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### Just Post It: A Critical Discourse Analysis on Nike's Instagram

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**Just Post It: A Critical Discourse Analysis on Nike's Instagram**

An honors thesis by

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## Abstract

Brands are entering an era in which social media has become an influential communication channel. In recent years, marketers have had to change many traditional advertising methods to keep up with consumer behavior and technology trends. With social media, brands can reach a bigger audience than ever before to build their brand, increase sales, and drive website traffic. Nike, one of the top leading brands in the world, has opted to focus on "non-traditional" advertising through new mediums by using a social strategy that uses ads to make social statements and evoke emotion. In this thesis, I present a critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how Nike uses narratives of personal empowerment, to shape their brand's message, specifically through Instagram. I will also explore the tools used by Nike to communicate and spread social and political life through Instagram. The corpus for this study is extracted from Nike's public Instagram account, which currently has a following of one hundred million users. The data analyzed in this study consist of twelve Instagram post from 2019, including associated captions. The result of the analysis shows Nike packages their brand to be emotionally empowering by reflecting the lived struggles and triumphs of individuals and delivers that message through personal values and experience while vocally and visibly shaping culture by highlighting such issues.

Keywords: *Social Media, Lifestyle, Nike, Identity, Instagram, Empowerment, Social, Feminism*

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Abstract	2
I.	Introduction	4
II.	Literature Review	
IIa.	Brand Narratives	5
IIb.	Networked Narratives	6
IIc.	Advertising Online	10
IId.	Emotional Advertising	11
IIe.	Empowerment	12
IIf.	Identity	15
IIg.	Crowd Cultures	17
IIh.	Nike	20
III.	Methodology	21
IV.	Analysis and Discussion	
IVa.	Nike-Vision	25
IVb.	Nike-Women	26
IVc.	Nike-Identity	31
IVd.	Nike- Adversity	33
V.	Conclusion	35
VI.	References	37

## **I. Introduction**

Social media is a powerful communications medium, that allows users to create, share, and or exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks. Social media has become a vital method of communication in the 21st century. Specifically, social media has allowed brands to build strong relationships with consumers through increasingly powerful communication strategies by targeting the individual and emotional needs of consumers allowing brands to intensify their connection with their audience. Instagram, a photo- and video-sharing mobile-based social media app with more than one billion active users as of June 2018 (Statistica, 2018), is currently one of the most popular social media platforms for marketing (Dewey, 2014). Social media sites like Instagram has forced brands to re-think and re-shape relationships with consumers that will effectively foster trust in their product or service.

Realizing the importance of social media advertising, this study aims to examine the Instagram account of the footwear manufacturing company, Nike. The main objective of this study is to explore the tools Nike uses through Instagram to communicate and disseminate discourses that influence social and political life. Through the integration of traditional media with social media, my analysis will focus on the multimodal nature of digital communication. Through this methodology, I will be able to identify how ideologies are disseminated and shared, and how technologies are deployed for these purposes.

## II. Literature Review

### *Ila. Brand Narratives*

In the context of interpersonal communication or mass media communication, narratives serve to persuade or entertain individuals (Wang, Kim, Xiao & Jung, 2016). A brand narrative is a central building block in creating a successful brand strategy. Brands adopt narratives as a tool to engage and inspire their audience and as a way to enhance consumers' connections with a specific brand (Singh & Sonnerburg, 2012). Stories help people understand the world around them; people create stories to organize their experiences, explain unusual events, gain perspective, and make evaluations (Bruner, 1986, 1990). Through casual links and shared experiences, stories elucidate goals, evaluate actions to achieve goals, and interpret outcomes (Pennington & Hastie, 1986).

In consumer theory, narrative processing creates a connection between the individual and the brand because narrative processing may form a link between a brand and the self when consumers attempt to map incoming narrative information onto stories in memory (Shank & Abelson, 1995). Because stories focus on goals, actions, and outcomes, and because stories in memory are likely to be self-related, a link may be forged between brands in an ad story and the achievement of personal goals (Escalas, 2004). Not only do these brand narratives create a conversation between the consumer and the brand, but they allow the consumers to fit their own personal and shared experiences into the brand's story, thereby allowing the role of the consumer to shift from a passive listener to an active participant (Escalas, 2004). While some brands do not have obvious personalities, others have successfully instilled their products with characteristics, thus strengthening consumers' ability to connect with brands. What a brand means to a consumer

is based in part on the personal narratives he or she has constructed that incorporate the brand. Narratives help people interpret the world around them to create meaning, including meaning for brands. The structure of narratives provides the framework for causal inferencing about the meaning of brands and the meaning of consumers (Escalas, 2004).

