

FEMINISM AND MARKETING: CULTURAL CHANGE OR PINKWASHING

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

In recent years ads from industry giants have begun to celebrate women and are now attracting new consumers with these ads. This paper is an exploratory study focusing on the intersection between marketing and feminism. The feminist movement and the role of advertising will be presented for historical and social context. Also, this paper develops case studies to analyze advertisement campaigns that promote feminist/female empowerment messages. The essence of this paper is to consider this marketing strategy trend and the implications it has for sustainability and the depiction of women in future ads.

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**#MamaWeMADEIt**

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## INTRODUCTION

*“Ads sell more than products. They sell values, they sell images, and they sell concepts of love and sexuality, of success and perhaps most important-normalcy. To a great extent they tell us who we are and who we should be. They tell women from an early age that we must spend enormous amounts of time, energy, and above all money, striving to achieve this look and feeling guilty and ashamed when we fail. And failure is inevitable because the ideal is based on absolute flawlessness. We all grow up in a culture in which women’s bodies are constantly turned into things and objects. Now of course this affects female self-esteem. And girls are getting the message these days just so young, that they need to be impossibly beautiful. So, what can we do about all of this? Well the first step is to become aware, to pay attention, and to recognize that this affects all of us. These are public health problems that I’m talking about. These are all public health problems that affect us all and public health problems can only be solved by changing the environment.”*

- Jean Kilbourne, 2010

In her 2010 documentary, “Killing Us Softly 4”, Jean Kilbourne addresses the widespread issue of women’s portrayal in the media, particularly advertising. Kilbourne opens the video by acknowledging that she has been talking about this issue for over 40 years and in that time she believes that things have only gotten worse. But in recent years, ads from industry giants including, Under Armour, Always, and Verizon have begun celebrating women and are now attracting new consumer markets with these campaigns. More important than simply embracing women in ads or celebrating the meaning of womanhood is the question of whether or not marketers are truly changing the environment and culture or if they are using feminism as a part of a strategic plan to reach sales objectives without investing in the feminist culture.

Feminist culture as part of U.S. history has been divided into various periods. These periods are known as waves and are separated based on the feminist theories

and goals of that time period. This began with the first wave, also known as the traditional era, occurring pre 1960. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the goal of this wave was to open new opportunities and expand the current ones available to women with an emphasis on political equality. This wave was later characterized in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century by women dominantly being placed in the private sphere, the home, while men took over the working and authoritative positions in the public sphere. Examples of this can be seen in media through popular television shows such as *Leave It to Beaver*.

The next period, known as the feminist period and the second wave, has been estimated to occur between the 1960s and 1990. This period is known for challenging the unequal power structure between men and women. This era saw the incorporation of feminist theory into social structures, but was still limited to certain areas of growth, particularly those areas that were labeled more and more as feminine or “soft” work. This could be seen in the professional arena where women served mostly as teachers, secretaries, and librarians, but could be fired if they became pregnant. Changes attributed to the feminist movement of this period can be seen through more women entering the paid workforce and the approval of the birth control pill, both would allow women more freedom personally and economically.

Lastly, there is the post-feminist period or third wave, which began in the mid 1980s. According to Sullivan and O’Conner (1988), in theory this period would begin to see the stabilization of the feminist movement due to women being portrayed in more realistic and less stereotypical roles in the United States culture

relative to prior times. But this assertion has been challenged by those such as Jean Kilbourne (2010), bell hooks (2000), and Ariel Levy (2005) who see new platforms of inequality being established through the rise of digital and social marketing.

With the established images of women during the various time periods, advertising worked within a narrow framework provided by popular U.S. culture. Therefore, marketers continued to reinforce the limiting images of women. Over the past 50 years, advertising has gone through substantial changes regarding the portrayal of women. Despite those changes, there is still an exploitation of women. Today, compared to men, women are shown in more suggestive poses, have increasing rates of being shown in subordinate positions, and are three times more likely to be portrayed in a sexually explicit manner (Mager and Helgeson, 2011).

