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Uppity Women Unite!

Marketing the Women's Movement in America

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In the decades since the Second Wave of the American feminist movement began, much attention has been paid to sexist advertising. Many feminist theories emerging from the academy have had an antipathy to market activities at their core. Scott has argued, in an **often-cited essay** that was reproduced in *Advertising & Society Review*,

that feminism has never been ‘outside the market,’ but instead has made successful use of the market to advance its agenda (2006). In this photoessay, we will go through a series of examples, dating from the early twentieth century and advancing to the present, to explore the feminist movement’s use of marketing, including its techniques and channels, as well as the way that advertisers have advanced feminism through their messaging.

As a result of the locus of attention on sexism in advertising, less study has been given to the way that the women’s movement has communicated its ideas, issues, events, products, and fundraising goals, often using the same channels through which marketers tout products and sometimes collaborating with corporations to achieve feminist goals. Yet, as communications technology has become cheaper and more easily available to individuals and small groups, the women’s movement has taken advantage of these media, from photocopying to Twitter, to build awareness, recruit adherents, raise funds, and even sell goods. Furthermore, several advertising campaigns have put forward people, products, or concepts associated with the movement; on occasion, these commercial campaigns have simultaneously raised funds for the movement. When these efforts are catalogued in one place, as we do here, it is easy to see that there is a substantial body of material and practice that deserves more attention from the academy (and the movement) than it has been getting.

In this photo essay, we will look back at some of these efforts. We begin with the homely practices—the handmade placards, the cheaply printed handbills—that are thought to typify grassroots, counter-cultural movements. We will note that an aesthetic is developed that is repeated long after the digital revolution makes the “handmade” merely a look, not a practice. We will catalogue the individual level signage—buttons, bumperstickers, and T-shirts—building to the echoes of those same messages in bigger campaigns and social media today. We will move from street theatre toward globally-televised special events, drawing the connection to the publicity value of both. We will note the types of celebrities that feminism has both spawned and recruited, as well as how these celebrities then marketed feminism to the public. We will look at campaigns for change that were do-it-yourself affairs, but we will build toward more recent efforts that involved major institutions, heavy publicity and advertising, and eventually affected millions of Americans. Throughout, we will note the involvement and support of major organizations, including corporations, as well as mainstream media. We end with an overview of product advertisements with feminist messages, turning to question why these messages are seen as unfeminist because of their ties to markets and media—when all the campaigns just catalogued were just as connected. And, finally, we will question the frequent assumption that the teams behind the creation of advertising are always presumed to be male and unfriendly to the cause of women’s equality, when lots of

evidence exists to suggest that this assumption is unreasonable, especially today. Overall, we encourage readers to think against the grain of well-used criticisms as they consider the active and often sophisticated way in which the movement has presented its agenda to the public.

Marches and Placards



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Figure 1.

During the Second Wave of the American women's movement, cadres of activists and small "consciousness-raising groups" would spring up overnight, sometimes splitting into smaller cells as tactics and philosophies gave rise to dispute. These groups staged spontaneous and local demonstrations. Handmade posters (**Figure 1**) were used to convey the feminist message. This poster epitomizes the kind of homemade communication that came to be associated with the movement. But, as we will show, the communication tactics that have been put to use to further the cause are far more various and sophisticated.



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Figure 2.

In the suffrage push of the 1910s, there were also pickets and marches, but the organization was far more formalized, strongly anchored, as it was, to the **General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC)**—an enormous women's group that was, by that time, nearly 50 years old (**Scott 2006**). Furthermore, donations from wealthy suffragists, such as **Alva Belmont and Miriam Leslie**, made it possible for organizers to use the most current of marketing techniques. The **National American Woman Suffrage Association's** leader, **Carrie Chapman Catt**, carefully orchestrated marches and pickets, using colors, songs, and themes that were eye-catching and memorable, but also “ladylike.” (Mrs. Catt was also the founder of the **League of Women Voters.**) The printing and dissemination of sophisticated announcements and collateral materials, such as this announcement of the 1913 march to Washington, D. C., presented a contemporary and progressive face (**Figure 2**).



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Figure 3.

The technology of color printing created a fad among the American public for collecting printed cards and posters. The cards were normally “trade cards” used by small businesses to promote goods and services, while the new national advertisers often commissioned well-known artists, such as **Maxfield Parrish** and **J. C.**

Leyendecker, to promote their products through posters and national magazine advertising. Particularly for products aimed at women, female artists like **Jessie Willcox Smith** often used sweet images of children. In the suffrage movement, there were also **posters, as well as cards**. The former would be produced by the state-level suffrage organizations, such as this poster from Ohio (**Figure 3**), which draws on a mountain range, a radiant sun, and bushels of wheat to lend angelic strength to the Ohioan woman.



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Figure 4.

Local chapters of the GFWC sometimes produced cards or posters based on art done by one of their members (**Figure 4**). The quotation is from one of feminism's earliest economists, **Charlotte Perkins Gilman**, who supported herself early in life as a trade card artist. In this particular example, the political message went deep: milk that was safe for infants to drink was far from readily available in the nineteenth century, and it took years of infrastructure development, regulation, and activism to ensure its quality. At the beginning of the twentieth century, infant mortality as a consequence of gastrointestinal issues, potentially caused by milk that was "dirty, spoiled, easily adulterated, and loaded with pathogens" had become a considerable public health concern (**Wolf 2015, 42**). Yet at the same time, urban mothers were transitioning 'from breast to bottle' because of a variety of changing pressures, opportunities, and views on women's social and economic roles.

Ensuring the 'purity' of milk was therefore a much further-ranging political statement than it looks at first sight—and much more tightly bound to the women's movement--and this trade card banked on the reader making these connections. The quote not only rallied mothers to ensure the health of their children, but it also implied that those who chose not to breastfeed according to historical practice should, in fact, be able to do so. The assertion that the domestic sphere was governed by

politics, foreshadowing the second-wave feminist slogan that **'the personal is political'** was a dig at those who contended that women had no business being concerned with civic decision making.

Flyers, Leaflets, and Handbills



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Figure 5.