### *Iib. Networked Narratives*

Humans have a long history of writing, telling, and sharing stories about themselves and others (Johnson, Huffman, & Jasper, 2014). Storytelling is central to human existence and spread within every known culture (Hayden & Orulv, 2009). Through the creation of elaboration, and revision of narratives of our own lives, we make meaning of life events by distilling our experiences into stories. When we reflect on our stories, we can see the unity between what has come before, where we are now, and where we are going in the future. Our stories are everything we have ever experienced and when reflecting on these narratives, we have a better understanding of our identity and the things that make up who we are. We tell personal stories to make sense of certain situations, to convey important qualities about ourselves to others, and to transform our understanding of situations from negative to powerful and empowering experiences (Hayden & Orulv, 2009). Narratives have become so purposeful within cultures that they have essentially become a crucial condition for living in a cultural setting (Bruner, 2010:45); however, over time, the way in which cultures share and pass down stories has changed significantly. For thousands of years, storytelling technology has evolved from cave paintings to digital mediums such as Instagram, blogs, YouTube, Facebook, podcasts, and many more social platforms. For centuries, storytelling has functioned as a tool to explain the traditions

and expectations of a tribal people or to teach a generation about community activism, stories educate learners throughout society (Hodge, Pasqua, Marquez, & Geishirt-Cantrell, 2002).

According to Lambert (2006), “digital storytelling is rooted fundamentally in the notion of democratized culture that was the hallmark of the folk music, re-claimed folk culture, and cultural activist tradition of the 1960’s” (2006, p.2). There are more ways to tell stories than ever before, however much of our storytelling today is digital. Digital storytelling is the melding of storytelling and digital media, in which it combines the art of telling stories with digital tools such as graphics, audio, and video. Today, nearly anyone with access to the internet can share their story with the use of new but accessible digital technologies.

In a technology-driven culture, social media platforms have changed the way humans communicate their experiences going beyond a single, linear textual sequence told by a single storyteller. In recent years with the rise of media technologies, this new form of narratives has been termed as networked narratives, which refers to the connection between people who created the narrative and those who read it (Page et al., 2013). Networked narratives are digital stories embedded with technology affordances. These technology affordances are specific applications within social networking sites such as the number of likes, the number of shares, and the number of comments (Page, et al., 2013). This practice allows individuals to participate collectively in the construction of “shared stories” (Georgakopoulou, 2007), that draw a connection between the people who created the networked narrative and those reading it. This allows narrators to co-construct their social identities through their interactions with others.

For example, in recent years, the internet has become an important venue for cancer communication efforts; individuals with chronic deceases are increasingly using online media to

engage in health-related social networking to provide mutual support, and share stories (Chou, et al., 2009). Numerous cancer control organizations use patient narratives as an effective communication device because survivors' direct experience with cancer makes them credible and effective messengers of information conveyed through their personal stories. Through this method, narrative communication is seen as offering unique advantages over traditional expository or didactic communication in the context of promoting desirable health behaviors (Chou, et al. 2009). As the increased number of cancer survivors take to social media to share experiences, cancer control organizations are using patient narratives as a communication device to raise public awareness, provide information and support, and change behavior for people living with cancer has clear instrumental value (Chou, et al. 2009). Cancer survivors take to networked narratives, to draw a connection through their own stories and those who are reading it online. Those who are reading survival stories enhance the story, through liking, commenting and sharing the posts

In 2009, The Lance Armstrong Foundation released a series of "Survivor Interviews" series, which featured 200 videotaped cancer narratives of men, women, and caregivers "to learn about cancer, to deal with a diagnosis and to hear firsthand about their experiences" (The Lance Armstrong Foundation, n.d, n.p.). Likewise, The American Legacy Foundation's Legacy for Health "Letters" campaign featured farewell letters of four women battling terminal tobacco-related cancers (Eysenbach, 2011). The inclusion of narratives was used to raise public awareness of the dangers of smoking and encouraging people to quit. Through these stories, the audience will be able to better understand their place in the larger narrative and how they can take an active role in shaping the future. Networked narratives are not only used in public service announcements, other examples of successful networked narratives include social media posts on

product, brand, and celebrities' Facebook pages. Many companies and celebrities have their own official social media pages where they generate carefully written posts containing photos and captions almost every day (Choa, Schweickart, & Abigail, 2013). Followers on social media can interact with the company or celebrity through liking, commenting, and sharing the posts. In brand contexts, these functions and tools of social media are likely to affect consumers' responses to brands and could have important implications for brands' social media marketing efforts. (Hoffman, Novak & Kang, 2017).

The main goal behind storytelling is connecting with your audience. The ability to tell stories creates an emotional connection, that is often used in the marketing world today. The use of storytelling is approached differently through different means of marketing. Digital stories for marketing (advertising through storytelling), can be used in emails, newsletters, landing pages, video/television, banner ads, retargeted digital ads, or ads sent through SMS and social networks. Advertising storytelling has three fundamental components (Bourdaa, 2012): 1) Hypertext: nonlinear reading of speech; 2) Multimedia: use of different media: animations, audio, video; and 3) Interaction: the user can choose and execute in the system its own actions. Berelowitz et al (2012), claim there are many specific advantages of digital storytelling for marketing and advertising. Storytelling allows you to connect better with customers because it directs users to pay more attention to what you tell them. It also creates an identity mark because your communication will become entirely personal and unique, helping you to differentiate yourself from the competition. Storytelling also helps customers identify your brand, a brand that chooses a message where it has something more to tell than its desire to buy its products is an identifiable brand. Storytelling through digital media has the great advantage of being used in many forms of communication, it applies to all digital marketing media and its potential is perceptible.

