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## Girl Power

Caroline Olesen

*Georgia College & State University*

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## Girl Power

Caroline Olesen

Dr. Amy Burt  
Faculty Mentor

It is now in the 16th year of the 21st century, and as a species, we are trying to improve. We're trying to reduce our carbon footprint; we're trying to help the sick and the poor; we're trying to combat racism, anti-Semitism, and sexism. But as of recent years, sexism has been more on the back burner – not because it is less important, but because of the huge strides that were made in the Western world in the 20th century. Women can now work, vote, get an education, and get a mortgage without a man's permission. Women, at this point, have become very independent. So why is sexism still a problem? Why do we have celebrities like Emma Watson, who speak very publicly about feminism? Much like racism, the 20th century for feminism was about equal rights. The 21st century is, and will continue to be, about equal opportunity and treatment. Because even though women are now allowed to work, in 1988 women were still making only 73.8% of what a man was making (Schmittroth 373). Because “a woman is 10 times more likely to be raped than to die in a car crash” (Schmittroth 75). Because “in answer to a question about how often they feel ‘happy the way I am’, 67% of elementary school boys answered ‘always’; by high school, 47% of boys still felt that way, and with girls the figure dropped from 60% to 29%” (Schmittroth 285). Feminism today in the western world is about changing the perceptions and myths that lead to sexist microaggressions.

The feminine hygiene company Always addresses this exact momentum in their commercial, #LikeAGirl. According to Always, the first step is recognizing that there is a problem. This is the main focus of the communication event that they put forth. Shedding light on how deeply imbedded it is for a grown-up's psyche and how it isn't naturally a part of a young girl's psyche, the commercial

seeks to change “like a girl” from a derogatory phrase to a positive phrase. With more than 60.9 million views on YouTube and even more on television, it is obvious that the commercial appealed to a large audience (Always #LikeaGirl). The spin-off “Unstoppable,” also a commercial by Always, has more than 38 million views in just four months (Always #LikeaGirl – Unstoppable). More and more people are gathering around the mission for equality and to change society’s view of the sexes. Always isn’t the only company taking advantage of this; Barbie launched a commercial, called “Imagine the Possibilities,” which shows how little girls engage with their dreams of whatever job they might want through playing with Barbies. From the launch on the 8th of October 2015 until the 8th of March 2016, the commercial has accumulated more than 40 million views (Barbie). Feminism is working towards a society where “like a girl” isn’t a bad thing, and where little girls can grow up to pursue any kind of career they want.

Through a communications perspective, I will look at the Always #LikeAGirl commercial. Specifically, I seek to understand the motivation of the commercial through a Burkean scope of guilt and redemption. Looking into the phrase “like a girl,” I will use the theory of symbolic interactionism and how communication affects the construction of “me,” “I,” and our “generalized other.” Finally, taking the commercial through a critical lens, I will evaluate whether I believe the commercial to be a public relations stunt for better branding or an actual attempt at creating societal evolution.

The shift in focus from rights to opportunities and treatment was especially interesting, and this in turn led me to the idea of microaggression as the latest enemy in feminism. Although the Always commercial, #LikeAGirl, was at the top of my list and was the introductory element to my research, I also looked at other commercials for comparison; the Dove “Real Beauty” campaign, the recent Barbie “Imagine the Possibilities” campaign, Victoria Secret’s “A Body for Every Body,” and Pantene’s “Sorry - Not Sorry” campaign were all possibilities for my analysis. I chose #LikeAGirl based on the wide recognition it had received and the approachability, as I myself identified with the commercial.

The Always #LikeAGirl campaign is a product of present

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day society's lingering oppression of women and seeks to become a vehicle for fundamental change in the treatment of women. By taking an ordinary phrase "like a girl," and confronting society about its derogatory connotation and its effect on young girls, Always succeeds in creating a campaign that becomes a tool for change.

