**Campaign Success in the virtual world: A study of the images of the *This Girl Can* campaign and its cultivation of engagement**

Abstract:

A study of the images of the *This Girl Can* campaign and its cultivation of engagement using the framework of the ‘attention economy’ to interpret the supposed success of said campaign. Utilising Marwick’s (2015) media image hierarchy supposition and Fairchild’s (2007) media cultivation of intimacy theory we propose that it is the relationship between the image and the participant interaction rather than the images themselves upon which the success of the campaign depends, and give the design of an practical study to test this proposition in the future.

Introduction

The *This Girl Can* campaign is a predominantly online campaign seeking to increase female participation in sport whose success has been such that its style and structure have been replicated both nationally and internationally for other health related campaigns (Australia’s *This Girl Can*; Newcastle Can). This study seeks to investigate the reasons for the campaign’s success through a particular focus on its use of images and cultivation of physical and virtual engagement.

First we shall give a background of the *This Girl Can* campaign to aid understanding of the study, followed by a summary of our guiding research questions. An introduction to the notion of the ‘attention economy’ shall precede further discussion of Marwick (2015) and Fairchild (2007), whose concepts of traditional media image hierarchy (Marwick, 2015) and media entity intimacy cultivation (Fairchild, 2007) shall form the corner stones of theoretical analysis for this study. Following the conceptual framework we shall lay out our proposed research design and justification for proposed methodologies with expectations of consequent finding, and finally our conclusion.

Background

*This Girl Can* is an on-going UK-wide campaign launched as an English national campaign in 2015 by the non-departmental public body Sport England whose remit is to improve level of public access to, and participation in, sport. The self-declared motive of the campaign is to ‘get women and girls moving, regardless of shape, size and ability’ (Sport England).

Sport England’s 2014 Active People Survey identified 2 million fewer women than men participating in sport with over 75% in the 14-40 age bracket declaring a wish to exercise more, a gender disparity it claims does not exist in many other European countries (Sport England). The body claimed that ‘further research into what’s stopping women turning their ambitions into reality found that fear of judgement –on appearance, ability or how they chose to spend time on themselves –puts women of all ages off exercising’ (Sport England).

The campaign was oriented around attacking the fear of judgement, and sense of isolation in that fear, that many women and girls seemed to experience, through producing and encouraging the sharing online of images of ‘real’ women being active and subverting the traditional image codes of women in the media that design women as object of visual pleasure, often through a sexualised lens (Mulvey, 1975).

The campaign started by releasing television, cinema and poster advertising showing women from around the country doing sport. The main features of these images were the women were always enjoying the sport and shown to be visibly sweating or with hair disordered. Now predominantly based on a website the images seek to show all types of women being active, including age, size, and ethnic diversity, as well as pregnant and non-able bodies, to encourage relatability [see fig. 1-5 in appendix 1] (This Girl Can). *This Girl Can* uses a hashtag (#thisgirlcan) to invite the public to share social media images of themselves participating in sport and these images are collated on the website [see fig. 6 in appendix 1]. These are predominantly from Instagram (This Girl Can).

In 2017 Sport England declared that since launching the campaign has directly inspired 2.8 million women to get active (Sport England). The campaign has also had critical success collecting several awards including in its year of launch, 2015: The Cannes International Festival of Creativity Glass Lion: Lion for Change award; the Cannes International Festival of Creativity Gold Lion Health award for Best Integrated Campaign; the Cannes International Festival of Creativity Gold Lion Health award for Best Film; and the United Nations Grand Prix for Good award (Young, 2015). The campaign is also to be used as the model for an Australian national campaign of a similar nature (Sport England, 2018).