### *Iic. Advertising Online*

Social media has recently been recognized as a highly impactful channel of communication and has grown to gain recognition as a pronounced and paramount marketing factor guiding the success of a product/service/business (Hawkins & Vel, 2013). For many users, social media is a part of a daily routine. Roughly three-quarters of Facebook users and around six-in-ten Instagram users visit these sites at least once a day (Pew Research, 2019). Social media sites are now one of the most widely used platforms for advertising (Pew Research, 2019). Companies have started to realize the importance of interaction with consumers and the use of social media allows them to meet the demand of their customers. As we move toward an increasingly digital future, marketers are adjusting their marketing plans toward digital efforts. Some of the world's leading brand visionaries such as Apple, as well as emerging brands like Trader Joe's, align their corporate site and social media objectives to enhance online returns on investments (Close & Hamlin, 2012). Today's brand managers have many different resources to help establish their brand's identity and to connect with their customers via social networking. Social networks are used as a brand management tool. How a brand interacts and presents information to future and current customers is known as touchpoints. A touchpoint can also be defined as any way a consumer can interact with a business (Close & Hamlin, 2012). Person-to-person touchpoints allow consumers to interact with a brand at live events (e.g., sponsor signage at a sporting event) however, virtual touchpoints are just as important because they work as a tool to help leverage previously built consumer relationships. Through social networks, these virtual touchpoints can strengthen existing relationships or stimulate new interests (Close & Hamlin, 2012).

## *IId. Emotional Advertising*

Advertisers use different media to increase users' empathy toward advertising. There is a multitude of factors that contribute to the appeal of advertising online, but one big element drawing consumers in is the emotional appeal. Studies show that active social media users experience high feelings of empathy when using social media (Vossen & Valkenburg, 2016). Previous research also shows that empathy could be drawn from social media because it allows users to access others in a similar situation easily and frequently (Caplan & Turner, 2007). Walther's (1996) hyperpersonal communication theory demonstrates how individuals communicate uniquely and present themselves in optimal ways while representing themselves to others, how others interpret them, and how the interactions create a reciprocal spiral of face to face communication. Communication through social media can become "hyperpersonal," when users experience a greater level of intimacy and share more information (i.e. self-disclosure) than in face-to-face communication (Vossen & Valkenburg, 2016). According to the appraisal theory (Scherer, 1997), feelings of empathy and deep emotion are based on evaluative interpretations of the situation (appraisals). This means, empathy allows individuals to view the situation presented as if they were present at that place and had been affected by the situation, while also recognizing someone else feelings whether negative or positive (Taute et al., 2011). Emotional appeals are used in advertising to impart certain attitudes in the consumers, so they will act in a certain way. Copeland (1924) theorizes that individual customers buy products and services for either a rational or emotional reason. The idea of rational advertising assumes that consumers process information when making purchasing decisions based on logical or/and utilitarian decisions. Emotional appeals are used in advertising to emotionally manipulate the attitudes of

the consumer. Brands are striving to create “content,” rather than “ads” by crafting stories that individuals will actively seek out because it takes the shape of entertainment rather than sponsored material.

### *Ile. Empowerment*

Advertising has changed constantly throughout its history in response to changes in the economy, technology, fashion, and social relations. There has been a significant shift in advertising representations of women in recent years, such that rather than being presented as passive objects of the male gaze, young women in adverts are now frequently depicted as active, independent, and sexually powerful (Gill, 2008). As developments in information and communication technologies advanced, companies were forced to rethink their previous advertising strategies (Gill, 2008). Feminism has made its mark into all aspects of culture and advertisers have fully embraced “marketplace feminism,” which can be described as a powerful corporatized, depoliticized, version of feminism that has recently developed within the past twenty years (Zeisler, 2016). As the stereotypical representation of women shifted over time, we can identify they are connected to their changing roles in the labor force and in the family. Women have also increased their power as consumers, specifically in the United States, women account for 85% of all consumer purchases, either directly or by influencing the decision to buy a certain brand or product (She-conomy, 2016). In the last two decades, the terms “ad-her-tising” and “femvertising” have been coined to define advertising addressed to women which present qualities of empowering women and equality (Becker-Herby, 2016). By the late 1980s and early 1990s, women’s increasing financial independence meant that they became targets for new products and also forcing advertisers to rethink their engagement with female consumers and

their ways of representing women (Gill, 2008). One way for advertisers to respond is to incorporate or mobilize feminist ideas. Feminism has become something that women can achieve through consumer choice rather than political action. Goldman (1992) coined the term “commodity feminism” to capture the ways in which advertisers attempted to incorporate the cultural power and energy of feminism while simultaneously neutralizing or domesticating the force of its social/political critique.

