

Feminist Capitalism: Feminist Branding in a Neoliberal Society

Olivia J. Mayron-Mort

Department of Media Studies, Pitzer College

MS 190.1: Senior Seminar

Dr. Jennifer Friedlander

December 4, 2020

Feminist Capitalism: Feminist Branding in a Neoliberal Society

In light of the new feminist wave, feminism has become commercially popular. Magazine covers urge women to love their bodies, hit songs endorse female agency, and feminist rhetoric fill the feeds of social media platforms. Brands have embodied this phenomenon through campaigns revolving around diversity and female empowerment. This trend is prevalent in a range of industries from athleticwear to lingerie and skincare lines. Whether they encourage self-confidence or confront bias, they contribute to a brand image that showcase feminist ideals. This begs the question of how compatible feminism can be with capitalism. Along with the popularity of feminist brands tension emerges between the objectives of neoliberal capitalism and that of the feminist movement. This calls for an exploration of the complexities of feminism within a capitalist society and the implications this holds for the feminist movement as well as the organizations that capitalize off it. I ask the question of whether feminist branding meaningfully furthers the goal of equality or produces a diluted version of feminism in pursuit of profit. Through the consideration of Victoria's Secret, Nike, and Billie I will examine the ways in which feminism is co-opted by corporate brands and how this reflects within the organization.

Corporate social responsibility is becoming commonplace as for-profit organizations are increasingly expected to take a stand on social issues and advance a social agenda. Professor of Strategic Management David Chandler (2020) describes corporate social responsibility as "*the way of doing business in the globalized, wired world in which we live*" and defines it as the creation of value for a company with the consideration of stakeholder needs (p.xxx). A brand is what communicates this value to stakeholders, most specifically consumers. Consumers become important economic stakeholders through their contribution to the financial welfare of an organization (Chandler, 2020). Social media has provided consumers with access to an

abundance of information as well as reach to global audiences, which give them the power to demand accountability. Due to the transparency provoked by this development and an increase in societal expectation, an organization's reputation is precarious, and brands become key to navigating this (Chandler, 2020). Chandler states that “businesses today need to build a watertight brand with respect to all stakeholders. The attractiveness of a firm- whether as an employer, producer, supplier, or investment- is directly linked to the strength of its brand” (p.38). Ultimately, social responsibility becomes profitable for an organization by contributing to a more appealing and meaningful brand. By leveraging social problems in order to improve their image, brands ultimately distract from their connection to the continuation of these issues in the first place (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Therefore, the question arises of whether these brands are doing more harm than good by advocating for social issues that are reinforced by the capitalist structure in which they operate. My intention is to explore this in relation to the feminist movement through the consideration of brands that aim to appeal to feminist values.

The Rise of a New Feminist Wave

In order to understand my interpretation of feminism, it is useful to situate the contemporary feminist moment in the historical development of feminism. Nowadays feminism is not easily defined or delineated (Zoonen, 1994). Feminist Media Scholar Liesbet Van Zoonen explains that, “for the greater part (feminism’s) character has moved from the highly visible, vital and sometimes spectacular countercultural form to a customary but at times still controversial component of established institutions such as political parties, unions, universities and local and national administrations” (p.2). In the beginning, feminism was unified in its search for the cause of women’s oppression, which was typically designated as social structures such as the patriarchy, capitalism, or a sexist society in general (Zoonen, 1994). This was

demonstrated in the objectives of the first and second waves of feminism as they combatted a material struggle regarding equal rights and opportunities for women within these structures (Grady, 2018). It's important to note that these feminist waves were covertly exclusionary and privileged the demands of white, middle class women (Zoonen, 1994). Later on, it became evident that in such cases 'women' could not be considered a unified constituency and feminism became fragmented (Zoonen, 1994). In the years following material advancements, such as suffrage and the ERA, feminism became more established in institutions. The third wave of feminism began to acknowledge intersectionality and sought to confront symbolic conflicts regarding definitions of femininity by reclaiming derogatory ideals (Grady, 2018). They embraced high femme girliness, such as heels and makeup, and associated it with empowerment rather than weakness (Grady, 2018). Recently, we have emerged into a post-feminist era with the belief that feminism is no longer needed. It's important to note that the complexities of the feminist movement cannot be fully covered here. You may refer to Rampton (2015) and Grady (2018) for a more in-depth analysis.

The rise of the nascent feminist fourth wave addresses that there is still a need for feminism. There remains a cultural bias in society, such as limiting definitions of femininity and the systematic acceptance of inequality (Abrahams, 2017). Definitions of femininity usually entail emphasized femininity, which underscores compliance, nurturance, and empathy and associate women with domesticity and subordination (Berkowitz, 2006). Additionally, portrayals of femininity in media commonly reinforce the feminine beauty ideal, which is the notion that physical attractiveness, as defined by exclusive Western ideals, is one of women's most important qualities (Spade & Valentine, 2010). The contemporary feminist movement begins to confront these representations among others.

What is sometimes called “the feminist fourth wave” will be my consideration of feminism throughout this analysis. There are four main components that characterize the fourth wave; that it is digitally driven, body and sex positive, emphasizes intersectionality, and calls for accountability (Sollee, 2015). The ease of networking and communication has allowed the internet to become a source for discussion, debate, and political organization. Whether a movement is located online, such as the #MeToo movement, or organized online, such as the 2017 Women’s March, the internet has become central to the contemporary women’s movement. Due to these affordances, often unrepresented, marginalized voices have become integral to the new wave and its emphasis on intersectionality (Abrahams, 2017). On the other hand, the affordances of digital media have made it a lot more difficult to distinguish the long-term goals of the contemporary movement as a variety of feminist perspectives engage in debate, making it challenging to designate a unified objective. Most prominently, there is a tension between liberal feminists and radical feminists. Liberal feminists advocate for women’s advancement within the current male-dominated society. They do not want to challenge capitalism but instead fight for women’s equal share of the wealth and opportunities it provides (Abrahams, 2017). Meanwhile, radical feminists, such as bell hooks and Jessa Crispin, highlight the inequality inherent in this. The privilege obtained by educated women in a capitalist society is made possible by the undervalued work relegated to poor women, such as domestic labor, and fails to address underlying power imbalances (Abrahams, 2017). Radical feminists instead champion a collective revolution to upend the current patriarchal system altogether (Abrahams, 2017). While an emphasis on representation and accountability call for corporations to adapt to the values of the fourth wave, these corporations inevitably favor the more liberal approach.