Handbills have been a primary marketing vehicle for petty merchants, itinerant speakers, events promoters, and social activists for hundreds of years (**O'Barr 2005**). Particularly when the topic was political, however, leaflets could cause the bearer to land in jail. The case of **Margaret Sanger**, the leader of the birth control movement in early 20th century America and founder of **Planned Parenthood**, however, poses a wry twist. Sanger distributed leaflets to promote her lectures, which instructed poor women in the arts of 'family planning,' and she also printed pamphlets that provided written instruction (**Figure 5**). She was arrested repeatedly for these activities, but her crime was not the actual instruction and provision of birth control. Instead, Sanger was brought to heel each time for distributing obscene printed materials in the form of handbills and pamphlets. Under the notorious **Comstock Laws**, the distribution of any material related to sexuality was considered pornography and punishable with jail time. Thus, Sanger's arrests for her attempts to educate the public fell under charges of obscenity, rather than political activism (**Scott 2005**).



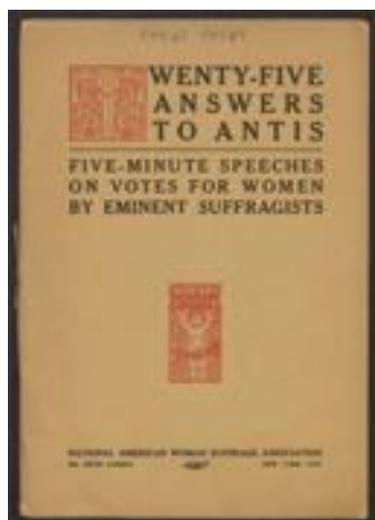
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Figure 6.

In the late twentieth century, cheap photocopying made handbills even more prevalent. Anyone who could get to a **Kinko's** could start a social movement. By the time this 2009 handbill was created (**Figure 6**), however, sophisticated imagery could be designed and reproduced entirely at home, using digital means. Nevertheless, this particular example echoes the aesthetic of the 1970s movement, both in the cut-out imagery and the choice of placements, as in the fonts for the text. Such flyers continue to lend the movement a grassroots, revolutionary aura: the promotions were still produced by individuals working on the cheap, but the materials and methods were far more sophisticated and machinized.

Pamphlets and Brochures



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Figure 7.

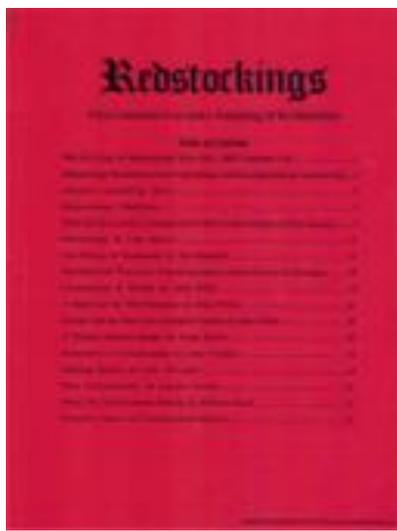


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Figure 8.

In both of feminism's First and Second Waves, the handbill practice was expanded to the production of booklets, brochures, and pamphlets. Oftentimes, these works gave instruction for individual and local groups to use in advocacy efforts. The first booklet we see here (**Figure 7**) is a compendium of short speeches to be used in rebuttal to anti-suffrage arguments. The second (**Figure 8**) is a guide to helping the drive to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment, which failed after a long state-by-state battle.



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Figure 9.



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Figure 10.

Redstockings, one of the most radical and memorable groups operating in New York during the early Second Wave, self-published a number of essays and short works (**Figures 9** and **10**). Interestingly, **Redstockings** still exists and maintains a website, redstockings.org, through which you can purchase these materials archived online in the spirit of “Building on What’s Been Won by Knowing What’s Been Done.”



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Figure 11.

The ‘local look’ of the movement during the 1970s was further supported by the spontaneous demonstrations typical of that era. Throughout the history of the movement, however, but especially beginning in the 1970s, capturing the attention of the press with provocative speeches or actions was a key strategy for gaining attention for the cause in the mainstream media. At the 1968 Miss America pageant, activists threw various beauty implements, but not bras, into a **“Freedom Trash Can”** to be burned (**Figure 11**). Somehow, the press got the notion that bras were being burned, and the story hit the news like wildfire. For reasons that are hard to understand, feminists have now denied that bras were burned for 50 years—as they are still afraid to be seen endorsing such a thing! We can only wonder why they have never simply embraced the bra-burning idea, which, intentional or not, was a brilliant and memorable distillation of the movement’s aims, and just the sort of galvanizing visualization that most marketing campaigns, as well as social movements, work hard to create.



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Figure 12.

One of the most creative—and provocative—of the small groups behind the Second Wave was the **Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell**, or W.I.T.C.H. W.I.T.C.H. staged witch-themed street theatre, such as marching to Wall Street dressed as witches and “throwing hexes” at the financial district (**Figure 12**). They once invaded a bridal fair, wearing black veils and chanting “Here come the slaves, off to their graves” to the tune of the bridal march. Street theatre such as performed by W.I.T.C.H. often made people quite uncomfortable, but it also piqued the interest of the national media, so colorful descriptions were often reported to the rest of the nation, in turn inspiring others. Today, we are of course familiar with performances in public spaces under the guise of flash-mobs, which have equally, albeit less controversially, been used for marketing purposes.

Buttons



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Figure 13.

No history of marketing the women’s movement would be complete without a mention of buttons. The button craze of the 1960s began with slogans from the peace movement (“Make Love Not War”), as well as the drug culture (“Turn on, Tune in, Drop Out”) and expanded into politics, such as the “Come Clean for Gene” slogan for **Eugene McCarthy**, a youth movement in support of a radical Democratic Presidential candidate very reminiscent of the recent push behind Bernie Sanders. But it was the women’s movement that created pins that lasted (**Figure 13**). These buttons were mass-produced in the 1970s; later, you could make them yourself. Today, they are all available for purchase online.

Stickers



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Figure 14.

Bumper stickers were another phenomenon that grew up in the polarized politics of the 1960s: car owners would battle over ideologies, with one side sporting peace signs and slogans, while the other would show the American flag with the phrase, "**America: Love it or Leave it**" The women’s movement of the 1970s put the form to a different use: a sticker proclaiming that “this oppresses women” was affixed to transit advertising that displayed imagery, language, or situations that the movement wished to protest. This image (**Figure 14**), however, is from a **2015 campaign** in which the same sticker was re-employed to raise awareness once again—and support a Twitter campaign with the hashtag **#thisoppresseswomen**.

T-Shirts



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Figure 15.