This method of advertising is also connected to Kimberlé Crenshaw’s (1989) notion of privilege and her concept of intersectionality, which argues that race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and even age all serve as vectors of oppression and privilege. This framework is important because it observes how inequality develops in a multidimensional basis, intersectionality proposes that all aspects of one’s identity need to be examined as simultaneously interacting with each other. In terms of advertising, this translates into the need to reflect the variety of races, ages, sizes, body types, and appearances of the female body (Pérez & Gutiérrez, 2017). In recent years there have been various forms of advertisements that illustrate this deep preoccupation of portraying such diversity. In 2004, Unilever launched the Dove Real Beauty campaign which featured “real women” instead of models in their advertisements, in an effort to liberate women from stereotypical portrayals of beauty. The campaign employed pro-female talent, messages, and imagery to empower women and girls, as it featured women of various ages, races, and body types (Duffy, 2010). Dove’s use of femvertising pushed aside the practice of traditional gender stereotypes and ensured that women are the protagonists throughout the entire marketing narrative (Becker-Herby, 2016). Jennifer Bremner, brand director of skin cleansing at Unilever, said in an interview “We believe that conversation leads to

brand love, and brand love leads to brand loyalty...That's obviously a positive for us not just in the power of the brand, but also ultimately in sales" (quoted in Bahadur, 2017, 2).

In creating these spaces where consumerism and activism intertwine, Dove implicitly argues that women's empowerment and advancement lie within an individual's buying power, not within a larger cultural cause or movement (Love & Helmbrecht, 2007). Because of the polysemic nature of these themes, the campaign was able to simultaneously endorse the product, exploit participant labor, and give consumers a sense of power as individuals, as women, and as creative professionals (Duffy, 2010). In 2015, She-Knows Media, a digital media company, created the #Femvertising Awards, in which they recognize brands "that are challenging gender norms by building stereotype-busting, pro-female messages and images into ads that target women" (SheKnows Media, n.d, n.p.) In 2016 brands that were recognized for their Femvertising campaigns included, Bud Light for "The Bud Light Party: Equal Pay," Badger & Winters for "#Women Not Objects," Under Armour for "Rule Yourself: Women's Gymnastics" and Girls Who Code for "Why Girls Can't Code" (SheKnows Media, n.d). Becker-Herby (2016), concludes campaigns connected to this phenomenon are built around five pillars: 1) Utilization of diverse female talent in an intersectional manner; 2) Messaging that is inherently pro-female; 3) Pushing gender-norm boundaries/stereotypes; 4) Downplaying of sexuality, and 5) Portraying women authentically. A key challenge in advertising towards women is, understanding how disciplinary power works, exploring the complex relationship between culture and subjectivity in such a way as to render women neither passive, docile subjects, nor the fictitious autonomous, freely choosing persons of liberal humanism (Gill, 2008).

When considering the relationship between gender and popular culture texts in terms of production, representation, and consumption, authenticity refers to variable features from the

talent, the product, scenario, and styling. Questions such as the following become fundamental when exploring commercials as objects of consumption by users: Who produces popular culture texts? What representations of gender circulate? What about resistive or counter-dominant representations of gender? What is the relationship between gender and the consumption of pop culture texts? (Milestone & Meyer, 2013). In popular culture, one of the most substantial aspects of this method of advertising is understanding it is crucial to reject the passive nature of consumers as mere spectators and to replace it with an active and interactive role (Pérez & Gutiérrez, 2017). The flow of communication in advertising is no longer one-way; individuals can reject or negotiate media messages by leaving comments, feedback, and reviews on websites and social media (Pérez & Gutiérrez, 2017).

### *IIf. Identity*

Today, the way in which information is spread about a brand has become multidirectional, interconnected, and difficult to predict. Through the use of social media, marketers have lost some control over their brands and now participate in a “conversations” about the brand through different social media platforms (Deighton & Kornfeld, 2009). Rather than pushing brand messages at consumers as they would have done in the past, today we see brands combining traditional and new media channels by engaging consumers in conversations that identify with consumer lifestyles (Hennig-Thurau, et al. 2010). Social networks have dramatically altered how culture works, so for a brand to be successful, it must break through in culture. It is necessary for brands to emerge in culture—in entertainment, in fashion, in news, on social media—and use that awareness to inform how they should best position and integrate

themselves into the world. By engaging culture more directly, brands become a part of that culture, thereby deepening their relevance and connection with customers (Grossman, 2018).

Social media has a profound linguistic and communicative practice, in which individuals group themselves socially through the networks they create (Seargeant & Tagg, 2014).

Consumers construct identities by digitally associating themselves with certain brands that reflect a positive self-image. By strategically choosing the brands they discuss in online communities, consumers make their identities tangible by associating themselves with material objects and places (Schau & Gilly, 2003). Through new technology and more specifically social media, consumers can present themselves using digital rather than physical referents. According to Kenneth Burke's (1980) identity theory, identities are the shared social meanings that persons attribute to themselves in a role. Brand marketers care about which brands consumers choose to align with because identity theory suggests that a brand commitment connects an individual to a persistent self-identity, which produces consistent lines of activities, such as brand loyalty and purchase behavior (Giddens, 1991). Self-expansion theory suggests consumers communicate and associate themselves with certain brands due to overlapping identities (Burke & Reitzes, 1991). Every individual simultaneously has overlapping identities such as the overlap between race, gender, religion, class, age, etc. Issues can arise when consumers feel the relationship is one-sided or the brand does something that is not consistent with the consumer's identity, which can cause the brand to suffer (Huang & Mitchell, 2014.) Social media may serve as a channel for many marketing activities but regardless of what companies are trying to achieve through the use of social media, they must present relevant information to the consumer if they want the consumer to engage with the brand in self-relevant ways (Schmitt, 2012). Social media outlets allow new kinds of identity performance to be presented in different ways, and brands are a part

