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“Why Can’t Run ‘Like a Girl’ Also Mean Win The Race?”:
Commodity Feminism and Participatory Branding as Forms of Self-Therapy
in the Neoliberal Advertising Space

by

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Abstract

This thesis proposes a critical study of the techniques and motives behind modern commodity feminist advertising, focusing on the appropriation of the “young girl” as a symbol of the feminist cause. This evolving trend in advertising, building upon new movements of empowerment and the recent proliferation of the online feminist space, is shifting the logics of consumption by marketing feminist ideology and activism through consumer purchasing power. By prompting consumers to believe that their purchases can make a significant change, companies are developing brand loyalty in their key marketing demographics by using the image and rhetoric of the “young girl” to tap into a term I call “anti-nostalgia,” a nostalgia whereby women leverage the inherent sentimentality of childhood with a constructive understanding and rejection of the destructively sexist climate they experienced to combat these sociocultural conditions for future generations. Joining theoretical research on branding, user-generated content, and the neoliberal ideology of the consumer-citizen, I argue that these advertising campaigns, coupled with online spaces for public interaction and participation, effectively create channels for their target consumers to contribute to this commodified form of activism. In reality, however, these “feminist” purchases are simply forms of consumer self-therapy in a modern political climate of systemic gender discrimination.

Keywords

branding • commodity feminism • self-therapy • anti-nostalgia • user-generated content • neoliberalism

“What does it mean to run ‘Like a Girl’?” The director poses this age-old question to participants of various ages and genders. A man runs pathetically in little steps with his hands flailing at his sides. A young woman skips in place, hands up and hair bouncing back and forth. A young girl of six or seven years old responds, “It means run as fast as you can.” As the violins of the moving orchestral soundtrack swell in the background, the screen reads, “When did doing something ‘Like a Girl’ become an insult? Always wants to change that.”

This is only one example of a new trend in advertising as companies attempt to market activism and feminism through consumer purchasing power. Commodity feminism has emerged as an advertising strategy employed by companies seeking to build upon new movements of empowerment and the recent proliferation of the online feminist space to market the capitalist solution to modern gender discrimination. By branding their products as the “feminist option” within any given market, companies create a brand through which consumers can endorse the feminist cause, targeting their key demographic through marketing tactics within those campaigns. This kind of activist branding is making waves as it reshapes the logics of consumption, encouraging consumers to make their purchases based on the cause the product supports rather than on the product itself.

This strategy is becoming increasingly popular due to women’s growing share of purchasing power within the economy. One study conducted by the Harvard Business Review concluded that “women seek to buy products and services from companies that do good for the world, especially for other women. Brands that—directly or indirectly—promote physical and emotional well-being, protect and preserve the environment, provide education and care for the needy, and encourage love and connection will benefit.”¹ It is clear that women must be a central focus of new endeavors in marketing, advertising, and product development as they hold a

majority of the purchasing power and will continue to increase their influence in the coming years.

“Commodity feminism” is defined as the appropriation of feminism and feminist beliefs for commercial purposes, a strategy both praised as forward thinking and heavily criticized for detracting from the political significance of the feminist movement itself by reducing it to a commodified item for the general public.ⁱⁱ This attempt at joining feminism and femininity through the juxtaposition of symbols of feminist ideology and commercial products has created an ideological shift in advertising, one that reflects on meanings of womanhood, domesticity, and feminism. Corporations are creating more opportunities in the marketplace for female consumers to be empowered through the imagining of themselves and other women as somehow transformed by the products they purchase.ⁱⁱⁱ Commodity feminism as a concept has been revived recently with the emergence of “femvertising,” or pro-female messages within the advertising space, featuring seemingly genuine representations, claiming the use of real people and not actors to further their argument in authenticity, inspirational feminist rhetoric and iconography, and often the image of women and girls as forms of empowerment.^{iv} The leader in researching the femvertising space, SheKnows, an American digital media company for women that circulates lifestyle content with corporate advertisers, published a survey in which 52% of respondents confirmed that they had purchased products specifically for the portrayal of women in their advertising campaigns, proving the statistical success of this strategy.^v

In an examination of three recent advertising campaigns from Always, Barbie, and Verizon, we can observe a trend in the presentation of the “young girl” as a symbol of the feminist cause. By using the image and rhetoric of young girls within their ads, companies market the empowerment of young women and invoke a sense of remembrance, what I will call

“anti-nostalgia,” in their key marketing demographic. In reflecting on experiences from childhood where, for example, they were discouraged from doing something because of their gender, women are able to establish a personal connection to the brands themselves. Nostalgia itself has an inherent sentimentality regardless of the positive or negative nature of the experience, and while these advertisements remind us of negative experiences, there are typically positive connotations from childhood as well. These campaigns, however, attempt to mobilize women to fight against the inherent romanticization of childhood, calling attention to the destructive nature of these experiences. This is the “anti-nostalgia” they attempt to inspire in order to rally women to create positive change for future generations by endorsing these brands. However, whether their intent, or their consumer purchases of the commodified feminist product is actually helpful in instituting any key change is up for debate. By examining concepts of commodity feminism, branding, and self-actualization within the context of neoliberalism, I will lay the groundwork for an in depth analysis of modern advertising campaigns that utilize these strategies in the context of the “young girl.”

Branding is pervasive in determining our interactions with products in the marketplace, the emotional connection and development of these brands is key in how we cultivate meaning in our everyday actions.^{vi} By creating commodity feminist advertising with supplemental participatory spaces for user-generated content, these brands, utilizing neoliberal theory, develop channels for their target consumers to contribute to this form of activism in the public sphere. Furthermore, building on Janice Peck’s neoliberal theories on the therapeutic enterprise and the reflexive project of the self, in her work, “The Therapeutic Enterprise and the Quest for Women’s Hearts and Minds,” I argue that such campaigns utilize these strategies to create notions of self-empowerment that affect viewers’ consumer habits, prompting them to think of their purchasing

power as a form of influential activism. In reality, however, endorsing these “feminist” products is simply a form of self-therapy; the neoliberal consumerist solution to the systemic issue of sexism and women’s freedoms in the modern space.