Hard to believe now, but before the 1960s, T-shirts were underwear for men. The youth movement of that era adopted the T-shirt, as well as blue jeans (which were worn mostly for construction work and rodeos before that decade) as the generational uniform. By the late 1960s, the aphorisms that were appearing on buttons, bumper stickers, and posters, were also printed on T-shirts. Such shirts were often produced locally, with the most pithy slogans at first hard to find. Later, of course, they were mass-produced and the most popular ones became standards. “The Future is Female” t-shirt here is a vintage 1970s shirt, as claimed by the [Etsy](#) vendor who offers it now for purchase ([Figure 15](#)).



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Figure 16.

The feminist political T-shirt probably reached its apotheosis with the “This is What a Feminist Looks Like” shirt of the early 2000s. The shirt first appeared on **the cover of Ms. Magazine in 2003**, worn by four contemporary celebrities, **Whoopi Goldberg, Ashley Judd, Camryn Mannheim, and Margaret Cho (Figure 16)**. The T-shirts, produced by the **Feminist Majority Foundation**, engaged with the negative stereotype that had been active since the formal American women’s movement began in the mid 1800s. The stereotype portrayed feminists as ugly women who were angry because they could not attract men. The T-shirts were quickly taken up and could be seen worn by a number of celebrities, as well as ordinary men and women.

The phrase entered the national vocabulary to a degree that was even more impactful than the T-shirts. In 2014, the campaign was revived with a hashtag #WhatAFeministLooksLike and a new T-shirt design. **The shirt proliferated** through social media, worn by celebrities such as **Benedict Cumberbatch** and **Emma Watson**. However, the campaign was halted when **rumors surfaced** that the shirt was being produced in a sweatshop.

The life of the slogan, however, continued. At the United State of Women Summit in June 2016 in Washington DC, **President Obama remarked**, “I may be grayer than I was eight years ago, but this is what a feminist looks like.”

The Celebrity Feminist



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Figure 17.

The T-shirt made several turns in a campaign called the **“I Had an Abortion”** project begun by activist **Jennifer Baumgardner**. In 2004, Baumgardner persuaded 10 celebrities, including today’s most famous feminist, **Gloria Steinem**, to be photographed wearing a T-shirt saying, “I had an abortion” (**Figure 17**). Eight years later, when a panel and a book-signing by Baumgardner was scheduled at the **University of North Carolina at Wilmington**, some of the “I Had an Abortion” T-shirts appeared locally, being worn by students and others in Wilmington—and were sold for \$15 each at the event. In a propaganda war reminiscent of the bumper-sticker era, abortion foes appeared in hand-made T-shirts declaring, “I have never killed a baby.”

The amazing last round was when **Gloria Steinem** was featured in a **Lands’ End catalogue**, along with an article on her “legendary” career, and a company promise to donate \$3.00 from any purchase of a t-shirt monogrammed with the symbol of her organization in support of a revival of the **Equal Rights Amendment (Steinem and Scott 2003)**. Though the abortion T-shirt was not pictured or sold, the outcry from the anti-abortion crowd was immediate. Catholic schools, in particular, objected, which had a real bite for Land’s End, as their clothes are frequently purchased as school uniforms. Land’s End removed the article and apologized to the public for its support of a **“divisive political or religious issue.”** Of course, Land’s End was then battered with the backlash from women who objected to equal rights being called a divisive issue.



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Figure 18.

The entire story builds on the celebrity power of **Gloria Steinem**, who first emerged as the feminine, beautiful face of the movement in the 1970s. Though there is no question of Steinem's commitment to the movement, nor of her unparalleled contribution to its growth and strength, it is nevertheless true that when she first appeared, she was a highly fashionable, well-connected semi-celebrity among what were then called "The Beautiful People" (**Scott 2006**). Celebrity feminists, however, were commonplace in the Second Wave: **Betty Friedan, Germaine Greer, and Kate Millett, just to name a few, might still sound familiar to the contemporary reader.** However, they were hardly the first to achieve fame through their activism: **Lucy Stone, Victoria Woodhull, and Susan B. Anthony** were national celebrities in their time—and Victoria Woodhull was also a fashionable beauty. All of them had commercial pulling power, as is evidenced by this turn-of-the-century endorsement of Fairy Soap **by Elizabeth Cady Stanton (Figure 18)**. Though less well known now, Cady Stanton was Susan B. Anthony's co-author, co-conspirator, and constant companion. Present at the **Seneca Falls convention of 1848** and a signatory to its declaration, Cady Stanton was one of feminism's first and most articulate public advocates—and probably also their first celebrity pitchwoman for a manufactured product (**Scott 2006**).



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Figure 19.



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Figure 20.

Just to be sure you know that Emma Watson and Beyoncé are not a completely new feminist phenomenon, we do want to say that the most famous actress of the early twentieth century, **Lillian Russell**, marched and wrote a newspaper column in support of suffrage, giving the movement a much-needed publicity and credibility boost. The Second Wave also had **Jane Fonda** and **Marlo Thomas** (**Figure 19**), both quite famous actresses of that time. Today, however, the impact of Emma Watson (**Figure 20**) coming out as a feminist, followed soon by **Beyoncé**, Jennifer Aniston, and

Jennifer Lawrence, is a sign that the movement is once again live and newly fashionable. Emma Watson's **announcement** of her own feminism in a powerful speech before the United Nations in 2014 was followed by controversy from all sides. But she has stood strong and has followed up by becoming **ever more astute and informed** on both feminist thought and gender inequality around the world. Watson, a graduate of elite Brown University in the U.S., may yet become one of feminism's most articulate advocates, as well as one of its starrier celebrities.

Bands



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Figure 21.



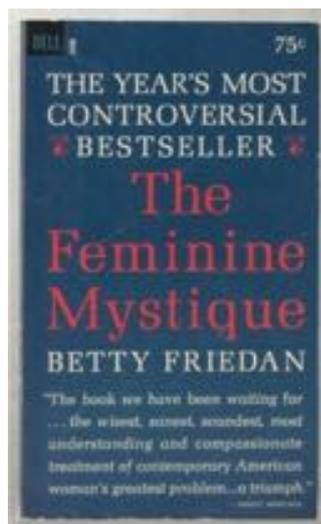
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Figure 22.