Aims and Objectives including Conceptual Framework

Our primary research questions were: 1. why is the *This Girl Can* campaign successful?; 2. in this image dominated era what about the images it used gained the desired audience’s attention?; 3. how did the campaign translate that attention into physical action? Of particular interest to us was how the *This Girl Can* campaign negotiated the juxtaposition between using platforms designed to attract attention and invite aesthetic judgement and its intention to lessen fear of such judgement; how the campaign engaged the community aspect of viral image sharing; and whether the *This Girl Can* campaign had created its own style of image as a consequence of these things.

Initially intending to base our research within the discipline of Feminist Sports Studies we soon found that although authors such as Lenskyj (1986) and Hall (1988) gave strong historically based arguments for the barrier of conceptual femininity to female physical activity these studies focused predominantly on the notion of perceived sexuality over activity. Whilst it was possible to use such feminist criticism to analyse the images of the campaign in a sort of negative-proof of what they did not do, it did little to help us answer our real question which was what *did* the images do that so appealed to women.

To explore what about the images of the *This Girl Can* campaign stood out to campaign participants we began by placing these images in the context of their media environment. The term ‘saturation’ is often used in popular discussion to refer to the daily environment of modern individuals (Miles, 2015; Abramovich, 2016; Price, 2017), especially in reference to image advertising. In our discussion of the images of the *This Girl Can* campaign we found it most useful to use the framework of the ‘attention economy’ to give vocabulary to our discourse. Attention economy is a concept borrowed from advertising and marketing theory that describes how in an era of proliferation of objects to attract attention, attention itself has gained intrinsic value or currency. As Fairchild summarises of Davenport and Beck, and Brody (2002; 2001), ‘the more taxed public attention gets, the more valuable it becomes’ (Fairchild, 2007, 359). As such it is possible to use the notion of currency in the attention economy to articulate the meaning of a successful image within the parameters of this study; in the design of the *This Girl Can* campaign images were used as the initial hook to attract and sustain participation through directing attention through the images to the message of the campaign, thus success is here interpreted as the ability of those images to gain and attract attention making this further communication possible, as opposed to any aesthetic or critical notion of success. The notion of attention economy also enables a more complex reading of the attraction of the images of the campaign as it does not presuppose that portrayal, or lack, of sexuality through stereotypes of femininity would be the primary appeal to women and girls, as is suggested through isolated feminist readings.

Marwick’s theory of traditional media image hierarchy replication in online social media images, specifically those of the social media site Instagram, was one we initially used to perform content and composition analysis of the images used in the *This Girl Can* campaign in preliminary pilot analyses. Marwick uses the frame of the attention economy to argue that the vastly expanded access to image publishing online through social media sites has not democratised or challenged traditional media image hierarchies, but rather enforced them further and into wider levels of society (Marwick, 2015). Her claim is that the familiar trappings of traditional hierarchies of fame (previously orchestrated by film and advertising companies) such as sexual appeal, ostentatious wealth symbols, and high value aesthetic design are replicated by those online images that become the most successful, or rather, acquire the greatest currency in the economy of attention tallied in likes or reposts (Marwick, 2015). This hierarchy, she argues, has its most concentrated manifestation in the site Instagram, an image focused social media site, predominantly app based, where users can use professionally toned image filters and upload their own images with an optional short written description, available to be seen by any other user and categorised for search purposes by hashtags (Marwick, 2015). Likes, reposts and comments are open to anyone, and users can be ‘followed’ to collate all new posts in a continuously updating feed on the homepage. As *This Girl Can* uses the idea of the attention economy supposedly to counteract this hierarchy Marwick claims is endemic, our interest is focussed on examining how the *This Girl Can* campaigninteracts with the Instagram model or structure, and testing Marwick’s theory against the images used. Does the campaign visually attract their audience in a different way? Our supposition is that we shall find that the images do defy Marwick’s hierarchies, in their portrayal of women, but also in how the community structure created by the hashtag #thisgirlcan and the collation of participant-shared images on the website breeds a sense of community under a specific cause that potentially overrides the hierarchies Marwick claims are built into the structure of image platforms such as Instagram.

