing financial

independence and economic status forced a rethinking of marketing strategies – women started buying products for themselves, not just for their husbands or their families, and women were beginning to compose a previously unconsidered, inexistent demographic (Gill, 39). Decades ago, Gloria Steinem decried the lack of “people products” marketed towards women, but now women are just as likely audiences for credit cards and cars as they are for lotion and lipstick (251). But perhaps the most significant change in the marketing landscape is that the conversation has shifted from one-way brand monologues to two-way conversations between brand and buyer.

As a result of these changes, advertisers started to reconsider their engagement with this new market. One response, popular now more than ever, was through “the incorporation or recuperation of feminist ideas, which could be (re)packaged and rendered safe and unthreatening,” basically selling the f-word in disguise because everyone knows the f-word is a loaded one (Gill, 39). Media critic Robert Goldman coined the term “commodity feminism” for the ways in which “advertisers attempted to incorporate the cultural power and energy of feminism while simultaneously neutralizing or domesticating the force of its social/political critique” (Gill, 39). In commodity feminism, “ideals such as self-empowerment and agency are attached to products as a selling point” (Banet-Weiser, 19). Commodity feminism operates as a subset of “commodity activism,” a reframing of activism that is “realizable through supporting particular brands; activism is as easy as a swipe of your credit card” (Banet-Weiser, 18). Feminist critic Susan Douglas put it simply,

Advertising agencies had figured out how to make feminism [...] work for them . . . the appropriation of feminist desires and feminist rhetoric by [companies like] Revlon,

Lancome and other major corporations was nothing short of spectacular. Women's liberation metamorphosed into female narcissism unchained as political concepts like liberation and equality were collapsed into distinctly personal, private desires. (Gill, 39).

In appropriating feminist ideas for the purpose of selling a product, has advertising “gone feminist”?

There is nothing particularly feminist about CCOs and CMOs from mega-corporations preying on women's issues for financial gain. And social justice issues are, unfortunately, never as easily solved as selecting a new shade of eyeshadow or fat-free yogurt. At its core, commodity feminism is just “retooled capitalism built upon a restructuring of traditional identities” (Banet-Weiser, 20). The kind of feminist change that really matters, in the lives of millions, is about much more than a beautiful, brand new matching underwear set, night cream to hide dark circles, or a designer pair of jeans (Penny). Real feminist change will “free [women] to live lives in which we are more than how we look, what we buy and what we have to sell” (Penny). However, I believe ads occupy a larger social space than some critics and scholars like to give them credit for, and empowering women, in whatever small ways, should not be wholly discredited or so easily dismissed. Commercials and branding essentially are first and foremost motivated by profit, but they can also be much more. Brands, and their messages, have the potential to “pave the way for a range of other kinds of relationships to consumers” (Banet-Weiser, 12). So, if a shampoo or maxi-pad advertisement is where the beginning of a discussion about female empowerment starts, I am okay with that. The truly significant moment is the start of the conversation.

Procter & Gamble's "Like A Girl" campaign for Always is unique and powerful because it presents a feminist message to and about younger girls, a group that is often left out of broader discussions of feminism. The invisibility and marginalization of young girls' voices has been an issue of feminist scholarship and of the feminist movement for decades, even within third-wave feminism, which pushes for intersectionality and variety of perspectives and female experiences. In 1982, one teen feminist journalist submitted a blunt critique to feminist magazine *Spare Rib*, "The women's movement must now come to terms with the contradiction of needing young women to be part of it, and treating us as if we were smaller, inadequate and immature versions of the older women in it . . . We can never really be together until the oppression of ageism is recognized and worked on." (Sally and Illona, 158). A generation later, an American teenager wrote, "I feel like we've been forgotten... I read *Ms.*, flipping through its pages like a tornado, looking for anything but what's there. I don't have a career, I don't have a husband... I don't need help in recovering from being raped when I was I kid. I am a kid" (Doza, 252-53). These public critiques have shed light on the adult-centered perspective that persists in the feminist movement, an issue that is just starting to gain visibility and serious traction (Kearney, "Coalescing," 4). Feminism shouldn't be a question or discussion that's answered with "I'll tell you when you're older."

Western culture has both a problem and an obsession with girls. Girls are lesser than men, lesser than women, but function as a family-friendly face for social and family issues. Girls, in popular American culture, are cute. In the first-half of the "twentieth century girls were repeatedly, and even obsessively, associated with the rise of mass culture and accompanying cultural changes," for example, America's obsession with Shirley Temple in the 1930s, and concerns about sexual delinquency and exhibitionism in the 50s and 70s (Projansky, 40). Media

images of girls drew upon long standing traditions of “girls as problems, victims of social ills, as symbols of ideal citizenship, and all-around fascinating figures” (Projansky, 42). Girls were everywhere – but they were not discussed, addressed or particularly well understood.