### **Literature Review**

Entering into the realm of Burkean analysis, it was almost mandatory to pull from the original source of dramatism. Kenneth Burke, having published several books on the subject, is widely recognized as a 'founding father' of dramatism. In his two books, *A Grammar of Motives* and *A Rhetoric of Motives* (which is combined to one volume), Burke touches on the origins of words and their substance, as well as their connotations and the effect they have on the human condition. Moreover, in his book *Permanence and Change – An Anatomy of Purpose*, Burke explores several concepts of his theory concerning language as the root of what he calls guilt in society and the methods that we use to rid ourselves of this guilt, as well as how this is evident in literature.

Over the years, Burkean analysis has been utilized by many people, so it was not surprising to find that there was a sea of articles on Burkean analysis of advertising. In her article "Sociological Propaganda," Kathleen Vandenberg uses the Burkean perspective to examine the propagandist transformation made within the advertising community. Wood uses the concepts of scapegoating, victimization, and Burkean guilt to analyze a social construct as a product of the present day in her article "The Secrets We Kill." Burkean analysis is also used in Brown and French's report, "It's All Your Fault," on victim blaming in sexual assault and sexism in the fitness community.

Within the advertising world, the portrayal of gender is especially important as ads today are such a big part of society. In "Advertising Professionals' Perceptions of the Impact of Gender Portrayals on Men and Women: A Question of Ethics?," Tuncay and Coleman studied the advertising world and the gender stereotypes portrayed within it, critiquing the old-fashioned gender represen-

tations. The derogatory attitude towards females is further explored by Daniels in her article “You Throw Like A Girl.” Daniels specifically focuses on the depiction of women in sports films, but relates this to just how deep-seated the perception of women as the weaker sex is and has been for years. Martin echoes this with a study called “Giving Birth Like A Girl,” highlighting society’s expectations of women’s behavior through the pressure that some women feel to be ‘nice,’ even during the process of giving birth. In *Gender and Sex in Society*, Lucile Duberman supports this study with her theory about gender roles and the establishment and importance of these roles in society. All of this is reflected in Schmittroth’s *Statistical Record of Women Worldwide*, which is a book of statistics on women in all contexts of society.

The evolution of advertising, combined with new social realities, has led many companies to seek social responsibility. In “Gap (RED): Social Responsibility Campaign or Window Dressing?” Amazeen analyzes the GAP RED campaign in order to figure out whether this quest is sincere or merely a new era of capitalism leeching on the consumers’ conscience instead of their needs.

## Analysis

The #LikeAGirl commercial was first published on June 26th, 2014. Taking the viewer through the journey of recognition and realization of one of the microaggressions women face in modern American society, it displays an obvious problem without belittling the receiver of the message.

The Always commercial steers its audience straight to the center of the problem, the very core of the issue they are exposing. For the first 37 seconds, filmmaker and director Lauren Greenfield asks both males and females, who look to be either teenagers or older, to “do the first thing that comes to mind” (0:10) when instructed to perform certain actions “like a girl.” The people proceed to make fun of either running, throwing, or fighting “like a girl” in a way that looks awkward or weird – one girl even going as far as voicing her actions with “Oh, my hair, oh god” (0:20) in a very wimpy voice. This is the manifestation of the problem, a problem

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that is deep-seated in our society. Dayna B. Daniels writes that “nothing is a greater insult to a male athlete than to imply that he is female, feminine, or homosexual” (35), and it has been that way for years. She provides plenty of examples of sports movies where a phrase close to or the exact phrase “like a girl” is thrown around like the worst insult:

‘You’re playing like a bunch o’ girls out there, everyone of ya (*The Longest Yard*)!’; ‘Sit down and shut up you mouthy prima dona (*The Natural*)!’; Crush: ‘I don’t believe in fighting.’ Ebbie: ‘That’s sweet, you pussy (*Bull Durham*)!’; and ‘If you’re going to act like a loser, raise your hand. If you’re going to act like a pussy, raise your hand (*Any Given Sunday*)!’ (36).

