“Woke-Washing” a Brand: Socially Progressive Marketing by Nike on Twitter and the User Response to it

Abstract: This paper focuses on a marketing campaign involving American football player Colin Kaepernick by Nike on social media platform Twitter. The paper explores how Nike uses progressive values to woke-wash their online marketing campaigns and investigates users’ responses to it. The empirical basis of the paper consists of two tweets, one by Nike and one by Kaepernick, as well as Twitter users’ replies (ranging from hundreds to thousands of replies) to the posts. The replies were categorized according to the most prominently and frequently expressed sentiments. A grounded theory approach was used then in order to apply relevant theoretical perspectives such as postfeminist sensibility and the floating signifier to the reply types and original posts, through which the source material was split into analytical themes. Ultimately, this study revealed an individualization of political expression on social media, both when a corporation like Nike uses it to improve its brand image and in how individuals engage with political and social

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2 This article is based on a master’s thesis in digital humanities (Herbert, 2020), and only includes a part of the full study conducted for the thesis. Full master’s thesis can be downloaded at https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2:1438652.
issues, and that progressive causes are exploited to improve brand image and sell products.

Keywords: Woke-washing, Nike, Colin Kaepernick, Marketing, Twitter, Digital humanities.

Introduction

Recently, the term “woke” (derived from “awake”), which originated from within African American communities, has gained popularity especially on social media. The term refers to people becoming aware of societal injustices like racism and sexism (merriam-webster.com, “woke”). Together with “woke”, “woke-washing” arose, referring to when brands and corporations appropriate politically and socially progressive values, causes and terminology in order to market their products, and in some cases for the purpose of concealing exploitative business practices. This is an issue that has gained prominence in mainstream media (Jones, 2019; Sheehan, 2019), and one of the main arenas where these marketing campaigns are carried out is social media. Therefore, this study focuses on “woke-washed” marketing campaigns on Twitter as well as the user response to them. Specifically, the focus is on the social media marketing of Nike (mainly known for athletic apparel) and its marketing collaborations on the social media platform Twitter with African American athlete Colin Kaepernick.3

Some background context is needed to fully understand the significance of Kaepernick participating in this campaign. On September 1st, 2016, when Kaepernick was playing for an American football team, the San Francisco 49ers in the NFL, he kneeled on one knee while the American national anthem played before the start of the game. He and a teammate who did the same, both African Americans, later explained that they did so as a peaceful protest against racial inequality and police brutality against people of colour (Reid, 2017). This act of protest

3 The thesis that this paper is based on also contains an analysis of another marketing collaboration on Twitter, between Nike and African American tennis player Serena Williams.
subsequently caused major controversy in the US, with President Donald Trump stating that players who do not stand for the national anthem should be fired from their NFL teams (Stelter, 2017). Although the protest was not the official reason for it, his team later released Kaepernick in 2017 and he has not been an NFL player since. It is with this as a backdrop that Nike and Kaepernick chose to collaborate with each other on a marketing campaign.

There are a few reasons for focusing on this specific case. Firstly, it is because Nike as a company has a global reach. This global reach and influence means that examining how they utilize progressive causes in their marketing is of some importance. Nike is also noteworthy in relation to this topic considering that it was recently used as an example of a “politically neutral” brand in a study about politics in branding (Matos et al., 2017, p.129). That perception seems to be changing, with Nike’s collaboration with Kaepernick labelled as “corporate woke-washing” (Boyd, 2018), and hopefully this thesis will shed light on why Nike went in that direction. I also specifically examine their social media collaboration with Kaepernick due to him being a well-known figure globally who is also outspoken on societal inequality. This issue poses relevant questions concerning the boundary between marketing and activism for public figures like athletes, and how blurring that boundary might impact how people perceive them and the brand they associate with.

With all this considered, another potentially useful aspect of this study is that it examines marketing specifically on social media, an area where brands can reach out to people in a very direct way. Out of the most popular social media platforms, Twitter allows the most direct line of textual communication and debate, users can respond directly to each other in “threads” rather than just commenting below a post like on Facebook or Instagram.