The “Like A Girl” campaign speaks directly to girls and reclaims and places a positive emphasis on the word “girl.” This decision to focus on “girl power” is at once “feminist and postfeminist; progressive but also regressive” (Hains, xii). By definition, postfeminism is “contradictory, simultaneously feminist and antifeminist, liberating and repressive, productive and obstructive of progressive social change” (Projansky, 68). In the 1960s and 1970s many feminists “rejected the term ‘girl’ because of its construction of women as incapable and subordinate” (Kearney, “Coalescing,” 7). In calling girls “young women” instead of girls, the movement failed to address “girlhood” as a legitimate stage of female growth and ignored the “unique experiences and needs of female youth,” a step backward for the larger women’s liberation movement (Kearney, “Coalescing,” 7). Feminist issues were “adult” issues, even in instances of teen pregnancies, birth control and abortion. To identify comfortably and happily as a girl is a very postfeminist claim, complicating many tenets and goals of the larger feminist movement. Within the feminist movement, however, this exclusionary discourse continued, and continues, to silence and marginalize valuable voices, perspectives and experiences.

Young girls themselves have drawn attention to this issue, however inadvertently, creating cultures that explicitly celebrate girl power. Through their “involvement in youth cultures, like hip-hop and riot grrrl, girls are actively asserting themselves in the public sphere and thus reconfiguring both girlhood and girls’ culture” (Kearney, “Coalescing,” 10). Tavi Gevinson, international teen fashion icon, started her blog “The Style Rookie” at age 11, and now age 18 has been featured twice in *Forbes’* 30 Under 30, appeared in *Time’s* “25 Most

Influential Teens of 2014” and has given her own Ted talk. In sticking with the title “Rookie,” now the founder and Editor-in-Chief of online publication *Rookie Magazine*, Gevinson uses her youth as an asset, a unique way to distinguish herself (Beach, 37). Lena Dunham named her HBO show about adult women *Girls*. “Contemporary female youth are using virtually every medium available to make their voices heard and their presence known,” and are creating a positive, and positively girl-centered movement, resisting homogenization under the term “women” (Kearney, *Girls Make Media*, 4). Many young women have taken up “girlhood as their primary identity, often using it as a site for initiating cultural and political action,” a phenomenon unseen only a few decades ago (Kearney, *Girls Make Media*, 5). Blogging is the new female body-project, creating visibility for girls issues across the Internet, and effectively, across the world (Beach, 2). Girl power carries significant cultural currency and girls have managed to create their own cultural practices and consumer behaviors.

As a result, mainstream media is even *more* obsessed with girls. From the Spice Girls to *Mean Girls*, to *Kim Possible* and *The Powderpuff Girls*, to Rosalind Wiseman’s best-selling *Queen Bees and Wannabes: Helping Your Daughter Survive Cliques, Gossips, Boyfriends and Other Realities of Adolescence* and also *Gossip Girl*, contemporary culture has crowned girls worthy of our attention. But what are these media texts and movements really saying to and about girls?

Advertisers are aware that women and girls, and basically every other group, are taking to the Internet and companies want to use their voices to advocate for their brands and brand mission. The hashtag never seemed so insidious. The “Like A Girl” campaign, while it is a positive piece of media for young females, is also designed specifically to advance a brand’s commercial value. “Advertisers have woken up to the fact that women – and plenty of men, too –

will take to Twitter, Tumblr and Facebook to decry sexist, tasteless and phony advertising. But if done well, marketing with purpose can rally consumers around your brand,” says one industry expert (Zmuda). In many ways, marketing of this sort—as it works to rally people around an issue— operates more like a political campaign than a traditional ad campaign. Consumers typically have brand preferences that support their lifestyle choices and needs, and if a brand backs a cause a consumer finds worthy, consumers are likely to add that brand to their own personal brand. "On the internet, women have been able to build power ... to move and change public debate," said Jennifer Pozner, founder and executive director of Women in Media and News. "Some [advertisers] have wised up and said ... 'If we create ad platforms that treat women and girls as if they're fully human, we can turn them into brand loyalists'" (Zmuda). This observation lies at the heart of politically branded campaigns.

What the “Like A Girl” campaign asks girls to do is one very simple thing. The campaign asks girls to share on social media what they do #LikeAGirl, and in doing so, provides an example of convergence culture and cross-media marketing. The advertisement officially debuted on YouTube in June, a conversational, anti-gendered and seemingly authentic digital marketing approach, and quickly became a viral sensation. The campaign consists of a three-minute video and also a branded hashtag – #LikeAGirl – encouraging interaction and cross-media participation. "Convergence culture," as media scholar Henry Jenkins calls it, is at once "a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer driven process" and it is because of this balance and seemingly mutual benefit that cross-media marketing works (Miller, 82). Hashtags are increasingly common, with 57% of Superbowl ads aired in 2014 containing one (Marketing Land). When consumers engage with a hashtag, they feel like they're getting involved, and companies use these consumers' tweets and voices as further advertisements, using

“the immaterial labor of participants for material gain” and to create visibility for their brand on social media by word of mouth, or, keyboard (Banet-Weiser, 43). Most advertisers would likely agree that a recommendation from a friend is more effective than any ad, and advertisers hope to generate a conversation among social media users surrounding their product. Social media marketing is low-cost with a high profit return if executed effectively, an ideal business model in a time when companies are generally spending less on advertising. Corporate hashtags serve a dual function, bolstering both a consumer’s personal brand and generating online conversation and visibility for the brand it is associated with.

