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Corresponding author: paula.catipovic@studenti.fpzg.hr

WHAT HAS NIKE DONE WITH THE BATON OF STEREOTYPES IN THE MEDIA

*Paula Čatipović*¹

Abstract: The paper analyzes ways in which women are portrayed in the sports advertisement "Nike: What will they say about you?" and how that relates to stereotypes and representation of women in a broader sociological context. This is achieved by considering social trends through the prism of commodification and contemporary consumerism. For this purpose, the qualitative method of narrative analysis was used. Thus, the paper explores advertising segments in detail through linguistic, visual, and symbolic categories, which are then interpreted within the social discourse and gender and religious stereotypes. Women portrayed in said commercial are shown in different sports, situations, and conditions that require a lot of sacrifice, while the female appearance, in this case, is not the subject of attention. This discourse is therefore, in the context in which it is analyzed, an example of a refreshingly positive media advertising practice.

Keywords: media representation, sports, narrative analysis, advertising

¹ Paula Čatipović, Teaching Assistant, Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Zagreb, Ivana Lepušića 6, 10000 Zagreb, Croatia, ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-7589-8874>, Email: paula.catipovic@studenti.fpzg.hr



Introduction

“Stereotyping involves the representation and evaluation of others in ways that ratify and endorse unequal social relations” (Pickering, 2015: 1). The relay race of stereotypes, whose bearers are all those who allow themselves to be drawn into this obscure race, can thus be very dangerous, thanks to those who pass on the “baton.” In addition to individuals, various institutions, and many social and interest groups, the actors who often engage in this action are precisely the media, and public opinion influencers are known to rely on social trends and stereotypes through commercials (Jung, 1973). By taking into consideration fundamental questions, concepts, and context tied to advertisements in contemporary society, this paper analyzes the rejection of gender and religious stereotypes in the “Nike: What will they say about you?” commercial from 2017. Gender stereotypes are defined, by Casad and Wexler (2017: 755), as overgeneralized beliefs about the characteristics that are based exclusively on gender, without considering the actual differences between gender groups. On the topic of religious stereotypes, Warren (2018) points out that Islamophobia is now a widely reported social phenomenon, as Runnymede (a leading British think tank for racial equality) defines it as anti-Muslim racism. What does this mean? It is about religious-based hostility and discrimination against Muslim individuals and communities, which is a prominent political issue (Warren, 2018). While considering these definitions, the paper also theorizes the concepts of advertising and its narrative elements as a prerequisite for purposeful polemics on the questions of capitalism, commodification, and consumerism. Because of this, and for the purpose of analyzing gender and religious stereotypes in the advertisement “Nike: What will they say about you?”, narrative analysis was chosen as the most suitable research method. It is a qualitative method that enables the researcher to investigate the cause-and-effect relationship of events in a story (Ospina and Dodge, 2005).

Theoretical framework

Capitalism, commodification, and consumerism

According to Barnard (1995), the word “advertisement” comes from the Latin *adverto* and *advertere*. The author suggests that the root of the word is related to “turn” or “turning to something”, thus incorporating the idea of directing attention into the very essence of the word (Barnard, 1995: 27). Stolac and Vlastelić (2014: 15)

define advertising as "a complex semiotic sign that promotes the value of a product; media content whose purpose is to inform potential buyers about products or services; information; selling a dream; ubiquitous business." The persuasive effects of advertising are very well known and highlighted to the public (Jung, 1973; Cook, 2001; Baudrillard, 2005; Hromadžić, 2014), as they are inherently tied to the social circumstances we live in, and, as Walsh (2013) explains it, commodification is inevitable under capitalism, as it is part of its logic. One example of deconstructing this phenomenon is given by Bilić in *Sociology of Media* (2020), when, under the auspices of capitalism, he explains the increasing influence of electronic media owned by powerful companies that reduce the space for rational debate (2020: 39). Speaking of the prerequisites for the creation of modern society and the rise of capitalism as the dominant mode of economic organization, he explains "the creation of a fragmented cultural field in which different actors struggle for public visibility and authority (Bilić, 2020: 69)." Jung (1973) argues that, if a man who wants to influence public opinion misuses symbols for this purpose, while they may affect the masses if true, whether they will have an emotional effect on the unconscious of these masses cannot be calculated in advance, because it is essentially irrational. Attempts to influence public opinion by means of newspapers, radio, television, and advertising are based on two factors. On the one hand, they rely on techniques that reveal trends in collective attitudes, and on the other, they express the prejudices, projections, and unconscious complexes of the author (*ibid.*). Walsh (2013) goes on to explain commodification as a process of transformation of goods into products that become marketable and widely available. Afterwards, he sets a question of how far the market can, or should, go and interfere in other aspects of life. Therefore, in the context of this paper, the concept of commodifying female presence in advertising is imposed. Hromadžić (2014) speaks of women's appearance as a subject of increasing social attention, while Urla and Swedlund (2002: 24, cit. according to Hromadžić, 2014: 85) explain the logic behind female bodies becoming advertising goods on the capitalist market, as it is desirable for mass communication to be widely understandable (Vrebić and Kesegić, 2014: 51) and attention-catching. Clearly, the issue of ubiquitous consumerism arises here, the importance of which can be emphasized by framing it in the signifier of "consumerism as a way of life" versus "consumption as an act" (Žakman-Ban and Špehar Fiškuš, 2016). There is also the theory of cultivation and the thesis that media producers homogenize meanings (Ng, Chow, and Yang, 2021), which is especially highlighted in the commercial environment of media systems, as Bilić (2020: 58) points out information as being key in the production processes of the new technological paradigm. The media are thus in a direct relationship with cultural change in information societies and symbolic flows, and "the Internet is becoming an increasingly important part of the networked commu-