Charles Fairchild’s study on engagement and interaction in visual media domains looks at how media entities cultivate intimacy through reciprocal relationships that invite interaction as a method of overcoming the ‘attention deficit’ inherent to the attention economy (Fairchild, 2007), of interest for us as it depicts a design structure similar to that of the *This Girl Can* campaign. Fairchild uses the term ‘attention deficit’ to refer to the idea that as a consequence of the increasing taxation of public attention levels of attention are actively decreasing, thus stating that currency in the attention economy is not just gained by attracting eyes to the image but more acutely manifested in sustaining such attention once acquired (Fairchild, 2007). In his study he identifies a structure in which individuals are invited to participate in content creation to ensure a more faithful, long-term level of attention, somewhat similar to the structure of the *This Girl Can* campaign where the images posted by participants serve as a form of content creation- a literal form of self-made advertising- that encourages repeated involvement and thus attention in the practical and virtual aspects of the campaign. However, Fairchild’s work describes this intimacy structure as where the attention to the product or image is primary in motivation and focus, the interaction a secondary consequence to achieving that. Within the *This Girl Can* campaign it is the participation and interaction that are primary in its structure.

We propose to use Fairchild’s intimacy structure to examine whether by inversing the primary-secondary relationship, the primary currency, within the context of the attention economy’s attention deficit, is transferred from the image to the interaction, and whether this could thus allow the image to subvert Marwick’s claimed structural hierarchies. Our supposition here is that when an image is held in isolation, it must compile elements of high attention value to invite not just initial, but further and sustained attention. Using Roland Bathes’ semiotic perspective (1957 (1972)) we can see that these elements may largely conform to Marwick’s hierarchies as they sustain attention through engaging a secondary level of interaction beyond visual pleasure, often through imagined potential pleasure. For example, images of wealth objects invite the viewer to engage in a secondary level of interaction through aspirational fantasy. The image becomes much more than a simple document or record of an object of wealth, it gains a level of semiotic signification and rather than being a denotative sign it becomes a connotative sign (Barthes, 1957 (1972)), vastly expanding its potential meaning and thus diversifying the aspects of appeal to a viewer. If we take Roland Barthes’ idea of language as both sign and symbol, and image already being of a secondary level of signification in having no stable meaning when taken beyond visual document, the elements of the greatest currency in the attention economy could be supposed to be those that engage the third level of signification, myth (Barthes, 1957 (1972)). If ‘myth’ is understood as a socially agreed association so widely held it becomes ‘iconic’ it would seem logical that iconic symbols as image elements that hold the greatest currency would be those most socially familiar, and therefore those seen as iconic for a longer historical period. However, if an image is not in isolation, but rather serving as invitation to interaction, the image need not rely upon just itself to sustain and maintain attention; the wealth of the image need only be enough to prompt interaction which, being a more active form of engagement, as Fairchild claims, better overcomes the inherent attention deficit to breed a higher value of attention (Fairchild, 2007). Therefore, we expect to find that it is the relationship between the image and interaction, rather than a unique style of the images of the *This Girl Can* campaign in isolation that are the foundation for its success. However, we are interested to see whether in being removed from primary currency value of the attention economy equation has in fact allowed the images used in the campaign to develop their own style in contrary to Marwick’s suggested elements of hierarchy.

Research Approach and Design

Our proposed practical research approach is thus twofold: a visual semiotic and textual analysis of the images of the campaign, followed by an ethnographic study using semi-structured interviews of campaign participants to more directly explore their relationship to said images.

