

EMPOWERTISING: HOW DO BRANDS USE FEMINISM AS A MARKETING STRATEGY?*Terenteva Daria**(Терентьева Дарья Сергеевна)**Central Saint Martins & London Colledge of Communication*[DOI: 10.31618/ESU.2413-9335.2019.3.58.59-63](https://doi.org/10.31618/ESU.2413-9335.2019.3.58.59-63)**ANNOTATION.**

This essay will explore how brands appropriate feminism and girl empowerment to broaden their target audience. It will investigate how brands subvert the human desire for meaning and spend resources in order to advertise a carefully created and designed myth prior to the product development. Taking several well known companies as examples this essay will explore how the new marketing technology allowed them to increase the number of female customers significantly. It is beneficial to acknowledge this strategy for both customers and marketing specialists.

АННОТАЦИЯ.

В статье представлено исследование по вопросу технологии апроприации брендами концепта феминизма и расширения прав и возможностей женщин для привлечения новой целевой аудитории. Рассматриваются механизмы использования брендов свойственного людям подсознательное желание покупать со смыслом. Показано, как компании расходует финансовые средства на распространение тщательно спланированного рекламного мифа вместо работы над продуктом (товаром) как таковым. На примере нескольких известных компаний будет разобрана маркетинговая стратегия, позволяющая значительно увеличить количество женщин-покупателей. Эту стратегию важно осознавать как покупателям, на которых она направлена, так и маркетологам.

Keywords: empowertising, empowerment, advertising, feminism, marketing

Ключевые слова: феминизм, реклама, маркетинг.



Fig 1

Introduction .

The term ‘empowertising’ was introduced by Andi Zeisler [21] to describe a new wave in advertising, namely targeting a female audience. Companies that have historically attracted male customers, such as De Beers, famous for its engagement rings, and Nike, for its well-known sports attire, are currently

expanding their sales by attracting female consumers.

Jenkils [9] claims: “...activism about girls’ self-esteem is hot right now – a whole industry has been built around it”. The marketing strategies of the above-mentioned companies will be examined as examples of ‘empowertising’, using female empowerment as a selling tool.

Research methods. I will begin by analysing the historical roots of feminism and compare its values with the messages that companies use to win female customers today. I will examine the marketing strategies of several brands, namely Nike, De Beers and Always through their advertising materials (posters, slogans, branded video, and photo content). This will help us identify how they create extra empowering meaning for their product to win female customers. To research the concept of ‘empowertising’ I will use a Zeisler A. [21] book ‘We Were Feminists Once From Riot Grrrl

to Covergirl’, who was the first to use the term and other readings listed in the bibliography section.

Research innovation. I will consider how women were thought to smoke, choose male-dominated sports and express their independence through buying their own diamond rings. I will also explore how feminist ideas are used in branding through the process of substituting one’s purchasing habits with personality. Let us define the term ‘branding’ and why it is so important in the industry.

Experimental data, analysis, results. According to the business dictionary, branding is “the process involved in creating a unique name and image for a product in the consumer’s mind”[3]. According to Olins [13], this image of a product is important for consumers because it gives them confidence in the good reputation of the company and the high quality of its products. He argues that technology can be replicated quite easily in the modern world, but the unique brand image, reputation and emotional connections with customers are not something that can be achieved easily. As Olins [13] states, branding is becoming one of the most important unique selling points in today’s world. Camper [4] specifies five main aspects of branding: brand identity, personality, values, promise and concept. By carefully manipulating these components, the ‘mythology’ of the brand is created. Many of the successful brands have solid values and promises that they project into the world. For example, Klein [10] states: “Nike isn’t a running company, it is about the idea of transcendence through sport. Starbucks isn’t a coffee shop chain, it’s about the idea of community”. Thus, despite the fact that there are numerous companies that sell sports clothing and coffee, many people will choose well-known and established brands. This is because alongside the product itself, these companies sell a certain lifestyle and values that customers approve of and desire. For example, when drinking a Starbucks coffee,

you are not merely satisfying your desire for a tasty coffee, you are also becoming part of the “culture of warmth and belonging, where everyone is welcome” and you are “connecting with transparency, dignity and respect” [17]. These quotes are cited from the list of corporate values that can be found on Starbucks’ website. Often, branding leads to a mis-indication of customers’ personal values and identities with their shopping habits [19]. Companies present people with a desirable image of themselves. This image resonates with the target audience and makes people choose a product so they become part of the brand’s myth. They buy a product in order to acquire certain values that are important to them. By selling an idea rather than a product, companies build an emotional connection with customers who will prefer their products to those of any other company. Feminism is often used as a tool to sell products to a female audience. Feminism is a very sensitive topic in the modern world. Women have been actively fighting for their rights since the first wave of feminism took place between the 1830s and the early 1900s [8]. One of the first strong feminist movements was called the Suffragettes. This term derived from the French word ‘suffrage’, which means an ability to vote, so its aim was to give political rights to women [5]. Over the decades, the feminist philosophy was spreading and bringing an equality and freedom of choice to other areas of women’s social life. Since the 1990s up to the current time, society has experienced a third wave of feminism. Today, women are urged to embrace

