

Classic Case Study: Run Like a Girl

In June 2014, a major feminine care brand (Always - a Procter & Gamble brand) launched a powerful advertisement that rapidly became known as the “Run Like a Girl” campaign. While the slogan “run like a girl” had commonly been used as an insult—implying weakness or a lack of skill—the video sought to reclaim and redefine that phrase.

Rather than highlighting product features, the campaign focused on social norms and the ways language can undermine young girls’ self-confidence. This marked a notable shift in how brands communicate messages, elevating the conversation beyond mere selling points to embrace a broader cultural purpose.

In this case study, we will examine the “Run Like a Girl” campaign and video and review the messaging and storytelling methods used, consumer reactions, and the earned media from the campaign, and then discuss how these elements connected back to the brand. We will also delve into the larger context of social change, looking at why brands choose to tackle societal issues in their advertising.

Overview of the "Run Like a Girl" Video

The centerpiece of the “Run Like a Girl” campaign was a short video, originally released on YouTube and later extended to various social media platforms, broadcast channels, and digital advertising spaces. The video commenced with participants—both adults and children—being asked to perform simple actions, such as running or throwing a ball, but specifically “like a girl.”

The adults, and even some adolescent girls, demonstrated these actions with exaggerated flailing arms, feigned clumsiness, or giggling pretense. These dramatized movements reflected the cultural stereotype attached to “doing something like a girl,” insinuating ineptitude.

Shortly afterward, the interviewer posed the same command to younger girls, typically those around the age of 8 to 10. In stark contrast to the older participants, these young girls performed the actions with vigor, determination, and genuine effort. When asked to run like a girl, they ran as quickly and as powerfully as they could.

The juxtaposition of these two reactions—older participants presenting the phrase as an insult, and younger participants taking it literally as a call to action—revealed a profound shift in attitude that often occurs once girls approach puberty.

The central narrative unfolded as participants were challenged to reflect on why “like a girl” had become associated with negativity. Some of the older participants expressed surprise and concern about how they themselves had reverted to stereotypes without fully realizing the harmful messaging behind those words.

The video wrapped up by calling on viewers to help redefine what it means to “run like a girl,” “throw like a girl,” or “fight like a girl,” emphasizing that none of these terms should be interpreted as demeaning. Instead, the brand encouraged the audience to see them as badges of pride and confidence.

By the end of the short film, it was clear that the message went beyond a single brand or product. Rather, it used the brand’s platform to highlight a pervasive social issue: the negative impact of subtle, everyday words and phrases on young girls’ self-esteem.

In this manner, the video served as a transformative piece of content that prompted viewers—men, women, boys, and girls alike—to reconsider the language they used and its potential repercussions on personal identity.

Messaging and Storytelling Approach

One of the most striking aspects of the “Run Like a Girl” video is its deft use of emotional storytelling. While the brand behind the campaign had a history of speaking to female consumers, this initiative went beyond product attributes.

Instead, the video placed its narrative emphasis on personal experiences, self-esteem, and social norms. By blending unscripted interviews, candid reactions, and a structured format that gradually revealed a powerful core message, the campaign captured viewers’ emotions in a very raw and relatable way.

The creative team behind the campaign emphasized authenticity. The participants were not professional actors, and the reactions seemed genuinely spontaneous. When the adult women giggled and flailed their arms or legs in a stereotypical manner, the tension in the video built up.

This tension was then shattered by the younger girls, who demonstrated sincere athleticism and determination, running as fast as they could. That stark contrast left a deep emotional imprint on viewers, illustrating the damaging shift in self-perception that often happens during adolescence.

Additionally, the video employed straightforward language, reflective of actual consumer experiences. Phrases like “at what point does doing something ‘like a girl’ become an insult?” and “why can’t ‘run like a girl’ also mean win the race?” captured universal concerns in a concise manner. These lines made the video resonate with parents who worry about their daughters losing confidence, as well as with women who remember being teased at a younger age.

Visually, the stark background and simple production design drew attention to the participants themselves, emphasizing facial expressions and body language. This minimalist approach highlighted the interview process and steered viewers toward thinking critically about their own perceptions of gender norms. By not cluttering the video with branded imagery or advanced special effects, the emphasis remained firmly on the participants’ stories and reflections.

The underlying call to action was subtle but potent: share the video, spread awareness, and help redefine the notion of what it means to do anything “like a girl.” This direct engagement with viewers encouraged them not only to watch passively but to participate in the movement.