nication structure" (*ibid.*). That is precisely why an Internet commercial served as the unit of analysis in this paper, even though its capitalist patterns will have proven to be politically much more resistant to commodifying femininity, rather focusing on sports products and emancipation. But before moving on to the analysis itself, it is necessary to break down the elements of the narrative that will be studied in the rest of the paper. Also, the principle on which narration is deconstructed needs to be understood, as all narratives have some basic elements in common, which is to be further explained in the following section.

Narration

Solar (1997) lists five basic stages of action in storytelling. In this sense, the exposition is described as an introduction, followed by a dynamic-based plot, or often some sort of contradiction. The climax is the moment when the tension is at its peak and must be resolved. The turning point/peripetia occurs when the plot moves in a certain direction and eventually ends with a denouement as a resolution (1997: 238-239). The author explains both sequencing and gradation in storytelling, arguing that sequencing is primarily related to the stringing of motives, that is, sequencing events in a chronological order (1997: 192), while gradation is explained as a small, almost imperceptible, change that can still add details (1997: 196). Characters are also a very important component of the narrative, which can be related to advertising tendencies in terms of target groups, who are then offered the possibility of identification with the characters. "Characters offer us the possibility of identification, but also of refusing to identify with them, they evoke feelings of sympathies and antipathies, love and hatred, fun and boredom" (Grdešić, 2015: 61). Regarding media storytelling itself, Osmančević and Car (2017: 8) emphasize that communication today is almost impossible to imagine without the mass media. "They help shape up our personality, our attitudes and values, even when they indoctrinate, misinform, or mislead us" (Osmančević and Car, 2017: 8). Media narratives thus guide decision-making processes through framing (Entman, 1991), and for narrative analysis as a method to be successful, it is crucial to distinguish the elements that will be observed within media storytelling. Accordingly, the categories that stood out in the advertisement "Nike: What will they say about you?" from 2017 include women's inhibitions, success, independence, and emancipation, as well as women's physical qualifications through the presentation of the role of sports, which are now to be explained in more detail. The reason why "Nike: What will they say about you?" commercial, in particular, was chosen for analysis is because it addresses several important aspects in just a bit more than one minute. It deals with the subject of women's freedom, athleticism, individuality, religion, and stereotypes. Also, the YouTube platform, where it is published, seemed most suitable for commercial

analysis because of the platform's interactive element and the popularity of the media. Therefore, said commercial was picked out for narrative analysis as an example of positive media portrayal.

Inhibition of women as a media narrative

Muslim women are often portrayed as oppressed women who require some sort of salvation, and the media seem to be an indispensable component in this narrative construction of *weak* women (Alsultany, 2012). Tuchman (2000) notes that lots of media portray women in general in traditional roles, as homemakers or mothers, or doing some "pink-collar" jobs. He argues that there is a lack of focus on depictions of strong female characters, encouraging education or training. Instead, women are defined in terms of their relationships with men, needing guidance. Newer research (Santonnicolo, Trombetta, Paradiso, and Rollè, 2023) seems to agree that stereotyping, objectifying, and sexualizing representations are still very common across several contexts and appear to strengthen beliefs in gender stereotypes and endorsement of gender role norms, fostering sexism, harassment, and violence in men and stifling career ambitions in women. Bali, Omer, Abdulridha, and Ahmad (2021) claim that their research had shown how most Arab women were afraid to post their picture on social media when given this task, and only about one-third (490/1312, 37.3%) ended up doing it. On the other hand, internet platforms can be seen as a way of accumulating power and empowerment in general. "The events of the Arab Spring empowered men and women activists to express their dissatisfaction with the social reality through internet and social media" (Hamid, Basid, and Aulia, 2021: 101).