That kind of direct dialogue gives a clearer view of how brands “woke-wash” themselves in order to connect with people and how users in turn respond to it directly. And while there have been studies that focus on politics in branding (Strach, 2016) and studies that focus on political expression on social media (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2019), there seems to be fewer studies that synthesize these aspects by looking at the political expression that occurs in the interaction between political branding on social media and the political expression of users in response. To
conclude, social media platforms like Twitter and the social interactions they enable play a big part in shaping many people’s worldviews, which makes it vital to examine the ideological mechanisms and impact of these marketing campaigns. This paper seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How does Nike and the athlete in question communicate progressive values and sentiments such as anti-racism on social media, and what are the most prominent patterns?

2. What are the most prominent patterns in the users’ political expression on Twitter in response to this marketing campaign, and what kind of values and sentiments are expressed?

These questions are answered through a qualitative analysis. The analysis uses a grounded theory approach as a method of data collection and filtering in order to collect source material from the replies to one tweet by Nike and one by Kaepernick respectively. The results and discussion of the analysis is then presented by help of a theoretical framework including postfeminist sensibility theory and the floating signifier concept, as well as a postmaterialist theory.

Previous Research

In terms of previous research on the topic, Tanja Storsul interviewed young people regarding how they use social media for political purposes (2014). Other researchers have conducted similar studies on how people express themselves politically on social media (Velasquez et al., 2019; Fox & Warber, 2015). There are also studies that examine more general trends of political action and expression and how social media has shaped those trends (Bennett, 2012; Barnidge et al., 2018), with Daniel S. Lane and his co-authors studying how political expression on social media could potentially have an impact on how politically active and engaged people perceive themselves to be generally (Lane et al., 2019).

Research has also been conducted on how people perceive the politics of a brand. Geraldo Matos et al. analyse how consumers assign political positions to brands based on
political standpoints that brands take (2017). Other, similar studies on the topic having been carried out as well (Shetty et al., 2019; Palazzo & Basu, 2007). Additionally, studies within this political branding topic also examined how public figures speaking out on political causes impacts the public perception of them and the brands they associate with Bumsoo Park et al. analysing the general perception of Colin Kaepernick as an athlete activist (2019). Further research in the same vein focuses on how other prominent figures are perceived as a result of their political activism (Morin et al., 2012; Cunningham & Regan, 2012).

Several studies also analyse brands’ usage of activism and progressive causes on social media in relation to an emergence of more socially aware and outspoken consumers on social media (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Van den Broek et al., 2017; Hoffman, 2016). Research has also been conducted on how athletes and other public figures shape their own image and brand on social media by addressing political causes, and how that impacts responses on social media (Coombs & Cassilo, 2017; Schmittel & Sanderson, 2015; Duvall & Heckemeyer, 2018). In conclusion, these studies all individually examine certain elements of social media and online marketing, while my study synthesizes these issues and examines how they interact and impact each other.

**Methods and Materials**

The focus for this study in terms of material is a marketing campaign on social media by Nike, including a tweet by Nike and a post by Colin Kaepernick promoting Nike (and himself). This also includes the responses to these posts by users on the platform. Focusing on a specific case to study in this way provides an in-depth and contextualized analysis of the dynamics on social media between politically/socially conscious branding and the political expression of users in their responses.

One of the posts is from Nike’s official Twitter account. It reads “Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything” (Nike, 2018), in reference to male NFL (American football) player Colin Kaepernick, the post has roughly 15000 retweets, 34000 likes and 1000 replies (See Appendix 1).
The other post included in the material is by Kaepernick, it corresponds to the above-mentioned posts from the Nike account. The post by Kaepernick reads “Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything. #JustDoIt”, with a close-up image of his face, the same phrase from his tweet written across it and the Nike logo and slogan at the bottom (Kaepernick, 2018). This post has roughly 342000 retweets, 883000 likes and 43000 replies (See Appendix 2).