The narrative was thus both introspective and forward-looking, urging a shift in cultural lexicon and personal attitudes while reminding the audience of the brand’s commitment to championing young women’s self-esteem.

Consumer Reaction and Public Response

When the “Run Like a Girl” campaign debuted, it quickly became a viral sensation. Within days of its release, the video accumulated millions of views on YouTube and was shared across numerous social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter (now X), and Instagram. Viewers praised the raw honesty of the interviews, with many women expressing that the campaign had made them reflect on their own experiences growing up.

On social media, hashtags related to the campaign began trending, such as #LikeAGirl. Users posted personal stories about overcoming stereotypes, highlighting times when they felt belittled by the phrase “like a girl,” or recalling moments when they subverted these expectations. Parents also joined the conversation, posting videos or photographs of their daughters performing various sports and activities to demonstrate that “like a girl” could mean strong, competitive, and capable.

The mainstream media also took note. Several news outlets, talk shows, and online magazines featured stories about the ad. Many reporters applauded the brand for tackling an important social issue, observing that the campaign deviated from typical product-centric advertising. This wave of positive coverage contributed to widespread awareness of the message, even among people who might not have encountered the video online.

While the campaign was met with overwhelmingly positive feedback, some viewers questioned whether the brand was using a social cause to mask commercial intentions. Nevertheless, the majority of the public dialogue was favorable. The focus on an empowering message—instead of a direct sales pitch—helped the campaign avoid appearing excessively self-serving. Moreover, the authenticity of the interviews and genuine reflections from participants lent credibility to the brand’s role in steering the conversation.

In addition to the strong emotional response from consumers, the campaign saw tangible shifts in brand sentiment. Social listening data revealed that the “Run Like a Girl” tagline started appearing with positive connotations, thus reframing the language in online discussions. People who may not have previously identified with the brand or even thought about it at all became newfound supporters, drawn in by the resonance of the message rather than any specific product claim.

Earned Media and Viral Momentum

A crucial aspect of the “Run Like a Girl” campaign’s success was the volume of earned media it generated. Earned media refers to publicity gained through word-of-mouth, social sharing, news coverage, and other non-paid channels. The brand’s marketing team engaged in some upfront advertising—particularly to seed the video and build momentum in the first few days—but much of its widespread circulation was fueled by organic sharing.

Influencers, celebrities, and public figures contributed to the viral spread by endorsing the campaign on their personal social media accounts. Some posted heartfelt comments about how they had grown up hearing “like a girl” used in a derogatory sense, while others celebrated the younger generation’s resilience and strength. This high-profile support not only multiplied the reach of the video but also served as social proof: if beloved celebrities were applauding the campaign, fans and followers were more likely to share and discuss it as well.

Because the video addressed a timely and culturally relevant issue—women’s empowerment—numerous online and offline publications ran commentary pieces. Opinion articles, think-pieces, and lifestyle blog posts dissected the campaign’s strategies, praising its ability to spark critical conversations about language and self-esteem. Schools and community organizations even began using the campaign video as a discussion tool for gender studies or self-confidence workshops.

As the video soared in popularity, major media outlets devoted segments to analyzing its impact. Television morning shows hosted discussions on the changing attitudes toward girls in sports and academics, often referencing or playing clips from the ad. Meanwhile, digital platforms aggregated viewer comments, further amplifying the video’s resonance.

The snowball effect continued as marketing industry insiders and award committees recognized the campaign’s creativity and social relevance. Industry honors validated the brand’s choice to center on a value-driven message, reinforcing to skeptics that this was more than a fleeting viral video. By the end of the campaign’s primary run, the brand had gained not only countless media impressions but also deep emotional connections with consumers.

How the Campaign Connected to the Brand

Though the “Run Like a Girl” movement broadly tackled social issues, it was essential for the brand behind it to connect the message to its own identity. The brand specialized in feminine hygiene products, which aimed to serve women throughout different life stages. By focusing on self-esteem and confidence—especially during puberty—the brand aligned the campaign with its long-standing mission: supporting girls’ and women’s comfort, health, and development.

The video concluded with subtle yet strategic branding. The brand's logo or name was not glaringly placed at the forefront of every frame, which could have undermined the authenticity of the message. Instead, branding elements appeared in the final segments, tying the social commentary back to the company's broader goal of empowering female consumers.

