

Testing the Appeals of Feminist Ideologies in Female Athletic Advertising

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine whether Generation Y women respond more to athletic ads that embodied a second-wave feminist ideology or a third-wave, post-structuralist ideology. A focus group was conducted and its findings revealed that the women's ideological preferences were not based on their generation, but their lifestyle. In other words, the Generation Y women did not unanimously identify with one feminist ideology over the other. Instead, the ideology they responded to in the athletic ads was based on their athletic lifestyle. This ultimately indicates that Generation Y females are segmented, and each market segment responds to ads that present a lifestyle and values similar to their own. The implications found in this research may be used to provide consumer insights to professionals in the advertising industry.

I. Introduction

Second- and third-wave feminist ideologies helped advertisers determine the values and preferences of women in each generation. By understanding what women responded to, advertisers produce images and copy that engaged their female audiences. A new wave of feminism has yet to emerge, and its absence contributes to the lack of insight into the ideology that appeals most to female Generation Y™ consumers. Second- and third-wave feminism, although still relevant now, can both be associated with a generation of women. Generation Y has the two conflicting ideologies of the past, making it difficult to determine which, if either, mindset reigns supreme among today's early adult, female consumers.

This research aims to determine if Generation Y women respond more positively to second-wave or third-wave feminist ideology in athletic advertising. The studies in this investigation identify the characteristics of female athletic advertisements that appeal to Generation Y women and their corresponding ideologies. Athletic advertising has been selected because the athletic-wear industry was one of the many markets affected by feminist movements and trends. Brands such as Nike were strictly masculine and did not begin adding women's lines until the end of the 1980s (Grow & Wolburg, 2006). Since then, some brands have produced women's ads similar to their men's ads – taking a more second-wave, gender-neutral approach to advertising to their female audience. Others have catered specifically to third-wave, feminine sensibilities. The findings included in this research are intended to help athletic advertisers understand to which feminist ideology female Generation Y consumers relate most. The information garnered from this study will help these advertisers

* **Keywords:** feminism and advertising, women's athletic advertising, Gen Y, feminism, advertising
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** Generation Y, for the purposes of this study, is defined as the demographic born between 1984 and 2000 and is also known as the Millennial Generation (Mashable, 2013).

better tailor their messages to fit this demographic.

II. Literature Review

Background Theory

Market segmentation is changing the way in which advertisers reach audiences, especially women. Females have long been considered one “homogeneous category” (Scott, 2008). Now, with markets growing increasingly segmented, targeting such a broad audience is ineffective. As Janet Riccio, CEO of the women’s consultancy G23, notes that marketing just to “women” is a bankrupt concept – “it’s very paternalistic . . . far too passive for the women of the 21st century and seems to be code for ‘marketing to moms.’ Women are other things besides moms” (Scott, 2008). As advertisers begin to specify and segment female markets, the challenge becomes how to effectively communicate with each target audience.

A study of women’s responses to different portrayals of females in advertisements demonstrates the value behind segment-specific messaging. Although performed over 20 years ago, the findings from this study still apply to today’s advertising industry. Researchers tested women’s reactions on a cognitive response level to understand how the “spontaneous thoughts of the audience to an ad influence the audience’s attitude toward the ad and the product” (Leigh, Rethans, & Whitney, 1987, p. 55). As the basis for their experiment, Leigh, Rethans, and Whitney (1987) examined the relationship between role orientation – a woman’s beliefs about the lifestyles and place of women in society – and role portrayal, the “characterizations of people in commercials as well as their setting relative to the product and other characters” (p. 56). In 1987, when women were still grouped into broader audience categories, the researchers tested the different reactions traditional and modern women had to traditional and modern role portrayals of women in advertisements. To gauge the respondents’ cognitive responses, they measured the different groups’ “attitude toward the advertisement, the role model (or source), the brand, and the act of buying the brand” (p. 56). They found that traditional women responded strongest to ads with traditional role portrayals of women. Likewise, modern women related best to the ads featuring women in modern roles. In other words, women responded to the role portrayal that was consistent with how they saw themselves and their role orientation. It follows then, that effective advertising maintains consistency between the role portrayal of females and the target audience’s role orientation or general values.