Beyoncé has once again brought feminism to the lyrics of pop music. Pop artists, however, have brought feminist anthems to market before, including **Helen Reddy's "I am Woman"** from the 1970s and 1985's **"Sisters are Doin' It For Themselves"** by **Aretha Franklin** and **Annie Lennox**. But the most radical role for bands in the movement goes to the **Riot Grrrls** of the early 1990s. This hard-core punk movement began in Seattle, eventually boasting several headline groups such as **Sleater-Kinney (Figure 21)** and **Bikini Kill (Figure 22)**. Their music expressed the rage behind the desire to overcome subordination, and their lyrics explored difficult topics, such as rape and domestic abuse. Riot Grrrl bands promoted themselves with a self-consciously "do it yourself" media look, using the collage-and-photocopy approach of the early Second Wave to produce ads and fan mags.

Books



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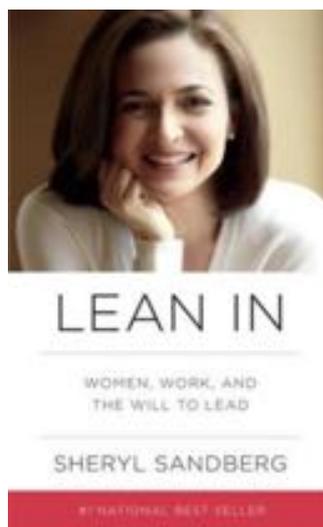
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Figure 23.

Though the movement has had its actresses and musicians, as well as activists who became known *as* activists, the best-known feminists after World War II came to the public scene as authors of books. The first of these was Betty Friedan's ***The Feminist Mystique*** in 1963 (**Figure 23**), an immediately controversial book, to be sure, but also a bestseller. Shortly thereafter came **Helen Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl***, not a book to the taste of intellectual feminists or radicals, but a more practically minded account detailing how single women in the workplace might achieve status and allure without incurring pity. Gurley Brown's sassy tips ranged from savvy

financial management to the enjoyment of love affairs, encouraging women to resist gender prejudices. As such, Brown's work can be seen as a kind of 'working girl's feminism' (**Scanlon 2010; Scott 2005**).

At the end of the decade, a barrage of feminist books appeared that were all bestsellers and all made their authors famous (and sometimes rich): Kate Millett's ***Sexual Politics***, Robin Morgan's ***Sisterhood is Powerful***, and **Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex***, followed by equally popular fictional works a few years later, **Marilyn French's *The Women's Room*** and **Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying***. These works all gave feminism a way into the hands of the public, but also created speaking and media opportunities for the authors, which in turn spread the word. Without exception, every one of these books was published by a mainstream house like Doubleday or Random House, not a small, private, or university press. Thus, the movement benefitted from the marketing muscle of these institutions (**Scott 2006**).



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Figure 24.

Between the books of the 1970s and the close of the twentieth century, perhaps only two books appeared of this stature: ***Backlash*** by **Susan Faludi** and ***The Beauty Myth*** by **Naomi Wolf**. Nevertheless, the stream of feminist books, both trade and academic, has been constant, including multiple books by celebrity feminists, including Gloria Steinem, Germaine Greer, Betty Friedan, and Naomi Wolf. In recent years, ***Lean In*** by **Sheryl Sandberg** (**Figure 24**) has had a broad popular readership, creating a public persona for the author beyond what she had achieved as a businesswoman. Revealing the marketing thinking behind the launch, ***Lean In's*** clever

website is more reminiscent of an NGO showcase than a book promotion: it documents women's achievements, offers guidance, and, Twitter never being far from the picture, is home to the #leanintogether campaign.

Women's Magazines



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Figure 25.

The Second Wave hammered relentlessly on women's magazines for their alleged complicity in the subordination of women, protesting the ubiquity of male editors and recipe and beauty articles. Yet, over the long haul, the women's magazines have been a primary means by which the issues of feminism were taken to the mainstream. Founded in the late 1880s by Louisa Knapp Curtis, the *Ladies' Home Journal* (**Figures 25 and 26**) was not the first American women's magazine, but its appearance signalled a new stream of large circulation vehicles aimed at middle-class women that included *Good Housekeeping*, the *Pictorial Review*, the *Woman's Home Companion*, and *McCall's*. Except for a brief period in the 1950s, all these magazines have had female editors and staff. Though they were huge media outlets for the burgeoning advertising industry, these women's magazines became important vehicles for news and ideas relevant to women, not just recipes and love stories, but issues like consumer rights, women's work opportunities, and suffrage. Later in the century, the actual record shows that women's magazines also supported the Equal Rights Amendment, though feminists of the Second Wave often claimed otherwise (**Scott 2005, 2006**).



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Figure 27.

The women's movement has produced a significant number of organizations in the past 200 years, some of them growing quite large and some remaining small. These institutions stage events, raise funds, shepherd campaigns, publish booklets, print T-shirts and buttons, maintain websites, and launch hashtags. Despite their counterculture *raison d'être*, these organized groups form the “establishment” of the movement and act as anchors for activities and depositories for funds, as well as facilitators for change (**Figure 27**).



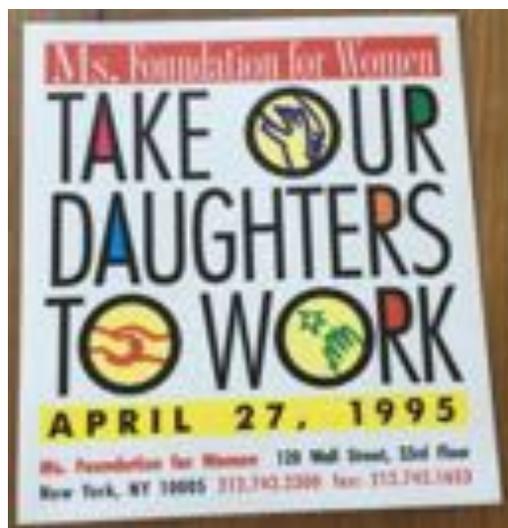
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Figure 28.

As for any organization, a memorable brand and solid marketing strategy could make or break its cultural presence. The National Organization for Women (NOW), for instance, was supported by renowned media and PR experts from its earliest days (**Scott 2006**). Its logo, depicted in **Figure 28**, was designed by member activist **Ivy Bottini** and is but one example of their marketing know-how. The circularity and simplicity of the evocative acronym lends itself to easy modification, which is a useful device for an organization that supports many causes. Remarkably, the logo has been in use since 1968; very few corporations can boast such visual stability.

Campaigns for Change



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Figure 29.