The brand had also established partnerships with organizations dedicated to supporting adolescent girls. Some versions of the campaign included a prompt encouraging viewers to visit the brand's website or social channels for information on confidence-building workshops or volunteer opportunities. This was an integral step, transforming viewers' emotional engagement into a tangible commitment or action.

The synergy between the campaign message and the brand identity was further evident in follow-up efforts. As the conversation around the video continued, the brand introduced educational materials and tools, in partnership with relevant organizations, to help parents and educators facilitate discussions about self-esteem. These supplementary resources reinforced the brand's role as not just a purveyor of products, but also a champion for young women facing societal pressures.

Ultimately, the brand staked out a position that transcended straightforward product marketing. By advocating for the self-confidence of teenage girls, the company demonstrated a commitment to nurturing its core consumer base from an early age. This formed an emotional bridge between the brand and its audience, suggesting that buying the company's products could be part of a larger narrative of female empowerment.

Brand Objectives and Strategic Alignment

Behind every campaign lies a set of specific brand objectives. For the "Run Like a Girl" effort, the overarching ambition was to reinvigorate a brand that had been well-known but perhaps less top-of-mind among emerging generations. Younger consumers often make decisions based on brand values, looking for alignment with causes they find meaningful. The brand saw an opportunity to reaffirm its relevance by spotlighting a real social challenge: girls' confidence plummeting during puberty and societal reinforcement of limiting stereotypes.

First, the campaign aimed to enhance brand perception. By adopting a stance on a pressing cultural issue, the brand positioned itself as a proactive, socially engaged entity. This approach was particularly crucial in a category that sometimes struggled to create emotional connections beyond functionality.

Second, the brand recognized an opportunity to distinguish itself from competitors in the feminine hygiene sector. While many companies in this space emphasize comfort or discreetness in their advertising, few delved into deeper emotional or sociocultural conversations. Through "Run Like a Girl," the brand not only set itself apart but also appealed to an audience yearning for messaging that reflects the complex reality of modern femininity.

Third, the strategy involved building brand loyalty over the long term. Empowering girls at a crucial developmental stage could forge positive associations that last well into adulthood. By providing content and resources aimed at uplifting self-esteem, the brand effectively nurtured future customers who would recall its support during their formative years.

Lastly, the campaign sought to spark genuine social change, or at least to catalyze public dialogue. The brand's marketing team recognized that achieving real change would rely on ongoing engagement and cross-sector partnerships. Though some observers remain skeptical when profit-driven enterprises engage in social activism, the leadership believed that pursuing a cause aligned with their consumer base and corporate values could result in benefits for both society and the brand's market position.

Driving Social Change: Why Brands Get Involved

A key question for any cause-driven campaign is: why would a for-profit company choose to invest in addressing a social issue? In the case of "Run Like a Girl," several drivers motivated the brand to go beyond product promotion and embrace a broader cultural conversation.

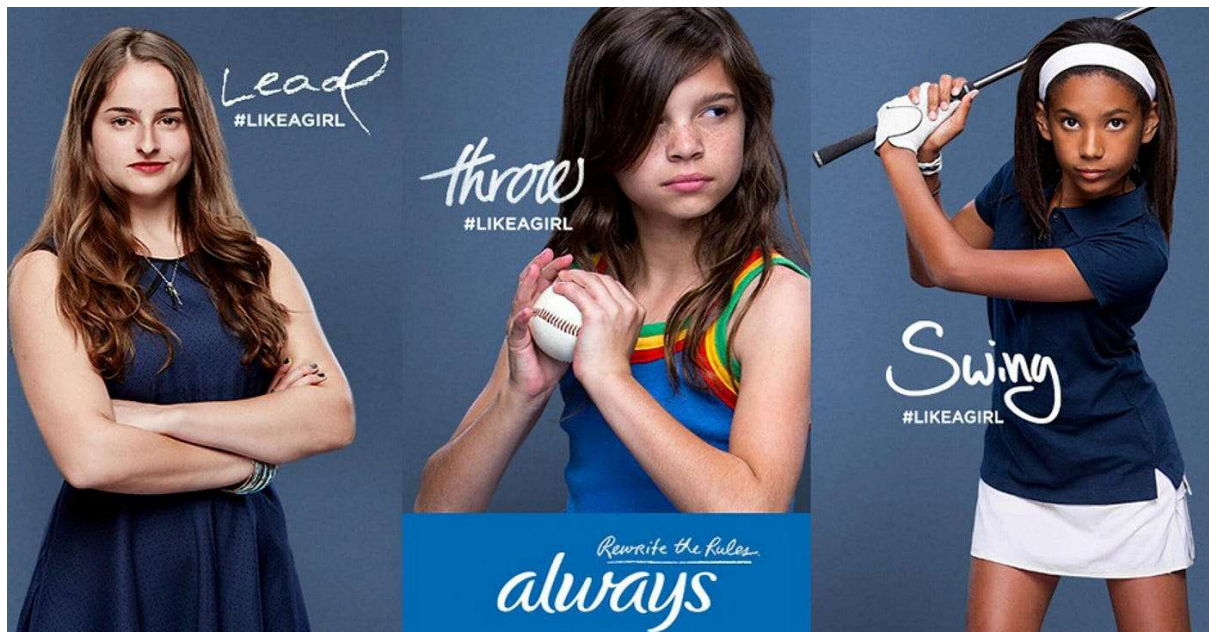
First, consumer expectations have evolved. Today's buyers, especially among younger demographics, often evaluate brands based on their corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives and ethical stances. Companies that appear indifferent to real-world challenges can be perceived as out of touch, while those that commit resources to meaningful causes can forge stronger emotional connections.