The overall goal of this paper is to explore the connection between feminism and marketing with respect to past and current links and consideration for the future relationship between the two. First, a brief overview of the feminist journey with a marketing perspective will be detailed in order to provide a foundation of understanding for this paper. Next, this paper will explore the role of advertising in our society in order to understand its positive and negative impacts. Finally, this paper will consider how the use of feminist messages/female empowerment in campaigns has become a growing trend and the implications it has for the image of women in future advertisements. This will be done through case analysis of various brands and their recent advertising campaigns targeting women.

## **FEMINIST HISTORY**

In today's society, many fields have been labeled as masculine, qualities generally associated with men, or feminine, qualities generally associated with women. From colors and careers to hobbies and fashion, society has established a structure that encourages men and women to pursue different life paths. These paths are not always based on skills and interest, but sometimes on gender. Social theorists, such as Judith Butler, propose that there is no inherent truth to gender; it is a social construct (Butler, 1990). A social construct is something that does not exist independently in the natural world. It is an invention of society contextualized by individual understandings of reality based on social norms (Boghossian, 2001).

As cultures change and develop so do constructs. Over time views on "masculinity" and "femininity" have changed, but some traditional viewpoints remain and stagnate the development of gender roles. Gender roles determine what is expected, what is allowed, and what is depicted. Feminists through various forms have contested the use of gender to determine the placement of women in society throughout history.

### **First Wave: Pre-1960s**

Until the passing of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment in 1919 and its ratification in 1920 much of the feminist movement centered on basic rights for women specifically that of suffrage and women's rights to their own body. With regard to the female body a societal change was underway. The Roaring Twenties was an era of prosperity,

which helped to push feminist ideals forward as the country saw a rise in peace, prosperity, and consumerism (Amos & Spears, 2013). Pop culture and media helped to show a new image of women that was a lot riskier and socially contradictory to traditional roles. But as time passed and the country experienced economic turmoil during the 1930s, the role of women became a conversation that returned back to the belief that women belonged in the private sphere (Amos & Spears, 2013). But by the 1940s women were vehemently expressing their desires to step out of the home and into the labor force, especially after fulfilling jobs during the World War II period. An image of women popularized during this period was Rosie the Riveter, an ad depicting women as more dominant during wartime. And although Rosie the Riveter and women like her took on more public roles, these emerging ideas were only temporary based on extraordinary factors, not strongly held beliefs like those of the wife/mother (Amos & Spears, 2013).

### *Second Wave: 1960s-1980s*

The second wave feminists were deemed as radicals. Events such as the Miss America Protest and bra burnings were ways that women signaled their independence and dissatisfaction with the prejudice against them. During the 1960s and 1970s many feminists used the phrase “the personal is political”, signaling the connection between individual women’s private lives as they relate to the larger social and political structures. This phrase was a defining characteristic of the second wave feminist movement; it also provided a slogan for the more radical feminists.

Characterized by prominent societal issues including the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement, much of the 1960s and 1970s saw the enlightenment of a variety of minority groups around the world. This was a period of social unrest with calls for social justice, such as the Black Power Movement and the Gay Liberation Movement, which made it easy for the feminist movement to be seen as less pressing. But with the awareness of many other minority groups came the question of intersectionality. In this phase, questions were raised on how the feminist movement thus far and its future would benefit all women equally. Young (1997) argues that separating gender from other categories, such as race and social class, is exclusionary because it ignores the full identity and only allows for partial liberation. Up to this point, much of the gender issues that had been studied were focused on middle class white women with accessible resources. At its core, intersectionality helps to show how it is impossible to analyze and theorize women's lives by using an inaccurate sample and representation. As opposed to the first wave, driven largely by white women, the second wave gained insight from minority ethnic groups, sexual orientations, and social classes to help guide ideals towards a more inclusive future.

### *Third Wave: 1980s-1990s*

By the late 1980s through the 1990s, deemed the third wave, there is the deconstruction of the idea of "universal womanhood". Another prominent aspect of the third wave is the shift in the feminist mindset held by younger feminists. The mothers of the movement questioned the new acceptance of lipstick, bras, heels, and