The findings from this study ultimately indicate that ad context and messaging must align with the views of the target audience. A harmonious matching of female portrayal to audience expectations yields positive viewer responses and influences, among other things, their consideration and/or purchasing of the product and their opinion of the ad’s effectiveness. (Leigh et al, 1987, pp. 54-55; Scott, 2008). Researchers found that messaging needs to be segment-specific to effectively influence an audience’s perception of the product and brand. Once the modern women identified the traditional women in the test ad as “housewives” they tuned out the ad completely (Leigh et al, 1987, p. 58), indicating the negative result of a role portrayal inconsistent with the target audience. Overall, the results “confirm the market segmentation view that communications effectiveness is enhanced by tailoring that advertisement . . . to the target audience” (p. 60). The ads whose context matches the views of the market segment will be the most effective. Furthermore, as Riccio found in her survey of women around the world, “there is power to be had in the intersection of a product . . . and the needs or values of women and girls in your target customer group” (Scott, 2008).

Advertising today does not solely focus on selling the product, however. Ads help construct consumer product preferences, establish a brand’s identity, and likewise, influence the audience’s perception of the brand as a whole. The postmodern branding theory identifies brands as more than a collection of products; brands are an entity of their own. They are living things with sacred identities and are full of emotional promises (Grow, 2008, p. 314). A compelling brand and its advertising “recognizes there are fundamental human truths and needs that it can uniquely serve” (Grow, 2008, p. 315) and communicates those qualities in a way that resonates with its target market. In short, ad context influences the audience’s perception of both the individual product and of the brand in general. For this reason, it is imperative that ads accurately appeal to the intended audience.

Feminism and Advertising

The rise of second-wave feminism in the later 20th century helped define a generation of women and their preferences. The driving women behind this movement, such as Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, sought to liberate women from the constraining gender roles and gender discrimination of the patriarchal culture in which they lived (Skinner, 2009, p. 9). Second-wave feminists addressed the primary issue of role equality, while arguing that “gender roles and gender behaviors . . . inherently disadvantaged women” (Skinner, 2009, p. 12). These women shaped the second-wave through their efforts to “break through the oppression of women” (Mack-Canty, 2004, p. 157) and incite a change in “traditional” gender roles that would ultimately affect societal gender norms (Skinner, 2009, p. 13). Essentially, the second-wave feminists saw no “difference between women and men, other than the superficial one of having been treated differently” (Mack-Canty, 2004, p. 157). They rallied for images, especially in advertising, that portrayed women as more than housewives and positioned them as equals to men (Skinner, 2009, p. 12).

Second-wave women wanted “egalitarian representations of women [and] . . . texts more respectful of women’s intelligence, paired with images more reflective of their diverse roles” (Howard, 2010, p. 142). As Steinem and her editors at *Ms. Magazine* explained, “We don’t spend half our money on makeup . . . and the other half on food . . . we also buy cars, books, airline tickets . . . and the many products that aren’t usually directed to women at all” (Howard, 2010, p. 139). These demands changed advertisers’ perceptions of the “American woman consumer” and how they targeted female audiences (Howard, 2010, p. 137). Effective advertising gave women what they wanted; it valued the female consumer and portrayed women in roles more similar to men.