On the website page of the *This Girl Can* campaign is a page that streams current social media content that uses the hashtag #thisgirlcan across multiple platforms [see fig. 6 in appendix 1] (predominantly Instagram, followed by snapchat and twitter- snapchat being another social media platform app that uses mostly images and photographs rather than text). For this study we would seek to screenshot this webpage once a week over a fixed time period, currently theorised as a month. Although the page can load further images if the ‘load more’ button is pressed at the bottom of the page we believe the first page should be sufficient giving approximately eighteen social media images per sample. In limiting our number of images collected each week we would also potentially be better able to track rate of change of the images and current demographic of women and girls participating, giving an idea of the contemporary level of use of the hashtag, but also whether certain images are repeated over time. A longer study, over perhaps six months or longer, could potentially identify whether the social media images appeared to be influencing each other or evolving in style, thus helping to address the idea that images from the campaign may be cultivating their own unique style. However, due to the limited time-scope of this project these considerations are secondary as they are more likely to support or detract from a hypothesis on the role of the images in the success of the campaign rather than be foundational.

Once these samples were collected we would conduct both textual and visual semiotic analysis on the images to see whether common themes in content and design could be identified, as well as common standards of composition and image quality. The results of this analysis would then be compared to an identical analysis conducted on the professionally produced banner images of the *This Girl Can* campaign in order to better articulate the visual relationship between the two types of images used within the campaign.

The combination of both of these methods of research allows for a more open level of image interpretation. Whilst textual analysis can look more generally at potentially meanings of the image and multiple potential interpretations, visual semiotic analysis (following the principles of Roland Barthes as referenced earlier (1957 (1972))) offered a structured, coded analysis that can be used to test Marwick’s (2015) hierarchy theory more specifically through comparison of levels and forms of signification, and can categorise image elements, potentially with a view to discovering the currency hierarchy of those elements through comparison to proliferation in the social media, and other, images sampled. Using McKee’s model of textual analysis no images can be read as accurate or inaccurate in representation, but each represent their own interpretation of reality (2001). Therefore, in this study textual analysis can serve as a method of analysing the ‘reality’ of women and girls in sport, or rather how women and girls in the general population view their reality in relation to sport and physical activity during the process of the *This Girl Can* campaign. This could offer and alternative value hierarchy to compare to Marwick’s (2015) conception. If the scope of the study was wider we may seek to also analyse some images from ‘traditional’ –non-virtual –advertising of women and girls in sport to place our findings within a historical context and explore the possibility of novelty being a factor in the success of the images of the *This Girl Can* campaign, if, as we speculated earlier, the images push against the content present within Marwick’s traditional media image hierarchies (2015).

From this image based study we would then seek to contact those people who have participated in the hashtag within our collected samples and invite them to participate in an ethnographic study through semi-structured interviews centred around enquiring as to the effect of the *This Girl Can* campaign had on their motivation and decision to participate in sport and the wider impact of the images and social media engagement in directing their physical activity. These questions would focus around three main areas: 1. what the campaign means to the participant (either ideologically or emotionally); 2. their decision criteria in choice of image shared; 3. their historical relationship to sport participation. All topics would allow for more general participant guided conversation within the topic as face-to-face, in depth guided conversation using semi-structured or unstructured interview questions explores respondent’s feeling, emotions, experiences and values within their ‘deeply nuanced inner worlds’ Gubrium and Holstein, 2013, 57). It was through desire for such a response that we dismissed less personal ethnographic methods such as surveys or online questionnaires which can be reductive in their limitations of response.

This combination of methods allows us to examine the overlap in virtual and physical participation, as the images utilised in the campaign structure, especially the social media images, as both inspiration and evidence of, sport. This approach would also allow us to more fully derive the level of long-term success or impact on the lives of participants.

Conclusion

The structure of the *This Girl Can* campaign has already been adopted for similar health campaigns within England, such as Newcastle City Council’s 2017-launched *Newcastle Can* campaign headed by the chef Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall in effort to combat the region’s obesity epidemic (Newcastle Can). Through the methods explained above we hope to define a describable structure similar to that of Fairchild (2007) that can better articulate the metrics of success in online virtual campaigns. Our intension for this project is to better understand the mechanics of virtual campaign success in relation to social issues with a view to making the methodology more transparently available for use by other such campaigns.

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