Always’ embrace of cross-media marketing tactics takes a progressive approach toward a topic that is typically hush-hush and for young girls sometimes even humiliating. By encouraging young girls to share what they do #LikeAGirl, incentivizing action by displaying a ‘favorite tweets’ section on the Always homepage, Always is encouraging girls to speak loudly and extremely publicly about a personal topic that is rarely discussed, especially in mainstream media. Hashtags drive online conversation and engagement and serve as a way for people to chime in on broader conversations that expand beyond the scope of their followers/following and also as a method of categorization. Within the advertising industry, hashtags are an easy way for companies to measure the success of their efforts and to monitor the general cultural sentiment surrounding their commercial work.

However, the “Like A Girl” campaign brings menstruation to public consciousness without ever actually discussing or mentioning the m-word. In not explicitly mentioning menstruation, is the ad further contributing to the silence surrounding the real issues girls are facing, like the maxi-pads stuck inside their underwear in order to hide the blood? What are the implications of taking a more sideways approach? The ad only implicitly discusses menstruation

by discussing gender, an essentialist approach toward the female body. Menstruating is a distinctly female experience, though not all women have periods (transgendered men, postmenopausal women, prepubescent girls, those who experience issues with infertility or irregularity). There is no typical experience of menstruation for women, though menarche is culturally thought of as a hallmark of womanhood. Menstruation exists at “the complicated crossroad between sex and gender” a topic that is rarely discussed (Bobel, 155). Women’s identities are not solely embodied in their gender, problematizing the idea of menstruation as synonymous with womanhood.

The “Like A Girl” short video, by incorporating men and women’s and boy’s and girl’s perspectives on what it means to be “like a girl” prompts a larger discussion of what being a girl really means. Does being “like a girl” mean menstruating? As an advertisement for feminine hygiene products, this question seems valid and goes unanswered though “yes” is subtly implied. The ad wants girls to feel more secure about menstruation, but if bleeding isn’t so embarrassing, why is it never mentioned? It’s probably for the better, and the ad would probably have been much less successful if it simply read “Girls bleed once a month. Think twice before you tease them based on harmful body-centric stereotypes. Also, buy our pads.” The ad addresses more than just insults and stereotypes on the playground, but poses questions and comments for critical engagement about sexual and gender theory and about how the female body is defined, treated, and essentialized.

Operating within the rhetoric systems of commodity activism, commodity feminism and contemporary ideas surrounding brand culture, the “Like A Girl” campaign creates a space for discussion, identification and support. The advertisement, though advocating on behalf of a product line distinctly for women targets both males and females of all ages and speaks to a

broader, easily relatable social movement and issue – puberty and self-esteem. “Wanting to improve girls’ self-esteem is not a controversial political platform,” but when situated within dialogues of feminism, identity and empowerment, self-esteem is more political than simply looking in the mirror or standing in front of a group and feeling confident (Banet-Weiser, 20). The campaign teaches young girls to be proud of their bodies, whether they’re on the softball field or their local convenience store buying pads for the first time. There is no universal experience or understanding of femininity, puberty or menstruation, but the “Like A Girl” campaign encourages young girls to be proud of their bodies and their individual abilities.

Brand culture and identity carries serious weight in modern consumerist economies. Branding makes customers think critically about their purchases – even if it is based purely on commercial material and rhetorical packaging. Commodity activism shifts the focus of a transaction from “me” to “us” (Banet-Weiser, 88). Branding has the ability to make people feel as though their purchases and personal preferences are powerful and also functions as a cultural entity that operates outside of the economic sphere.

Authenticity and consumerism are not mutually exclusive. Contemporary brand culture is defined by ambivalence as brands continue to make personal, emotional appeals to relevance and authenticity, all motivated by profit. As consumers, we have the ability to buy what we like, and in the twenty-first century, in a world resembling logos, flashing screens and corporate-sponsored content, we like things that seem real.

Being able to identify with images and messages in mainstream media is important. At the end of the day, gender stereotypes don’t only affect girls. I think the “Like A Girl” campaign provides a positive point of identification for young girls and puts forth a positive message for every living person. The “Like A Girl” campaign, among other “girl power” efforts, “provide[s]

a different cultural script for both boy and girl audience members, a script that challenge[s] conventional narratives and images about what they are and who they should be” (Banet-Weiser, “Girls rule!”). Feminism is not a distinctly female issue, and identifying as “feminist” can perhaps feel divisive unto itself. The “Like A Girl” campaign not only makes feminism accessible, its simple, undeniable voice demands to be heard.

Gender equality will only happen through increased openness and understanding. I don’t think positive pieces of media about women should be discredited or thought of as lesser if they are brought to public consciousness by a corporation, a brand, or even if they appear in the form of an advertisement. Where the message comes from is secondary to the message itself. An ad for pads might not change the current state of gender relations, but it might change conversations online, with friends, or in the feminine hygiene aisle, and those are not such bad places to start.

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