Third-wave, post-structuralist feminism – the ideology born in the late 1980s and early 1990s – embodied a different set of values. Unlike second-wave feminist ideology, which referred to women as a singular group and assumed “a universalization of their experiences as ‘women’s experience,’” third-wave acknowledged the diversity in experiences and views among women (Howard, 2010, pp. 158-159). Third-wave feminists continued the second-wave’s resistance against hegemonic gender roles and a patriarchal culture. Yet, these feminists did not see gender neutrality as synonymous with gender equality and encouraged women to own their femininity and “re-appropriate their girlhood” into a means of rebellion and empowerment (p. 162). In summary, the third-wave ideology promotes individuality and the sharing of female experiences among women. During this movement, effective advertising meant presenting images of women who were empowered by their femininity, and copy where these women shared a story.

III. Methodology

The purpose of this study is to determine if Generation Y women respond more positively to second-wave or third-wave feminist ideologies in athletic advertising. A focus group was conducted to gain insight from female Generation Y consumers who purchase athletic gear. A focus group was the most appropriate research method for this study because it helps measure participants’ reactions and gauges their attitudes, perceptions, and thought processes to a particular subject (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p.4, 12). Ultimately, a focus group was the most effective method of determining the participants’ opinions (p. 12) on the ads presented and questions posed during the discussion.

Sample

A focus group of six Generation Y women was conducted for this purpose. The participants in this focus group were selected based on a convenience sample in an effort to gain input from a variety of women, and also due to time constraints. To protect the confidentiality of the focus group, the participants will be referred to as participants 1-6.

- *Participant 1*: 20 years old; exercises daily with a combination of weights, strength training, and cardio; plays rugby; considers self an athlete
 - *Participant 2*: 21 years old; exercises daily with a combination of weights, strength training, and cardio; heavily involved with intramural sports; considers self an athlete
 - *Participant 3*: 21 years old; exercises sometimes; does not consider self an athlete
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- *Participant 4*: 22 years old; exercises sometimes; does not consider self an athlete
- *Participant 5*: 22 years old; runs regularly; exercises a few times a week; does not consider self an athlete
- *Participant 6*: 22 years old; runs regularly; exercises multiple times a week; does not consider self an athlete

Procedure

The focus group was conducted on April 10, 2013. The six participants sat around a table and introduced themselves by age, regularity and type of athletic activity, and whether or not they would consider themselves an athlete. From their introductions, two types of participants emerged: higher-impact athletes and lower-impact athletes. On the spectrum of high to low, participants 1 and 2 were high impact athletes, participants 3 and 4 were low impact athletes, and participants 5 and 6 were in the middle, leaning more to the lower end.

A script guided the focus group and posed discussion topics to gain insight toward the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent do Generation Y women relate to advertisements that focus on females athleticism and appeals to femininity?

RQ2: Does copy or imagery have a greater impact on a Generation Y woman's response to an ad?

The focus group began with broader discussion topics regarding the participants' opinions about what appealed to them in ads. The participants discussed some values-based questions about the impact a woman's portrayal in an ad has on them, if a woman's portrayal affects their purchasing decisions, and if the portrayal of a woman influences their greater perception of the brand. From there, the discussion began to narrow and focused on identifying the characteristics in athletic ads that appealed to the participants.

The participants were given four advertisements to discuss. To avoid any brand bias, the test advertisements were from different campaigns done by Nike. All logos and mention of a specific product or of Nike itself were removed in Photoshop so that the participants would react solely to the ad content.



Ad 1: "Serena Williams"



Ad 2: "Thunder Thighs"



Ad 3: "Titles"



Ad 4: "Make Yourself"

The next part of the discussion was focused on the participants' responses to the test ads – how they would describe the women in each ad, the idea they saw each ad presenting, and how the portrayal of each woman affected their perceptions of the overall ad. The participants also highlighted the most impactful

characteristics in each ad. Participants then selected the ad that appealed to them the most and shared their reasoning behind why the ad appealed to them and went more in-depth about what made them connect to it. They ended by determining whether the ad would compel them to purchase a product from the brand.