Perhaps the most striking example of the interaction between the power of feminist organizations, their connections to the media, and their ability to effect change, is the 1990s **Take Our Daughters to Work Day** (**Figure 29**). The Ms. Foundation approached **Nell Merlino**, having been impressed by an HIV prevention campaign she had conceived and orchestrated. They gave Nell lots of material to read about how girls' self-esteem plummets in early adolescence, especially work by **Carol Gilligan**. Reflecting on how influential her father's work had been on her own life, Nell came up with the idea of taking your daughters to work so they could see themselves and their futures in a different light. The Ms. Foundation loved the idea.

Gloria Steinem set up a meeting with the “**Seven Sisters**” women’s magazines (conventionally referred to *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Redbook*, *McCall’s*, *Family Circle*, *Woman’s Day*, and *Better Homes and Gardens*). These magazines also loved the idea and agreed to form the backbone of the support for the campaign. However, other magazines, even men’s vehicles like *Esquire*, and broadcast channels were equally on board. Nell remembers that there was a resonance among journalists because they, too, had daughters and did not want them to be held back by gender stereotypes. So, the campaign opened with a huge swirl of media attention. Nell recounts, “I woke up on the first day and turned on the TV to check the news. There was the weatherman with his daughter presenting the forecast! I knew then we had a success” (interview with Scott, 2017). Indeed, a million people took their daughters to work that first year, and the campaign became an annual ritual that many millions of Americans observed.

Special Events



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Figure 30.

It was the largest crowd ever to watch a tennis match. Gathered at the Houston Astrodome on September 20, 1973, a crowd of 30,000 people watched Billie Jean King beat former Wimbledon winner Bobby Riggs, once considered the best tennis player in the world, 6-4, 6-3, 6-3. This “**Battle of the Sexes**” had been hyped by Riggs, who claimed that he could beat any woman and purposely picked King as “the women’s libber leader” (**Figure 30**). Some said Riggs set up the match and then threw it at the last minute, so that he would pay off gambling debts of his own. Riggs was well past his prime, though, and King was at the top of her career. King threw her racket into the air as she won the match, declaring that it would have set female athletes back 50 years if she had lost.

Nine million people around the world watched the match on television. Many say that this match made King the world's first female superstar athlete. The following year, she made nearly \$1 million in product endorsements. When she retired from tennis in 1983, she had won 12 major titles, including six Wimbledon and four U.S. Opens. She had also been an active advocate for women in sports—it has been said that Billie Jean King, especially her win against Bobby Riggs, did as much for American women in sports as Title IX.

Annual Celebrations



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Figure 31.

International Women's Day (**Figure 31**) was not popularly celebrated in the U.S. until after the United Nations invited all nations to observe the day in 1977. Before that, International Women's Day had been celebrated for more than 60 years in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and among socialist groups in Europe and America to acknowledge the importance of women workers as well as to sometimes demonstrate for suffrage. In fact, it was the occasion of International Women's Day that sparked the February 1917 revolution in Russia. Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin, along with **Alexandra Kollontai**, made it an official Soviet holiday following the October revolution.

Many countries around the world, especially the former Soviet bloc, have a national holiday on International Women's Day, while others have a holiday only for women and some, including the U.S., observe the holiday but without a break in business. The

theme of the day is set by the UN each year, but the practice in each country is different. In some nations, the theme is explicitly political or work-oriented, while in others, International Women's Day is more akin to Mother's Day or Valentine's Day.

In recent years, the United States has increasingly recognized International Women's Day with special speeches and efforts from the national government. This year (2016), there was substantial support from the private sector, including a campaign by EY and its corporate clients around a hashtag, **#PledgeForParity**. There has been a special **Google Doodle** for **International Women's Day** every year since 2011.



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Figure 32.

V-Day was founded by **Eve Ensler**, author of *The Vagina Monologues*, as a way to catalyze the public against gender-based violence through performance (**Figure 32**). Ensler's play was based on interviews with real women and focused often on the effects of sexual violence. She found that, after each play, women would come forward and want to talk about their lives as survivors. This led her to conclude that the play could be a point of departure for a movement aimed at stopping the violence itself. The movement was begun with a fundraising performance of the play in New York that attracted many celebrities and yielded \$250,000 in a single evening.

Held annually on Valentine's Day, V-Day (in which the V stands alternatively for Valentine's, Vagina, and Victory) raises funds for victims of violence and for advocacy activities aimed at extinguishing rape, incest, domestic abuse, and other physical attacks on women, especially as a weapon of war. A primary means of fundraising is the royalty-free performance of the *Vagina Monologues* and other plays and performances that take the subject of violence against women as their focus.

On the 15th anniversary of V-Day, a new campaign, One Billion Rising, was launched. **One Billion Rising**, which refers to the number of women subject to violent attacks at some point in their lifetime, is the largest mass action effort to end violence against women in history.

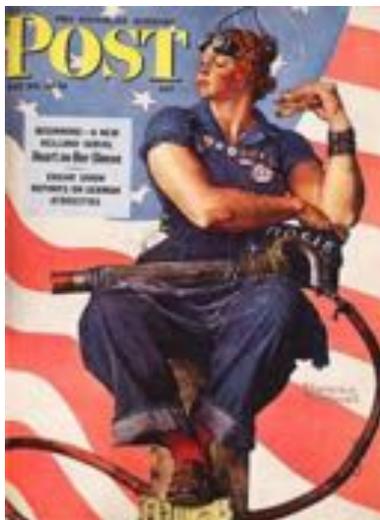
Recruiting to New Roles



[Click for larger view](#)

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Figure 33.



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Figure 34.

Marketing communications channels, as well as corporate support, have been used as vehicles for expanding the roles of women into non-traditional roles, especially at work. The most famous such effort is probably the **recruitment of women into the factories** during World War II (**Figure 33**). The archetypal “Rosie the Riveter” appeared in government posters and ads, but also on the covers of popular magazines (**Figure 34**).



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Figure 35.

Importantly, however, advertisers frequently featured the female factory workers in the messaging of that era, as in **this ad for Pond's**, giving a boost to the recruitment effort in the process (**Figure 35**). Though it is often remarked, accurately, that the women were cut from the work force when the men returned after the war, it is also true that women had regained and even exceeded wartime employment levels by 1950. Both the skills gained and the public perception of women as workers created by the war effort made it possible for women to hold on to some labor force gains (**Scott 2009**).



Click for larger view

[View full resolution](#)

Figure 36.

