

Shari Shallard puts the spotlight on three sportswear brands that have realised that selling to female consumers is as much about understanding the importance of identity to women as it is about the quality of the products they make.

Marketing identity in women's sportswear



Nike's 'What are Girls Made Of?' commercial breaks stereotypes with imagery of strong female athletes.

 Nike

Last year, Nike put a series of powerful advertisements in the local markets of Russia, the Middle East and Turkey, targeting the women of these regions.

Nike's goal, according to the agency behind the ads, was to inspire women to overcome any obstacle or barrier in the pursuit of being more active.

There is a lot to infer from these campaigns, and we won't attempt to capture all the cultural and political implications here. But as we watch the market for women's sports apparel extend its global reach like never before, one conclusion is becoming increasingly evident: identity is paramount. More than ever, women are seeking sports apparel that fits with their lifestyle, how they see themselves, and who they want to be.

The brands discussed here are three that understand the importance of identity to their target consumers: Nike, which is pointing its marketing might at the most aspirational side of today's women; Lululemon, which blends identity and product by infusing brand philosophies into its workforce and product packaging; and Fabletics, whose subscription-

based approach requires a commitment that cements sports-apparel shopping as part of each consumer's identity.

Revolutionary branding

Let's look first at those Nike ads. Part of a broader campaign, for which the tagline is 'Believe in More,' they were launched in time for 2017's International Women's Day.

The commercial conceived for Russia, 'What Are Girls Made Of,' shows a young Russian girl standing on stage to perform a Russian children's song. Girls are made of "flowers" and "gossip," she is singing, when her performance is interrupted by the appearance of several strong female athletes - an ice skater, a ballerina, a boxer, a skateboarder, a runner. The young girl sings on but changes her lyrics. Girls are made of "iron," she belts out, and "perseverance" and "bruises."

For the Middle East, Nike asks 'What Will They Say About You?' Women, some wearing a hijab, jog, jump across buildings, play soccer and fence, as locals of the older generation look on disapprovingly. "They may say you're not supposed to be out here" or that "it's unladylike," the narrator begins. The women boldly press on

*Sabre fencer Ibtiha
Muhammad predicts
Nike's hijab can
advance the
conversation around
hijabs and Muslim
women in sports.*



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as the message gradually changes. "Or," the commercial concludes, "they'll say you are strong" and "you'll be the next big thing."

Turkey has a lighter, sassier feel. Against the soundtrack of Beyoncé's 'Who Run the World? (Girls),' women burst out of traditionally feminine scenarios and into their athletic identity: a woman kneading bread is suddenly lifting weights; another woman dismisses a jewellery shop for her own gold medal; the last woman stomps on a sweet dollhouse with her Nike-clad foot.

This aspirational message is translating into product. In December, Nike launched the Nike Pro Hijab at select retailers, and this season it is becoming available just about everywhere. Consider what that represents: Nike has chosen to invest in the development, manufacturing and marketing of an extremely niche product designed just for women - and a somewhat marginalised niche of women at that.

Even Nike's own news release announcing the hijab recognises this is about more than providing gear for another sport. Nike athletes who tested the prototype agreed the hijab offered a better-fitting, lighter-weight, sweat-wicking option which allowed, among other benefits, easier hearing. But they also described how the hijab's significance transcended those features: "The Nike Pro Hijab will help advance the conversation around hijabs and Muslim women in sports and further make sports an inclusive space," says Ibtihaj Muhammad, a Nike athlete and champion fencer.

"It inspires me to reach greater heights and to run farther distances," says Manal Rostom, who recently completed the New York Marathon in the Nike Pro Hijab. "And I believe it's going to inspire girls worldwide to follow their passion for sport."



Lululemon signature shopping bags are covered in the insights and aphorisms about living better.



Singer Demi Lovato modeling her second collection of activewear for Fabletics.

 Fabletics

To figure skater Zahra Lari, the Pro Hijab is a symbol of empowerment. "It's a reminder to us Muslim women that we can achieve anything in the world," she says.

Cultivating identity

For the women at whom those Nike ads were aimed, such messages and products can be life changing. Nike is saying: these women exist; you can be this woman.

Lululemon, on the other hand, knows that for women born and raised in western cultures, the message may be less revolutionary, but it is still there: you can be this woman.