their sexuality and accept their gender as a gift [8]. Alongside other feminist writers, these ideas are influenced by Camille Paglia’s “Sexual Personae” [14]. She claims that women are repressed by patriarchy in a male-dominated world. Thus, society is now tackling the issues of women’s sexuality and total equality with men.

Looking closely at modern feminism, one can argue that its ideology and aims have shifted from legislation to social and psychological freedom. The third wave of feminism is tackling problems of equality by dealing with people’s mindsets, making them more open to suggestions and subversions. Famighetti [6], an editor of a special issue of *Aperture* magazine ‘On Feminism’, provides this warning: “The aspiration and demands of feminist movements have changed dramatically. A century ago, women protested for the vote. Today, women lead from the heights of politics and business. Celebrities have taken up the mantle of popular feminism...” Alongside celebrities promoting female sexuality and pride, brands are beginning to use feminist desires as a bottom line for their branding and marketing strategies. One of the earliest examples of successful advertising targeting feminists was conducted by Edward Bernays [2]. He was hired by the American Tobacco Company to expand the company’s sales to both genders. He understood that smoking was associated with male power so he decided to use this concept for a marketing trick. He hired some attractive women to march at the feminist



Fig 2

Easter Sunday parade in New York in 1929 with lit cigarettes in their hands. Women’s desire for freedom and power was used to change the public mindset about smoking.

Cigarettes evolved from being a social taboo to being a “torch of freedom”, bringing a large number of new customers to the tobacco company [2]. Such subversion of the general public’s mindset proved to be an

efficient sales technique, attracting new customers. This method is still flourishing in contemporary branding strategies. To prove this point, I will take a closer look at the examples of successful companies that are using feminist ideology and female empowerment to attract new customers.

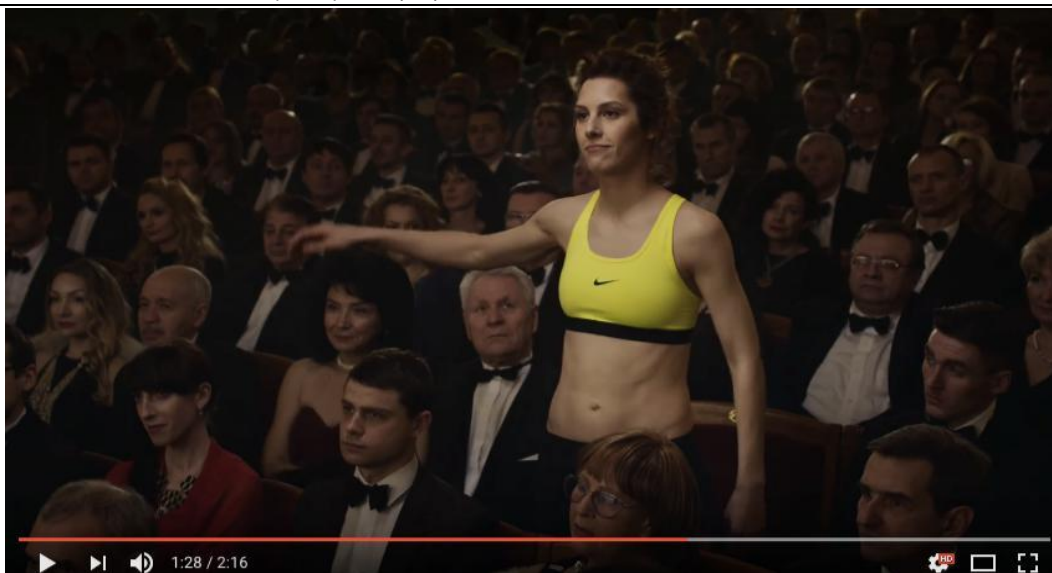


Fig 3

Scrolling through Instagram, one may come across a Nike ad featuring a pretty young girl participating in a martial art. She proudly claims that, during a tournament, a man hesitated to hit a girl so she punched him first. This ad aims to empower girls to do what they want and to

break the traditional patriarchal taboos. Another aspect of Nike's branding strategy worth mentioning here is that the company produces different ads for different countries and cultures. It has ads featuring Muslim women (fig.2) skating in a hijab [20] and it introduced a performance hijab for Muslim athletes [16]. In a Russian Nike ad(fig.3), a girl changes out of a pretty dress and into football attire [7].