There are certain limitations to this source material. That only two tweets are included means that any wide-ranging, overarching conclusions cannot be drawn on the values and social interactions that are generated through “woke-washed” online marketing campaigns. Additionally, focusing only on Twitter also means that this study does not encompass the full extent of the discussions that the marketing campaign in question might have generated on other online social media platforms. However, the aim of this study is not to provide a macro-perspective that gives a general overview of marketing and user response on social media, partially because several other studies that focus on wider trends already exist. The advantage with doing this type of qualitative case study instead is that by staying “close” to the content of these posts in this sense rather than zooming out and analysing general trends, a more nuanced and detailed understanding of the ideological underpinnings in the material can potentially be revealed.

Concerning the data collection, replies to the two posts are collected, interpreted and analysed by focusing on the content of the posts, taking notes on the most prominent recurring patterns in terms of phrases, sentence structures and tone (anger, joy, etc.). This data collection process constitutes a type of grounded theory approach, wherein the initial analysis process is coding, in other words categorizing and sorting the data by assigning descriptive labels (codes) to the data based on the content (Charmaz, 1983). These initial descriptive codes are then developed into analytical, theory-based themes that are used to structure the analysis section of this thesis. An integral aspect of this grounded theory approach and the development of these codes from a descriptive level to an analytical and theoretical level is that the theory is constructed and applied based on the data itself, a process which is further elaborated on in the theory section of this thesis.
This content-focused and descriptive data collection process encompassed to start with all replies to each post, a sorting and filtering process then took place in order to identify prominent types of replies. The replies were at this stage assigned descriptive codes, which are described from this point forward as “reply types”. There are several, distinct types of replies to the posts by Nike and Kaepernick that are prominent. When it comes to the marketing post by Kaepernick, six reply types are identified as reoccurring on multiple instances. These replies were coded as (1) intention to boycott Nike products, (2) negatively comparing Kaepernick to military/police, (3) describing Kaepernick as a hero or role-model, (4) defending Kaepernick’s action as freedom of speech, (5) thanking Nike and Kaepernick and voicing the intention to buy products in support, and (6) accusing Nike of hypocrisy over usage of sweatshops. Out of these types, 1 and 2 recurred most prominently by a clear margin, though types 3-6 recurred enough to also stand out in the material. Concerning the replies to Nike’s marketing post about Kaepernick, only 4 recurring reply types are identified. They are the same as the reply types for Kaepernick’s post except for the types calling Kaepernick a hero and those defending his actions as freedom of speech.

To preserve the anonymity of the users, only the content of the posts is collected, without information on the users. I also do not quote any of the replies verbatim in this analysis in order to prevent the risk of users’ identities being exposed, they only function as reference points for the analysis, allowing me to keep a record of phrases and attitudes that reoccur the most. Simply put, this collection process reflects the most prominent patterns in the replies rather than focusing on singular replies in detail, which preserves anonymity and streamlines the data collection and analysis process.

Theory

Concerning the analytical themes, two were identified in the two tweets by Nike and Kaepernick while two analytical themes were identified in users’ replies to those posts. Starting with the posts by Nike and Kaepernick, the first identified analytical theme is Identity politics in Marketing, specifically the usage of race and gender in the marketing
campaigns. The usage of these identity aspects constitutes in this case a commodification of identities, in the sense that the race and gender of Kaepernick is used to promote Nike’s brand and products. The main theoretical tool that is applied here is Rosalind Gill’s conception of postfeminist sensibility within contemporary media culture (Gill, 2007), which Gill argues consists of several interconnected themes. Among these themes is an increased emphasis on individualism in terms of personal choices and empowerment. Even issues like sexism and racism are framed in individual terms in media according to Gill, divorced from the mechanisms of any structural, political context.