The focus group discussion was recorded, transcribed, and then coded to identify trends in the participants' responses and attitudes toward the four ads. The discussion was guided in hopes of determining whether Generation Y females responded more to ads that had characteristics of second-wave feminist ideology or ads that embodied more third-wave values. The responses, however, did not fit into a binary of pro-second-wave or pro-third-wave.

Since the majority did not clearly lean toward one ideology over the other, the content needed to be analyzed using a more "who" and "why" approach. A basic typology was employed first, to group the respondents into two categories based on their professed level of athleticism or athletic activity. Each participant was either a high-impact athlete or a low-impact athlete, based on the distinctions provided earlier in this section. A content analysis was then performed to identify which category of respondents had responded most favorably to each ad. Given that each ad represented either second- or third-wave feminist ideology, analyzing the responses high-impact and low-impact women gave to the ads would identify any correlations between consumer type and feminist ideology.

The responses to each ad were separated out and color-coded to identify the reactions from high- and low-impact athletes. Under each ad were lines of pink (low-impact) and purple (high-impact) responses to show respondent preferences and to distinguish opinions. "Serena Williams" and "Thunder Thighs," the opposite ends of the feminist ideology spectrum, garnered the most responses. The responses to each of these ads were then analyzed for content to determine the values each respondent category had expressed. In other words, the content was analyzed to understand who favored each ad and why. The patterns that emerged during this coding process revealed relationships between types of athletes and their underlying ideology preferences.

IV. Findings

Lower-impact athletes: feminine focus

In responding to the ads, participants 3-6 said the third-wave ads – identified as "Thunder Thighs" and "Titles" throughout the focus group – appealed to them the most. Both ads had concepts based on female experiences, and for this reason, were ads to which these participants related because they could identify with the experiences communicated.

Participant 3 noted that at first glance, the tagline in "Titles" looked as though it said, "Are you looking at my titties?" The actual tagline reads, "Are you looking at my titles?" but participant 3 liked the seemingly sly play on women's objectification and the shared experience.

When you're walking down the street and you see people checking you out, you're like, "are they looking at my 'titties'?" Are they looking at my ass?" That kind of thing.

She responded most strongly to the challenge the ad's tagline posed because of its "sassiness" and how it took a commonly negative experience and thrust it back in the perpetrator's face, empowering the woman behind it. Participant 3 favored this ad because she found it the most relatable. She identified with the personality of the ad and the experience behind it.

These people could be my friends.

Participants 4, 5, and 6 shared similar justification when describing how and why they favored "Thunder Thighs." As with "Titles", "Thunder Thighs" acknowledged a familiar concept among females – "thunder thighs" – the term for thighs that are larger, thicker, and curvier than the ones seen on slender, model-like women. "Thunder Thighs" use of the term and its portrayal of thunder thighs resonated with the participants because it appealed to something they understood.

["Thunder Thighs"] appeals to me most mainly because I do run and I know people that have stopped running because they started getting thunder thighs, so I understand that concept.

I just like that it really related to me and kind of what I get out of working out.

Generally, participants 3-6 responded most positively to “Thunder Thighs” because it appealed to their female values.

The [“Thunder Thighs”] advertisement is probably the most feminine one because it appeals to what a woman would care about now and in the future.

Participant 5 liked that “Thunder Thighs” recognized her values of family and body image, but appreciated that the ad still celebrate her being active and athletic.

My favorite is [“Thunder Thighs”] . . . because it talks about having a grandchild – and that’s more of appealing to the female – but then it talks about thunder thighs, so that would be more athletic.

Higher-impact athletes: gender-neutrality

In contrast to the preferences of the lower-impact athletes, the higher-impact athletes did not connect with the femininity-focused, third-wave ads. Instead, they responded more to the gender-neutral, second-wave “Serena Williams” and “Make Yourself” and the equality-based messages they held. Participant 3, in weighing which ad she related to the most, recognized that “Serena Williams” did not give attention to any specifically female attributes, making it, in her opinion, the most symbolic of gender equality.