other symbols that had previously been considered oppressive. The feminists of this generation expressed an ability to wear push-up bras, define their sexuality, and have a brain simultaneously. For decades society held a male gaze and looked to men to determine what was considered beautiful and sexy (Aune & Redfern, 2010). Third wave feminists saw expressing their “girly” side and being openly sexual as a way to take ownership back from men (Taylor, 2006). With the acceptance of open sexuality came the emergence of raunch culture. In her 2005 book, *Female Chauvinist Pigs (2005)*, Ariel Levy identifies and critiques current society’s values as highly sexualized in which women are objectified, objectify one another, and are encouraged to objectify themselves. Levy defines this as raunch culture. The development of raunch culture could be attributed to the unresolved feminist sex wars- between the women’s movement and the sexual revolution. Most prominently, the high rise in raunch culture can be attributed to and seen in every aspect of life from politics, music, television, art, and advertising. Levy sees raunch culture as a problem because it continues to distort the perspectives of women through objectification and the limiting of a woman’s sexuality. Raunch doesn’t expand female perspectives or open avenues for women to be seen differently; it simply reinforces sexuality to the cliché caricature. ‘Raunch culture isn’t about opening our minds to the possibilities of sexuality. It’s about reiterating one particular shorthand for sexiness’ (Levy in Orr, 2010).

### Fourth Wave: 2000s- Present

More recently, some feminists are calling on a new era, known as the fourth wave. This wave is to be characterized by 21<sup>st</sup> century technology, more specifically the Internet and social media. This wave also pushes forward with some of the same issues as earlier feminists including reproductive rights and pay equality. But they are also including issues of transgenderism, sex trafficking, and male feminists. While some do not believe a fourth wave exists, many do because the younger feminists are speaking to issues more crucial to this generation of Millennials. Replacing songs and papers with blogs, Tumblrs, and online campaigns, fourth wave feminists have created a space using the resources available and accepted by them. The Internet itself is seen as the central reason for the shift in waves. Easy access to the Internet and social media has created a new generation that can be considered the “call-out” culture, where offenders can easily be placed in the spotlight. Those that challenge the fourth wave do not see the increased use of the Internet as a reason for a new wave. Because of this, strong support for the idea of a fourth wave is still developing and its actualization stands to be seen.

### **ROLE OF ADVERTISING**

By definition, advertising is the placement of announcements and persuasive messages by agencies and individuals who seek to inform and/or persuade members of a target group about products and services. (American Marketing Association, 2014.) But more than promoting products, advertising also has a powerful social impact by reinforcing roles, attitudes, values, perceptions, beliefs,

and behaviors. Daily, we are exposed to as many as 5,000 ads, up from 500 in the 1970s (Johnson, 2006). Advertisements come in the form of print magazines, newspapers, billboards, television and radio spots, and most recently digital platforms. The variety of media and advertising's persuasive nature allow them to be prime tools of socialization and reinforcers of societal stereotypes (MacKay & Covell, 1997).

In the past, scholars, advertisers, and even consumers have debated the role of advertising. A focal point of discussion is advertising's influence on consumer culture, especially its influence on products viewed harmful to society. Advertisers have typically straddled the fence on their level of influence. They have to convince clients that advertising is efficient and effective- increasing sales, brand awareness, and bettering the image of the brand. But on the other hand they argue that they have little impact on consumer decisions when questioned about products such as drugs and alcohol. Debate between two marketing scholars Pollay (1986) and Holbrook (1987) sparked the argument of whether advertising helps to construct and shape society or if it simply mirrors the culture (Pollay, 1986). While there is no dispute that advertising reflects society, Holbrook argues that advertising is a mirror of society while Pollay asserts that it is a "distorted mirror" which both reflects and constructs the culture (Holbrook, 1987).

There are also the two competing methods of communication, which describe advertising. The transmission view presents the idea that communication disseminates information. The ritual view presents communication as a form of reflection that confirms a particular view of the world (Carey, 1989). Most ads are

used for more than disseminating information; ads beg our attention and invite us to take part in a world centered on the product's functions, benefits, and value to our life. There's more featured in an ad besides the product that influences society. The images and copy provide context for the product and it is context that helps to depict the type of reality exposed to consumers.

### **DEPICTIONS OF WOMEN IN ADVERTISING**

The traditional era, the period describing feminist history prior to the 1960s, is heavily focused on presenting women as individuals to be seen rather than heard. Advertisers recognized that much of the household shopping was done by the woman, but still supplemented by the income of the man, which meant he had the final decision on spending. Therefore, four major perspectives of women were presented in advertisements: (1) a woman's place was in the home, (2) women did not make important decisions or do important things and were accepting of objectification, (3) women were dependent on men and needed men's protection, (4) men regarded women primarily as sexual objects and were not interested in women as people (Courtney & Lockeretz, 1971) This study, conducted by Courtney and Lockeretz (1971), confirmed the concerns of major feminists of the time.