of the performance (Padrez et al., 2015). Therefore, consumers may share their own opinions and/or share the branded content with their network, which in turn is used as advertising to influence consumer brand attitudes and trigger audience engagement (Ashley & Tuten, 2014). Traditional research in both cultural and cross-cultural psychology has focused on the effects of culture by identifying the influence of culture on the individual (Cooper & Denner, 1998). However, the reverse relationship also exists; individuals influence brands through the creation of institutions, symbols, and practices that carry and validate particular cultural meaning systems (DiMaggio, 1997; Kitayama et al., 1997; Shore, 1996). According to Giddens, differences in lifestyle between groups are the preliminary structural forms of social groupings (2004). Lifestyle can be understood as the interests, opinions, behaviors, and behavioral orientations of an individual, group, or culture (Vyncke, 2002). Through each individual lifestyle, you can see a reflection of a person's values, life vision, aesthetic style, and life goal (Vyncke, 2002). According to the social identity theory, lifestyle is a valid instrument of creating a solid sense of self that resonates with both personal and social identity (Turner, 1987). Lifestyle is a manifestation of self-expression because it forges a solid sense of self that resonates with both personal and social identity (Cătălin & Andreea, 2014). Individuals strive to create unique identities based on personal experiences linked to the past, present, and future self. Brands can reinforce or convey this sense of identity by adding perceptual anchoring points that individuals can constructively relate to (Cătălin and Andreea, 2014).

### *Ilg. Crowd cultures*

Social media has changed the way in which companies and mass media diffuse new ideas into the mass market. Cultural innovations stem from societies that challenged mainstream norms and conventions (Holt, 2016). For example, communities that were once geographically

isolated, are now linked together through social media which specifically increases the pace and intensity of collaboration (Holt, 2016). Since these once-remote communities are now densely networked, their direct influence on culture has become substantial (Holt, 2016). Online culture and communities are not necessarily a direct reflection of offline communities but are often unique cultures with their own values, norms, rules, sanctioning mechanisms, shared history, and folklore (Crystal, 2001; DiMaggio, et al., 2001). These new “crowdcultures” identify particular online locations assumed to contain the subcultures, which incubate new ideologies and practices and contribute to the art worlds, which break new ground in entertainment (Holt, 2016).

Social media has made these subcultures available to everyone on the internet; with a few clicks, you can be in the center of any subculture. Typically, you will not necessarily be “welcomed” into a specific subculture unless you understand its norms and customs. Through participants' intensive interactions, new ideas, products, practices, and aesthetics cultural innovators and their early adopter markets have become one and the same (Holt, 2016).

Through the use of social media, users have the opportunity to communicate experiences through an alternative lens that combines visual and textual content (Wilson, 2020). The art world helps create new and innovative entertainment in pop culture through competitive collaboration. Artists (musicians, filmmakers, writers, designers, cartoonists, etc.) work together, learn from one another, play off ideas, and push one another (Holt, 2016). Cultural entrepreneurs come together online to enhance their technique, exchange ideas, modify their content, and compete to produce praiseworthy content (Holt, 2016). The engagement of users has become an essential component in social media campaigns where strategic communication specialists use these techniques as a cultural prototype as new talent emerges and new genres (Bronner & Neijens 2006).

For brands to be successful they must breakthrough through social media and set aside conventional thinking and develop a new mind-set by targeting crowdcultures. This process is successfully done through the cultural branding model, a strategy that works differently than the branded content model (Holt, 2016). Brand content has been a tactic that embodies everything a company is and does, which consists of carefully selected attributes, benefits, and attitudes that are communicated to consumers through purposeful marketing activities, to purposely persuade their audience (Holt, 2016). In cultural branding, communications are the center of customer value; customers are buying the product to experience the stories being told by the brand. The product is simply an outlet through which customers can experience these stories (Holt, 2016). Rather than chasing after trends, brands target novel ideologies stemming from crowdcultures, this allows brands to create diverse viewpoints that stand out in overpopulated media environments (Holt, 2016).

Three brands that have generated tremendous consumer interest and identification on social media are Dove, Axe, and Old Spice. Each brand engaged in cultural discourse about gender and sexuality which supported an overarching distinctive ideology and promoted this ideology to a mass audience (Holt, 2016). Each brand promoted this ideology to mass audiences through research to identify ideologies that are relevant to crowdcultures. However, companies that work in the chaotic world of social media and rely on the traditional segmentation models will always have trouble identifying these opportunities.