Feminist Capitalism

Political theorist Jodi Dean's (2009) term *communicative capitalism* provides insight into the interrelationship between feminism and capitalism from a more radical perspective. Dean (2009) defines communicative capitalism as "the materialization of ideals of inclusion and participation in information, entertainment, and communication technologies in ways that capture resistance and intensify global capitalism" (p.2). Within communicative capitalism a focus on the unique individual replaces mindsets related to a collective. Additionally, it places neoliberal markets as the site in which democratic aspirations can be realized. Consequently, rhetorics of democracy ideologically reinforce the neoliberal structure, ultimately privileging the elite over the masses (Dean, 2009). Similarly to the function of democratic ideals within communicative capitalism, feminist ideals are modified to reinforce the neoliberal agenda. I propose the term feminist capitalism to describe the phenomenon in which feminist rhetoric and ideals are used within capitalist structures. Within feminist capitalism, the feminist woman is "primarily interesting for her increased purchasing power. Her economic independence supports the capitalist economy, instead of reforming or even undermining it" (Zoonen, 1994, p.72). Following this logic, feminist ideals may be perceived as co-opted into "acceptable fantasies of individual middle-class achievement and success" (Zoonen, 1994, p.72). Neoliberalism encourages the formation of identities dependent on cultivating our individuality through consumption (Zoonen, 1994). As brands become sites of identification this arguably reduces the feminist cause to a fashionable, individualistic choice, while undermining collective approaches to systemic problems (Dean, 2009; Zoonen, 1994). Banet-Weiser's (2018) description of *popular feminism* can shed more light onto what feminist capitalism can look like. Popular feminism is a media and corporate friendly feminism that explicitly embraces feminist values and is dedicated

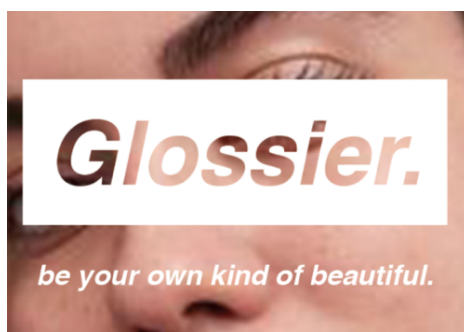
to recognizing that gender equality still exists but does so within a neoliberal framework (Banet-Weiser, 2018). It focuses on the individual rather than the collective in order to promote self-confidence rather than advocate for deeper structural issues (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Glossier as Popular Feminism

Glossier provides an example of a largely successful popular feminist brand. Its brand is established on the feminist notion of natural, real beauty and perceptions of “democratiz(ing) beauty” (Glossier, n.d.). It began with the blog *Into The Gloss*, where users shared their favorite products and provided inspiration and information for Glossier. Glossier’s website states that “Now, we’re building the future beauty company where everything we make starts with you. We create the products you tell us you wish existed.” This emphasis on personalization demonstrates popular feminism’s tendency to emphasize the individual under pretenses of participation and inclusion. This is exemplified in Glossier’s “be your own kind of beautiful” advertisement depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Glossier “be your own kind of beautiful.” Advertisement



In this advertisement Glossier singles out the individual consumer, promoting their own unique version of beauty. Nonetheless, there is the implication that the consumer must utilize Glossier’s products in order to realize this beauty. The placement of the Glossier logo over the woman’s eyes is especially significant as it allows identification with the woman depicted while

showing just enough of her delicate features to signify western standards of beauty. Ultimately, it's utilizing the feminist notion of body positivity and confidence, while still promoting their skincare and beauty products by implying that they are necessary in order to achieve this confidence. This strategy is utilized by many brands within the beauty and fashion industry.

A Constructionist Perspective: The Power of Representation

While feminist capitalism suggests that the use of feminist ideals within corporate brands dilutes feminism to accommodate the neoliberal agenda, we must also consider its potential for positive change. The values of the fourth wave call for more diverse representation of women in terms of ethnicity, age, and body type. This form of representation within mainstream brands signifies potential symbolic sociocultural advancement. Advertisements, and by extension brands, may be seen as a reflection of the influence of the women's movement and the changing reality of women's position in society (Zoonen, 1994). Zoonen (1994) discusses the dual capacity of symbols to function simultaneously as symbols of reality and symbols for realities. This perspective can shed light on the more positive impacts of female empowerment images in corporate campaigns. Zoonen states:

Mass media are thought to produce symbols of reality, expressing an abbreviated form of the nature of a particular reality. However, symbols have another capacity as well that is often overlooked in transmission models of communication. They function as symbols for reality, (re)constructing reality while simultaneously representing it. The latter view of symbols is central to constructivist views of communication that perceive 'reality' as a product of the social and sense making activities of human beings (p. 68).

Therefore, advertisements both act as a symbol of societal ideals as well as shape them in turn. The prominence of women of varying ethnicities, ages, and body shapes within mainstream

brands suggests that the feminist fourth wave and its demands might hold influence on cultural discourse. It may be argued that this signifies a considerable cultural change in which the dominant discourse is shifting away from exclusive, misogynistic representations of women. Following a constructionist perspective, since reality is recursively reconstructed through discourse then these representations in mainstream brands demonstrate potential to influence even greater sociocultural change. Therefore, definitions of femininity may be extended to include more diverse, underrepresented groups of women. However, it is important to emphasize that feminist branding is just one sector of corporate and marketing media, and hegemonic, patriarchal representations of women are still very prevalent in media. Additionally, the amplification of feminist ideals has been met with increased misogynistic backlash (Banet-Weiser, 2018). This is exemplified in the later discussed Billie case study, in which an advertisement displaying unshaven bikini hair was met with disgust and offense. Nonetheless, certain forms of feminist branding can be considered impactful from a constructionist perspective, especially since it is most prevalent within the fashion and beauty industry, which historically set exclusive standards of femininity and beauty.

