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The Power of Selling Empowerment

From the beginning of the first Olympic Games in 760 BC, women athletes have been underrepresented and ignored in media and sports coverage; however, in recent years there has been a strong push for equality between men and women in this field. While feminists and female athletes have been supporting this social outcry, sports companies like Nike have been using these social situations as critical marketing strategies to appeal to their female audience.

An analysis of Nike press material and its “Unlimited Pursuit” campaign demonstrates how the company responded to the current criticism behind the unequal differences between men and women in sports coverage by selling ideas of empowerment to its female consumers.

Before the passing of Title IX in 1972, which requires federally funded programs to provide equal opportunity to both male and female athletes, 1 in 27 females played high school sports and the women of this small proportion who went on to participate in collegiate sports programs received close to no scholarships while only receiving two percent of athletic budgets. Title IX was meant to break the barriers between women and sports, which it has successfully done to an extent. The passing of Title IX has been described as being a “catalyst” for the current push for equality in the sports world as it created long-awaited opportunities for female athletes.

However, Jessica Shaller of St. John Fisher College describes, “Although women's participation in professional, Olympic, intercollegiate and interscholastic sport has reached unprecedented highs, the media still lag behind in the representation of the female athlete” (Shaller 51). While female participation in sports has increased, the little coverage of women’s sports creates a misconception that women are virtually removed from the sports world, which is the exact issue Nike is attempting to address. In the summer of 2016, in the context of the Summer Olympics in Rio, Nike released their “Unlimited Pursuit” campaign that features a number of female Olympic athletes including Gabby Douglas, Simon Biles, Allyson Felix, Serena Williams, Elena Delle Donne and Alex Morgan. The “Unlimited Pursuit” campaign, as stated by Nike, aims to celebrate women athletes who “push their own limits to embark on an unlimited journey and to empower the next generation of athletes” (news.nike.com). Ironically, from its early beginnings in 1964, Nike’s founder, Phil Knight, was not a firm believer in advertising and did not implement popular advertising strategies of that time; however, with the growing popularity of competing brand, Reebok, in the 1980s, Knight finally began to publicize his products at a higher level. Once Knight acknowledged the increasing competition in sports products, the company had begun to put marketing strategies regarding its consumers into effect. By understanding Nike’s history in advertising and the current advance towards equality in sports media, an analysis of the company’s “Unlimited Pursuit” campaign and common marketing strategies can show how current social issues in society affect how Nike advertises to its target audience—women.

Having an in-depth understanding of the common strategies used in advertising and applying them to Nike’s campaign is helpful in fully comprehending how Nike sells

empowerment to its consumers. Sut Jhally provides a thorough explanation of how the consumer society developed and how advertising became a necessity for all consumers in his piece

Advertising as Religion: The Dialectic of Technology and Magic. Jhally provides a history of the relationship between advertising and the consumer to show how advertisers began to exploit their consumers from the beginning of the capitalist preindustrial era. The idea that advertisers like to play with society's needs and emotions is not a new idea as advertisers from the early twentieth century used consumers' "feelings of unreality, depression, and loss accompanied [by] the experience of anonymity" that spurred from the rise of modernism (Jhally 132).

Consequently, a concern for mental and physical health reflected these feelings. Advertisers then understood these movements and started to take advantage of the consumer's emotional needs.

This toying of the consumers' needs and always being socially aware is the exact strategy Nike uses to appeal to their customers as stated by Nike's co-founder and chairman, Phil Knight, "We had to learn to do well all the things involved in getting to the consumer" (Willigan). By

releasing this commercial at the same time as the Olympics and the current social movement regarding women representation in sports with Olympic female athletes, Nike is using the conventional strategy of appealing to the consumer. Jhally also borrows Marx's term

"commodity fetishism" to describe the lure commodities have on consumers. Commodity fetishism is when an object has a magical allure that promises a heightened sense of social value and this magical power causes people to desire the given commodity, even if this value is not closely related to the commodity. The heightened sense of value associated with a commodity is best described as Knight reveals, "We wanted to communicate not just a radical departure in shoes but a revolution in the way Americans felt about fitness, exercise, and

wellness” (Willigan). To support Knight’s strategy, Ronald Berman, in his book *Advertising and Social Change*, notes that “social change consists of the new conceptions of self that are fed by advertising and consumption” (106). The “Unlimited Pursuit” campaign applies this technique as the messages conveyed in the commercial encourage social change by feeding ideas of empowerment to women.