Lululemon prints such messages all over its products and packaging, but we'll look more closely at that in a moment. The Canada-based technical athletic apparel company makes highly-stylised and relatively highly-priced clothing and accessories, for yoga, running, training and what the brand calls "most other sweaty pursuits."

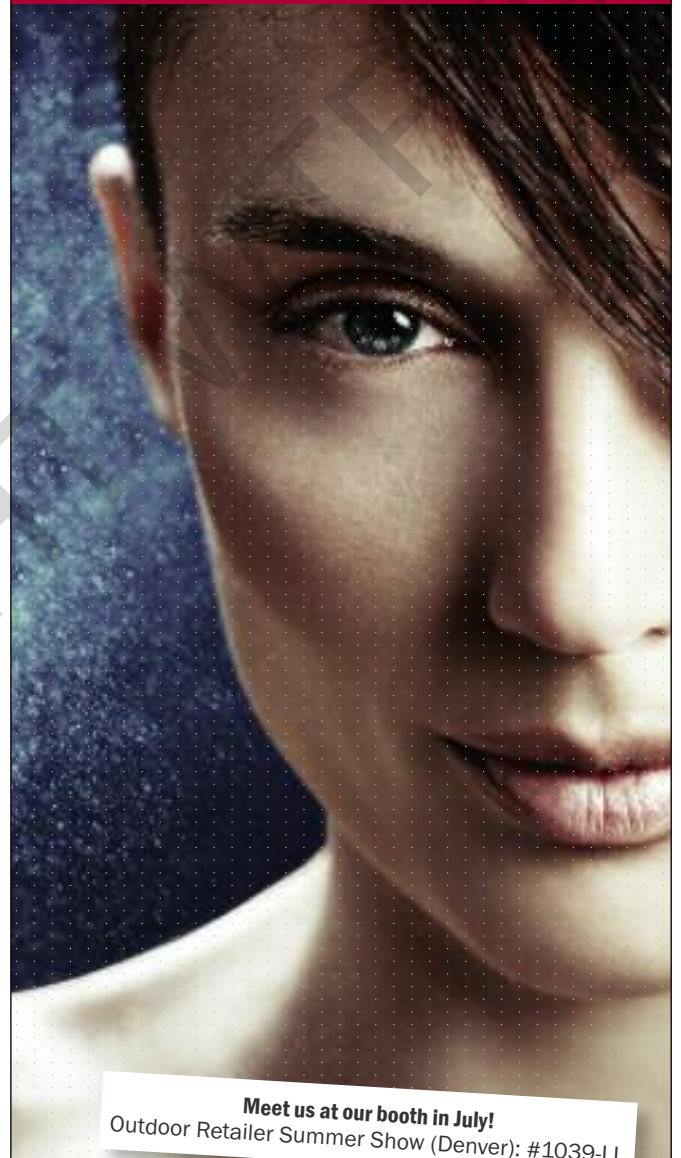
The brand has extensive offerings for both men and women, though it began as a women's brand and is generally known for its strappy sports bras, figure-flattering feminine tops, chic bottoms and overall ability to convert a women's yoga class into a fashion event.

What distinguishes Lululemon above all else, perhaps, is its use of identity branding to evoke passionate loyalty from its wearers.

I recently posed this question to a group of female friends (all in their early forties) at my gym: Do any of you consider yourself a fan of Lululemon enough to talk about it?

I had already asked a similar question about several other

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sports apparel brands, but it was only when I mentioned Lululemon - or "lulu," as loyalists are likely to say - that the response was immediate and effusive. Within minutes women were coming forward with comments like "Love, love, love lulu" and "my favourite brand."

Whitney Sumrall, a tennis player who also runs several times a week, says Lululemon pants are comfortable, functional, durable and flattering. "Plus," Ms Sumrall adds, "they come in cute patterns." She recognises the clothes are "pricey" but "the durability is worth the cost."

Bree Dean works out every day. "I love

the quality, fabrics, functionality, and the fashionable look of Lululemon's products. Their customer service is amazing too," Ms Dean says. "I like to stay cool when I work out, plus I want to look cute! I like pretty colours and designs."

Stephenie Allen began wearing Lululemon running shorts while training for the 2012 Boston Marathon and has worn them ever since. The exception was a short-lived dip into another major brand's shorts, which, Ms Allen says, fell apart after only a summer - so she returned to her beloved Lululemon speed shorts.