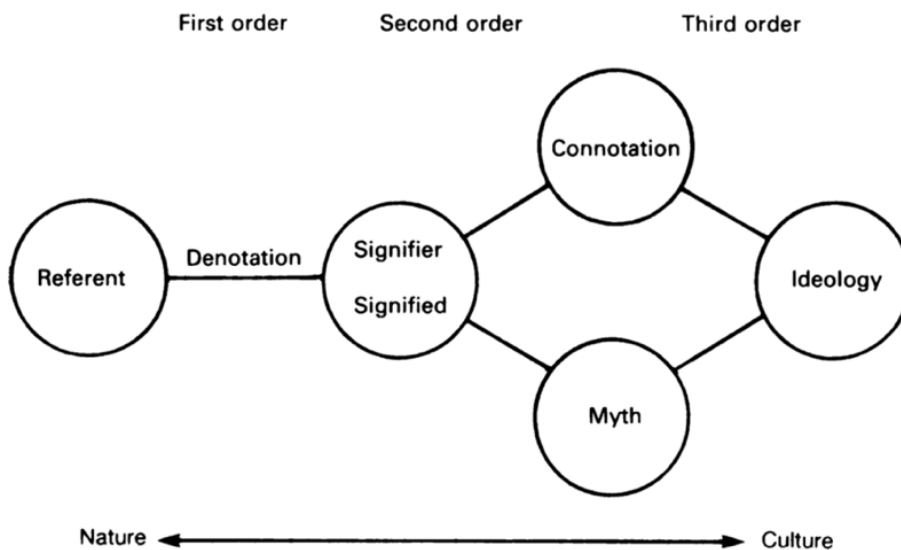
Case Study Analysis

Thus, as shown in my consideration of feminist capitalism and constructivist theory, the impact of contemporary feminist branding is more nuanced than the dichotomy of good or bad. In order to gain a greater understanding of how contemporary brands manifest fourth wave feminist ideals and the implications of this, I plan to analyze three corporate brands and how these ideals are reflected in their campaigns and organization. Victoria's Secret exemplifies a brand that once capitalized off the feminine beauty ideal but found it financially necessary to adopt more feminist values; Nike provides an example of a corporation which eventually

incorporated a feminist brand within an established male-dominant image; and lastly, Billie Razor demonstrates a brand founded on feminist beliefs. In my application of this analysis I will utilize a semiotic approach as explained by Zoonen (1994) and depicted in Figure 2. This will guide me in investigating the significance of brand campaigns. Additionally, the previously discussed insights of Chandler (2020), Dean (2009), Banet-Weiser (2018), and Zoonen (1994) will act as a framework to guide my discussion.

Figure 2

Processes of signification by O'Sullivan and utilized by Liesbet Van Zoonen



Note. Denotation (first order) concerns manifest expressions, while connotation (second order) concerns latent expressions and may take on the form of a myth (associations/complete narratives). Ideology (third order) conceives second order as manifest expressions of an underlying structural principle.

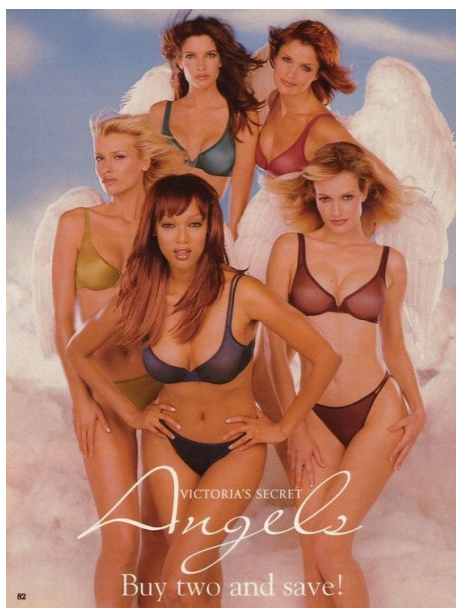
Victoria's Secret: The Downfall of the Fantasy

Victoria's Secret exemplifies positive representational and organizational change provoked by the feminist movement and its subsequent adoption of feminist ideals. Victoria's

Secret is known for its exclusive image of feminine beauty and sex appeal. This is not surprising considering it was founded in 1977 by Roy Raymond in an effort to create an underwear store where men felt comfortable shopping for their wives (Hanbury, 2020). This initial objective relates to Victoria's Secret's construction of a brand appealing to the male gaze. The male gaze objectifies woman by portraying them as erotic, passive objects for men's active viewing pleasure (Zoonen, 1994). This remained prominent when Les Wexner and his corporation L Brands bought Victoria's Secret in 1982 and shifted its target audience to women (Hanbury, 2020). The brand began to portray exclusive images of female beauty for men to desire and women to aspire. This was massively successful at the time as Victoria's Secret became the largest lingerie retailer in the US with sales topping \$1 billion and 350 stores placed nationally by the 1990s (Hanbury, 2020). Victoria's Secret had established a successful image of glamour and sex by signifying elite perceptions of femininity through their models, who were labelled Angels. This is exemplified in their "Angels" underwear campaign.

Figure 3

Victoria's Secret "Angels" underwear collection advertisement from 1997.



This advertisement depicts the Victoria's Secret Angel as a 'fantasy' woman. The denotation labels them as "Angels" and the connotation supports this with corresponding signifiers- wings, windblown hair, and clouds. It creates the perception that a Victoria's Secret woman is an angelic fantasy and reinforces the feminine beauty ideal that Western standards of beauty define attractiveness. This symbolism was not only established in their advertising but epitomized in their glamorous Victoria's Secret fashion show where top models were adorned in lavish lingerie pieces as a way to market products in a high-profile setting (Howland, 2018).