Second, aligning with a purpose can differentiate a brand in a crowded marketplace. By championing the confidence and empowerment of girls, the brand set itself apart from competitors whose marketing strategies remained product-focused or narrowly targeted. This differentiation can lead to significant competitive advantage, as consumers increasingly seek relationships with companies that share their values.

Third, addressing social issues allows brands to transcend transactional relationships with their audience. When a brand invests in content or programs that resonate emotionally, it fosters loyalty and trust. Rather than viewing the brand solely as a supplier of goods, consumers begin seeing it as an ally or advocate. This deeper engagement can translate into long-term business returns, even if the initial campaign appears less focused on direct sales.

Finally, many brands have leadership or staff who genuinely believe in making a positive contribution to society. Whether it stems from personal experiences or broader ethical convictions, some corporate decision-makers see an inherent value in leveraging their brand's influence for good. While profitability remains the bottom line for a business, these organizations often view social impact as an integral component of a sustainable, forward-thinking brand strategy.

In summary, the “Run Like a Girl” campaign exemplifies how modern marketing can integrate social advocacy into a brand’s core identity. In taking on an issue that affects half the global population—namely, the erosion of girls’ confidence during puberty—the brand not only advanced a progressive message but also created a genuine, values-driven dialogue with consumers.



Ethical Considerations

While the campaign received substantial praise, it also sparked debate about the ethical dimensions of using social issues for corporate gain. One primary concern is authenticity: does the company genuinely care about young women’s self-esteem, or is it employing an empowerment narrative to enhance brand image and sales? Critics state that companies risk trivializing serious social problems if they do not commit substantial resources or follow through with concrete actions beyond a single advertising push.

Another ethical concern revolves around the portrayal of participants in the video. Although the unscripted format lent credibility, some viewers wondered about the psychological impact on the young girls featured. Questions arose regarding whether they had given informed consent, understood how widely the video would be circulated, or been adequately compensated for their participation. While such concerns are speculative, they highlight a broader ethical challenge in cause-related advertising: how to handle real people’s vulnerabilities within a promotional framework.

There is also the potential risk of overshadowing grassroots voices. By leveraging its large advertising budget and international reach, the brand could inadvertently crowd out smaller nonprofits or advocacy groups that have been working on women’s empowerment issues for years. Though brand-led initiatives can bring resources and attention to the cause, critics worry that commercial campaigns can overshadow the efforts of organizations that have historically championed these topics without the same publicity.

Finally, the question of cultural sensitivity arises. Empowerment campaigns may not translate the same way across different regions and cultural contexts. The brand had to ensure that its core message—“like a girl” should not be an insult—resonated universally, while acknowledging local nuances in language and social norms. Some consumers in diverse markets might have distinct or additional concerns about gender stereotypes, which the brand would need to address respectfully.

Despite these challenges, many observers argue that even if a corporate campaign has business motivations, it can still yield positive societal outcomes. For instance, if the message elevates conversations about sexism or self-esteem, then some measure of good is accomplished. However, the brand’s commitment to ongoing efforts and transparency can determine whether its involvement is viewed as genuinely beneficial or merely opportunistic.

Longevity and Follow-Up Initiatives

One hallmark of a successful campaign is the ability to maintain relevance over time. While viral videos often enjoy a burst of attention and then fade, the “Run Like a Girl” initiative sustained momentum through subsequent phases. The brand followed up with additional content pieces, including social media challenges and partnerships with youth organizations aimed at nurturing confidence in adolescents.