### *III. Nike*

Nike is an American multinational company that has evolved to become a global leader in athletic wear and has become one of the most visible brands in the world. Since its inception in 1964, Nike has been an innovation leader in product development, marketing, and consumer experience, with advertisements that have drawn both praise and disapproval (Childs & Jin 2017). Nike is the most publicly recognized company in the global sports shoe and apparel industry (Greenberg, & Knight, 2004), Nike's social strategy focuses on expanding globally to reach its wide range of customers. The company's goal in engaging with consumers via social platforms states "Social networks are tools that help build and leverage our relationship with the consumer. These networks serve as a platform to reach our athletes. However, the goal hasn't changed since the beginning of Nike — we want to connect with athletes to inspire and enable them to be better" (Nike, n.d., n.p.). With the rise of social media Nike can go global, but think local, with new tools and methods Nike will continue to push the edges of how they reach a multitude of communities.

Apart from its central brand, Nike markets its products under Nike Pro, Nike+, Nike Golf, Nike Blazers, Air Jordan, Air Max, and others as well as subsidiaries including brands Jordan, Hurley Int. and Converse. Nike sponsors many high-profile athletes and sports teams around the world. Nike can be highly recognized for their trademarks of "Just Do It" and the Swoosh logo (Nike, n.d.). Nike's vision and mission are to drive product innovation for athletes everywhere, their mission statement is "*To bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world*" (Nike, n.d.). The company further states that everybody is an athlete based on Nike founder Bill Bowerman's statement, "If you have a body, you are an athlete." This mission

statement represents the company's strategic goal of reaching out to the global leisure and sports footwear, apparel, and equipment market (Nike, n.d.).

However, Nike has not always held a stellar reputation. In November 1997, an article in the *New York Times* detailed how a disgruntled Nike employee had leaked a damning internal audit of a Nike factory in Vietnam, uncovering numerous illegal and dangerous working conditions (Greenhouse, 2002). The article mentions that seventy-seven percent of Nikes factory workers suffered from respiratory diseases, most likely due to the large amounts of carcinogens found in the factory air (Greenhouse, 2002). It was also found that employees work ten and a half hours a day, six days a week, in violation of Vietnamese law. Nike's decision to advertise good corporate conduct as a reaction to negative public perceptions about its practices has raised some serious ethical concerns over the years, but Nike still remains on top as one of the most social brands in the world (Detienne, & Lewis, 2005). Nike has used social justice advertising as a way to repair its image through celebrity endorsements and sponsorships as vehicles for the promotion of worthy social causes (e.g. equal opportunity for women, racial minorities, and the disabled) (Greenberg, & Knight, 2004). Nike's decision to advertise good corporate conduct as a reaction to negative public perceptions about its practices has raised some serious ethical concerns over the years, but Nike still remains on top as one of the most social brands in the world (Detienne, & Lewis, 2005).

### **III. Methodology**

This study draws on Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework in which there are three levels of analyzing texts: description, interpretation, and explanation

(Fairclough, 1992). CDA is a particular strand of discourse analysis that focuses on the role of language in society and the ways people use language to achieve a certain relationship between language and power. CDA is a research method for studying written or spoken language in relation to its social context (Bouiver & Machin, 2018). It aims to understand how language is used in real-life situations and the ways people use language to achieve specific effects. Rather than focusing on smaller units of language, such as sounds, words, or phrases, CDA is used to study larger chunks of language, such as entire conversations, texts, or ideology behind certain messages (Bouiver & Machin, 2018). Because Instagram's layout is structured around the image, the visual mode is very important. This multimodal textual and visual analysis was based on analytical tools from semiotic approaches. Semiotic reference plays an important role in the relationship between discourse and ideology (Jewitt & Oyama, 2001).

Using critical discourse and semiotic analysis, I will examine how Nike transfers their ideas and thoughts through certain strategies to shape their overall brand message through Instagram. This research is aimed at exploring the tools Nike uses through Instagram to communicate and disseminate discourses that influence social and political life. Through the integration of traditional media with social media, my analysis will focus on the multimodal nature of digital communication. Through this methodology, I will be able to identify how ideologies are disseminated and shared, and how technologies are deployed for these purposes.

The corpus for this study is extracted from Nike's Instagram account, which currently has a following of one hundred million users (Nike, n.d.). The data analyzed in this study consist of twelve Instagram post, including associated captions. All posts were published publicly on Instagram, from Nikes' official account. The data corpus consists of the first post from each month published by Nike in 2019. I analyzed not only written text in the caption of each post but

also other content associated with the posts such as still images (photos) and moving images (IGTV video). The analysis was carried out in three steps. At step one, the data corpus was systematized in terms of mapping how many people were presented in each post, their gender, status on Instagram (account has a verified badge in which, Instagram has confirmed that an account is the authentic presence of the public figure, celebrity or global brand it represents) and what activity was presented visually within the post. At step two, the visual resources in each of the twelve images in the data corpus were analyzed. The visual analysis included evaluations of whether the post was a still image or video, how the athlete(s) was depicted in the image/video, and whether or not the Nike symbol was visible. At step 3 the linguistic resources were analyzed using CDA, through the use of vocabulary, terms, and metaphors. At this step, the relation between visual and linguistic meaning was also taken into consideration. This research aims to take a critical stance in examining, Nikes' uses of empowerment through lifestyle branding on Instagram using critical discourse analysis.