However, the success of their fantasy image did not last. With the rise of the feminist fourth wave, this brand significance became outdated as consumers instead sought comfort and body positive representations (Bhattarai, 2020). This is exemplified in the controversy surrounding Victoria's Secret's "A Body for Every Body" campaign in 2014, first known as "The Perfect Body" campaign. In promotion of its new *Body* collection, Victoria's Secret released an advertisement depicting its Angels in lingerie along with the text "The Perfect Body." This advertisement provoked heavy criticism and sparked an #IamPerfect movement on Twitter, which called Victoria's Secret out for body shaming (Mullins, 2014). Thousands of people signed a petition requesting an apology and a new campaign (Mullins, 2014). Other retailers capitalized off the controversy by releasing their own "Perfect Body" campaigns which instead featured diverse bodies (Fontazzi, 2014). While Victoria's Secret never did release an apology, they did respond by changing the text to "A Body for Every Body" (Mullins, 2014)

Figure 4

Victoria's Secret "A Body for Every Body" campaign from 2014



When analyzing Victoria's Secret's updated campaign, it becomes clear that the underlying message of their campaign did not change. While the denotation of the text "A Body for Every Body" implies a diversity of body types, the connotation maintains that there is only one type of body that matters, signifying the myth of "a fantasy woman" once again. Despite backlash and the demand for change, Victoria's Secret continued to embody the symbolism of the feminine beauty ideal. This mindset was reflected by their executive staff. For example, in 2018 Chief Marketing Officer Razek commented that plus sized and transgender women could not participate in the Victoria's Secret fashion show because it is a "fantasy" (Hanbury, 2020). Additionally, the company only had two female board directors out of eleven members and CEO Wexner had close ties to Jeffrey Epstein and his sexual assaults (Hanbury, 2020). Epstein had claimed to be a Victoria's Secret model recruiter in an effort to coerce women into sexual acts (Hanbury, 2020). These misjustices provoked severe backlash from major economic stakeholders, including consumers and investors, and sales faltered along with a drop in their market share (Bhattarai, 2020; Hanbury, 2020). The financial threat this posed demanded a reprioritization of values, resulting in the enactment of change. Both Razek and Wexner resigned, two new female board members were appointed, their first transgender model,

Valentina Sampaio, was hired, and they began including curvier women in their campaigns (Hanbury, 2020). This change was reflected in their most recent “Body” campaign.

Figure 5

Victoria’s Secret’s “Body” campaign in 2020



This campaign deviates from earlier advertising by including both a curvier model and an older model. While this image still signifies the glamorous, sex appeal of the Victoria’s Secret brand with depictions of tousled hair and a luxurious lounge, it also includes body types that would not have previously conformed to their perception of a “fantasy” woman. This implies progress toward fostering a more inclusive image of beauty. The underlying ideology has shifted toward notions of body positivity and acceptance, especially in comparison to prior advertisements. When referring to Zoonen’s (1994) constructionist perspective, Victoria’s Secret not only indicates the extent to which feminist values have altered dominant discourse, but also demonstrates potential to further reinforce a more inclusive definition of femininity within mainstream spheres. However, it seems these changes were instigated by necessity and profit rather than the intention of progressing toward equality. The values of the feminist fourth wave likely influenced Victoria’s Secret’s primary consumer base, women, and the company’s failure to prioritize their demands over the ideals of male executives, fed into their financial struggle and ultimately threatened the company’s survival. It became necessary to adopt feminist values in

order to maintain revenue. These changes ultimately occurred within the confines of feminist capitalism.

Nike: Feminist Ideals in a Male Industry

Nike exemplifies a company that integrated a feminist brand image within a masculine parent brand. It was founded by track runner Phil Knight in 1964 as Blue Robbins Sports with the shoe design of his coach Bill Bowerman, which he sold out of the backseat of his car (Meyer, 2019). It is now a world leading athletic wear company with a net worth of about 34.8 billion dollars (SportyTell, 2020). Social issues have been at the core of Nike's brand image, ranging from female empowerment to racial equity. The Nike website states,

At Nike, we are committed to fostering an inclusive culture and breaking down barriers for athletes* around the world. We celebrate diversity and strive to create equal playing fields for all. Our work to promote equality starts with our employees and the people who make our products and extends to people in the communities where we live and work. We know that we won't prevail Until We All Win. (Nike Purpose, 2020).

However, breaking down barriers was not always in the forefront of Nike's executive mission. Nike launched its women's sub-brand in 1990 in an effort to reach a largely untapped female market (Grow, 2008). Its most popular campaign for the women's sub brand at the time was the "If You Let Me Play" campaign (Grow, 2008). Nike's "If You Let Me Play" advertisement was a thirty-second video that utilized powerful statistics in order to encourage girl's participation in sports. The video transitions between close-ups and medium, slow-mo shots of young girls on the playground. The advertisement repeatedly states the slogan "if you let me play" along with a fact on how athletic participation impacts girls over time. Some examples include, "I will suffer less depression...I will be more likely to leave a man who beats me...I will

learn what it means to be strong.” The video ends with the signature Nike swoosh and slogan “just do it.” The use of young girls instead of grown women is noteworthy for two reasons. First, the innocence of the girls in relation to the harsh statistics is impactful; they have been untouched by these possible realities. Second, the infantilization of women through the use of young girls, who are depicted as vulnerable, is less threatening to the patriarchal world of athletics (Grow, 2008). The corporate dynamics behind the Nike brand provide context on this. In the nineties Nike was “the patriarch of all sports” and definitively a masculine brand (Grow, 2008, p.313). Grow (2008) reported that the Nike all-male executive team and all-women creative team, who were the brains behind this advertisement, disagreed on how to represent women within the brand. The executive team wanted to encourage women’s participation in fitness as long as it aligned with hegemonic ideals and didn’t “pinkify” the masculine brand (Grow, 2008, p.328). They requested that the advertisements feature pretty women who engaged in fitness rather than competitive sports and that they remain in women’s magazines (Grow, 2008). The creative team pushed these boundaries and created advertisements that depicted women finding pleasure in their strength, which was rare at the time (Grow, 2008). Ultimately, the “If You Let Me Play” advertisement encouraged girls’ participation in sports while recognizing that it was the patriarchal industry’s decision whether women entered the world of athletics with the plea “If you let me play.” Little did most know that this dynamic was mirrored within the organization. Nonetheless, this advertisement reflected tremendously well on the brand and won more awards than any prior advertisement (Grow, 2008).

In the following years, Nike began to champion female participation in athletics and absorbed the women’s sub brand into their main line. Along with the rise of feminist discourse, Nike’s branding embraced feminist capitalism. In 2010, Nike launched its “Make Yourself”

campaign. Nike reportedly ignited this movement to “inspire and motivate women everywhere to achieve their goals and become the best ‘versions’ of themselves, whatever this may be: fit, proud, fast, healthy, strong or beautiful...” (Nike News, 2011). The complete campaign featured a team of elite female athletes from varying sports in multiple videos with corresponding images (Nike News, 2011). The “Make Yourself” video discussed here includes track star Allyson Felix, skier Julia Mancuso, and dancer Sofia Boutella.