The Roots of Commodity Feminism

To truly understand the modern shift in feminist advertising, we must look to the origins of “commodity feminism.” This kind of advertising harkens back to the 1920s with Edward Bernays’ campaign encouraging women to break the gender limitations of the time surrounding smoking. Bernays called cigarettes “Torches of Freedom,” effectively associating the act of smoking with women’s emancipation and liberation, which shattered forever the taboo on cigarettes for women.^{vii} The approach made a distinct comeback in the 1980s, when a common strategy used by advertisers included “validating an image of the new woman defined as independent and equal to men” and a “subtle reframing of the male gaze shifting the power as such a relationship from the surveyor to the surveyed.”^{viii} Advertising has used this commodified feminism to reclaim “the female body as a site for women’s own pleasure and as a resource for her power in a broader marketplace of desire than marriage.”^{ix} By encouraging this self-empowerment through signified ideology, these products were able to target the female market rather effectively. Shifting these views of women to reflect postfeminism, a theory that implies that we, as a society, are beyond the wishes of second-wave feminism and the gender binary as a whole, companies again continue to redefine feminism through commodities of what women wear, purchase, use, and negotiate in their daily lives.

In examining a series of ads, Goldman, Heath, and Smith put these theories to the test, articulating that many ad campaigns, including those of Esprit, Lawman Jeans, and Hanes, attempted to define the “new woman” through the use of various taglines, signifiers, and images

intended to invoke feelings of independence and freedom. These ads accomplished their goals in a variety of ways, some of the more successful ones including creating a female sexuality free from the male gaze, invoking rhetoric of the successful businesswoman, and explaining the power behind femininity. These advertisements all recast the image of the woman as a strong and independent female, respecting the postfeminist movement of the time period, to sell products and in the end, a commodified self-esteem. The article states elegantly that, “when appropriated by corporations, feminism becomes an object, a look, a style, a product, which then take on the feminist ideals of independence, success, empowerment, and more.”^x

In addition to the formal commodity feminism, “popular feminism” has also infiltrated our consumer culture and daily media intake. Specifically focusing on the ways in which corporate culture has begun appropriating feminism to present products and brands as allies to young women, McRobbie, in her article, "Young Women and Consumer Culture: An Intervention," presents a condemnation of the commercial domain's usage of “girlhood” as a site of consumerism.^{xi} McRobbie argues that in the current state of corporate and commercial culture, the invocation of girlhood has “accelerated and expanded with the effect that commercial values now occupy a critical place in the formation of the categories of youthful femininity. This appropriation of the site of girlhood actively draws on a quasi-feminist vocabulary which celebrates female freedom and gender equality.”^{xii} The form of feminist rhetoric in commercial culture that markets to teenage girls has been coined “popular feminism,” and has typically been received positively. However, McRobbie questions the merits of its acceptance, arguing that popular feminism is “celebrated in such a way as to suggest that the politics of feminist struggles are no longer needed” and that the “girl power movement” and others like it create the image of a woman who has already won her freedom.^{xiii} As seemingly helpful as these advertisements are,

they often do not institute any further change and simply act as a therapeutic mechanism for women to feel empowered through their capitalist values. While many praise these advertisements for breaking convention in the way they show authenticity and inspire young girls, the optimism of the values system they reinforce is in fact a reality not yet achieved, which may result in false hopes and further consequences. In the case studies I will explore in this paper, we can observe the two distinct techniques of commodity feminist advertising, one of which illustrates that optimistic view of the girl power movement. By showcasing young girls in an assortment of successful roles without the societal limitations of girlhood, these advertisements communicate a postfeminist message in an undeniably encouraging, but ultimately harmful way.

Creating a Brand

Our daily lives are filled with media forms that attempt to influence how we form opinions and make meaning through our purchases. Branding allows “the producer to speak directly to the consumer through presentation, packaging and other media.”^{xiv} Understanding brands as intentionally created images for a product or company is incredibly important in analyzing how these brands and the media forms they work with present themselves. According to Adam Arvidsson in his work, “Brands a Critical Perspective,” brands can be defined as “mechanisms that enable a direct valorization [...] of people’s ability to create trust, affect and shared meanings: their ability to create something in common.”^{xv} He argues that branding is key to how we as citizens develop meaning in our actions and the products we purchase. This emotional significance, which Arvidsson terms as “ethical surplus,” can be defined as “a social relation, a shared meaning, an emotional involvement that was not there before,” functioning as the foundation of all economic success and value.^{xvi}

To further this argument for the emotional, Arvidsson points out that the most decisive yet prevalent mistake is for brand managers to focus on the physical properties of a product instead of the psychological benefits and connotations that complement it. He asserts, “Building brand equity is about fostering a number of possible attachments around the brand, be these experiences, emotions, attitudes, lifestyles or, most importantly perhaps, loyalty.”^{xvii} Once marketers found ways to showcase that products were not just defined by their physical characteristics and functional properties, but also by their essence, nature, and connotations, a large marketing shift occurred, which then gave rise to commodity activism, allowing consumers to purchase goods based not on the product, but on the social cause that is seemingly supported through their purchases.^{xviii} Advertisements that utilize the commodity feminist strategy rarely focus on the product itself and its physical ability to help women, instead creating an emotional level of fulfillment women can achieve through its use or a promise of empowerment for other women and a social support of the feminist cause.