#### **IV. Analysis and Discussion**

Instagram is essentially a visual-based social media platform. Posts tend to follow a generic form: photos and videos followed by a text-based caption and hashtags. All twelve of the posts studied in this analysis consisted of visual media followed by a caption. Seven posts were still images while five posts used an IGTV format, which is a standalone video application by Instagram for Android and iOS smartphones. This format allows for longer videos as compared to Instagram.

The data shows a balance between the gender of athletes featured in the posts: six posts featured a female lead; five posts featured a male lead; one post included both men and women appearing together. Six posts featured athletes from the United States while the remaining six posts featured international athletes representing countries including Somalia, France, Spain, England, Germany, Netherlands. The mix of gender and nationalities create principles of equality, suggesting that Nike is using diversity to reach wider audiences by fostering an inclusive and responsible online identity.

When considering external relationships, Nike identifies athletes mentioned in their post by using the function “Tag People,” which also notifies that person that they have been mentioned or referred to in a post and provides a link back to their profile. Nine posts included users who have verified Instagram accounts, one post included a user that does not have a verified Instagram account, one post included both verified and non-verified accounts, and one post did not tag the person but did identify their name and age. Having a verified sticker means that Instagram has confirmed that the profile belongs to a public figure, representing a symbol of status (Marwick, 2013). Nike tags these athletes to create authenticity and interpersonal communication with athletes. By presenting users with verified accounts, Nike signals to Instagram users their brand can be trusted because of the authentic figures mentioned within their post.

Among all the posts analyzed in this study, all twelve posts ended the last line of each caption with Nike's slogan tailored into the hashtag: #justdoit. Nike uses the hashtag as a branded and cultural signifier to represent their company. The “Just Do it” slogan represents a thematic trend across all of Nike’s posts.

Over a twelve-month period, I looked at twelve different Instagram posts, this study found that altogether the most prominent theme presented was “empowerment.” The framework in which themes of empowerment are presented varies throughout different posts, in the next section, I will be exploring topics related to female empowerment, adversity, emotions, and overcoming diversity. The themes presented act as categories to understand why Nike has chosen to position itself as an aspirational lifestyle brand rather than just another fitness brand on the market.

#### *IVa. Nike-Vision*

Two posts tagged the same external brand; @GoPro. Both posts were presented in an IGTV format through the lens of a GoPro camera. There are patterns of simplicity and thoughtful construction within these posts. For instance, these posts have the smallest average character count captions compared to other posts and both captions begin with the phrase “This is what it looks like to be....”

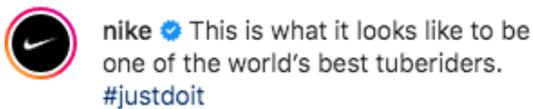


Figure 1. Post from May 2019.



Figure 2. Post from August 2019.

Both videos, capture the intense movements and actions of “one of the world’s best tuberiders” (Figure 1) and “two of the world’s best beach volleyball players” (Figure 2). The use of fewer characters in the caption simply conveys the meaning, leaving space to focus on the visual

content paired with the posts. Phrases like “the world’s best” are used as strategies to normalize these “superstar” athletes as having a form of cultural and social power. Nike’s visual use of the GoPro brings unique angles and new perspectives from a viewpoint of some of the world’s best athletes. This vision has a profound impact on bringing Instagram users closer to the action and making the story of sports even more compelling from the athlete's point of view. Nike is using a first-person perspective to give the viewer insight into the perspective of the athlete depicted in the visual. The focus is on the first-person point of view, which is important as we understand how Nike frames the idea of empowerment as a first-person achievement/accomplishment.

Nike creates an inclusive definition for sports here, by presenting two sports (tuberiding and beach volleyball) that are not widely popular throughout the world. Through the use of video, Nike shows that the definition of sport is simply competition and movement of any activity. In Figure 1 Nike presents an IGTV video that illustrates “what it looks like to be the best tuberider in the world.” The video uses a wide lens to capture the motions and movement of Hawaiian surfer Kao Smith. Smith is actually holding the GoPro camera and recording his adrenaline-fueled journey as he surfs through enormous waves, to make it feel like the person watching the video is also performing the action. The video shows and tells a story of what it looks and feels like to be the best tuberider in the world. Universally, tuberiding is not a highly recognized sport and athlete Kao Smith depicted in Figure 1 is not generally acknowledged as a famous athlete. Nike draws a spotlight on this particular sport and athlete to connect back to their vision of what sports are or who an athlete is. Nike’s mission statement reads “To bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world. If you have a body, you are an athlete (Nike, n.d.). Nike brings light to a sport and athlete whom are not well-known globally, to expand their definition of sport.

*IVb. Nike- Women*

“Ad-her-tising” and “femvertising” are prominent tools used by Nike. In their posts, Nike calls out the double standard for women in sports, by inspiring women to any and all athletic performances. Posts that feature women have powerful captions to support the visuals paired with the post. In Figures 3-7 below, Nike highlights women’s exceptional and unique athletic performances to create powerful messages to construct reality, shape culture, and draw women into a ritual for change.