Moreover, the brand integrated the core message into other facets of its communication strategy. For instance, product packaging in certain markets included empowering messages or short motivational quotes. In educational materials or brand-sponsored community events, references to the “Run Like a Girl” ethos reaffirmed the brand’s dedication to shifting cultural perceptions.

Seasonally, the brand revisited the theme, especially during high-profile events like the Super Bowl or major international sporting competitions. By featuring female athletes or stories of girls breaking boundaries in sports, the company reinforced the link between its product line and an ongoing commitment to championing female achievements. This repetition helped the campaign transcend a single viral moment, building it into a narrative that consumers could follow over time.

One of the most telling indicators of the “Run Like a Girl” campaign’s influence is how the phrase itself began to shift in public discourse. Before the campaign, “like a girl” was commonly used as a put-down, connoting weakness or incompetence. Post-campaign, social media and anecdotal evidence suggested that people started to think twice before using the phrase in that manner. Many began to associate “like a girl” with competence, persistence, or energy—a testament to the campaign’s objective of reclaiming the phrase.

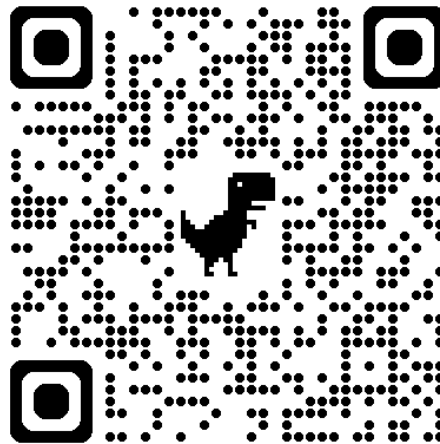
Beyond language, the campaign opened doors for other brands to engage in meaningful dialogues about social issues. Numerous companies have since followed suit, launching their own cause-driven initiatives that challenge stereotypes or address societal problems.

Although the results have varied in authenticity and impact, the “Run Like a Girl” campaign demonstrated that a single powerful advertisement could spark significant cultural conversations, generate extensive earned media, and lead to tangible brand benefits.

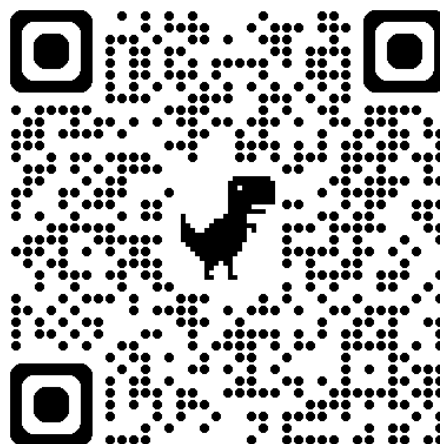
In evaluating the campaign’s legacy, observers note its continued relevance in discussions around gender stereotypes, even years after its initial launch. While the brand might not have singlehandedly dismantled the cultural baggage behind “like a girl,” it undoubtedly sparked a meaningful shift in awareness. Most importantly, it set a precedent for how marketing efforts can champion inclusive, empowering messages without devolving into shallow tokenism, provided they are backed by genuine brand commitment.

The Run Like a Girl Videos

1 = It is necessary to review the video itself to get a better sense of the campaign.



2 = Plus here is a video overall of the case and its earned media and social impact.



Student Discussion Questions

1. What was your personal reaction the video? Did it resonate with you? Were you inspired, challenged, skeptical, entertained, disinterested, bored?
2. Thinking about the content and messaging, what techniques were used to effectively communicate the message? Think about storytelling, staging, people, questions, change in views and perspectives, visual tools etc.
3. The campaign gained significant earned media. What were the key factors that contributed most to its viral momentum? And why is earned media so sought after by brands?
4. From a marketing and brand perspective, do you think that brands should leverage and support social change issues or should they stick brand and product messaging only?
5. From an ethical and social perspective, do you believe that this brand (and other similar campaigns) has underlying good intentions for social change, or are these types of campaigns just a hook to build positive brand associations and likeability in order to sell more product?
6. Based on your prior responses, to what extent do you agree with this statement? = Campaigns like this “Run Like a Girl” one play an important and necessary role in addressing social issues.
7. What are the key lessons that brands may draw upon from this campaign when looking to address different societal challenges in their marketing efforts?