Today, a similar goal is being sought by the “girls who code” effort. Many organizations, government agencies, and corporations are investing in various efforts to encourage girls to study the sciences, especially computer science, in order to balance the gender gap in STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics). “Girls Who Code” is **a non-profit organization** that builds clubs around girls’ interest in computers and offers summer immersion programs in technology training. Their work is supported by more than **20 major tech companies**. And, in keeping with movement tradition (and popular practice), there are T-shirts to buy to express your support—but these are offered by **private sellers of T-shirts**, not women’s groups (**Figure 36**).

Product advertising

Thus far, we have seen a wide range of media vehicles being used to support the movement, as well as product sales (books, magazines, tickets, T-shirts, music) and corporate campaign support (Land’s End, EY). Marketing endeavours have gone hand-in-hand with the publication of activist campaigns from the beginning, so we hope readers can see that there is a fine and rather blurry line between feminist campaigns supported by advertisers, and advertising campaigns that support feminism. Yet the synergies are often uncomfortable, and regularly draw critiques that are often reflective of the divisive fault lines between differing feminist ideologies. In the following sections, we wish to investigate this puzzle further.



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Figure 37.

Consider, first, a column written by [Katy Waldman](#) for *Slate* criticizing the Pantene commercial from the Philippines that went viral in 2013. The spot addresses the way that women are judged negatively when they step forward and lead—when they allow themselves to “shine,” rather than step meekly back and let the men take the spotlight. We see a man talking authoritatively in the office and a label appears behind him that says “Boss.” The scene quickly switches, but the only change is that the person speaking is female and the sign says “Bossy.” We see a man giving a public speech with a sign on the podium saying “Persuasive,” but when the woman is in the same scene, the sign says “Pushy” (**Figure 37**). The commercial was actually made in response to research showing that Filipino women felt this phenomenon was a problem for them in the workplace. The tagline was: “Don’t let labels hold you back. Be strong and shine.” The commercial definitely hit a chord: the hashtag was Number 1 in the Philippines and Number 3 worldwide. The YouTube video was shared around the world, inspiring accolades from Sheryl Sandberg and others.

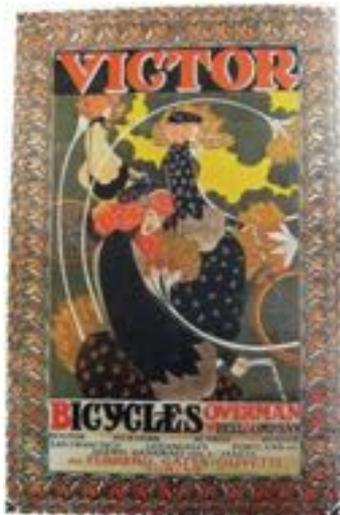
But Waldman wants all those supporters to feel foolish for not realizing that the people behind the commercial don’t really care about feminism, but rather care about selling shampoo. And that, of course, shiny hair and buying shampoo won’t solve the problem. She objects to feminist messages in commercial because she knows ads sell things; but she thinks it is ok for the Dove and Kotex people to do it (*cf.* the ‘**Real Beauty**’ and ‘**U**’ campaigns), though she is not really clear why. She concludes that she would rather have these kinds of messages out there than something else, as long as she doesn’t allow herself to be fooled into buying shampoo by such ads. In other words: being a feminist activist cannot be equated with buying shampoo.

Waldman’s reading is painfully at odds with what most people would take from the spot—to the point of being rather insulting to the millions of women who saw their own struggle in these scenes. The commercial really is rather obviously *not* saying that having shiny hair or even buying shampoo is the solution to the gender-stereotyping problem. Certainly being an activist is not being “equated” with purchasing Pantene,

as Waldman claims. The message seems to be one of solidarity—it is naming the problem in a very direct way and then encouraging women to go for it anyway. The audience is being encouraged to let their capabilities, talents, and ambition shine—if their hair shines, too, then fine, but that is not the point. Suggesting otherwise is to imply women cannot see the difference between an everyday purchase and an activist gesture; it is to imply that those who are heartened by the clip will automatically go out to buy shampoo. This facile understanding of advertising, though common, has never been fair to the rather more complex abilities of the reader (**Scott 1994**).

Waldman's column exemplifies so many commentaries on the increasingly feminist messages we are now getting from commercial campaigns. Though the original problem was the sexist messages that were so often draped around product propositions in the 1970s (and, let's face it, are still very frequent), the appearance of a feminist message instead is being met with similarly scathing criticism. Yes, the messages are being deployed in a promotional context, but, as we have just detailed, the women's movement has never shied away from marketing in order to deliver its punches. So why the opprobrium?

Let's take a look at a few other commercials to explore the concept of a feminist advertisement a bit further. Luckily for us, there is a long history to draw from: We begin with products that explicitly contributed to the empowerment of women.



[Click for larger view](#)

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Figure 38.



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Figure 39.

One of the most important product innovations for women was the bicycle. These machines gave women mobility they had not had previously, as well as a “reason” to adopt more fluid clothing, including bloomers and shortened skirts ([Scott 2006](#)). The bicycles were heavily advertised to women ([Figures 38](#) and [39](#)), especially using the posters that were becoming all the rage and the new art styles that were synonymous with progressive thought—the same medium and styles being used to promote suffrage. These posters were definitely intended to sell bicycles, but the product itself had a positive impact on the lives of women, producing a real watershed in their progress toward equality.



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Figure 40.

Another important innovation was packaged sanitary products, both the pad and the tampon. In **Figure 40**, we show the first ad for Tampax, which appeared in *The American Weekly* on July 26, 1936. While the declaration of a “New Day for Womanhood” may seem over the top from today’s perspective, the invention of the tampon did, indeed, make it possible for women to be more active during their periods, just as sanitary pads made it possible for women to continue to go to school or work at ‘that time of the month.’ The ad uses all the tricks of the trade—medical endorsement, reference to ‘thousands’ of satisfied customers, a laundry list of functional benefits, and an ‘emotional’ appeal—for a product that has now become so naturalized none of these claim remotely resemble puffery.



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Figure 41.

For decades, the tampon was advertised with imagery that warranted their reliability under the most stressful circumstances: showing ballerinas and swimmers, usually dressed in white, was a discreet way to say a woman could do anything, all month, by using this product. Eventually this imagery became a cliché, and was **spoofed hilariously** by U by Kotex, the ads that Waldman did appreciate, even if they were trying to sell her sanitary pads (**Ryus 2011**).