The second theme identified in the original posts is American Nostalgia. This specifically pertains to how American civil rights history and the historical cultural concept of the American dream is deployed in the marketing campaigns. I understand the American dream as mainly the ideal that any American citizen, regardless of class or cultural background, can achieve success. In other words, the belief that any individual through hard work can achieve upward social and class mobility. I also understand this ideal mainly as a form of nostalgia, following Ron Von Burg and Paul E. Johnson. They argue that nostalgia is a useful conduit for examining the contradictions of the American dream, due to nostalgia being a unitary narrative that masks cultural and political tensions within certain ideals such as the American dream (Von Burg & Johnson, 2009).

Continuing to the analytical themes constructed based on the replies to the above-mentioned posts, the first constructed theme here is American Nationalism. This theme is focused on the reply types that unfavourably compare Kaepernick to American soldiers, police officers and/or accuse him of disrespecting the American flag, the types that call him a hero and role-model and the reply types that defend his actions as freedom of speech. Symbols like the American flag, military soldiers and the free speech concept are central to the idea of the US as a nation. However, the debate among users replying to Kaepernick and Nike indicate that the meaning and use of these symbols can shift depending on context.

This is why the floating signifier concept, originated by Claude Levi-Strauss and further developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe is the theoretical perspective used to analyse these replies. A floating signifier could be understood as “a boundary object that ... is plastic enough
towards different meanings and interpretations” (Laskar et al., 2016). I understand the references to aspects like the American flag and soldiers in the replies to Nike and Kaepernick in a similar way, as boundary objects that are flexible in that they can be imbued with different meanings depending on purpose and context.

The final analytical theme constructed based on the replies is Boycott or “Buycott”. This theme focuses on replies to both Nike’s and Kaepernick’s tweets that were identified as expressing the intention to either boycott or “buycott” Nike products in reaction to the marketing campaigns, as well as the replies in which Nike was accused of hypocrisy over sweatshops. The term buycott refers to when consumers support a brand or company for ethical and/or political reasons by buying their products. Simply put, it is the antonym of what boycotting means in this context (Copeland, 2014). For this analytical theme, a post-materialism theory, which focuses on examining the increased importance of political and ethical aspects in consumption (Copeland, 2014), is applied in order to examine why and how individuals expressed the intention to buycott/boycott Nike as a response to these tweets.

Results

IDENTITY POLITICS IN MARKETING & AMERICAN NOSTALGIA

The first analytical theme applied to the two tweets, Identity Politics in Marketing, showed that Nike commodified the identity of Colin Kaepernick for the purposes of their marketing posts on Twitter. The perspective that was employed through this theme revealed that individualized narratives relating to gender and race, detached from structural mechanisms, were built around the athlete to make his identity the main selling points in the campaigns rather than Nike products themselves. The African American identity of the athlete was especially emphasized in the narrative of the campaign, focusing on his heroism as an individual rather than the cause of his protest.

The second analytical theme focusing on the posts is American Nostalgia. Applying this theme to the data showed how historical American events and concepts like the civil rights movement are used as expressions of nostalgia within
the individualized marketing narratives of the athlete. The analysis showed that Nike evoked the history of civil rights and incorporated it as a nostalgic element, visually by including a black and white image of Kaepernick in the post, as well as textually referring to his actions as Kaepernick sacrificing his career for his beliefs. He is as a result portrayed as an individual, idealized hero in the marketing campaign. Portraying Kaepernick and the cause he protested for individualistically is a common thread in these results.

**AMERICAN NATIONALISM & BOYCOTT OR “BUYCOTT”**

American Nationalism, the first analytical theme focusing on the replies to the tweets, was constructed around replies negatively comparing Kaepernick to military/police, replies defending his actions as freedom of speech, as well as replies calling him a hero or role-model. In terms of the first reply type here, the comparison to military/police is invoked in order to devalue Kaepernick’s protest, with military/police positioned as the superior and ideal (white) heroes by those within that reply type. The other two reply types that were positive regarding Kaepernick, position the military/police as symbols of freedom that enable Kaepernick to protest freely, although certain racial undertones are also present here when the imperialist and racist tendencies of US military/police is considered. This theme revealed then that symbols like the American flag and military/police are imbued with different meanings depending on context and intention.