Nike's branding message is that sport is for everyone. Bill Bower, a co-founder of

Nike, comments: "If you have a body, you're an athlete." Due to the company's previous successful campaigns, men already know that they can "Just Do It" and succeed in any sport they like, by choosing the Nike brand. Now, it is time to attract a whole new wave of customers: women who are searching for equality, power and transcendence. Nike invites women to "Do It" through sport by wearing full Nike sports attire. These female-empowering ads are blurring the boundaries of religion, gender and culture. They are contro-

versial at their core so they trigger an animated discussion in the comments and therefore attract a lot of attention. For example Instagram post of the Russian blogger about Nike Women campaign gathered nearly 196 thousands likes [1]. At the moment, Nike is at the cutting edge of girls' self-esteem and empowerment advertising. The profile picture on the company's Instagram page displays just one word, "equality" [12]. This is the bottom line of its current branding. Nike is spending its advertising money on supporting social movements. Klein criticises the Nike business model, blaming the company for producing products "through an intricate web of

contractors and subcontractors" and for pouring its "resources into design and marketing required to fully project [their] big idea". She finds it outrageous that companies switch from "product business" to "idea business" and that creating meaning is their new act of production [10]. In an era when feminism is becoming a valuable brand [21], Nike is using it for its branding strategy.

Another fruitful example of feministic advertising is the De Beers' campaign "Your left hand says 'we', your right hand says 'me'" (fig. 4). It is worth mentioning that its "A Diamond is Forever" campaign made diamond rings "synonymous with marriage or engagement" [13] and generated a large number



Fig 4

of male customers, spending a month's salary on an engagement

ring. With that campaign, "De Beers literally changed Western

culture" [13]. Now, there is an opportunity to sell diamond rings to women

directly, without the mediation of men. De Beers' new marketing

strategy targets single, independent working women who have the potential to spend a large amount of money on themselves. On the poster with the catchy slogan "Your left hand says 'we'", we see a middle-aged, beautiful and wealthy woman. "Your right hand rules the world" and "Raise your right hand" suggests De Beers' new branding strategy. "The campaign was a massive success, increasing diamond sales by up to 15% and winning the ad industry's prestigious Gold EFFIE Award". [13] Thus, it can be seen that De Beers is masterfully flipping its brand values and message from a diamond ring being a symbol of marriage to it being a symbol of self-sufficiency and independence following the fashion of the time. This proves Klein's [10] theory about the preference for symbol over substance. De Beers may not be the best jewellery company in terms of price and value and it does not try to convince customers that its products are the best in terms of technology and quality. Instead, it makes people confuse the product with the myth that is being carefully built around it. I believe branding follows the same rules as storytelling because it involves creating a brand myth and a meaning for the product. "Storytelling is an indispensable human preoccupation, as important to us all almost as breathing. From the mythical campfire tale to its explosion in the post-television age, it dominates our lives." [20]. Companies pour their resources into making a good 'story' for their brand, a story that their target audience will like and feel compassion for. However, as soon as the story is not suitable for the current time and situation, it is time to create a new one.

Conclusion. The above-mentioned companies are only a few vivid examples of the 'empowerising' trend

in branding. Many other popular companies follow the same fashion. For example, Always and its "Like a Girl" campaign striving to normalise menstruation [15], or Dove with its pursuit of a real non-Photoshopped beauty [11], or the STEAM campaign 'Inspire Her Mind' [1] showing how women are repressed in traditional society. Even Vodafone promises to give "power to women" [18]. Female empowerment is in fashion; it attracts people's attention and brings new devoted customers who support feminist values and choose to show it by purchasing the products of particular companies. Despite the fact that "some advertisers will do it just because it's trendy, and they'll do it badly" [16], some brands successfully prosper on the back of social movements. The majority of companies will support popular social movements in order to win customers. However, like De Beers producing two contradictory campaigns in order to sell a diamond ring, which could be a symbol of marriage and independence at the same time, brand values will conform and change, depending on fashion and the opinion of the general public.

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Illustration List

Figure 1. Dick W. (1944) *Of course I can!; I'm patriotic as can be - And ration points won't worry me!* United States. War Food Administration [Poster].

Figure 2. Get Russia (2017) *Nike Wonders What Russian Girls Are 'Made Of '*, Available at: http://getrussia.com/videos/what_are_girls_made_of/, (Accessed: 11 March 2017).

Figure 3. Haider K. (2017) *Nike is Challenging Stereotypes with This Ad Featuring Muslim Sports-women*. Available at: <http://www.todayspak.com/nike-challenging-stereotypes-ad-featuring-muslim-sports-women/>

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Figure 4. J. Walter Thompson (2003) *Raise Your Right Hand* [Poster].