The text in it [“Make Yourself”], it’s totally non-gender specific because it doesn’t say, “ranked #140 because I’m a girl,” it says, “ranked #140 because of all these traits” . . . and you could apply that to any athlete.

Additionally, the higher-impact athletes did not feel the need for a stronger female focus to compel them. Participant 2 said she related more to “Serena Williams,” but that its appeal did not span beyond anything more than gender. She also liked how the two ads’ less feminine-focused approach made the women appear more equal. She identified with the fact that the ads did not give special focus to any female attributes but rather, gave the message that an athlete is an athlete, regardless of gender.

I feel like if it’s girls pictured, I can relate to it more being a female athlete, whereas, if it was just like, a guy tennis player flexing, I’d relate to it more just as being an athlete. So it depends on the sex of the person in the picture.

In other words, the appeal of “Serena Williams” was not in the depiction of the woman or her role portrayal, but in the ad’s presentation of a woman in general.

Higher-impact athletes: performance

Throughout the discussion, the participants compared elements of each ad to their own associations with athleticism and their personal lifestyles. Based on what each participant mentioned, it was clear that there were differing values between the higher and the lower-impact athletes. The higher-impact athletes primarily valued performance and related most to “Serena Williams” and “Make Yourself” because they portrayed this value.

It’s not about how you look when you’re working out. It’s more your performance.

I like [“Serena Williams” and “Make Yourself”], again, because these two women just look like the epitome of hard work, which for more, as an athlete, that’s what athletics have always been about – always working hard to win something or not necessarily to get in shape, but to get somewhere.

Lower-impact athletes: empowering copy

Participants 3-6 associated “Thunder Thighs” with the concept of empowerment because of the positive spin its copy put on thunder thighs. The participants saw the ad’s copy as taking a generally negative concept and repositioning it as a positive thing. Thunder thighs are a potential cause for self-consciousness among women; “Thunder Thighs” is encouraging women to take ownership and pride in their bodies, which, the participants agreed, embodies their definitions of empowerment.

I see empowerment as putting power back into something or taking something without power and adding power because something has been changed.

It's saying, "actually, thunder thighs are powerful and strong and awesome." So I see that as being most empowering.

Higher-impact athletes: dynamic visuals

"Serena Williams" and "Make Yourself" appealed to participants 1 and 2 because of their intense images. Both participants were engaged by the visuals alone and gave little regard to the accompanying copy.

There's more going on in both of those ["Serena Williams" and "Make Yourself"].

The more action in the picture really draws me to it ["Serena Williams"].

I would also agree and say that ["Serena Williams" and "Make Yourself"], I feel like I can relate to more. There is more action going on.

Also of note here is that the higher-impact athletes likened the visuals in "Serena Williams" and "Make Yourself" to images they would find in male athletic ads. Participants 1 and 2 noted that the visual elements present in most male athletic ads were the same characteristics that appealed to them in these female ads.

If I see male fitness ads . . . there's a lot of muscle, a lot of sweat, and I feel like in 1 and 4 that's kind of what would draw you in.

Especially in ["Make Yourself"] – I mean, I don't think she has that much makeup on and I feel like when you're like, either on a team or like, doing a sport, it's not about the way you look.

Essentially, participant 2 noticed that the women in the second-wave ads were styled similarly to men. Their natural appearance appealed to her because it more closely resembled her image of an athlete.

V. Conclusion

The relationships found during this study emerged from an open round of coding. They were not discovered through a priori inquiry, but instead, revealed themselves. The responses from the focus group ultimately demonstrated that one ad, or feminist ideology for that matter, does not fit all. There are different athletic lifestyles among Generation Y female athletes, each with their own feminist values. The lower-impact athletes – the yogis, intermediate runners, and cardio-intensive gym goers, for example – preferred the ads that portrayed active lifestyles but still appealed to their feminine characteristics, as in the highly favored "Thunder Thighs." For this reason, it can be said that low-impact athletes favor ads that evoke a third-wave feminist ideology. These respondents found the ads that depicted more intense, masculine versions of women intimidating. On the contrary, the higher-impact athletes – the sport-intensive and cross-training-oriented females – preferred them, aligning their preferences with ads promoting second-wave feminist ideology. These differences indicate that each lifestyle has its own athletic values that guide its members' ideology preferences and ad responses.