Daniels goes on to say that “this language form is used frequently in sport films about adolescent males” (36). However, this usage is not just in sports films, and Always proves this by taking people who look to be from several different ways of life – male, female, adult, teenager, different races – posing the same question and then watching them respond the same way. What makes the issue even more disturbing is the next segment of the commercial, in which young girls, who have yet to hit their teenage years, are told the same thing, but their responses are in stark contrast to the previous responses. The girls give it their all and respond that running “like a girl” means “to run as fast as you can” (1:00). The very next frame is a question; “When did doing something ‘like a girl’ become an insult?” (1:04).

“Like a girl” has become what rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke defines as a “devil-term,” “the term that sums up all that the speaker regards as bad, wrong, or evil” (Griffin et al 295). In society, being female is indirectly linked to qualities such as weakness, failure, and inferiority. Kenneth Burke writes that “from a dramatic point of view, we are admonished to dwell upon the word...so that we may detect its covert influence” (*Grammar* 21). Words have power beyond their simple function of communication. “Like a girl” has become a tool of humiliation for society to use as it pleases, not considering the ramifications that this might have on the female population. This phrase has an impact on how girls come to

view their gender role, which is defined by Lucile Duberman as “the socially learned patterns of behavior that differentiate men from women in a given society” (26). Because “a society decides what is considered masculine and what is feminine” (26) and a person’s gender role is largely based off of patterns formed by society, making “like a girl” encompass the weakest and/or worst qualities “is profoundly disempowering” in the words of director Lauren Greenfield (Always Youtube).

The Always commercial is also an expression of what Burke calls guilt – “a catchall term to cover every form of tension, anxiety, embarrassment, shame, disgusts and other noxious feelings intrinsic to the human condition” (Griffin et al 296). By even making the decision to make the commercial, Always recognizes that there is something tense or shameful about the current status of equality. According to Kathlyn Wood, “language is the primary process [that]...allows humans to mortify their guilt and find rebirth” (6). Like previously mentioned, the first step is recognizing that there is a problem. In the commercial, Greenfield confronts the first participants on whether they believe they just insulted their close female relatives and a teenage boy answers, “No! I mean, yeah, insulted girls, but not my sister” (1:09). This is a distinction that marks the Burkean guilt. The boy can see that there is something shameful in making “like a girl” an insult, but he separates his sister from this equation, as if to ask for forgiveness.

This process is called mortification in dramatism, “referring to the purging of guilt that comes along with ridding oneself certain mysteries” (Wood 5) or the “confession of guilt and request for forgiveness” (Griffin et al 298). As a commercial, this clip is carefully chosen, because it is representative of not only how the boy sees his own actions, but how society sees its actions; “like a girl” isn’t an insult to MY sister, mother, friends – at least it wasn’t meant like that. This insult can be compared to discrimination on the basis of sexuality, race, or mental ability. When confronted by someone, we will almost immediately excuse ourselves with “oh, I didn’t mean it like that” or “it was just a joke,” because we feel guilty about knowing the inappropriateness of using such language and inadvertently seek forgiveness for our wrongdoing.

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Another way of seeking redemption, Burke said, is through victimization, also called scapegoating. Burke wrote that “the scapegoating mechanism in its purest form, the use of a sacrificial receptacle for the ritual unburdening of one’s sins” (*Permanence and Change* 16). This “transference of guilt to an ‘outsider’” (Vandenberg 8) is what Always is doing. No one specifically in the commercial is being scapegoated, but the commercial as a whole blames society, or, more precisely, those who uses the phrase “like a girl” in society. The commercial battles with this, as it should not alienate its audience, but it must foster societal change by pointing out that those who “utilize language degrading to women” (Daniels 36) are the adversaries of this change. Sandra L. French and Sonya C. Brown argue that “scapegoats may be chosen for their complicity” (3), and so, in this case, simply by using the phrase “like a girl,” one becomes an accomplice and therefore a part of the guilty party.