Celia Lury, in her piece, “Brand as assemblage: Assembling culture,” outlines that “brands are devices for the reflexive organization of a set of multi-dimensional relations between products or services, subject to statistical testing and the rapidly changing pressures of mediation, stylization and practices of commercial calculation.”^{xix} But these brands are not simply social constructions, because the brand plays a part in production as well. The brand is a way of modeling markets multi-dimensionally, both representational and non-representational. Brands are reflexive, affecting and being affected by its products and the world around it. As a consequence, brands help create culture just as culture creates brands.^{xx} In examining commodity feminism, it is important to remember that feminist culture affects this shift in

marketing, but also that by creating feminist advertising, we are creating an image of postfeminism, often insinuating that women have already achieved their feminist goals.

Building upon the emotional connection of brands, Arvidsson further develops the connection between Lazaretto's notion of "immaterial labour" and intentional consumption. Immaterial labour refers to the practice of creating the "immaterial content of commodities" and the social and emotional framework and perspective of a product.^{xxi} Consumers produce meaning and social context within the products they purchase, and therefore, "use goods, and the 'general intellect' available to them in the form of a commonly accessible media culture, to produce a common framework in which goods can have a use-value."^{xxii} However, for this contextualization to occur, brands and the marketing of said brands must create the climate for meanings to be made. Arvidsson argues that brands must create an environment, whether virtual or physical, that predicts and fulfills the consumers' desires so that they may fully realize the promised empowered lifestyle. It is crucial to create spaces where consumers have the freedom to realize their potential with the help of the product in a nonintrusive way so they can interact with the brand and general media to form their own opinions autonomously.^{xxiii} Often in commodity feminist advertising, ad campaigns will utilize a hashtag slogan around the brand and symbol to start an online movement. When companies create an online space for consumers to share views and opinions of their ad campaigns, they help start the conversation and engage their consumers in the cause. It is in this public, online space that consumers may brand themselves as feminist and share the motivation behind their purchases, which ultimately functions as additional advertising for the company itself.

Neoliberalism, Self-Realization, and Self-Branding

In discussing brand strategy in the present day, it is vital to discuss neoliberalism in

context. Neoliberalism “privileges a kind of brand strategy in its production of goods, services, and resources that manages, contains, and actually designs its identities, difference and diversity as particular kinds of brands.”^{xxiv} Because of the economic ideological shift in giving more power to the private sector and free market, neoliberalism creates self-sufficient and self-governing individuals with an inherently selfish mode of living. These lifestyle politics allow commodity activism to thrive, and for the “consumer-citizen” to “satisfy competing ideologies of consumerism (an ideal rooted in individual self-interest) and citizenship (an ideal rooted in collective responsibility to a social and ecological commons).”^{xxv} Commodity feminist advertising thrives on the tenets of neoliberalism in that it paves the way for the citizen to rely on consumerism as a key part of identity and selfhood. Utilizing the neoliberal theory that a “human’s well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong property rights, free markets and free trade,” Alison Hearn argues that individual responsibility is being increasingly emphasized, leading to more ethically driven and socially responsible people.^{xxvi} Under conditions of neoliberalism and post-Fordism, the term “flexible personality” has emerged, one that describes people’s willingness to change personal affiliations and develop themselves further, creating a commodified self-production. By assuming new, more socially responsible versions of the self, we as consumers begin to support causes through our purchasing power and social media consumption.^{xxvii}

In relation to the neoliberal consumer citizen, more specifically the consumerist and inherently selfish side, it is important to look at the concept of “self-realization” within the context of the empowered self, which is marketed in association with the products. As advertising developed, certain products were marketed as crucial methods of “self-realization,”

where the “self had become largely a matter of merchandising and performance and was built around commodities, style, and personal magnetism.”^{xxviii} Soon, a language of transformation emerged, one which enabled speaking about services and products while addressing the relationship between appearances and identity. Because products were marketed as transformative, promotions usually attempted to help women find themselves and realize their full potential.^{xxix} “These commodities offered women a language through which they could articulate new demands, concerns, and desires: this in a period when women’s relationships to the civic, economic, and social “public” realms were under renegotiation.”^{xxx} In this regard, commodity feminism in advertising markets the “activist self,” allowing you to imagine yourself as an empowered, feminist woman fully realized in the context of these products. By purchasing specific products within the context of the neoliberal mindset and climate, you can create and brand a sense of self affected by the rhetoric of the feminist advertisements endorsed.

In addition to the inner transformation, another part of this self-realization is the concept of personal and self-branding in the public sense. Self-branding is the creation of the outward self the individual wishes to portray to the world; it is “blurring the distinction between product and consumer, private self and instrumental associative object.”^{xxxi} Personal brands are built around a person’s “true character, values, strengths and flaws,” but also in their ability and agency to take control of their own happiness and empowerment.^{xxxii} Personal branding influences how individuals feel about their own lives based upon the purchases they make and the consumer brands to which they feel loyal. There is an inherent cynicism in this process, as individuals create “a form of self-presentation singularly focused on attracting attention and acquiring cultural and monetary value.”^{xxxiii} This form of self-branding is used to garner attention from the outside world, profit from its stances, and share best attributes with the general

public. As in the case studies of Always, Barbie, and Verizon, there are branded connotations with the feminist cause, such that if you purchase those products or participate in the company's online forums, you, the consumer, brand yourself as feminist by association.

Feminist advertising can foster brand loyalty in consumers by creating a commodified feminism and empowerment in the products themselves. Products can form feminist images through these marketing campaigns, in particular through the use of feminist rhetoric surrounding the "young girl," incentivizing consumers to make purchases based on the causes they care about. In these campaigns, the subject of the advertisement is always a young girl in the pre-puberty age demographic, creating a focus on the next generation of women growing up in this sociopolitical climate. This method exploits not only the inner desire to live a certain empowered lifestyle or change gender dynamics for future generations, but also theories of self-branding in how consumers want to portray themselves to the outside world. Consumers purchase and endorse products that appear feminist in nature, associating themselves with those products, to appear not only feminist, but also active and vocal in the community. At the level of neoliberalism, self-branding and the project of the self has emerged as an alternative to traditional forms of activism for addressing socio-political issues, because it reinforces the consumerist attitudes that privilege this kind of activism. By creating a personal brand as an activist or feminist and making purchases through these notions, consumers are creating a capitalist solution for systemic and institutional issues.