Video 1

[Click to view video](#)

The viral video (Video 1) was a hilarious send up of the immense variety of products now on the market: a guy in the sanitary care aisle approaches strangers to help him choose a product, but none of them can explain the differences. Clearly not the consumer, and stereotypically not the customer, of these products, his feigned bewilderment (and the amazing reactions his questions elicit from the well-meaning strangers) highlights how the taboo has become an industry that we would want to see less stigmatized (**Ryus 2011**).



Video 2

[Click to view video](#)

The stigmatization of the menstrual cycle is not far removed from harmful stereotypes about women’s abilities, as one of the most successful recent sanitary care campaigns impressed on its viewers. The Always “Like a Girl” YouTube spot (Video 2) interrogated the way gender stereotyping damages the self-esteem of little girls. The ads, which appeared on Youtube and the Super Bowl, never mentions sanitary pads, much like the Pantene ad never mentions shampoo. Most people took the advertising as a feminist message—which was certainly the intent of the team behind it (see **Fedewa and Fischer 2003** for an interview on the Leo Burnett team in charge of Always).

“After today,” wrote a **Time magazine** reporter, “You’ll probably never use the phrase ‘like a girl’ in a negative way—intentionally or not—again.” This was a strong pronouncement for what was, after all, only an advertising campaign. But the #LikeAGirl **video** went viral for just this reason: it caused viewers to suddenly shift the way they thought about saying someone threw, ran, and jumped—or thought, calculated, or computed—‘like a girl.’ In just four minutes, this common phrase, so often thoughtlessly uttered, is shown to be the damaging humiliation it really is—and by extension, how damaging all gender stereotypes are.

Perhaps we can agree that sanitary products are good for women, so maybe it is generally acceptable for them to use a feminist message. But what about beauty products? Critics have claimed for years that fashion and beauty ads are fundamentally harmful to women. Let’s look at a few examples.



[Click for larger view](#)

[View full resolution](#)

Figure 42.

“A Skin You Love to Touch” is often touted as the first advertisement that used sex to sell (**Figure 42**). Feminist critics excoriate this campaign for years without knowing anything about who created the ad, what the philosophical context for it was, or even where it ran.

In truth, there were many earlier ads that used sex to sell. What was unique about the Woodbury Soap campaign of the early 1910s was that it appealed to the sexual desires of women. The advertisements were clearly aimed at women and ran only in their magazines. Further, the emergent recognition that women, too, were sexual beings with desires of their own, was a key premise of one wing of the women’s movement of that era (**Scott 2015**).

The author of the campaign, Helen Lansdowne, was a feminist and a suffragist. As she grew in stature within J. Walter Thompson, the agency that ran the ad, and virtually all the major toiletry brands came under her control, she built a group of women who managed the clients and produced the creative. She would only hire women who were avowed feminists (**Scanlon 1995**), and she was certainly not alone in her working activism. While most working places remained closed to women well into the twentieth century, the advertising industry was one of the first that saw women being promoted from secretarial work to managing accounts and heading creative departments (although admittedly, it has not maintained this momentum; see **J. M. Grow and Deng 2014**). As Jane Maas details in her biography, rising to prominence did not come without sacrifice, but it was possible (**Maas 2013**; for a review, see **Van den Bossche 2014b**). Adwoman Mary Wells not only founded her own agency, but she also became the first female CEO to list her company on the New York Stock Exchange (**Wells and Scott 2011**)—she became a well-known business woman and public figure.

Underwriting these women’s work was a sense of possibility, opportunity, and hope. They were successful because they had incredible amounts of talent, but also because they understood their target audiences better than any male counterpart ever could. Female customers, on the other hand, form the majority of the market audience; there was (and is) much work to be done, and even today marketers are paying increasing attention to their power and their stories. Recognising that good research in this area is scarce, Leo Burnett houses a research unit, ‘LeoShe,’ that has as its sole purpose the study of women (**Fedewa and Fischer 2003**). We may therefore see many more pitches relying explicitly on feminist messaging, but women have certainly already been the authors of several landmark campaigns.



[Click for larger view](#)

[View full resolution](#)

Figure 43.

The Maidenform ‘Dreams’ campaign that ran from 1949 until 1969 was also created by female copywriters (Mary Filius, and later Kitty D’Alessio), and despite its iconicity, has drawn ire well past its last run. The campaign broke down norms of female propriety by depicting bra-wearing models who “dreamed” they did a range of public activities “in their Maidenform bra” (**Figure 43**). Launched when restrictive gender norms had made a full comeback after WWII emancipation, the ads were situated against the supposed sensibilities of the suburban housewife ideal. The campaign celebrated some ‘mundane’ activities (“I dreamed I went strolling,” 1949), but it also reached into a whole variety of other sorts of behaviour: some were entirely fictional (“I dreamed I was cut out for fun,” like a paper doll, 1960), while others highlighted female successes in the workplace (“I dreamed I was a lady editor,” 1951 and 1960), and aspirations that still seemed out of reach for most (“I dreamed I was a Lady Ambassador,” 1951).

Though critics have assumed Maidenform was deriding a set of impossible dreams, the entirety of the campaign was playfully putting the spotlight on the many roles and identities opening up to women. What was the Maidenform lady going to do next? Nothing seemed impossible. Yet the shock value of the campaign also came from what it implied about women’s freedom. Always careful to avoid vulgarity, the ads did not shy away from sexual innuendo and relied on salacious puns such as “I dreamed I drove them wild in my Maidenform bra” on the backdrop of a Roman chariot race. Maidenform was selling sex, and although this was by no means an innovation, it was probably the first time semi-nudity was brought to broad daylight, away from the voyeuristic boudoir scenes (the female private sphere) that characterised other

lingerie ads. As a commentator at the time remarked, the women might have been “more decent” if they had been in a state of full undress. For Maidenform, women could be both active in the public sphere *and* sexually self-possessed.

Despite their controversy, the ads enjoyed widespread mainstream circulation and general uptake across media and retailing platforms—it became a cultural phenomenon. Countless spoofs and references indicated that the campaign was being used—across fault lines—to give expression to the deep gender anxieties that beset the 1950s and 1960s. Most remarkably, *Time* ran two headlines that alluded to the ‘dreams’ tagline, with only tangential links to the brand in the rest of the article. “I dreamed...in my bra” had become shorthand for women’s social participation and self-fulfilment (see [Van den Bossche 2014a](#)).



[Click for larger view](#)

[View full resolution](#)

Figure 44.