As the commercial addresses this societal flaw and exposes it to the audience, it also addresses the impact that it has on young girls and their confidence development. Transitioning from showing the mortification of the young boy, a sentence appears on the screen: “A girl’s confidence plummets during puberty” (1:26). This is further supported by the statistic shared in the introduction, that the percentage of girls who are “happy the way [they are]” nose-dives from 60% in elementary school to only 29% in high school (Schmittroth 285).

I think it definitely drops their self-confidence, and really puts them down because during that time they’re trying to figure themselves out, and when somebody says “you hit like a girl,” it’s like well what does that mean? ‘Cause they think they’re a strong person and it’s kind of like telling them that they’re weak and they’re not as good as them.  
(1:34)

This is a teenage girl’s answer to the question “how do you think it affects them, when somebody uses ‘like a girl’ as an insult?” (1:32). It is clear that she is drawing on her own experience to answer the question and this showcases that even the younger generation is aware of the effect it has on young girls in the long run. Lucile Duberman explains that “although we know that socialization is a



lifelong process, we still recognize that childhood is its most significant period” (24), therefore solidifying how important communication is for personality development and that a negative connotation to the phrase “like a girl” could potentially damage a young girl’s perception of self.

Sociologist George Mead “believed that our thoughts, self-concept, and the wider community we live in are created through communication – symbolic interaction” (Griffin et al 54). Nobody is born to be racist or anti-Semitic; it is learned through interactions with the outside world. The same goes for the perception of women as the weaker sex – the connotation added to the phrase “like a girl.” It is learned, not natural, thought that occurs. This is excellently displayed in the Always commercial by contrasting the older demographic with the young girls’. It even displays the pivotal point where a young girl is becoming aware of the negative connotation, explaining “I actually don’t know if it’s a bad thing or a good thing. It sounds like a bad thing. It sounds like you’re trying to humiliate someone” (1:16).

As young girls develop their identity, this can create a conflict between their subjective, impulsive “I” and their objective, organized “me.” Mead believes that a person’s self comes from a combination of the two. In this case, the “I” is displayed as the young girls acting on impulse, giving everything that they have in every action requested by director Greenfield. The “me” is the older demographic, thinking about what is known to be the action expected when hearing the phrase “like a girl.” It is a very interesting exposure of just how much a single phrase changes in meaning and just how much impact is made in the beginning years of puberty. Now, of course, it is not just this sentence that gives girls at that age insecurities. There are factual biological differences between boys and girls, but, as Duberman, points out “menstruation has been and generally still is regarded as ‘dirty’...surely this must have an impact on the way women see themselves” (43). It is a societal generality that being female more often than not carries negative connotations, and “like a girl” is a product of this – a product which is used on playgrounds, thoughtlessly implanting undertones of inferiority in young girls.

This perception of the female sex extends further into adulthood and influences what Mead and other symbolic interactionist call ‘the generalized other,’ which is “the composite mental image a person has of his or her self based on societal expectations and responses” (Griffin et al 60). “Like a girl” embodies the societal expectation of the female sex by saying that if one is doing something in a certain way, usually meaning sub-standard, it is “like a girl” would do it. In the Always commercial, fighting “like a girl” means not really giving it one’s all, kind of just bashing one’s arms, because women do not know how to fight properly. These expectations of the female role are so imbedded that when Karen Martin performed a study, she found that “...women often worry about being and often are nice, polite, kind, and selfless in their interactions during labor and childbirth” (54). One of the most physically painful experiences a woman can go through, but also one of the most natural and essential to human survival, is childbirth. Yet, the expectation of how females are supposed to be is so deeply rooted in their generalized other, that even in that moment, they are compelled to act according to this expectation.

In essence, the phrase “like a girl” becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. It starts off small, like on the playground someone saying “wow, you throw like a girl,” but in the long run, it is only the beginning of the influence that societal expectations has on the general female population. It is a ripple effect aided by modern advertisements and how they “continue to misunderstand and misrepresent gender by conflating sex, gender, and sexuality, utilizing outdated and inaccurate stereotypes” (Tuncay and Coleman 266). Tuncay and Coleman continue, stating that “these understandings are important because consumers make sense of their identities using messages in advertising” (266). Because media is ever-present and nearly impossible to avoid, the constant flow of messages are streamlined into our everyday like an IV. This makes it inevitable that some of the messages will influence our perception of the world.