The other analytical theme focusing on the analysis of replies to these two posts, Boycott or “Buycott”, was applied to replies that expressed the intention to either boycott or buycott Nike products in response to these marketing posts. The analysis shows that many who express the intention to boycott Nike also mention Nike’s exploitative labour practices, but this is mainly done due to politically motivated grievance towards Kaepernick. Generally, the replies stating that they would boycott or buycott Nike products seemingly did so based on their perception of Kaepernick, and whether they believed that Nike’s association with him and his actions were ethical.
Discussion

In the results of the analytical themes focusing on the content of the posts by Nike and Kaepernick, the common thread throughout seems to be the focus on individualism and identity in the marketing campaigns. Kaepernick’s main goal was to protest structural inequalities and discrimination by kneeling, but the following controversy centred largely around Kaepernick as an individual rather than the structural problems that he attempted to bring attention to through his protest (Guerrero, 2020). That other athletes carried out similar protests but did not get the same level of exposure as Kaepernick, further emphasizes the extent to which progressive causes like this one are framed around an individual’s actions and choices, potentially a result of an increasingly neoliberal, identity-focused culture (Gill, 2007).

This marketing collaboration on Twitter between Nike and Kaepernick can then be considered as both a perpetuation of this individualized media narrative around Kaepernick and an evolvement of it. The narrative is perpetuated by keeping the focus on Kaepernick and not on the structural issues that he protested against. The narrative is further evolved by commodifying Kaepernick’s cause and his identity as an African American man not only to sell Nike products (financially benefitting both Nike and Kaepernick), but also to “woke-wash” Nike’s brand image by associating with a socially progressive and outspoken athlete.

In terms of American Nostalgia, a nostalgic construct is built based on the history of the movement for black Americans’ civil rights in both Kaepernick’s and Nike’s posts. However, this is not done by directly referring to the civil rights movement, it is instead done in a more implicit way. The phrase used in the campaign, “Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything” is a reference to Kaepernick’s kneeling protest against racial inequality in the US, an action that prompted comparisons to historical civil rights protests in American media coverage (Ballesteros, 2017; Robinson, 2018). With this media narrative already existing, Nike then makes terms like belief and sacrifice a central aspect of a marketing campaign with Kaepernick, effectively echoing the notion of Kaepernick as an important, selfless civil rights figure on the level of historically important black activists in the US. The generality and relative vagueness of the phrasing in the campaign however (believe in “something”, sacrificing
“everything”) sanitizes and detaches the reference to civil rights history from its actual political context. The unspecific formulation of this phrase in the marketing campaign produces a construct of nostalgia that masks the political specificity of both civil rights protests and the institutionalized discrimination that they protested against, exchanging it for the more general terms of belief and sacrifice. By producing this nostalgic construct in the marketing campaign, Nike portrays Kaepernick as a romanticized, heroic figure detached from any complex political struggle, a heroic figure that also (perhaps most importantly from Nike’s perspective) publicly represents and promotes their brand.

By using the civil rights movement to portray Kaepernick as an idealized heroic figure in this way, the nostalgic construct also takes on an individualized form. An issue such as the civil rights movement, largely a collective struggle against a structural problem, is reframed along more personal terms in this campaign by putting the spotlight solely on Kaepernick while simultaneously echoing the media narrative that drew parallels between him and other historical civil rights protests.

Moving on to the analytical themes focusing on the replies to these posts, the American Nationalism theme exposes certain floating signifiers, the main ones being the flag and references to military/police. Both function as symbols in the replies that are open and flexible enough to be imbued with varying meanings, values, and interpretations (Laskar et al., 2016). They are specifically used in various ways in order to define the meaning of American values and what it means to be (un)American in relation to Kaepernick and the marketing campaign.