Lower-impact athletes value an active lifestyle over straight athleticism. They mostly engage in exercise of some form to stay fit and maintain a good figure. These women appreciate athletic ads that maintain a balance in promoting fitness and appealing to their femininity. They are empowered by ads that promote positive body images and frame commonly negative aspects of female life (i.e. thunder thighs) as positives. For this type of audience, an ad with copy communicating a positive message and a corresponding visual of a healthy, active woman will have the strongest impact.

While a lower-impact athlete might lift weights to tone, a higher-impact athlete lifts to tone and build muscle mass. The higher-impact athletes value athleticism defined by performance, achievement, and physical strength. They participate in sports and exercise for the physical benefits and for the feeling of accomplishment it brings them. Higher-impact athletes favor ads that show women in action and that highlight the performance-based benefits of a product. While an acknowledgment of femininity resonated with the lower-impact athletes, higher-impact athletes are not concerned with this concept. The fact that there is a female athlete in the ad is enough for them to find it relatable. This audience will respond best to an ad that has a large visual depicting a physical activity with some level of intensity and very little copy to detract from the action in the image.

A lower-impact athlete is the female who wears Nike shorts for running, but also wears them because

they are fashionable. A higher-impact athlete wears the same Nike shorts, but because they do not restrict her leg movement during her run and wick away sweat well. Both groups of women are buying the shorts, but for different reasons. This underlines the key characteristic of Generation Y female athletes (or athletic wear consumers) – they are not a single group. These female athletes may have gender and generation in common, but the values that drive their purchasing decisions are entirely different and rooted in two distinct feminist ideologies.

A company needs to understand these differentiating characteristics and determine to which group it wants its ad to appeal. Therein lies the importance of understanding the values of each athletic lifestyle. A feminist approach to advertising to women may create impactful ads, but the ideologies communicated in them need to be appropriately tailored to fit each audience. The femininity-focused, female-empowerment messages of the third-wave's post-structuralist ideology matches the values of lower-impact athletes. A company or agency should design ads that reflect this ideology to better reach lower-impact athletes. Likewise, the gender-neutral, or rather, gender irrelevant approach of second-wave feminist ideology shares values similar to those of higher-impact athletes. The characteristics of this ideology should be present in ads directed toward a higher-impact audience. In short, successful athletic advertising will understand the need to go beyond cursory categorizing and sub-categorize. Advertisers need to recognize the differences in the female athlete audience and appeal to the feminist ideologies and corresponding lifestyle values of each.

Limitations and Further Research

While this study may present conclusions regarding Generation Y females and the feminist ideologies that appeal to them in women's athletic advertising, most of the inferences made are based on the responses from a focus group of six females. The focus group is too small for any strong generalizations to be made about the greater female athletic audience. The findings and conclusions from this focus group may serve as inspiration for further research, but alone, are not enough to provide any larger insights into the preferences of Generation Y females. Ideally, several focus groups of six participants each would have been conducted to strengthen the conclusions of this research.

Using this study as a starting point, further research could be conducted to determine if specific athletic activities influence the feminist ideologies that appeal to a woman. Additional studies could also be performed to determine the ideologies present in different brands' ads and whether brand perception or ideology has a greater influence on consumers' purchasing decisions.

Acknowledgments

The author extends sincere thanks to Professor Glenn Scott at Elon University for his guidance, thoughtful help, and general support. Laura Burgess deserves thanks as well for being a late-night sounding board. This article could not have been published without them or the reviewers who helped strengthen it.

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