Figure 6

Nike “Make Yourself” Campaign featuring Felix, Mancuso, and Boutella.



This “Make Yourself” campaign video shows Felix, Mancuso, and Boutella working out along with close-up shots of various body parts- legs, midribs, butts. They each state respectively, “there is no better feeling than knowing you gave one hundred percent...rain or shine, I push myself to the limits everyday...you have to earn it,” which emphasizes the empowerment they felt by earning their success. The video is superimposed throughout with the slogan “I’m making myself” followed by “strong, shine, and proud” with each respective athlete. It concludes with the question “What are you doing to make yourself?” before the infamous Nike swoosh appears. The segmentation of the women’s bodies through close-up shots on toned body parts consequently sexualizes the athletes and fosters connotations of femininity and attractiveness (Arend, 2015). Most prominently, this campaign is a form of popular feminism

because it individualizes the female athlete. Conversely to the “If You Let Me Play” campaign, the “Make Yourself” campaign places responsibility onto the individual woman. It demands that you put in the work to make yourself strong, fit, shine, beautiful, and so on. The denotation of the text suggests that it is up to women to personalize their efforts and overcome the barriers they face within the male-dominated world of athletics. Nonetheless, the campaign seemed to have been received positively due to its spotlight on successful female athletes and encouragement of female participation (Hearst, 2011). Ultimately, Nike capitalized off notions of female empowerment and inclusion, while dismissing the patriarchal barriers women confront within the industry.

Nike continued to embrace the momentum of the feminist movement in the following years. They announced 2019 as their year for women and stated that this year would include more exposure and participation for female athletes (Danziger, 2019). This is reflected in their merchandise as they design products tailored for women’s bodies and released the world’s first Pro Hijab for Muslim Athletes (Danziger, 2019). This message of female empowerment is epitomized in their “Dream Crazy” campaign. Serena Williams narrates a video depicting world-class female athletes overcoming incredible odds, such as the first woman to run a marathon and the first to coach an NBA team. The video addresses the double standards women face in the industry by stating, “If we show emotion, we’re called dramatic. If we want to play against men, we’re nuts. And if we dream of equal opportunity, delusional...” It ends by challenging women to “show them what crazy can do” along with the text “It’s only crazy until you do it. Just do it.” The images of strong, successful women are incredibly impactful, especially in conjunction with the voiceover. Williams exposes the gender bias prevalent in the industry and challenges women to push the boundaries of what is conventionally ‘feminine’ in

athletics. While the message still depicts individual women overcoming these barriers, it addresses the misogynistic bias within the sports industry that they must confront. The advertisement was met with overwhelming positivity, commending it for its message of equality and female empowerment (Anusic, 2019).

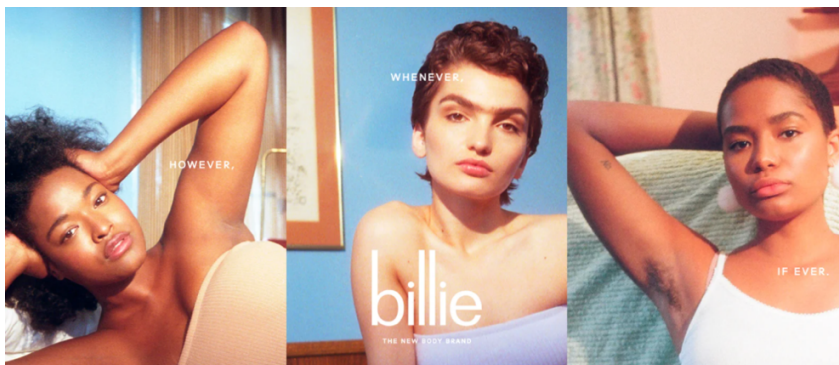
However, Nike does not seem to hold the same standards within their corporate practices. While Nike calls out the gender bias in athletics in the “Dream Crazier” campaign, it doesn’t seem to address it within its own corporation. Track and field National Champion Alysia Montaña recently released an op-ed on her struggle with Nike sponsorship during her pregnancy in which she had to run, even at eight-months pregnant, in order to sustain her income and health insurance (Aidasani, 2019). Additionally, runner Mary Cain came out with an op-ed about the abuse she suffered from Nike Oregon Project coach Alberto Salazar and four other former female Nike employees have filed a class-action lawsuit accusing Nike of a culture of discrimination and sexual harassment (Aidasani, 2019). These misogynistic practices do not align with the values of equality outlined in their mission and preached in their brand. Nonetheless, Nike seems to have been minimally impacted by this. It made the most profit from footwear sales this very year, 2020 (SportyTell, 2020). Since they have not been held accountable for these inequalities, they are left unaddressed by the corporation. Nike seems to empower women so far as it helps them economically. Their feminist advertising may even distract from the less visible misjustices occurring within the corporation. However, the continued visibility Nike provides for women within an industry that only dedicates about 4% of media coverage to women is essential in order to normalize women’s participation in athletics (Aidasani, 2019). This demonstrates the complexity of feminist branding as it may increase visibility for the cause but can also distract from structural inequalities.

Billie: The Liberal Feminist Ideal

While Billie is not as long-standing as Victoria's Secret or Nike, it has been a massive success in its own right. It was founded in 2017 by Georgina Gooley and Jason Bravman in an effort to “champion womankind” in an industry that privileges men, the razor industry (Fox, 2019; *About Us*, n.d.). The Billie *About us* page states, “We noticed that women were overpaying for razors and shamed for having body hair. Kind of a double whammy, when you think about it. So we did away with the Pink Tax and put body hair on the **big screen.**” The beauty industry has expected women to remain hairless for decades and refusal to shave has become one form of resistance in recent years, in addition to it just being a preference (Singh-Kurtz, 2019). Billie has capitalized on the pro-body hair movement. It launched its brand with the “Project Body Hair” campaign, making it the first women’s razor to show body hair in its advertisement (*ProjectBodyHair*, n.d.).