Previous Studies of Commodity Feminism

Before diving into my own analysis of commodity feminism through three specific case studies, I must highlight the previous scholarship that has paved the way for this project. Sarah Banet-Weiser has led the way in the linkages between brand culture and commodity activism in

her study of Dove's advertising strategies. In her article, "'Free Self-Esteem Tools?': Brand Culture, Gender, and the Dove Real Beauty Campaign," Banet-Weiser examines the Dove Real Beauty campaign in the context of commodity activism and neoliberalism, utilizing the various facets of brand culture, including content, methods, and political participation. Dove's Real Beauty Campaign uses commodity feminism as a way to encourage audience participation, neoliberal brand culture, and social activism in its consumers.^{xxxiv} Banet-Weiser argues that Dove's campaign uses a three-pronged approach to its marketing, creating advertising, pedagogy, and social activism to target the neoliberal privileged consumer. Dove's participatory spaces through the use of innovative media technologies are allowing consumers to create a relationship with the brand and therefore, help build the brand culture itself. "By inviting consumers to be involved in the coproduction of the Dove brand, Dove provides the context or the lived experience of brand culture, where consumers participate in a critique of the norms of beauty culture, even while supporting and expanding the brand boundaries of a company firmly entrenched within this culture."^{xxxv} Clearly, The Real Beauty Campaign has proven successful for Dove, whose sales have jumped from \$2.5 billion to \$4 billion since its launch.^{xxxvi} In looking forward to my own study, it is important to reflect on Banet-Weiser's work connecting the neoliberal consumer to the success of commodity feminism in advertising. While recognizing her research and applying it to three new case studies, Always, Barbie, and Verizon, I will build upon her theories of the neoliberal consumer-citizen's role in these campaigns, while turning the focus to the appropriation of the "young girl" as a feminist symbol and site of anti-nostalgia. Where I will build upon Banet-Weiser's work is in my application of Peck's theoretical framework of the reflexive project of the self, diving into the motivations behind consumer support of these feminist ads as forms of self-therapy.

Always' #LikeAGirl

The Always #LikeAGirl campaign, which seeks to redefine the phrase “like a girl” as something strong and powerful, surfaced on June 26th, 2014 with its first video commercial, which to date has garnered over 60 million views on YouTube.^{xxxvii} Always' advertisement description states, “Using #LikeAGirl as an insult is a hard knock against any adolescent girl. And since the rest of puberty's really no picnic either, it's easy to see what a huge impact it can have on a girl's self-confidence. We're kicking off an epic battle to make sure that girls everywhere keep their confidence throughout puberty and beyond, and making a start by showing them that doing it #LikeAGirl is an awesome thing.”^{xxxviii} This mission statement communicates Always' pledge to change the culture of deprecation of young girls to help facilitate an easier journey through puberty, a time when Always and their products become relevant.

The ad begins with a young woman walking out onto a sound stage. The viewer sees the lights and the cameras; a production assistant walks out and slates. The director begins talking to the woman: “Show me what it looks like to run like a girl.” We see five participants, three females, all in their late teens and early 20s, and two males, one adult and one child. Each participant produces an exaggerated example of a stereotypical little girl running, arms flailing around, skipping in small steps, hair bouncing. The following statements include: “Show me what it looks like to fight like a girl,” and “Now, throw like a girl.” Again, the participants yield magnified examples of weakness and fear. The adult male produces the stereotypical image of a “catfight.” The younger boy pretends the fake baseball he is attempting to throw falls short and hits the ground in front of him. These responses clearly and decisively prove that “like a girl” is connoted as an insult. The screen flashes, “We asked young girls the same question.” This time,

several young girls, all in the pre-puberty age group, respond by running in place as fast as they can, pitching imaginary balls as hard as they can, and throwing punches into the air forcefully. Clearly, their intent is to show that young girls have not yet been conditioned to believe the negative connotations of doing something “like a girl.” As the music cuts out, the director, Lauren Greenfield, begins facilitating a conversation with the participants, asking questions, such as “Do you think you just insulted your sister?” and “When they’re in that vulnerable time between 10 and 12, how do you think it affects them when someone uses “like a girl” as an insult?”^{xxxix} The final montage of young girls fighting, running, doing karate, etc. features a voiceover by one of the older female participants, encouraging girls to keep doing things “like a girl” and showcasing their true potential and power. The director gives some of the older female participants the chance to redo their previous responses and redefine their own biases and preconceptions. The final title card reads, “Let’s make #LikeAGirl mean amazing things.”^{xl}

Described as a “social experiment,” the #LikeAGirl video tugs at the heartstrings as it lays out every misconception, prejudice, and societal expectation that goes along with “being a girl” and then artfully and intentionally shatters them.^{xli} Because of how the shots are laid out, where the viewer sees the behind the scenes elements (lights, cameras, floor tape, etc.) and hears and sees the director speaking from behind the camera, there is an element of truth to this advertisement that makes it feel personal, authentic, and trustworthy. These tactics of authenticity are intentionally employed to create that trusting feeling in the viewers and adds a level of legitimacy to the message otherwise unfeasible. Beginning with images of young women in their 20s and men of both younger and older age groups, the viewer sees the problematic and hidden prejudices present in society. But by showcasing the responses of young girls, it shows that they are learned biases, and asks whether we can pinpoint the age when a

girl's confidence is tested to the point of accepting these prejudices as truth. The effectiveness of this ad stems from the transformations seen in its participants, attempting to create personal reflection in viewers and inspire this anti-nostalgia for women who have experienced the "like a girl" insult personally. Additionally, seeing the confidence and security of young girls while reflecting on the feeling of the "like a girl" insult creates a sense of protectiveness in viewers who want to prevent the destruction of girls' confidence.