Success, independence, and emancipation of women as a media narrative

Powell (2018) points out that, although women are still somewhat underrepresented in the media, new media are encouraging women from different contexts to get involved, without implying traditional ideas of power. There are examples of positive portrayals of women in commercials, as Gajger and Car (2020) show in their narrative analysis of advertisements for perfumes that showcased women as decisive, assertive, independent, and wrapped in the idea of emancipation. Nevertheless, it was significantly easier to track papers emphasizing the negative media portrayal of women than positive, which is one of the main reasons this paper tries to contribute to filling that gap. Although Hamid, Basid, and Aulia (2021: 100) claim that Arab women and patriarchal culture are almost inseparable, they also explain that the emancipation and reactualization of the identity of Arab women is being written about in the media and point to potential positive developments. Posetti (2006) emphasized the media's debate on hijab as an extremism symbol, a sign of

Muslim women's backwardness. Therefore, its symbolism can be used to portray them as victims of their religion, or they could be shown wearing them proudly and showcasing their religion, depending on the media framing.

Qualifications of women and the role of sports as a media narrative

Milner and Braddock (2017) link the treatment of women in sports with issues of gender perception and discrimination but emphasize an increasing number of women who now compete in "traditionally male sports", such as football or mixed martial arts. Sherry, Osborne, and Nicholson (2016) state that women's sport is still not sufficiently represented in the media. They explain that by "a low level of media interest, narrative focus, prominence of positioning or scheduling, linguistic choice, and visual representation of women's sport" (2016: 299). Midgley, DeBues-Stafford, Lockwood, and Thai (2021) discuss the importance of sports' role models for women, emphasizing that women are less likely than men to name same-sex examples of successful sportspeople. Nevertheless, women were shown to be more motivated by their gender, and the authors claim that same-sex role models provide them with evidence that success is possible, and it depicts a positive future against negatively represented stereotypes. Semi-structured interviews with participants from Istanbul showed that stereotypical portrayals and emphasizing physical appearance over athletic skills resulted in internalization of stereotypes and affected the participant's self-esteem, contributing to performance anxiety and creating mental health challenges (Şahin, Soylu, Toktas, and Köse, 2024). This highlights the crucial role the media can play in constructing the way narratives are framed and its consequences.

Methodological framework

Aim and research questions

The aim of this paper is to analyze the ways in which women are represented in the "Nike: What will they say about you?" commercial, how this is related to social stereotypes, and how it serves the general representation of women in society. The research questions of the paper pose to examine how women are portrayed in the advertisement, what the relationship between their depiction and social, gender, and religious stereotypes is, what symbols appear in the commercial, and in what context. The method of research used to achieve this is narrative analysis.

Narrative analysis

Polkinghorne (1995) argues that narrative analysis uses stories while dealing with human experience and activities. In this sense, the environment in which the narra-

tive takes place, the characters that are being created, the events and actions of the narrative, are all integrated and crucial for thorough exploration (*ibid.*). Equally important is the characterization of narrative and its various themes, because they can be, among everything else, political in nature (Chandler, 1997). The tone and mood of the message create a relationship between the text and the reader, which is a crucial component for this paper, as it decides on the way the media audience is being addressed (*ibid.*). Put simply, the narrative method is based on the idea that people make sense of the world through stories and their meanings (Ospina and Dodge, 2005: 145), which makes a narrative the core of media text. Therefore, it was selected as the research method for this paper.

Sample

This research paper focuses on only one commercial and its narrative analysis, which may seem unusual, but the reason for such a small sample is a very thorough analysis that deconstructs positive media portrayal of women to its detail, which seems to be a very rare subject, as it was a lot easier to track papers that give examples of negative media portrayal. The analysis itself was carried out by following steps described in the previous chapters; it investigates the story behind the subject, the environment where the narrative takes place, the characters, events and actions. The theme of the narrative is thoroughly analyzed by investigating the tone of the commercial, and the mood of the message that is sent to the reader, while deconstructing the relationship between the text and the scenery. As Solar (1997) lists five stages of action in storytelling, the analysis follows them and analyzes the changes in them and what follows them. The advertisement that was chosen for the analysis, "Nike: What will they say about you?" is available on YouTube (28/01/2025) on channel "Nike Women" under hashtags #JustDoIt #Believeinmore (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F-UO9vMS7AI&ab_channel=NikeWomen). The commercial is one minute and ten seconds long, and it was released on March 6, 2017. It had 2,088,035 views at the time of this analysis, while the channel was followed by roughly 221,000 accounts. The description of the commercial reads: "What will they say about you? Maybe they'll say you showed them what was possible. #Believeinmore #JustDoIt." The advertisement was created by the Wieden + Kennedy agency for the Nike brand.