Figure 7

Billie “Project Body Hair” Campaign Images



Billie rejects the portrayal of women with smooth, hairless skin in razor advertisements and the corresponding expectation that women must be hairless. Billie’s video campaign is overlaid with the text, “Hair. Everyone has it, even women. The world pretends it doesn’t exist, but it does. So however, whenever, if ever you want to shave, we’ll be here. Billie,” along with

images of women with and without body hair on their legs, face, toes, or underarm. Sometimes they shave their hair and other times flaunt it or comb it. Both the denotation and connotation of this campaign emphasize women's ability to choose whether they want to shave or not. It subverts the common ideology that women must be smooth and hairless and instead attempts to normalize female body hair. Princess Nokia's song "Tomboy" plays in the background. This song primarily repeats the lyric, "That girl is a tomboy." Tomboy indicates a girl who participates in activities traditionally associated with men, making it an interesting choice for this campaign (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). It possibly signifies Billie's rebellion against hegemonic ideologies of femininity. Overall, this campaign was well-received with sales doubling the week it released, eventually selling out the product (Pai, 2018). The video amassed over 20 MM views and Serena Williams soon began investing in the brand (Pai, 2018).

It is reasonable to be skeptical about a razor brand that advocates for women not to shave. Is it just indulging the feminist notion of choice in order to attract female consumers? Billie addresses this on their website by connecting it to their second initiative, The Pink Tax. They clarify that their razors are made at an affordable price- with a starter kit of \$9- for women who do like to shave and have been overpaying for years due to The Pink Tax (*ProjectBodyHair*, n.d.). The Pink Tax is a discriminatory upcharge of women's personal care products in comparison to similar men's products (*Pink Tax Rebate*, n.d.). Billie states that they created The Pink Tax Rebate as a way to give women back some of the money they have been overcharged for in the industry (*Pink Tax Rebate*, n.d.). In reality, it is their referral program in which they encourage women to refer Billie's email list to their friends and in return they will receive a coupon for a discount on Billie's products. It is a strategic and clever way to expand their client list through discounts under the guise of overcompensating for the patriarchy.

One year later, Billie released its “Red, White, and You Do You” fourth of July themed video campaign. This campaign came out in the summer of 2019, featuring women with unshaved bikini lines and likely making Billie the first brand to show pubic hair (Singh-Kurtz, 2019). The advertisement depicts diverse women as they lounge on the beach with varying degrees of body hair, specifically focusing on the bikini line. It ends with the words, “This summer red, white, and you do you. Billie.” This campaign further signifies the notion of choice and Billie’s effort to normalize all types of female body hair and bodies. Along with the release of this campaign, Billie calls out the media’s notion of being “summer ready” and the unrealistic body expectations that go along with it (Billie, 2019). This advertisement did not come without controversy as related social media posts received reactions of disapproval and disgust. One commented, “Just don’t go getting mad when no one wants to get with you and your hairy bikini line,” and another wrote, “F*ck no. I feel physically ill. That’s just plain unAmerican” (Robin, 2019). This exemplifies the backlash that can occur along with the visibility of feminist ideals. Nonetheless, the campaign was overwhelmingly met with positive responses as people praised it for questioning societal expectations (Robin, 2019). Around this time, Billie had raised about \$25 million in Series A funding since its launch, primarily thanks to Goldman Sachs’ Private Capital Investing group (Hinchliffe, 2019). By January 2019, Billie had been bought by Procter and Gamble (P&G) and continued to be run by its two cofounders under the new corporation (Cheng, 2020). P&G also owns Gillette’s Venus brand, which is a massive women’s razor brand that represents the exact hairless, smooth beauty ideal that Billie is rejecting (P&G. n.d.). Interestingly, P&G acquired Billie in an effort to reach a younger audience of Gen Z and millennials, indicating the target audience of progressive advertising (Cheng, 2020).

Billie has since expanded its product line to include other personal care products, such as lip balms, dry shampoo, and face wipes (Glendinning, 2020). Their most recent campaign “Are We Doing Video?” launched on Instagram in May 2020 and is inspired by the pandemic eras’ reliance on zoom and video chat (Jackson, 2020). It depicts women and femme, joking and apologizing for their looks and insecurities over multiple video chat calls. It ends with the text, “What if we stopped apologizing for looking like ourselves?” This advertisement broadens Billie’s initial initiative of normalizing body hair to instead challenge greater societal expectations of looking a certain way, aligning with their new line of clean beauty products (Jackson, 2020). This campaign utilizes the popular feminist approach of encouraging women’s self-confidence in order to promote their product line. Nonetheless, they also represent a diverse definition of femininity that is not limited to gendered constructs and the feminine beauty ideal. Billie has not only adopted feminist ideals of body positivity and inclusivity, but also the clean product trend of no harm ingredients, including sulfates, GMOs, synthetic dyes, and many more (*About Us*, n.d.). However, Billie’s female empowerment initiative is not limited to its advertisements, it’s also incorporated into brand practices. Since its launch Billie has donated 1% of its revenue to support primarily female-related causes and reportedly has an executive team that is 80% women (*About Us*, n.d.; Simeon, 2020). It claims to have “zero-tolerance for racism and systematic oppression” and to have donated 100K to BLM and NAACP (*About Us*, n.d.). While the brand was founded by both a man and woman, female co-founder Georgina Gooley seems to be the face of the brand and only communicator with the press. Billie is a prime example of a liberal feminist brand, in which women are being uplifted within the male-dominated capitalist society. It is also working to subvert dominant beauty ideals, contributing toward a more inclusive definition of femininity. However, while the nascent Billie brand seems

to embody the liberal feminist approach, its recent acquisition with P&G indicates that it still operates within feminist capitalism as profit and corporate security reigns supreme.

Conclusion

Victoria's Secret, Nike, and Billie demonstrate some of the ways in which feminism may be manifested within a neoliberal capitalist society and how this is reflected within the organization. Each of these three brands operate within the constructs of feminist capitalism, albeit to different degrees. The majority of the campaigns analyzed endorse personal success and empowerment, individualizing the female consumer. As the Nike "Make Yourself" campaign signified, women can become successful through hard work and dedication. Similarly, the Billie "Are We Doing Video?" campaign urges women to embrace their looks and perceived flaws. This further implies that these struggles can be solved as easily as the decision to be confident or to work hard or, most importantly, with the help of their product. These advertisements, along with most popular feminist campaigns, capitalize off the neoliberal inclination to cultivate identity through consumption. Consequently, the complexities and disadvantages of gender inequality are compacted into simplified solutions of product and lifestyle choice. Therefore, they neglect and distract from the structural inequalities that created these issues in the first place and their role within it, such as the wage gap and profit made off stoking insecurity. These advertisements capture the resistance and rage provoked by the feminist movement and channel it into consumption, effectively reinforcing the capitalist structure (Dean, 2009). Even Billie, which was built off feminist ideals, is included in this through its use of popular feminism and recent acquisition with P&G, which owns another razor brand that represents the exact ideals Billie aims to subvert.