In a "Behind the Scenes" video that accompanies the campaign, the director, Lauren Greenfield, explains, "I think that one of the things that Always was interested in looking into is how girls deal with the confidence crisis that happens around puberty. Sometimes what seems small, like saying, "You run like a girl" is just words. But I think that that's a moment where identities are so fragile that it can be really devastating." Greenfield observes, "a lot of the girls pre-puberty were completely uninhibited by their identity as a girl. We started to see the negative associations come out more like twelve, thirteen, and up. I think the most moving part of the experiment [...] [was] how many women did it and then said, 'Wait a minute, why did I just do that?'" Clearly, Always is utilizing this experiment to prove itself as the feminist product for the transition during puberty where this confidence is tested, implying their devotion to the feminist cause and the protection and empowerment of young girls through their products. By creating an emotional connection or "ethical surplus," Always is following Arvidsson's advice to develop attachments based on experiences, emotions, lifestyles, and other benefits instead of focusing on the physical properties of the brand. Not once is the physical product of Always' feminine pads mentioned as the tool for this mode of empowerment, but instead the overall brand and therefore, all of its products, take on this association with the feminist cause.

In creating the #LikeAGirl campaign, Always, in alignment with Arvidsson's argument, also developed the infrastructure for a digital space where conversations about the product and its message could flourish amongst its consumers. The final image of the advertisement features three action buttons along the bottom border, stating the following: "Share to inspire girls everywhere," "Tweet the amazing things you do #LikeAGirl," and "Stand up for girls' confidence at Always.com."^{xlii} These three buttons, which take you to share links on Facebook and Twitter, and link you to their campaign website, create an action plan for viewers, turning them into the "consumer-citizen" coined by Sarah Banet-Weiser. Not only does this ad encourage you to purchase Always products, but also share their message, stand up for young girls, and stand up for yourself by redefining #LikeAGirl in the context of your actions. This method for engaging consumers in the online space allows them to share their experiences, and therefore, contributes to the creation of this brand and its connotations. By creating this authentic experience through filming techniques and focusing on the "young girl" within their advertising scope, Always creates an ad that fosters the emotional connection to the feminist cause of changing connotations of what it means to do something "like a girl," accompanied by a strong online presence to encourage consumer-citizens.

Barbie's #YouCanBeAnything

Unlike Always' authentically moving piece, Barbie's #YouCanBeAnything campaign takes a lighter tone, showcasing young girls in their pursuit to imagine their own futures through their Barbie dolls. Launched October 8th, 2015, Barbie's newest ad campaign cites their creator Ruth Handler's original mission for the doll: "My whole philosophy of Barbie was that, through the doll, the girl could be anything she wanted to be. Barbie always represented the fact that a woman has choices."^{xliiii} Barbie in turn created #YouCanBeAnything, a campaign aimed at

showcasing the diverse array of professions, lifestyles, looks, and more that Barbie and therefore, young girls through their interactions with the doll, can aspire to be.^{»xliv}

Barbie launched this campaign with their “Imagine the Possibilities” short commercial, which has garnered nearly 17 million views on YouTube to date.^{xlv} This advertisement claims authenticity, attempting to showcase real people and not actors reacting to young girls’ dreams, stating, “Hidden cameras capture real reactions to girls imagining everything they might one day become.”^{»xlvi} The ad opens on a wide shot of a collegiate lecture hall overlaid with a pink filter as the screen reads in white cartoon text, “What happens when girls are free to imagine they can be anything?” As the traditional Barbie pink fades away, we see the lecture hall fill up and a young girl around the age of five walks out to the front of the hall, very confidently introducing herself, “Hello my name is Gwyneth, and I’ll be your professor today. And I will be talking about the brain.”^{»xlvii} As the adults in the room start to react with small giggles and looks of enjoyable disbelief, the shot flashes to a veterinarian’s office where another young girl around the same age in pigtail braids and a lab coat introduces herself to a man and his dog as their veterinarian to which he responds, “You’re kidding.” A series of similar scenarios are shown with young girls all in Barbie’s targeted age range taking on various roles including professional soccer coach, traditional businesswoman on a business trip, and museum tour guide, while the adults around them giggle and laugh candidly about the ridiculousness of a young girl at the age of five saying, “I had the most fantastic day at the office. You’ll never believe what happened. I got that new business I wanted.” As the lighthearted music continues to play in the background, we come back to the original young girl in the lecture hall. As she begins to ask a question of her students, the scene cuts to the same young girl sitting on the floor of her bedroom with her Barbie dolls laid out in the same format as the lecture hall we have just witnessed. She is playing with her

Barbie imagining herself as a professor. The screen fades to the original Barbie pink and reads, “When a girl plays with Barbie, she imagines everything she can become.”^{xlvi}

“Imagine the Possibilities” takes a much more relaxed and cheerful approach than Always’ #LikeAGirl, attempting to showcase the charm of these young girls’ dreams as they play with the product rather than the inspirational call-to-action for a feminist cause. As we see young girls dreaming of all the professions they can achieve through their Barbie dolls, we find the emotional connection to the product through the lifestyles we can imagine these girls living and the desire for them to visualize themselves in any profession they choose. However, this campaign does fall victim to the postfeminist trap of imparting the idea that all is well in the world and gender discrimination will not stand in these girls’ way to becoming whatever they wish to be. This ad campaign also takes on the postfeminist ideology of choice; the idea that women should be able to choose their lifestyle without judgment or inhibition, whether that be the housewife or a workingwoman. “Imagine the Possibilities” describes its mission using this ideology: “For over 56 years, Barbie has inspired imaginations and encouraged girls on their journey to self-discovery. From Mermaid to Movie Star, Pet Vet to Police Officer, Fashionista to Fairy Princess, Barbie continues to celebrate the belief that You Can Be Anything.”^{xlix}

Barbie, a company that has fallen under fire consistently for promoting bad body image, lack of ambition, and gender stereotypes through a hyper-sexualized personification of women, is clearly trying to redefine Barbie as a feminist icon through this campaign, despite the fact that any woman with Barbie’s proportions would not be able to remain bi-pedal and still walk. Even further, studies show that girls who play with Barbie have a much lower career self-esteem, seeing boys more likely to be able to do more of both stereotypically male and female dominated careers including, librarian, teacher, flight attendant, nurse, doctor, pilot, police officer, etc.¹

Barbie has needed to reinvent its image, and by creating an advertisement that showcases young girls in often male-dominated professions (i.e. medicine, higher education, sports), Barbie is showing that their product encourages young girls to see themselves in a diverse array of future lifestyles, reassuring parents as their key market demographic of the benefits of buying Barbie products for their daughters.