One of the particularly sneaky tricks the advertising industry uses is what Burke called identification. Burke wrote in his book *A Rhetoric of Motives* that “you persuade a man only insofar as you

can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his” (579). The rest of the advertising world might be using this power for evil, but it seems that Always is trying to use it for good with the #LikeAGirl commercial. There are a wide variety of ways that they could have created this commercial, but truly identifying with the viewer “requires the critic to...point out the ways in which it invites consumers to share its values, attitudes, and belief systems” (Vandenberg 7). Instead of having someone stand in a room and talk about the issue Always wanted to confront, they cleverly leveled with the viewer and did the old “show-us -don’t-tell-us”; letting the viewer recognize the first situation, see the stark contrast, and then slowly transitioning to advice and empowering statements.

Another way the commercial seeks to identify with the audience is the diversity of the people shown. It is a very conscious choice on the filmmaker’s part, because if there had not been diversity, identification would have been non-existent for certain demographics. Even though “complete identification is, as Burke recognized, impossible” (Vandenberg 2), just a sliver is enough to at least catch the attention of the viewer. Females, in general, will see themselves in one of the many girls in the video – they are all shapes, sizes, ages, and skin colors. Younger males will see themselves in the young boy and will see their sisters, cousins, or even mothers in the females. Older males will identify with the older male in the video, but will also identify with the females, seeing them as their daughters or wives, sisters or mothers. If a demographic is left out by the commercial, there is always the “important process of identification...through the negative. That is, we bond through naming what we are not” (Wood 6). A common enemy makes friends, and in this case, no one wants to be the one who stands in the way of little girls. Even though most men might not have it as a passion to advocate for women, Always appeals to them, as said, through the association of sisters, mothers, cousins, partners, or other females in their lives.

Viewer responses echo this, if not amplifying the degree of identification felt. Mayacita (mayaahutchh) tweeted “I’m proud of jumping #LikeAGirl. Keep up, boys” and a father tweeted a picture

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of his daughter with the text “My younger daughter preparing for another round of hand-to-hand combat #LikeAGirl” (Ramsey). Even now, almost a year later, the hashtag is still used daily in tweets like Deborah Johnson’s “Yesterday I did 300 pounds on the leg press. Today I am moving slowly. Totally worth it. #LikeAGirl” or SISUGIRLS’ “Important reminder from @smrtgrls: there is no wrong way to be a girl. #LikeAGirl.” The recognizable phrase, compared with simple identification of gender or empathy for the gender, makes for a very powerful tool.

### **Evaluation**

So far, the Always #LikeAGirl commercial has been referred to as that, a commercial, but is this really the correct term? There does not seem to be an actual product anywhere to find in the video, and in fact there is not. At no point during the three minutes and eighteen seconds is there a material product displayed. It seems strange that a company would spend so much money on producing a video and not actually display the product they are selling. Dr. Kathleen Vandenberg of Boston University might have an explanation for this:

As the twentieth century progressed, however, there were significant shifts in both American culture and in American advertising; advertisements, as has been widely noted in media studies, became far more propagandistic in nature—that is, they relied more heavily on images, emotions, and appeals to desires rather than reason. (1)

We have entered an age in the Western societies, where it is no longer our needs that dictate our consumer habits, but rather our wants that have come to take the wheel. This has made branding of companies more central to sales. Focus has shifted away from the practicality and usefulness of the product to whether or not the consumer agrees with or approves of the company itself.

A result of this are the numerous initiatives companies from all areas have taken to be socially progressive or to take a stand on an issue. Many companies from the Southern United States have appealed to consumers not by promoting their product, but by

promoting their conservative values. Chick-Fil-A and Walmart are just two of the companies who have continuously been in the news for taking stances on controversial issues such as equal rights and contraceptives. Is Always sincere in their quest to make a change “to champion girls’ confidence” (2:25), or is this merely another way in which they are appealing indirectly to the consumer to win their favor?