Analysis and results

The commercial starts with a scene of a young woman wearing a hijab, as well as Nike sportswear. She goes for a run and soon notices an older-looking woman, who is also wearing a hijab, surprisingly staring at her. There is a text that reads: "What will they say about you?" and another woman is shown, riding a skateboard and also wearing a hijab. This woman, like the one in the previous scene, looks back and sees a frowning, gray-haired man looking at her. The subtitles continue the previous sentence reading: "That you shouldn't be out here?" Another woman is shown, swinging her boxing gloves towards her female opponent in a ring. The text reads: "That it's unladylike?" as she knocks her opponent down. Next, we see her fall into what seems to be the bottom of a pool. The text follows: "That you're not built for this?" and as her eyes open: "Or maybe...They'll say you're strong", and this is when the pace and tension of the commercial start growing. This is a twist, dynamic moment, captured by a scene of a horse in the desert, rising in the air, as the public is being brought back to the scene in the ring. This time the woman gathers her strength and begins punching her opponent back. The pace gradually grows even more as the viewer is shown women who are playing football. A woman is being chased by two of her opponents, and as she is successfully fighting them back, the text reads: "That you can't be stopped." After them running, the horse from the desert is shown running, and immediately after that, a woman doing parkour. In the moment when she is in between two buildings, in the air, the text appears: "That you'll always find a way." As she lands on the ground, her Nike sneakers are very clearly shown, close-up. The shot moves on from her hands and knees to the hands and knees of another woman exercising, and there seems to be a child next to her, doing the same. The boxer woman from the ring is shown again, punching and avoiding hits, but this time she is on television, as the match is being watched by men who are cheering. She delivers a powerful blow to her opponent, and the commercial switches the viewers to a silhouette of a woman dancing on ice, in a dark, empty gym. As she is seen practicing, the text reads: "That you make it look easy." The next scene is of urban character, with four women leaning on their motorbikes, looking straight at the camera. The scenes and music are very dynamic, as the viewer is being switched between the ice dancer and the women on motorbikes, followed by words: "That you make it look... good." The woman who was exercising with the child is shown again, as she falls on the floor to rest, the pace of the commercial starts to get slower, and the viewer is presented with a fencing scene. The winner gestures with her blade towards her opponent and symbolically removes her mask as a sign of victory while the audience is cheering. In the next shot, she is victoriously standing on a mountain that resembles the desert from

the beginning of the commercial. This is followed by a scene of a little girl standing in front of a skating rink that is glowing under the lights, while everything else is in darkness, except for the camera flashes coming from the audience. While she is looking at them confusedly, a light illuminates her face as she steps on the ice and the text reads: "Or maybe... they'll say you're... the next... big... thing." The screen goes black with white letters: "Believe in more" and the Nike logo appears.

Even though there are various examples of authors describing the representation of women as somewhat narrow-minded (Tuchman, 2000; Alsultany, 2012; Sherry, Osborne, and Nicholson, 2016; Santoniccolo, Trombetta, Paradiso, and Rollè, 2023), the commercial analyzed in this paper doesn't seem to be of such characteristics. It depicts women wearing hijabs, not wearing hijabs, doing all kinds of sports while dressed for doing sports, simply fighting to get better in their disciplines, while ultimately sending the message that there will always be supporters and non-supporters, but that that shouldn't stop them from doing "their own thing." At the beginning of the commercial they are shown to be judged by some people passing by (judging by the looks on their faces and the titles), but the ad starts to culminate (see Solar, 1997) the moment the boxer falls into the water. After a symbolic depiction of a strong running horse, the boxer gathers her strength again and is soon shown on television, while men are cheering for her, even though boxing is traditionally perceived as a rough, unfeminine discipline. The twist (see Solar, 1997) is not only visual but also linguistic, which is evident in the change of text, as it was initially asking questions about what other people will think, if they are being unladylike, or if they even have what it takes, which falls under the category of inhibition of women as a media narrative. But, as the twist happens, the viewer realizes the narrative is using these rhetorical questions to encourage women to pursue their desires, as they are shown to be strong, successful, and, in the end, completely independent of what other people think. Ultimately, narration in the advertisement starts from the middle and then, through elements of sequence and gradation (see Solar, 1997), becomes simultaneous (Genette, 1980, and Rimmon-Kenan, 2002, cited in Grdešić, 2015).