Barbie, like Always, has trusted Arvidsson's judgement in creating an online space for conversation and contribution, encouraging the use of the hashtag #YouCanBeAnything and linking their campaign website and social media accounts to the advertisement. While they encourage Facebook and Twitter, Barbie's focus is Instagram, where each Thursday, they "throw back to some of the most notable days in Barbie history, celebrating the limitless potential of all girls everywhere" with graphics featuring photos of Barbie's various professions and feminist quotes and facts to accompany them.^{li} Surgeon Barbie from 1973 shares, "The first time Barbie put on scrubs, women made up only 10% of physicians. Today, the percentage has grown to over 30%. That sounds like just what the doctor ordered." Navy Petty Barbie from 1991 reveals, "Barbie joined the Navy in 1991, when 2,600 Navy women participated in Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm." And finally, Astronaut Barbie of 1965's post reads, "The first American woman in space couldn't bend her arms," claiming Barbie as the first woman on the moon.^{lii} These facts and images attempt to rebrand Barbie as a feminist throughout its "trailblazing" history (a play on words quoted directly from Firefighter Barbie's Instagram post).

In creating the You Can Be Anything campaign, Barbie attempted the postfeminist method, presenting the belief that their product allows young girls to visualize themselves in a variety of professions regardless of their gender, ignoring the gender discrimination and limitations that exist in reality. By contributing to this commercial that appropriates the adorable

nature of girlhood and young girls' dreams using a variety of social media posts that redefine Barbie's history as that of a feminist trailblazer and Barbie as a feminist icon, the company brands itself as the feminist doll for young girls everywhere. In marketing the cuteness of young girls playing with Barbie and unashamedly imagining themselves in her shoes, Barbie is appealing to parents wanting their daughters to have the same experiences, seeing themselves without limitation in the postfeminist vein.

Verizon's #InspireHerMind

Steering away from stereotypically feminine brands like Always and Barbie, we must also observe an example of commodity feminism beyond the world of gendered products: Verizon's #InspireHerMind. As a part of their corporate responsibility, Verizon has developed partnerships with organizations including Girls Who Code, MAKERS, and other nonprofits aiming to close the gender gap in science, technology, engineering, and math. This mission within their corporate giving has begun to intersect with its branding and advertising strategies in an attempt to market Verizon as the foremost advocate of women in STEM and a feminist option within the tech market. Launched on June 2nd, 2014, Verizon's "Inspire Her Mind" commercial has gained the fewest views on YouTube of this paper's three case studies, only reaching around 4 million, but has still made a substantial impact on the online feminist space. Citing statistics in teenage girls' career aspirations, this campaign's mission reads, "Not enough girls are encouraged to pursue their love of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). The greatest opportunities in the future will be high-tech jobs in STEM fields, but we're lagging behind the rest of the world, currently ranked 36th in math and 28th in science."^{liii} Verizon's campaign adopts the causal approach to commodity feminism, arguing for change in a specific

facet of gender discrimination and prejudice, specifically the field in which they, as a company, operate.

“Inspire Her Mind” follows one girl’s development from toddler to teenager as she explores her interest in the sciences. Despite her burgeoning curiosity, she is consistently discouraged from exploring these interests due to society’s preconceived standards and expectations for young girls. We first see a close up of a toddler with a mother’s voice in the background cooing, “Who’s my pretty girl?” The video cuts to a five-year-old climbing through a riverbed with a walking stick and rain boots, and we hear “Sammy, sweetie, don’t get your dress dirty.” In elementary school, she works diligently on a model of the solar system, but as she goes to hang the glittery Styrofoam planet from her ceiling, her mother reprimands, “Samantha. This project has gotten out of control.” The teenage girl and her brother are outside working on a model rocket; the camera cuts to her hands painted with pink sparkle nail polish operating a power drill as the brother holds it stable. Her concerned father warns, “Woah! Be careful with that. Why don’t you hand that to your brother?” She follows his instructions, looking dejectedly at the brother. Finally, the same girl, now a young teenager, walks down her school hallway, stopping in front of a notice board encased in glass featuring a poster for the school’s science fair. As she looks at the poster, she pulls out a tube of lip-gloss and uses the glass as a mirror to fix her makeup. The voiceover, quoting Reshma Saujani, the founder of Girls Who Code, says, “Our words can have a huge impact. Isn't it time we told her she's pretty brilliant, too? Encourage her love of science and technology and inspire her to change the world.”^{liv}

“Inspire Her Mind” clearly takes the call-to-action approach to commodity feminist advertising, encouraging a shift in how we respond to girls’ interest in STEM fields. Through its

intentional use of language from the parental voice, this ad emphasizes the ways in which our words can harm a girl's self-esteem and prevent her from becoming involved in stereotypically male dominated subjects in school. The advertisement calls attention to the standards to which we hold young girls, which ultimately cause these preconceived notions of gender's role within the sciences. We are conditioned to believe that girls must be pretty, clean, well dressed, delicate, and lady-like, characteristics that do not necessarily correspond with the explorative nature of the sciences. By assigning this traditional role to young girls, we emphasize to them that it is more important for them to be pretty than smart. By showing the impact of these words on one girl over the course of her childhood, this advertisement has the transformative effect on viewers, creating the sudden realization at the end when you see a young girl whose interest in science has been invalidated while the desire to be attractive has come to the forefront.