Professor Michelle Amazeen analyzed this exact dilemma with the GAP RED campaign, voicing her concern that “it costs nothing (maybe a little) to proclaim a policy of ‘caring for the world,’ and finding a fig leaf ‘cause’ to cover the otherwise ‘heartless’ perception of a profit-seeking company” (167). Generally, most big companies today are viewed as greedy and cold-blooded, not an image that necessarily encourages the sales. By launching the #LikeAGirl campaign, Always promotes itself as a company that cares specifically for their soon-to-be customers, since the campaign focuses on girls who are starting puberty or are now menstruating.

Now “the corporation may truly be sincere” (Amazeen 167), but what speaks to their advantage is the setting of this video. Although clearly edited, it still displays a casual setting where the director Lauren Greenfield calmly talks with or asks the participants questions. The participants seem like ordinary people – they aren’t overly perfect in the way most actors today are; they say “um” and contradict themselves when confronted, but mostly, they seem sincere in their actions - first to portray silliness and then to give honest opinions. Moreover, the continuation with the sequel “Unstoppable” commercial also speaks to the sincerity. A shortened version of the ad was also shown during the 2015 Super Bowl, where one second costs roughly \$150,000. That is nine million dollars for the sixty-second version of the ad – this is a lot of money to spend on a TV event where most viewers are male. Fama Francisco, the VP of Global Always, said to *The Huffington Post* that, like any other ad, the inspiration for this one came from consumer research (Berman). They found that, as said in the commercial and supported by previously stated data, girls’ self-confidence takes a hard hit when they reach puberty. “That deep consumer insight and under-

standing made us really step back and think, ‘What are the things that really contribute to that and how can we make a difference?’ (Berman). As Amazeen concludes with the GAP RED campaign, the Always campaign “defies the marketing ‘gimmick’ label in that it goes beyond having little relevance or use. With the glare of the media spotlight comes the scrutiny from those ready to expose illegitimate claims to social responsibility” (175), it would simply be too big of a risk to do this only for the sake of increasing sales.

## **Conclusion**

The phrase “like a girl” was very well-chosen on Always’ part for their commercial #LikeAGirl. It illuminates just how ingrained the gender roles are in society. We do not even think of phrases such as “like a girl” as sexist until we are directly confronted with the derogatory inference that goes with it. The campaign is a product of this unintended sexism that is inadvertently expressed in statistics of how teenage girls come to view themselves. This inferiority is indirectly imprinted through the use of microaggressions such as “like a girl.”

By grabbing a hold of the problem, Always recognizes the guilt of society and how the phrase has been made into a devil-term encompassing all that is weak, incapable, and wrong. The phrase continues a downward spiral of negativity in gender stereotyping and the effect it has on civilization. The commercial clearly demonstrates that the behavior associated with this subtle sexism is learned and not a natural-born habit that appears out of the blue; the circulation of a mindset passed from generation to generation by simple use of language and coined phrases. This mindset teaches young girls to suppress their natural ‘I,’ their sex and gender, making them believe that they are not good enough simply because they have a vagina. The long lasting effects are seen in studies, supporting the theory that the phrase essentially becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; driving girls to think they are weaker than they are and adapting their behavior to this mentality.

Microaggressions are just a small sliver of the reasons why we still, to this day, need feminism. By identifying with participants

in the commercial, Always uses the viewers' identity to activate emotions of empathy and create a relationship. Although there might be an element of branding in the motivation behind the campaign, Lauren Greenfield says that she is "proud to partner with Always to shed light on how this simple phrase can have a significant and long-lasting impact on girls and women. [She is] excited to be a part of the movement to redefine 'like a girl' into a positive affirmation" (Always Youtube). The commercial achieves leaving food for thought in the viewer and awakening a consciousness of the language we use as to not promote inequality. This is perfectly punctuated by the ending question in the commercial: "Why can't run 'like a girl' also mean win the race?" (3:00).

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