However, these brands do prove beneficial in terms of visibility. They increase the visibility of the feminist movement, especially in terms of body positivity. The women depicted in these mainstream campaigns appeared more powerful and became more diverse in terms of age, ethnicity, and body type once the brand adopted feminist ideals. Following a constructionist perspective, this both represents a potential shift in dominant understandings of femininity and beauty as well as reinforces this more inclusive representation. This was most clearly exemplified in the Victoria's Secret case study. The feminist movement, advocated by consumers, held the company accountable for its misogynistic culture, which led to significant corporate and representational change. Meanwhile, Billie pushed boundaries by not only representing diverse women but also by showing female body hair for the first time in advertising. These representations demonstrate progress toward normalizing female body hair and expanding perceptions of femininity and beauty. The same is true for Nike in terms of normalizing women's participation in athletics, which is essential within the highly patriarchal world of sports. These representational efforts occasionally reflected in the organization as women took on positions of power, which occurred in Billie and Victoria's Secret. However, Nike exemplifies a case in which their efforts did not seem to extend to corporate practices, which instead demonstrated instances of misogyny. Nonetheless, Nike was applauded for the more visible efforts it made toward equality. This suggests that the corporation must be held accountable by stakeholders, as in the case of Victoria's Secret, in order for women to truly be advantaged and that strategic feminist advertising may even distract from corporate misjustices.

Overall, my analysis exemplifies the nuances of contemporary feminist branding and supports the notion that corporate advertising tends to dilute feminism into the more compatible, individualistic form of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018). These brands adopt a more

liberal approach to feminism by advocating women's advancement within the patriarchal society. However, as addressed by radical feminism, this tends to favor more privileged women who have the means to overcome the barriers posed by society, while neglecting lower-class women who are disadvantaged by this economy. Therefore, the movement's emphasis on intersectionality is lost and collective, structural action is dismissed. Advertisements may urge women to find self-confidence and take on leadership positions, but these statements do not overcome the fact that women only earn 81% of what a man does and are now expected to work full-time while being the primary caretaker (Hochschild & Machung, 2015; Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2020). Feminist branding increases the visibility of feminist ideals and demonstrates potential to broaden perceptions of femininity; however, the efforts should not stop there. Visibility is not enough if it is not acted on. For feminist branding to meaningfully further the goals of the feminist movement, it must advocate lasting change. As Banet-Weiser (2018) states, "What we need is a different sort of transformation, one that transfigures the rage of popularity into a powerful rage, an intersectional, collective rage, directed at a racist and sexist structure. We need a lasting feminist rage" (p.185). In conclusion, my analysis suggests that feminist branding demonstrates potential for sociocultural change, however it is limited by the constructs of feminist capitalism in its pursuit for profit. I support the findings of scholars, such as Banet-Weiser (2018) and Dean (2009), who claim that feminism is hindered by neoliberal capitalism. Future studies could expand off my analysis to conduct empirical research assessing the extent to which these brands influence dominant definitions of femininity and beauty. We must now ask whether these representations are truly impactful in enacting some form of sociocultural change despite the hindrances of feminist capitalism.

References

- About us.* (n.d.). Billie. <https://mybillie.com/pages/about>
- Abrahams, J. (2017, August 14). *Everything you wanted to know about fourth wave feminism but were afraid to ask.* Prospect Magazine.
<https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/everything-wanted-know-fourth-wave-feminism>.
- Anusic, I. (2019, February 27). *Dream Crazier: How Nike thrives on social issues based marketing.* Mediatoolkit. <https://www.mediatoolkit.com/blog/nike-social-issues-based-marketing/>
- Arend, K. (2015). *Female athletes and women's sports: A textual analysis of nike's women-directed advertisement* [Master's thesis, Graduate College of Bowling Green State University]. Ohio Link.
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2012). Branding Politics. *Authentic™: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture (Critical Cultural Communication, 30)*. NYU Press.
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2018). *Empowered: Popular feminism and popular misogyny.* Duke University Press.
- Berkowitz, D (2006). Consuming Eroticism Gender Performances and Presentations in Pornographic Establishments. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35(5):583-606.
- Bhattarai, A. (2020 , February 21). *5 Factors That Led to Victoria's Secret's Fall.* The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/02/20/5-factors-that-led-victorias-secrets-fall/>.

Billie [@billie]. (2019, June 26). *Hang on, why is there so much pressure to be 'summer ready'?* *Magazines tell us to stop eating carbs in.* Instagram.

<https://www.instagram.com/p/BzLExHqgE9h/>

Chandler, David (2020). *Strategic Corporate Social Responsibility: Sustainable Value Creation* (5th edition). Los Angeles: Sage Publishing.

Cheng, A. (2020, January 10). *Why P&G Is Buying Billie, A Growing Women's Razor Startup.*

Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/andriacheng/2020/01/09/the-stakes-are-high-behind-pgs-plan-to-buy-growing-womens-shaving-brand-billie/?sh=12b31aa34222>

Danziger, P. (2019, March 01). *Nike Declares 2019 Its Year For Women.* Forbes.

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/pamdanziger/2019/03/01/nike-the-worlds-most-valuable-fashion-brand-declares-2019-its-year-for-women/?sh=3071650d419d>

Dean, J. (2009). *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics.* Duke University Press.

Fantozzi, S. (2014, October 31). *Dear Kate Responds To 'The Perfect Body' Victoria's Secret Campaign with An Updated Version.* Bustle.