Nike’s campaign strategies are similar to the tactics created by Edward Bernays, also known as “the man who understood the mind of the crowd” as explained in Adam Curtis’s TV series *The Century of the Self*. Bernays, pioneer in advertising, began to use psychoanalysis of consumers in advertising to increase popularity of the product being advertised. Psychoanalyst, AA Brille, told Bernays that “cigarettes were a symbol of the penis and of male sexual power. He told Bernays that if he could find a way to connect cigarettes with the idea of challenging male power then women would smoke because then they would have their own penises” (Curtis). With this information Bernays attempted to break the taboo against women smoking. The smoking industry realized that half of their market was absent because of this taboo; as a result, The American Tobacco company reached out to Bernays. He then came up with the term of “Torches of Freedom” which represented the power cigarettes had on women. The powerful symbolic meaning behind cigarettes is a type of branding empowerment that is also used in the “Unlimited Pursuit” campaign. Knight explains how their staff spends hours figuring out “what the message is, what the theme is, what the athletes are all about, what emotion is involved. They try to extract something that’s meaningful” (Willigan). A close analysis of Knight’s comments in marketing shows how Nike carefully constructs their advertisements in a way that conveys a relevant message and can be sold not only to the masses, but to women as well.

Another important way Nike and many other successful brands increase popularity is through celebrity endorsements. Howard explains why this strategy is effective as he emphasizes the fact that celebrity endorsements tend to attract more attention than an ordinary testimonial and add an impression of confidence and believability. When consumers see their favorite basketball player advertising for Nike, they make connections between that particular player's athletic achievements and the product; this connection intensifies the magical charm behind commodity fetishism. Knight explains how famous athletes are successfully implemented in their ads as he explains, "The trick is to get athletes who not only can win but can stir up emotion. We want someone the public is going to love or hate, not just the leading scorer" (Willigan). Knight emphasizes the fact that celebrity endorsements are based not only on athletic achievement, but emotional effect as well; he goes on to clarify that "to create a lasting emotional tie with consumers, we use the athletes repeatedly throughout their careers and present them as whole people," (Willigan). By presenting athletes as "whole people" consumers have an easier time making emotional connections to these celebrities, which in return causes the consumer to want to invest in the product even more so. Through athlete's physical accomplishment and emotional attachments, Nike implements celebrity endorsements to further the worth of their products through their use of women in the "Unlimited Pursuit" campaign.

Jhally explains how "people need meaning for the world of goods. Thus advertising derives its power from providing meaning that is not available elsewhere" (Jhally 132). But how does meaning get conveyed? In order to fully understand how meaning is derived an interpretation of the short commercial, "Unlimited Pursuit" is necessary. The mixing of popular culture and advertising is a core strategy in the marketing of a product as mentioned earlier;

Gillian Dyer expands on this idea as she poses the question of “what do advertisements mean?” in her book, *Advertising as Communication*, as she provides an in-depth analysis of specific traits within a commercial regarding appearance, manner and activity. Adding to her ideas, Roland Barthes describes two different orders of significance that consumers use to find meaning that can be applied to Nike’s new campaign and the concepts described in Dyer’s book: denotation and connotation. The first order of significance, denotation, is a description of obvious, literal meanings in an image, or in this case a clip. On a denotative level, women of different ethnicities are shown training, running, lifting, doing gymnastics and playing basketball, soccer and tennis in their respective settings, which includes, tennis and basketball courts, gyms, studios and tracks. The clip is a montage of action shots of these athletes training and still close-up shots of the athletes intensely staring at the camera as a female cover of Kid Cudi’s “Pursuit of Happiness” is played in the background. All of the athletes shown are dressed in Nike apparel and have intense, straining expressions on their faces. Both the characters in the clip and the artists providing the background music are female while no men are shown in the entirety of the video.