The 1960s and 1970s had a very present relationship with the media of its time. This era is the representative example of the feminist movement to many people today. This era saw a trend where women became more vocal about ads that were demeaning and lacked depth in the representation of women. Advertisers questioned whether these vocally expressive women were voices of a small group of

feminists, who could be ignored without sacrificing substantial market share, or if they spoke for a larger majority of women who represented mainstream consumers that held substantial purchasing power. This expressive nature of women during the feminist period helped to reposition women in the public arena. Studies conducted by Schneider and Schneider (1979) report that by 1979 television advertisements' portrayal of women saw a convergence of gender roles compared to those in 1971. While gender roles were becoming less prominent and women were being shown as less dependent on males, there was an increase in women's bodies being used as fragments and objects (Lysonsk, 1983). Though the 1960s and 1970s saw gains made by women as men and women began to play similar roles in advertising, the post feminist period of the 1980s and on would see a drastic rise in other ways in which women would be misrepresented.

Up until the 1970s and early 1980s, advertisers positioned women in one of two roles: wife/mother committed to the domestic sphere or career women climbing the corporate ladder. But as time passed women's roles in society became more complex and outgrew the limiting spheres advertisers had previously placed them in. With this development, advertisers presented campaigns featuring women more cautiously; due to the variety of ways things could go wrong (Campenelli, 1993). Not many brands were willing to present new ideas to their female market, which lead to some confusion and ambivalence about the ideas of women in society.

Despite the changes over time in the depiction of women there has been one constant, beauty. Each era has had its own standard of women's beauty shaped by the cultural norms of that time. During the post feminist period, the focus on female

beauty and sex in advertising rose in considerable ways. A University of Georgia study, performed by Reichert, Reid and Childers, showed that in reviewing magazine ads over the past 30 years, the emphasis on sex and beauty has increased (Sorrow, 2012). Looking at over 3,000 magazine ads, the study shows that 15% of ads used sexual content in 1983 in comparison to 27% in 2003 (Sorrow, 2012). Specifically, the alcohol, entertainment, and beauty ads are credited with the increase as their use has risen. Of the 18 product categories studied, those that feature sexual content most prominently include: health & hygiene (38%), beauty (36%), drugs and medicine (29%), clothing (27%), travel (23%), and entertainment (21%) (Sorrow, 2012).

With respect to gender, there is an array of evidence that suggest that exposure and attention to gender representation in media is associated with a more gender-typed perspective (MacKay & Covell, 1997). Consistent with prior research studies performed, Lanis and Covell (1995) find that males exposed to ads that glorify women as sex objects are significantly more accepting of gender stereotypes and hold more adversarial beliefs.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To further understand the intersection between feminism, marketing, and its effect on consumers, exploratory research has been conducted through the development of case studies. The case studies will focus on three noteworthy brands that have used feminist messages and/or empowerment messages as a focal point of their brand's campaign. For the purpose of this research there is a distinction

between feminist messages and female empowerment. Feminist messages will be identified as messages that support the idea of women being seen as equal to men in social, political, and economic areas. Female empowerment messages will be identified as messages that contrast the stereotypical roles that show women in the home, as sexual objects, and victims of violence. These messages are more encouraging to women's self-esteem and fight societal beauty standards.

The case studies are developed around Nike (If You Let Me Play, 1990s), Dove (Campaign for Real Beauty, 2004), and Verizon (Inspire Her Mind, 2014). The information used to develop these cases was collected through previously published articles, company websites and social media platforms, and industry journals. The goal of these cases is to assess the patterns and execution of previous brand campaigns as it relates to feminist/female empowerment messages. The case studies are analyzed based on four elements including:

1. Brand Image: This element looks at how the message of the campaign aligns with the brand's current image. Brand image was chosen over brand identity in order to examine the consumer's view of the brand and consumer's belief in the brand's credibility for this form of advertising.
2. Portrayal of Women: This element looks at the roles and spaces that women occupy in the campaigns
3. Reception: Focuses on assessing the approval/criticism, viewership, and reach received by the campaign. It also reviews some of the financial impact attributed to the campaign.
4. Product Type: Explores how the specific product being promoted facilitates or detracts from the message of the campaign.