In the case of the replies that negatively compare Kaepernick to military/police, there seems to be one main element that is assigned to the military and police as well as the flag as signifiers. This element is heroism, namely that heroism and thereby “real” sacrifice entails fighting in, and dying in, a war or other violent conflicts in service of the US government. Within the context of this reply type then, the floating signifier that is the military/police is interpreted as a symbol of idealized heroism, one that can be used to dismiss other claims of heroism (Kaepernick and the marketing campaign in this case) as disrespectful or unworthy in comparison. The American flag as a floating
signifier is then used here in relation to this conceptualization of the military and police, meaning that the flag itself becomes a symbol of the same idealized heroism and bravery that the military and the police represent. By assigning these meanings to these two floating signifiers, it allows the users in question to accuse Kaepernick (who protested against racial inequality during the national anthem and the raising of the American flag) and Nike of disrespect towards the American flag and the military/police.

In contrast to the meaning that users on Twitter who are critical of Kaepernick give to the military/police, the posts in the two other reply types in this theme do not use military/police as a symbol of idealized heroism. They do not use it as a rhetorical tool with which other acts such as protesting racial inequality are made to look inauthentic or unworthy in comparison. Instead these posts refer to military/police as symbols that represent and enable democracy and freedom for all Americans. In other words, military/police are conceptualized as a symbol for a free and democratic liberal society in the posts defending Kaepernick. This shows that the military/police, as a floating signifier, can be (re)interpreted in different ways in order to be used for differing purposes and contexts (Laskar et al., 2016). In this case for either defending or attacking Kaepernick’s actions and the marketing campaign.

In terms of the Boycott or “Buycott” theme, the most noticeable aspect in those replies is that many of the Twitter users that stated they would boycott Nike were met by other repliers who came to the defence of Nike stating that they would support the brand. Ultimately then, the post-materialist framing of these marketing campaigns meant that even those who disavowed Nike’s products on ideological grounds were met by consumers who stated their support of Nike in response. In this sense, Nike exploited the prevalence of postmaterialist values in potential consumers by emphasizing the identity of Kaepernick in its marketing. Thereby, they facilitated a social dynamic in these replies where users supported and defended Nike precisely because Nike made its brand synonymous with socially progressive values through the marketing campaign. This means that those that stated their vocal and financial support of Nike in the replies did so because they believed that they were simultaneously stating their support of certain ethical and progressive values, such as racial and gender equality.
Conclusion

In conclusion, this analysis has revealed the various political and ideological factors that shape this Nike marketing campaign on Twitter, the replies to it, as well as the dynamic between the two. Most prominently, the pervasiveness of a neoliberal, individualized conceptualization of progressive/political values and causes has been shown to be pivotal both in how Nike has attempted to “woke-wash” its brand image in this marketing campaign and in how those who replied interpreted and responded to the campaign. Colin Kaepernick was central in this individualized framing of these progressive issues, becoming a personalized proxy for issues like racial equality, both for the purpose of Nike’s campaign and subsequently for the purposes of the Twitter users’ discussions in response. A case study of this scope is limited in terms of the extent that its results can be generalized to. However, similar case studies could be conducted in the future to explore these kind of social media dynamics even further. This is especially relevant now considering that brands like Nike continually use social and political causes to “woke-wash” their brand images, with the protests against police brutality in Minneapolis, Minnesota, being the latest example (Pasquarelli, 2020). Brands are constantly finding ways to exploit social and political causes for marketing purposes, and future research could be valuable when it comes to uncovering and exploring how brand “woke-washing” evolves.

References


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**APPENDIX 1: TWEET BY NIKE REFERRING TO KAEPERNICK**

Link: https://twitter.com/Nike/status/1037388425727383352?s=20

*Date published: 2018-09-05*

*Text:* “Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything”

**APPENDIX 2: TWEET BY KAEPERNICK**

Link: https://twitter.com/Kaepernick7/status/10366955183251434498?s=20

*Date published: 2018-09-03*

*Text:* “Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything. #JustDoIt”

*Image description:* Close-up headshot of Kaepernick, overlaid with the text “Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything” and Nike logo.

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