The second order of significance, connotation, has a wider range of meaning that can be described as a cultural analysis, which is closely related to Dyer’s three different ways in which people can communicate by: appearance, manner and activity. Two of the traits discussed in Dyer’s book about appearance is, nationality or ethnicity and gender, which typically functions to create meaning by either implementing notions of gender or racial stereotypes or attempting to erase traditional racial or gender norms. By releasing a video that does not include any men, Nike is tapping into the widespread feminism that has significant weight in American culture. Additionally, by showing successful female athletes training hard, the commercial articulates the

American idea that if you work hard enough, you will reach your goal, which has been widely popularized in society. The commercial tries not to limit this success to White people only and encourages women of all races to push themselves as they include women of all races, which is another example of an American idea being implanted into consumers' brains through connotation. Setting is another element to consider when analyzing meaning; Dyer explains how "[i]n some ads several backgrounds/settings are shown in order to show off the product's versatility or to provide some kind of juxtaposition of meanings" (Dyer 105-06). By showing athletes training in different settings and playing different sports, Nike plays with notion that success is truly unlimited for all genders in any sport.

The second distinction, manner, relates to the expression, body position, eye contact and positional communication of the characters. Expression, body position and eye contact are all meant to intensify the already powerful mood each athlete exudes; from each athlete's determined gaze to their confident posture, Nike carefully constructs the way in which each character is shown to appeal to this movement of women's empowerment in modern society. Another example of how manner introduces meaning can be found in positional communication; Dyer refers to positional communication as the relationship between actors and objects within the given frame of the picture. Advertisers often use close-up shots to create intimacy and a connection between their consumers and their product to further implement the important messages they are trying to convey. In Nike's commercial, close-up shots on not only the women themselves, but of their clothing and accessories aid in creating a connection between their brand and the message of empowerment for the consumer.

One feature often overlooked in advertising is music and how it impacts the entire

meaning of a commercial. John Howard provides an explanation of how music effectively reflects meaning in his book, *Advertising and the Public Interest*, as he explains how music can “be used to create a mood, to highlight an action, or to emphasize a product benefit or selling phrase . . . with a particular target audience in mind” (47). In Nike’s scenario a product benefit is more than well-made athletic clothing, but a rush of empowerment especially tailored towards women. Nike’s commercial includes a cover of the song “Pursuit of Happiness” by Kid Cudi which is originally a rather depressing song about the dangerous, yet unfettered effects of drugs and alcohol. But how could Nike possibly include a song about the saddening effects drugs and alcohol and continue to sell empowerment to women? Lessig’s concept of culture jamming and notions of cultural appropriation is subtly incorporated into Nike’s “Unlimited Pursuit” campaign as Nike calls attention to certain aspects of the original song while ignoring others to create a new meaning. One of the most obvious differences between the two versions is that the cover is sung by a woman; by changing the gender of the singer, Nike is trying to appeal to their target audience which is women. Within the commercial’s forty seconds, Nike includes the only uplifting part of the entire song about pushing through, even when people say to slow down, to reach a new level of happiness. Referring to drugs and alcohol not stopping is seen as a negative, but when referring to training and sports, it is seen as positive. This new meaning Nike has associated with the song replaces the somberness of drugs and alcohol with empowerment for all women, which is a subtle marketing strategy used to sell power to consumers.

A close examination of the history behind women empowerment and Nike’s marketing strategies, general strategies used in advertising and Nike’s “Unlimited Pursuit” campaign exposes how Nike sells empowerment to its women consumers as an answer to the currently

unfair representation of women in the sports world. By showing the psychological effects advertising has on the consumer through commodity fetishism and celebrity endorsements, advertising companies effectively sell products to its consumers by creating a meaningful connection between the commodity and consumer. Applying the popular techniques used in advertising to Nike's specific campaign further speaks to the assertion that Nike released its "Unlimited Pursuit" campaign as a reaction to the objection against unfair representation in sports coverage during the 2016 Rio Olympics in order to market their products as symbols of empowerment for women in need of support.

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