With these criteria a better understanding of feminist/female empowerment can be achieved as analysis are made between historical and current campaigns.

## **NIKE**

### **Brand Image**

One of the early examples of boldly challenging the stereotypes about women in culture came in the form of Nike's late-20<sup>th</sup> century campaigns including *List, Participation, Dialogue, and If You Let Me Play*. During this time period few ad campaigns saw the success that Nike did as it helped to shift the ideas held about women in American society. Nike's mission and media message has always centered around athleticism and winning. But majority of it was targeted towards athleticism and winning in men. This is partly due to the competitive and aggressive nature seen in sports that was considered uncharacteristic of women. Historically, Nike was all about men, but with its entrance into women's apparel Nike had to learn how to communicate to women in a genuine manner without alienating its core male demographic (Grow & Wolburg, 2006) Through the creative work of copywriter Janet Champ, art director Charlotte Moore, and later art director Rachel Manganiello, Nike was able to create positive female messages while maintaining its brand image. This was due to the fact that the women's ads were created with the understanding that the creative team had to "protect Nike as a men's brand at all costs or risk 'pinkifying' the brand" (Grow & Wloburg, 2006).

While the campaigns promoted more feminist messages they never strayed from Nike's emphasis on athletics and winning. The content expressed these values

in a fairly different manner, but overall the campaigns held on to the themes of sports, athletic heroes, and the superiority of Nike products. For Nike working in this new environment, a new female market with a creative team led by women, helped to expand the definition of what the Nike brand could stand for. According to Mark Parker, Nike had never appreciated the entirety of the active lifestyle until entering into the women's market and seeing the opportunities available there (Grow & Wolbug, 2006)

### Portrayal of Women

Throughout her tenure with Nike, Champ recognized that Nike had always preferred "smiling and pretty women" and "always happy" women. But for these upcoming campaigns, Nike would step away from depicting the 'pretty women' and instead would use real women with real life emotions seen in advertisements as a means of empowerment. These advertisements challenged the societal belief that held attractiveness over ability. Specific campaigns include, *Wolves*, where women were portrayed as fiercely independent, in your face, and more masculine. *Dialogue*, focused on showing young girls that they were not inferior to boys and could excel at the same levels physically. *List*, attacked things that other women's advertising pressured women into doing, such as wearing bras, fitted clothing, and make-up. *And If You Let Me Play*, focused on justice and equality by "highlighting the benefits of girls playing sports" and blaming society for imposing such unfair barriers on women in athletics (Grow & Wolburg, 2006). Overall, Nike took steps to create campaigns that advanced feminist goals and empowered women to see and think of

themselves with limitless boundaries as opposed to the restricted view placed on them by society.

### Reception

The success of the various campaigns was initially seen with the influx in conversation about Nike and the ways in which consumers praised the path Nike had taken. “[we] won dozens of awards and got everybody talking about the ads and had thousands and thousands of women and girls calling in for reprints, and Oprah [was] talking about the ads on TV. It was a huge deal.” (Grow & Wolburg, 2006). But more than people simply talking about the ads, the positive feelings translated into sales as Nike saw an early jump in sales. In 1990 sales jumped 25%, another 25% in 1991, and 28% in 1992. But from Nike’s perspective, the campaign was also a success because while the brand went in a new direction and reached out to a new demographic with bold statements, there was no negative impact felt by men.

### Product Type

Some credit the success of this form of feminist marketing to Nike’s unique situation and extraordinary creative talent as opposed to the product itself (Grow & Wolburg, 2006). And although the creative teams at Wieden + Kennedy and Goodby, Silverstein & Partners set the foundation for the campaigns, Nike must be credited with producing a product worth marketing and buying. Advertising cannot compel consumers to support a product or company that they do not feel a positive association with. When Nike says that women can dominate in all aspects of life as

well as any man can, the product transforms from an article of clothing to a message itself. The shoes, shirt, or shorts are constant reminders, boosts to self-esteem, and a deconstruction of societal norms because the product is so relevant to consumers that associations are created between the company, the product, and the user.