Hamid, Basid, and Aulia (2021) claim that Arab women and patriarchal culture are inseparable but also emphasize the power of new media and its potentially good influence on their independence. Somewhat similarly, the analyzed advertisement conveys that there will always be judgment, but when women embrace their power, as in the commercial, they overcome all obstacles, both in the sports and social sense, which seems to be the ultimate metaphor and something Nike is looking to support. On the symbolism of hijab, Posetti (2006) emphasized the media's debate on hijab as an extremism symbol, which can portray women as victims of their

religion. On the other hand, this commercial seems to be portraying them as wearing it proudly while doing their sports activities, which explains how much of the narrative depends on the way media framing is done (see Entman, 1991). Hamid, Basid, and Aulia (2021) talk about the renewal of the myth of feminism in the context of old customs and stereotypes being challenged. Speaking of this advertisement, women are not shown in customary roles or, for example, seductive, compromising positions that would have nothing to do with real sports, which seems to be a good way to avoid prejudicial social perceptions (see Walsh, 2013; Hromadžić, 2014; Gajger and Car, 2020). Rather than that, women are portrayed as achieved athletes who clearly got there by training and hard work, on their own. The commercial also considers the importance of future generations of women and thus symbolically ends with a depiction of a little girl wearing ice skates, gathering the courage to perform while the audience is cheering for her, which can be interpreted as a kind of path to acceptance that has been paved by women before her.

Sherry, Osborne, and Nicholson (2016) argue that women's sports are still underrepresented in the media, and Midgley, DeBues-Stafford, Lockwood, and Thai (2021) have found that women are less likely to cite examples of successful female athletes than men are likely to name male athletes. However, the authors argue that women are more motivated by their own gender because other women provide them with evidence that success is possible. Considering that, the "Nike: What will they say about you?" commercial seems to seek to inspire and encourage women's sports, as they are placed in contexts of various disciplines, such as running, skateboarding, boxing, football, parkour, ice skating, and fencing. In this way, both "traditionally masculine" and "traditionally feminine" sports (see Milner and Braddock, 2017) are merged into a neutral category where women are successful and motivated simply because they exercise and put in the effort. Therefore, the focus is on sports and Nike equipment, rather than anything else. This is not to say that Nike doesn't use marketing tricks to present their equipment, or that engaging more women in sports doesn't favor the brand, only that they found a somewhat positive way to do it, without diving into social polarizations and creating more prejudice.

Conclusion

This paper provides a combination of gender and religious stereotype analysis while placing the advertisement "Nike: What will they say about you?" into the contemporary media cultural context. While considering capitalist trends that manifest themselves through elements of commodification and consumerism, the paper uses

narrative analysis to find out about the representation of women in said commercial. Since narrative analysis deals with human experiences through stories, it was chosen as the most suitable method for this qualitative research of media text. The paper focuses on only one commercial, as it aims to make a very thorough analysis of its narrative elements, but there are limits to this in terms of generalizability and potential researcher bias. The field could benefit from future research comparing positive media practice in systematized categories and drawing conclusions from that. This research has found that said commercial seems to be resisting the traditional (and somewhat contemporary) stereotypes by showcasing women who are strong, persistent, and resilient, regardless of religion or gender. This is done by portraying them in challenging disciplines and conditions that require a lot of sacrifice. Female appearance isn't the subject of attention, as the emphasis is on sports and women's emancipation. This doesn't suggest that Nike didn't use certain trends or consumeristic tricks to put focus on their equipment, only that they found a more positive way to do it, proving that it is possible to sell a product and still send a meaningful message to your buyers. Therefore, the symbols in the advertisement also served the purpose of empowering representations of women, denying sexual and religious prejudice, thereby challenging traditional societal divisions and roles. The discourse of this commercial can serve as an example of positive media representation, and writing about such examples might have a positive overall effect, which is the aim and importance of this paper. Moreover, Nike's approach to tackling stereotypes in advertising could have significant practical implications, such as influencing consumer behavior, supporting emancipation and women's athleticism, maybe even setting new industry standards and providing guidance for marketers and brands. In conclusion, Nike, in this case, did not pass on the social baton of stereotypes, and such examples invite for representation in public discourse.

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