Angela Stokes recalls recently

introducing Lululemon to a friend. "I said to her, 'welcome to your new addiction.' It's the truth," Ms Stokes says. "They're in a league of their own." She cites excellent customer service - she recently swapped out a pair of pants that had ripped, with no receipt and no questions asked - and she agrees that the clothes are flexible and comfortable.

Fit might be where Lululemon's understanding of women's physical needs manifests most clearly. As Ms Stokes says, "the pants are just awesome; they shape and hug in all the right areas, hiding the things that need to be hidden."

But perhaps even more so, Lululemon understands the female in their female consumers. Being female isn't just a size and shape, it's an identity; customers aren't just buying the products, they're buying an idea. Unlike the compelling ad campaigns of Nike and Under Armour, Lululemon takes a more guerrilla approach to reaching the hearts and minds of its target consumers.

For example, shopping bags are covered in sentiments from the company's manifesto - from "Do one thing a day that scares you" and "Breathe deeply" to "Your outlook on life is a direct reflection of how much you like yourself" and "The pursuit of happiness is the source of all unhappiness".

Staff at Lululemon stores aren't salespeople, they're fellow gym-goers and yogis who are encouraged to chat with customers about their workouts and goals. Lululemon "ambassadors" are yoga teachers who offer free classes inside Lululemon stores in exchange for apparel and support from the company.

Lululemon has traditionally relied on this grassroots approach, though in the last 24 months the company has kicked up its approach to traditional marketing. This spring, Lululemon celebrated International Women's Day with a #Worth100 campaign, including a "What are Women Worth?" video in which men and women answer the question with responses such as "worth listening to," "common decency," "equal opportunities, and "representation."

These tactics have been effective, if that informal survey of gym friends (or Lululemon's \$2.6 billion revenue in 2017) anything to go by.

Join the club

This is an age of subscription-based everything. Consumers value the

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convenience and reliability of consistent deliveries; brands enjoy the steady stream of revenue from a (literally) committed customer base. These subscriptions have become modern-day identity indicators, demonstrating a consumer's commitment to good food or fashion, for example.

Fabletics has tapped into this trend of merging convenience with lifestyle and identity in a subscription-based sports apparel online store. Founded in 2013 by Adam Goldenberg, Don Ressler and actress Kate Hudson, Fabletics was perhaps the first American affordable and accessible stylish athleisure brand. According to Forbes, they have well over one million members and they were projected to reach \$250 million in sales last year.

Members are customers who subscribe to the Fabletics "VIP" program; they complete a brief quiz about their body type and preferences, then every month are offered several outfits to choose from at a discounted rate. Shoppers can choose to buy an outfit or skip a month. (Shoppers can make one-off purchases as guests, but they miss out on subscription programme pricing.) To skip a month, members must decline by a certain date or be charged \$50 (which can be put toward future purchases); purchasing a monthly ensemble is the default action.

Allison Hollinger, a health and fitness coach, is a natural fit for Fabletics. She describes the brand as "trendy" and says its clothes are great quality for the price, particularly with the subscription programme.

"I love the convenience of the service and the price point," she says. "It definitely makes shopping easier when you are able to customise your profile and then receive recommendations delivered to your inbox every month."

Being able to maintain a wardrobe of appealing workout apparel is important to Ms Hollinger's profession. "I wear athletic clothing all day long since I'm a fitness coach," she says, "so the quality needs to hold up to a busy lifestyle."

Last year, Fabletics partnered with singer Demi Lovato, a decision that reinforces Fabletics' message of empowerment and inclusiveness. Ms Lovato, who has struggled in the past with addiction, bipolar disorder and other personal challenges, has become a vocal advocate in these areas.

At the launch of their collaboration, she spoke less about the clothes and more about the brand's message: "The clothes are so cute," she said, "but most importantly I love what they stand for. The company is all about inspiring women [to be] the best version of themselves, to be strong, and it doesn't matter what shape or size or age. It's just about empowering women."

According to Forbes, Fabletics grew 43% from 2015 to 2016, then 644% the following year. Like Lululemon, Fabletics is tapping into what women want - specifically the identity a woman endorses by wearing them.

Who is winning female customers?

While women's sportswear still lags behind men's by most measurements, two key truths are emerging about this market. One, women's workout apparel is constantly becoming more available, diverse, high-quality, affordable, stylish and interesting. Two, women are exercising and spending more than ever. Brands that take time to understand and speak to the identity aspects of their target market are the ones who effectively and consistently offer the former. This allows them to harness the benefits of the latter. 



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