## **DOVE**

### **Brand Image**

Dove is a personal beauty brand owned by Unilever and the creator of one of the longest standing examples of female empowerment advertising. Dove's *Campaign for Real Beauty* was launched in 2004 and continues to be a focal point for the brand's marketing strategy. In 2014 the campaign celebrated its 10-year anniversary. Throughout its history Dove has always sent a media message that beauty is not about glamour but about the individual. It also promotes that more women trust Dove because of its stance on beauty in comparison to other brands. Through its *Real Beauty* campaign, the company was able to align itself with the rising popularity of marketing female empowerment and rebrand Dove's image. With the campaign Dove was also able to solidify its commitment to "building a world where beauty is confidence." But there was criticism for the campaign because some audiences claimed that it was inconsistent with Dove's image. Congruence and consistency are important aspects to gaining and maintaining a loyal customer base. And for Dove, a company that sells an easily substitutable product, brand loyalty is important. While there is an interesting juxtaposition of an enhancing beauty brand promoting *real* beauty, Dove's most prominent evidence of

inconsistency comes from its association with its parent company, Unilever. Unilever owns several other brands that don't align with Dove's *Real Beauty* campaign. For example, Axe, a product that has promoted advertising that objectifies women through hypersexualization; Slimfast, a product that benefits from the idea that being thin is a hallmark of beauty; and Fair and Lovely, a skin lightening product. But these inconsistencies are not directly related to the Dove brand, rather it is the Unilever brand that has a vast portfolio of inconsistent product brands.

### *Portrayal of Women*

Dove has likened itself to a hero of beauty standards for women through its beauty sketches, beauty patch social experiments, and Photoshop comparison videos. Dove shows women the error of their ways by exposing the beauty myth while simultaneously providing them with a solution to all their beauty problems which is the use of a Dove product. With this campaign, Dove didn't sell soap or lotions; it sold recognition and acceptance of beauty to women by using everyday women. Unfortunately, the campaign portrays these regular women as the critic and the victim. Rather than addressing this as a societal issue, the message is that women are the biggest critics and reason for the beauty complex. It also depicts women as flawed and vain individuals seeking beauty tricks that will endow them with higher self-esteem.

### Reception

Dove can attribute a large portion of the company's recent success to its *Real Beauty* campaign. The *Dove Real Beauty Sketches* have been viewed more than 114 million times in over 100 countries, featured on over 400 broadcast segments, is the 3<sup>rd</sup> most shared ad of all time, and over 1,800 blog posts written about the ad. As for sales, in the inaugural year sales rose from \$2.5 billion to \$4 billion and this trend has continued with the most recent phases of the campaign further increasing the brand's sales numbers according to Jennifer Bremner, brand director of skin cleansing at Unilever. Dove's *Real Beauty* campaign was able to break through the media clutter, captivate the masses, and tear down some of the beauty norms. Along with the success came some criticism of Dove's brand inconsistency, some audiences questioned Dove's integrity because of claims that the campaign subliminally reinforced the stereotypes and attitudes that it insists it was trying to eliminate. The ads reinforce the idea that when women evaluate themselves and their worth beauty must be part of the equation. Dove's message is somewhat at odds with its brand because it capitalizes on the poor body image of women. If women in Dove's target market believed in the message Dove promotes then the products could not exist.

### Product Type

Some credit Dove for its riskiness to take part in this form of marketing, but actually this is the perfect way for Dove to elevate its brand image in the eyes of their target market. While Dove does sell products for men, majority of its products

are feminine beauty care products, which provides the perfect audience for a campaign that is seemingly feminist in nature. A female beauty brand's power lies in the insecurities of women and the superior attitudes towards beauty and the brand's ability to provide a "remedy". But instead of providing a superficial remedy through products only, Dove provided products that cared. With the campaign Dove was able to transform an ordinary bar of soap into a meaningful and powerful message that was spread to the masses. The general necessity of the product and target market demographic in conjunction with the emotional appeal that Dove was able to garner allowed for an experimental strategy to turn into a highly successful 10-year campaign.