[www.bustle.com/articles/47035-dear-kate-responds-to-the-perfect-body-victorias-secret-campaign-with-an-updated-version.](http://www.bustle.com/articles/47035-dear-kate-responds-to-the-perfect-body-victorias-secret-campaign-with-an-updated-version)

Fox, M. (2019, May 23). *5 Tips From Billie's Cofounder On Building A Female-First Brand.*

Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/meimeifox/2019/05/23/5-tips-from-billies-cofounder-on-building-a-female-first-brand/?sh=5c25c7a05d31>

- Glendinning, M. (2020, March 17). *Billie Launches New Line of Clean Beauty Products*. Fashion Magazine. <https://fashionmagazine.com/face-body/billie-launches-new-clean-beauty-products/>
- Glossier. (n.d.). *About Glossier*. <https://www.glossier.com/about>
- Grady, C. (2018, July 20). *The waves of feminism, and why people keep fighting over them, explained*. Vox. <https://www.vox.com/2018/3/20/16955588/feminism-waves-explained-first-second-third-fourth>
- Grow, J. (2008) The Gender of Branding: Early Nike Women's Advertising as a Feminist Antenarrative. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 31:3, 312-343, DOI:10.1080/07491409.2008.10162545
- Hanbury, M. (2020, May 21). *The Rise and Fall of Victoria's Secret, America's Biggest Lingerie Retailer*. Business Insider. <https://www.businessinsider.com/victorias-secret-rise-and-fall-history-2019-5>.
- Hearst, A. (2018, April 25). *The Star Athletes Behind Nike's "Make Yourself" Campaign*. Marie Claire. <https://www.marieclaire.com/fashion/a6340/nike-make-yourself-campaign/>
- Hinchliffe, E. (2019, January 29). *Billie Raises \$25 Million for Women's Shaving and Personal Care*. Fortune. from <https://fortune.com/2019/01/29/billie-shaving-25-million-series-a/>
- Hochschild, A. R., & Machung, A. (2015). *The second shift: Working families and the revolution at home*. New York: Penguin Books.

Howland, D. (2018, June 6). *Has Victoria's Secret Sold Its Brand Image to the Angels?* Retail Dive. www.retaildive.com/news/has-victorias-secret-sold-its-brand-image-to-the-angels/524717/.

Institute for Women's Policy Research. (2020). *The Gender Wage Gap by Occupation 2019 and by Race and Ethnicity*. <https://iwpr.org/iwpr-issues/employment-and-earnings/the-gender-wage-gap-by-occupation-2019/>

Jackson, D. (2020, May 12). *Confidence Shot Lately? This Inspiring Video Will Turn That Around in 30 Seconds*. PopSugar. <https://www.popsugar.com/beauty/billie-are-we-doing-video-ad-campaign-47464693>

Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). *Tomboy*. from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tomboy>

Meyer, J. (2019, August 15). *History of Nike: Timeline and Facts*. The Street. <https://www.thestreet.com/lifestyle/history-of-nike-15057083>

Mullins, J. (2014, November 6). *Victoria's Secret Discreetly Changes 'Perfect Body' Campaign Tagline Amid Backlash*. E! News. www.eonline.com/news/595520/victoria-s-secret-discreetly-changes-perfect-body-campaign-tagline-amid-backlash.

Nike News. (2011, June 07). *Make Yourself Team*. <https://news.nike.com/news/nike-make-yourself-team>

Nike Purpose. (2020, September 23). *How We Stand Up for Equality*. <https://purpose.nike.com/how-we-stand-up-for-equality>

Pai, D. (2018, October 16). *Millennial Razor Brands Now Embrace Body Hair-but Does It Matter?* Glamour. <https://www.glamour.com/story/flamingo-body-care-millennial-brands>

P&G. (n.d.). *Brands*. Retrieved December 04, 2020, from <https://us.pg.com/brands/>

Project Body Hair. (n.d.). Billie. <https://mybillie.com/pages/projectbodyhair>

Rampton, M. (2015, October 25). *Four Waves of Feminism*. Pacific University.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20151119073645/http://www.pacificu.edu/about-us/news-events/four-waves-feminism>

Robin, M. (2019, June 27). *Billie's New Ad Campaign Featuring Pubic Hair Has Sparked a Debate on Social Media*. Allure. <https://www.allure.com/story/billie-razor-ad-campaign-unshaven-pubic-underarm-hair>

Silver-greenberg, J., Rosman, K., Maheshwari, S., & Stewart, B. J. (2020, February 1). *Angels' in Hell: The Culture of Misogyny Inside Victoria's Secret*. The New York Times
www.nytimes.com/2020/02/01/business/victorias-secret-razek-harassment.html.

Simeon, A. (2020, May 12). *Billie's Newest Campaign Aims To Tear Down Zoom Beauty Standards*. Refinery29. <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2020/05/9804720/billie-razor-quarantine-zoom-campaign>

Singh-Kurtz, S. (2019, July 24). A new razor brand is encouraging women not to shave.
Retrieved December 04, 2020, from <https://qz.com/quartz/1672807/razor-brand-billie-is-encouraging-women-not-to-shave-their-body-hair/>

Sollee, K. (2015, October 30). *6 Things To Know About 4th Wave Feminism*. Bustle.

<https://www.bustle.com/articles/119524-6-things-to-know-about-4th-wave-feminism>

SportyTell (2020, August 3). *Nike Net Worth 2020: Facts, Brand Value, Earnings*.

<https://sportytell.com/net-worth/nike-net-worth/>

Stevenson, S. (2020, June 9). *Victoria's Secret Has Only Itself to Blame*. Slate Magazine.

[https://slate.com/business/2020/06/victoria-secret-coronavirus-jeffrey-epstein-les-](https://slate.com/business/2020/06/victoria-secret-coronavirus-jeffrey-epstein-les-wexner.html)

[wexner.html](https://slate.com/business/2020/06/victoria-secret-coronavirus-jeffrey-epstein-les-wexner.html).

The Bastion. (2019, December 31). *A Slippery Undersole: Nike and its Faux-Feminist Culture*.

from <https://thebastion.co.in/politics-and/a-slippery-undersole-nike-and-its-faux-feminist-culture/>

The Pink Tax Rebate. (n.d.). Billie. <https://mybillie.com/pages/pink-tax>

Zoonen, V. L. (1994). *Feminist Media Studies (Media Culture & Society series)* (1st ed.). SAGE Publications Ltd.