Bringing us back to the concept of "anti-nostalgia," it is crucial to note how this advertisement uses specific techniques to instill a sense of remembrance and personalization in its viewers. Throughout the commercial, the parental voice is simply that: a voice. In each scenario, the shot focuses on the image of the young girl, never cutting to a parental figure, but instead using a generic voiceover. This technique allows viewers to attach that voice to their own childhood memories of authority figures. Without an actor's face to which they can assign the voiceover, they substitute their own parental figures within the ad. This technique is successful because of Verizon's intentional scripting of generic and universal comments not uncommon for young girls to hear on a regular basis. Therefore, Verizon is creating a place for viewers to remember hearing these words said to them, harkening back to their own childhoods and any discouragement they received. While the ad creates a beautiful sentimentality of growing up, by the end, we see the clear message of how harmful our seemingly benign words

can be, crafting this “anti-nostalgia” to remind older women of their own victimization. Mobilizing them to change this fate for the next generation, Verizon, subsequently, promotes their brand and products as a way to not only support young girls in STEM, but also become a part of a larger societal change in gender expectations and rhetoric.

User Generated Content in the Online Participatory Space

In providing tools for consumers to participate with their product and cause in an online forum space, Always, Barbie, and Verizon are creating opportunities for user generated content to help shape their brand. Sarah Banet-Weiser argues that because of the shift in technology, brand culture on the Internet using consumer participation and interactive networked media is becoming more important in the commodity activist sphere. She states, “The meteoric rise in consumer-generated content together with its service to corporation as well as in the crafting of the ‘empowered citizens’ must be taken into account when examining contemporary neoliberal brand culture.”^{lv} Because of the neoliberal emphasis on individualism and agency, utilizing online spaces and participatory opportunities to make lifestyle changes in more innovative ways fits perfectly within the context of these campaigns.

In her article, “Empowerment Through Endorsement? Polysemic Meaning in Dove’s User-Generated Advertising,” Brooke Erin Duffy explores the ways in which consumer participation drives branding and advertising within media industries by encouraging the “newly empowered consumer.” In recent years, interactive communications have increased exponentially, creating a growing amount of user-generated content and a large participatory culture in the form of feedback and commentary. However, there are boundaries surrounding these spaces that are created specifically by the producers. She cites another source asserting that “marketers are using consumers’ desire for agency, creative license, and empowerment to

‘reconfigure marketing as a technology of consumer exploitation and control suitable for the complex machinations of global information capitalism.’^{lvi} While some believe these spaces do exploit consumer audiences in their immaterial or creative labor, they can also provide pleasure to the contributors as they participate within these textual spaces. The question here is whether or not this exploitation is negative if the interaction is benefiting the consumers’ well-being in the end. Duffy argues that this relationship between empowerment and exploitation highlights the “polysemic nature of interactivity.”^{lvii} Duffy found that, specifically within the Dove Real Beauty campaign, many women felt empowered by the “space of resistance and negotiation to the dominant meaning” of what it means to be beautiful.^{lviii} However, some were well aware of the exploitive nature of the contest, but accepted it regardless as a part of a larger social movement and change. Because these women were able to take part in defining the real image of beauty, they were able to create a real image of empowerment. In the end, Duffy argues that the “lack of distinction between empowerment and exploitation—as well as between power and pleasure and between real and constructed—allowed the contest to work.”^{lix} Within this paper’s three case studies, it is helpful to understand Duffy’s understanding of the exploitation-empowerment debate within the context of feminist discourse. The melding of feminism and commercialism is often seen as problematic because it “insinuates female empowerment by giving women a choice to participate,” a concept that situates itself well within the neoliberal and postfeminist emphases on individualism and agency.^{lx} However, by creating the illusion of empowerment within the feminist space through individual consumption and purchasing power, these campaigns are deflating legitimate feminist movements and gender politics.

Always’ #LikeAGirl, Barbie’s #YouCanBeAnything, and Verizon’s #InspireHerMind are clear examples of intentionally created opportunities for participation and feedback. By

encouraging discussion and contribution within their ads, these campaigns utilized consumer labor to help increase their reach, spread their message, and validate their intentions, often doing so quite successfully. #LikeAGirl, for example, garnered 101,679 posts between June 26th, its launch date, and July 7th with 81% of those posts and interactions being made by female audiences.^{lxi} Many women began sharing their approval and excitement for the campaign and its social goals, posting about their experiences with the ad. The following tweets are only two of many similar posts expressing admiration for Always and its newest campaign:

“#LikeAGirl - to me it was #CryLikeAGirl cause that commercial was just so freaking awesome!! Go, girls” –Ellie (@ellestcoolmavie) June 27, 2014^{lxii}

“why can't "run #likeagirl " also mean "win the race" "? (yes, this pad commercial made me teary!) #likeagirl” – dana meyersen (#danameyersen) July 10, 2014^{lxiii}

With posts like these, a female demographic of 81% of total engagement, 71% of women insisting that brands be responsible for using advertising to promote positive messages to women, and 52% of women justifying their purchases based on portrayals of women in advertising, it is clear that these campaigns are having significant success in the market.^{lxiv} In creating a space for participation, Always, Barbie, and Verizon have enabled a feedback apparatus, whereby they can better understand how to appeal to their audiences, while also creating a mechanism for consumers to share the campaigns contributing to the brand’s overall promotional strategies.