## **VERIZON**

### **Brand Image**

One of the most recent examples of feminist advertising is Verizon's *Inspire Her Mind* campaign. Verizon has solidified itself as one of the premiere mobile/wireless networks and has been recognized by audiences for the strength and ubiquity of its network. The Verizon image that has been crafted in the minds of consumers has little to do with the encouragement of women. This is because Verizon has promoted media messages that focus on its ability as a network and is mostly known by its "Can you hear me now?" tagline and competitive advertisements.

Verizon has supported girls in STEM fields since the creation of its Verizon Foundation, but this is not something that is seen often or naturally associated with

the Verizon brand for many consumers. The brand's message in *Inspire Her Mind* is consistent with the brand identity, but not noticeably consistent with the brand image that is formulated by consumers.

### Portrayal of Women

*Inspire Her Mind* primarily showcases young to teenage girls in activities that most would consider male dominated arenas such as hiking/wilderness and science activities. The videos also subliminally support the idea that there are gender specific fields that are mutually exclusive. It promotes that society's idea of conventional girl culture is an obstacle that young girls have to overcome in order to be considered equal to boys in certain arenas of life.

### Reception

Like many of the other campaigns with feminist messages, Verizon's immediately went viral. The ad has been viewed over 4 million times on YouTube, Vimeo and other video platforms, embedded in over 822 other places, and has 70,000 plus Facebook likes and shares. In addition to its reach, Ambassador has considered the ad as one of the best social media campaigns of 2014. News outlets deemed it "inspiring" and "a blast of fresh air"; and consumers were caught up in the whirlwind of its viral nature. Magazines such as AdWeek have given Verizon kudos saying that ads like these are "very important"; while others like Charlotte Atler of TIME magazine, find it suspicious that Verizon is now part of the female empowerment frenzy now that feminism is becoming valuable when aligned with a

particular brand. With positive and negative feedback some of the most noticeable criticism came from those questioning the validity of the statistics presented by Verizon. Christina Sommers of the America Enterprise Institute asserts that Verizon uses “phony data and misleading images” and that journalist and consumers alike are unable to see through to the real truths about girls in STEM fields.

### Product Type

Verizon’s target demographic is young in nature, typically between the ages of 18-35. This demographic aligns with fourth wave feminists and Millennials who are more readily embracing feminism/female empowerment and are more likely to be effected by the social media campaigns for this product. Because their product is seen as gender neutral it is less likely for their campaigns to be criticized in the same ways that beauty/fashion products are. For true feminist/female empowerment ads to work companies that have products with non-female consumer bases need to lend their voices and this is exactly what Verizon is doing.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

Ries & Trout maintain the idea that, “to be successful, you must touch base with reality.” (Ries & Trout, 2001) That is essentially how genuine feminist/female empowerment marketing can succeed. It is not enough to promote a product with positive images of women if there is no evidence of some basic human truth. Selling truth in conjunction with the product is what makes feminist marketing work because “truth and facts are unavoidable. Undeniable. And unless you’ve stopped

breathing, they make you think.” (Grow & Wolburg, 2006). Based on the case studies presented and the previous research, the key to the overall success of feminist/female empowerment messages in marketing and a cultural shift is authenticity. The brand that is utilizing female empowerment/feminist messages must do so in a sincere manner in order for the message to resonate with consumers and be received positively. The brand’s mission/vision/values and/or previous campaign messages must align with its current message of female empowerment. The better the message fits into the brand’s overall image and reputation the more staying power it has.

The need for authenticity is apparent beyond storytelling. As more brands follow this trend, authenticity becomes harder to establish. It will be necessary to go beyond messages and take action. Companies must be actively engaged in the cause for women’s equality. Inauthentic support cheapens the idea of women’s equality, and that is not only dangerous for the purveyors of business behind the token message, but to the feminist movement and progress itself (Fineman, 2014).

## **CONCLUSION**

The goal of this research is to explore and understand the connection between feminism and marketing. Use of feminist messages/female empowerment in campaigns is a popular trend that doesn’t seem like it’s going anywhere. But the limited understanding of how these messages have a larger impact on our societal norms can harm not only the brands, but also the women they seek to represent and attract.

At its core, this research can be used to identify ways in which feminist messages are not only used as a selling tool for products and strategies to increase the bottom line, but as guides to aid brands in creating positive cultural change and progress for women.

The research conducted through the case studies show that there are four elements that can be further researched to understand the impact that feminist/female empowerment messages have on our society.

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