The Nike for Women campaign that began in the late 1980s and continues to run today originated with a team of two women, Janet Champ and Charlotte Moore. They began their work by immersing themselves in the messages about appearance in the women’s magazines, sharing with each other their personal and political reactions to the way these ads made women feel negatively about themselves. Then they began and extended exploratory research using these insights.

One of their first ads was intended to be a direct feminist attack on traditional standards of femininity. This two-page spread had a list on one side that said:

Your padded bra
Your pushup bra
Your 48 hour bra
Your control top pantyhose
Your support pantyhose
Your control top support pantyhose
Your baggy pants
Your baggy shirt
Your shirt with the vertical stripes
Your sweater with the vertical stripes
Your dress with the vertical stripes
Your black anything.

On the opposite side read: “Self-support from Nike.” The team developed a series of ads exploring this issue, moving toward an increasingly visible feminist message. Their breakthrough ad, shown in **Figure 44**, talks in an intense and personal way about the hateful impact of “statistics” on a woman’s sense of self, alongside a sweet photograph of Marilyn Monroe, herself a victim of these very expectations (**J. Grow and Wolburg 2006**).

The Nike ads grew into an insightful body of work about women and their bodies, their sense of self, and their relationship to the debilitating expectations that the culture put upon them. The ads sold shoes and repositioned Nike, which had a too-male image among women, into a more positive light. Despite these commercial benefits, it would be hard not to credit this campaign with sincere feminist consciousness, as well as a positive impact on women.



Click for larger view

[View full resolution](#)

Figure 45.

The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty was created by a group of men and women who were intentionally critiquing the way beauty standards devalue women and girls (**Fielding et al. 2008**). The campaign debuted in 2004, first in Germany, then in the UK, and then in other countries, including the United States. The first ad that appeared in Germany was a billboard that showed six “real women” in not-very-interesting white cotton underwear. Against the contemporary backdrop of commercial imagery of all kinds, the mere appearance of “ordinary” women in “normal” underwear was enough to catch attention. In the US, the first campaign was a series of posters: the photograph of a woman alongside tick boxes that highlighted some aspect of her ‘imperfection,’ and invited viewers to name it (**Figure 45**). Fat, or fit? Grey, or gorgeous? Wrinkled, or wonderful? In the first year, the advertiser, Unilever, got 30 times the media exposure it had paid for, just because the campaign touched off so much discussion. The point? Real women are beautiful enough.

In the past 12 years, the campaign has extended into many media and vehicles, including **a spot** on the 2007 Super Bowl that dramatized the effect of beauty prejudice on little girls’ self-esteem. Importantly, this campaign was initially produced in rough form by interviewing the daughters of Unilever’s board member. When they saw that their own daughters were expressing such self-doubt, these industry leaders were keen to produce the campaign and spread it wide. We must ask ourselves: why would business people be any less worried about their daughters’ self-regard than were journalists? The effort further extended into in-school programs that were designed to improve female student self-confidence, programs that were expanded via a partnership with the World Associate of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts in 2013. In 2013, the Dove team launched a **“Photoshop Action”** that tricked artists and photographers trying to photoshop a picture of a women into compliance with prevailing standards: they thought they were going to add a “skin glow” to the image, but the software instead took them back to the original image. Seems like a pretty radical intervention, does it not?

2016 Presidential Campaign





Video 3

[Click to view video](#)

Advertising is not just used to sell products, however. It has become a central part of the American political process—a place where they probably should be more unwelcome than they are in everyday commerce. Today, we are watching as a woman appears likely to become the next President of the United States. If successful, Hillary Clinton will certainly have pushed the frontier for women’s role models toward the highest aspirations. Yet, like the feminists who first objected to the negative messaging about women in advertising during the 1970s, Clinton is pointing toward the potential impact of negative speech and role models even in political discourse. One of her presidential campaign television ads shows children watching Donald Trump as he says horrible, hateful things—and leaves the viewer apprehensive about the effect that witnessing such behavior from a presidential candidate may have on them (Video 3).

It is no secret that Hillary Clinton’s campaign, including her advertising, is supported to a large degree by corporate America. Indeed, this is often one of the criticisms made of her, that she is too closely tied to ‘Wall Street.’ But another side of corporate America supports Donald Trump, one with a different politics. The women’s movement seems well able to accept Hillary Clinton and her run for the Presidency as an example of feminist leadership. And, implicitly, the movement is accepting that there are some companies out there who are more on the side of the movement than others. Surely, the message in this advertisement is an important one, no matter who paid for it.

Conclusion

When the idea for this paper first surfaced, it was our intention to highlight how product advertising and feminism have never been strangers to each other. Yet as we dug deeper, the sheer amount and variety of promotional material that beckoned our

attention shifted our initial focus to illustrating a much larger point: Without marketing, there would be no feminism; without feminism, marketing would be much impoverished.

We see this in the way that all kinds of materials have been used to promote activities, spread ideas, and challenge the status quo. Many of these goods, such as the t-shirts, buttons, and trade cards, were also available for purchase and were avidly collected. Prominent feminist books, celebrities, and campaigns have all benefited from well-oiled marketing machines pushing them into the limelight. In this context, where activism and promotion blend into one, recent allegations that feminist messaging is being co-opted to hoodwink the public into consumption seem trite. Or a century too late.

The group of women at J. Walter Thompson—and women who have been involved in the marketing industries since then—should give critics pause. It is often asserted that the people who run advertising campaigns are all men. At one time, to be sure, most advertising personnel were male. But, from the beginning of the twentieth century, advertising for “women’s products” was usually produced by “girl groups,” some of whose members were active in the women’s movement. It is never safe to assume, as is so often done, that the people behind a campaign are men (or women) who despise females and just want to keep women down. The women who are often behind campaigns like Pantene’s “Be strong and shine” are as likely to be feminists as any other working women in today’s world and may indeed be sincere in their desire to put out positive messaging for women.

It is often difficult to get the word out on matters important to us. When the opportunity arises because a corporation has the funds, expertise, and willingness to do so, these chances should be grabbed with both hands. The market should be a place where we can express our hopes for an equitable future. And if people do buy shampoo thinking they are making a political statement, then perhaps it is well worth paying the price: at least the message is getting out there. Suggesting it is inappropriate for corporations to promote these messages may be consigning them to oblivion. For those who remain unconvinced, we challenge them to find feminist activism that has not, in one way or another, relied on the tools of marketing.

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