Purchasing Power as a Form of Self-Therapy

Clearly, commodity feminist campaigns are having an effect on women as evidenced by the overwhelming support and feedback and measured impact on consumer practices. The

question we must ask is why these campaigns and the messages they impart have caused this shift in the logics of consumption. These brands and their products, while employing and appropriating feminist rhetoric and methodology, do not substantially cause any concrete change in a political or institutional setting. Systemic gender discrimination and prejudice will continue until there are substantive policy changes granting women their basic rights to equal pay, reproductive health, and more. It can be argued that “changing minds” is making a tangible difference; for example, calling attention to the fact that we as a society are conditioned to use “like a girl” as an insult can inform how we move forward in our use of language. Alternatively, demarcating the rhetoric of what we expect of young girls as underhandedly harmful to their self-esteem and aspirations will advise parents on the necessary precautions they must take when raising their daughters. However, in the end, essential change is not being made, so why are women so motivated to support these brands purely based on the feminist pretense?

Using Janice Peck’s theory of the therapeutic project of the self, I argue that these ad campaigns are media-based forms of self-therapy that induce feelings of empowerment and healing in a time when women’s rights and freedoms are consistently being challenged. In her work, “The Therapeutic Enterprise and the Quest for Women's Hearts and Minds,” Peck discusses the rise of the “therapeutic ethos” in modern America in cases of both public issues, including criminal justice, education, welfare policies, and political discourse, and televisual forms, including religious series, talk shows, and shopping channels. Psychological insight has influenced modern society, creating a therapeutic enterprise that attempts to create “freedom from personal suffering and all manner of social problems.”^{lxv} Peck uses *The Oprah Winfrey Show* to develop these claims, arguing that the therapy talk show as a genre tackles this psychological worldview in its own distinct cultural form. In order to truly be effective, these

shows and media forms must acknowledge the neoliberal expectation of a viewer's ability to overcome his or her problems and move forward with the help of guest speakers, shared stories, and consumer endorsements. Taking on a "self-determination" model of therapy, Peck suggests, undermines the authority of psychological expertise in favor of the "active/activist individual who has the capacity to think and disagree" and thereby "gives a voice to normally voiceless women" who "speak for themselves and are valued for their experience."^{lxvi} This concept relies heavily on the neoliberal belief in self-sufficiency, privileging an individual's power to make changes in their own life through entrepreneurial opportunities and free markets.

Women, by engaging with these media forms, develop their own feminist therapy that is self-determined and independent as they take an active role in what they consume. It is a different form of therapy because of its televisual nature that requires a choice to watch or adopt it, but can ultimately influence consumer choices in a fundamental way. These outgrowths of second-wave feminism create a space for women's experiences, recovery, psychiatry, and empowerment that have inspired women's loyalty to brands and consumer goods.^{lxvii} Acting as forms of self-empowerment, these campaigns commodify self-esteem as something you can support through your purchases. Additionally, by using the image of the "young girl," these commercials instill in women the idea that they can aid and protect these young women through the years where these issues come to light.

The Neoliberal Search for the Self

Commodity feminism offers a solution. It creates a space for women to understand each of their quests to finding their empowered selves within the context of their consumer habits. In a time of systemic sexism and dismissal of women's equal rights, these campaigns utilize commodified self-empowerment and "anti-nostalgia" as tools to affect viewers' consumer habits,

prompting them to think of their purchasing power as a form of activism. In creating advertisements that portray the inherent sentimentality of childhood while developing a constructive understanding of the sexist and ultimately destructive aspects of their experiences, these companies are rallying women to change and remediate these detrimental sociocultural conditions for future generations. By developing the emotional connection to a brand through appropriated experiences, memories, and sentimentality using filming techniques that deliver authenticity, pertinent voiceovers, and familiar language and rhetoric, Always, Barbie, and Verizon adeptly create ad campaigns that feature this personal touch within their key demographic. Creating scenes and dialogues featuring young girls in vulnerable phases of their lives allows for audiences to feel connected to the images on screen, remembering their own experiences or reflecting on the ways in which their language can be harmful or gendered. Because of these thoughtful campaigns and the intentionally designed space for feedback and contribution in their participatory spaces that complement them, women are motivated to engage with these brands in not only their purchases, but also online, contributing to the user-generated content that helps market the brand and product to an even larger audience. Because neoliberalism encourages increased power to the private sector and free market, fostering socially responsible consumer-citizens, these advertising campaigns convince their market that their products are ethical purchases. In reality, however, endorsing these “feminist” products is simply a form of self-therapy, whereby women experience feelings of healing and empowerment by flexing their consumer power. These endorsements and purchases act as simply the consumerist solution to these systemic and institutional issues of sexism and gender discrimination; unable to make significant change in the sociopolitical space, but instead acting as a form of therapy for women influenced by the neoliberal belief in individual agency.

Of course, it is impossible to claim that all audiences will react equally, and undoubtedly, there will be those who react indifferently if not badly to these forms of advertising. It cannot be said that all women will remember moments of sexism from their childhoods when watching these advertisements, nor that they will feel protective of the young girls on screen, and therefore, want to change our culture for future generations. Some could even argue that these forms of media are indeed creating systemic change by simply changing minds, inspiring reflection on the ways in which we use gendered language and rhetoric, and therefore, inciting a cultural shift in how we raise our daughters, encourage young girls to explore their passions, and regard the women in our lives. However, these alternative readings and possibilities do not negate the argument that these campaigns and the purchasing habits they promote are forms of self-therapy for the activist consumer within the context of the neoliberal space.

Within Always, Barbie, and Verizon's campaigns, we can observe the use of the young girl as a site of contested nostalgia and an icon of the feminist cause. In reflecting on this "anti-nostalgia," women are able to tap into their neoliberal selves, becoming the ethical consumer-citizens who support brands that tackle feminist issues to create change for future generations. This trend is making waves in branding practices as increasing numbers of companies are realizing the importance of the female market. By inspiring self-empowerment and feminist change, these ad campaigns are successfully developing a female demographic for their products, prompting women to think of their purchasing power as a form of influential activism, when in reality it acts as simply a temporary consumerist solution to a much larger problem. At a time when women's rights are being attacked daily by political and social practices, if these forms of media and the purchases they inspire instill feelings of empowerment and hope in women through their daily purchasing habits, who are we to judge?

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