Figure 3. Post from January 2019

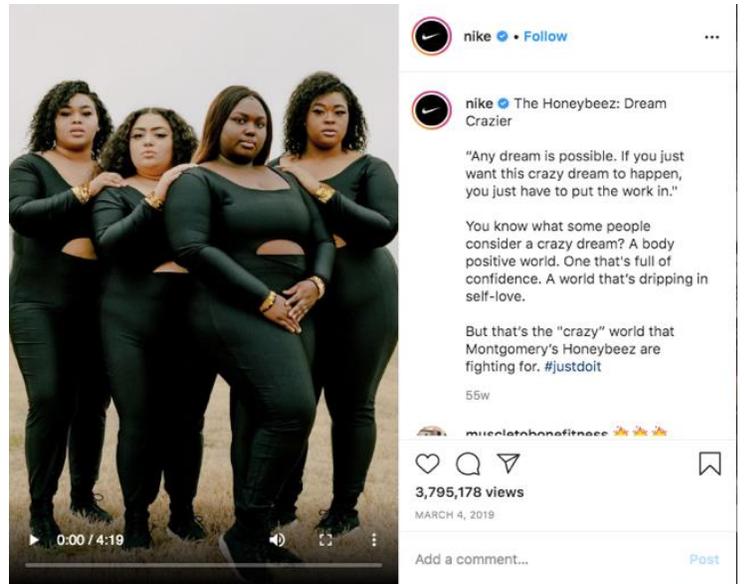


Figure 4. Post from March 2019



Figure 5. Post from April 2019



Figure 6. Post from June 2019



Figure 7. Post from July 2019

In Figure 3, Nike is packaging the idea of empowerment by highlighting female Somalian boxer Ramla Ali's story of overcoming challenges from her past. Boxing is a male-dominated sport and Nike leans into the idea of overcoming that stereotype through Ali's story of breaking

gender barriers in fighting sports. Nike displays feminism as something that women can achieve through a sport rather than political action, by celebrating the unique voice of Ramla Ali.

Figure 4 represents the Honeybeez a group of African American plus-size dancers who are fighting for a body-positive world, filled with confidence and self-love. This post directly reflects Nike's mission statement, "if you have a body, you're an athlete." In the IGTV video, members of the Honeybeez talk about the dance platform that allows them to be fearlessly who they are as they preach words of self-confidence and self-love. They also mention that their commitment to the team includes working out and working hard. One woman said in the video that when she first joined the dance group, she was pushing 400 pounds and now she's down to 294. Another dancer in the video touched on not loving and embracing the color of her skin then credits their coach for helping her embrace her skin color and realize the beauty that is within her. Nike sheds light on the inclusivity of sports, by helping women find their power within through confidence and self-love.

In Figure 5, Nike tagged the account @voltwomen whose page is dedicated to focusing on women's participation rates in international marathons. This tagged was mentioned in the caption of a post that was dedicated to The Paris International Marathon in France and was posted the day before the event, April 13, 2019. The last line of the caption read; "Follow @nikerunning to support @voltwomen. #justdoit." @nikerunning is used to emphasize Nike's relationship with running and @voltwomen is intended to rally runners in support of a marketing campaign to increase women's participants in marathons. By tagging volt women, Nike brings awareness and support to a cause, which also drawing publicity to the Paris Marathon. The hashtag #justdoit is the cultural signifier to identify Nike's overall relationship with the posts and its support in women running marathons.

Figure 6 displays an image of a young nine-year-old girl named Makenna. The caption that follows the picture reads “It’s important for young girls to believe in themselves because if you believe in yourself that means you can do anything.” All the figures above refer to full-grown female athletes, however, in Figure 6 Nike aims to inspire the next generation of female athletes at the grassroots level.

Figure 7 displays an image of the U.S Women’s Soccer Team winning the world cup in 2019, the caption reads “Few make history. Fewer change it. Don’t change your dream. Change the world.” The post calls out the double standard for women in sports and highlights women’s struggles to achieve against incredible odds. Nike uses the world cup win of the U.S Women’s Soccer Team, as an example of female athletes who have broken barriers. Nike uses the power of winning to bring people together through the team’s performance and success of changing history. Nike's goal is to empower and encourage females through the U.S Women's Soccer Teams victory, by maintaining their reality and ensuring that female sports stars in action are far from an unfamiliar sight in the future.

Goldman’s (1992) term ‘commodity feminism’ is dominant within each of Figures 3-7. Nike’s advertising team incorporates elements of cultural power and commodity feminism within each post. The language used in Figures 3-7 contains rhetoric features that encompass the brand’s values towards women. Throughout these posts, the thematic trend of empowerment is also accompanied by the theme of women overcoming challenges. Nikes uses notions of empowerment and challenges as a tool for illustrating, that the connection between them is not in the individual meaning of each term but in the form of their combination. Within these posts, Nike is empowering women to break barriers in sports and reminds women to keep pushing forward despite the social and political challenges faced.

#### IVc. Nike-Identity

Rather than pushing brand messages in consumers' faces, we see Nike engaging consumers in conversations that identify with consumer lifestyles (Hennig-Thurau, et al. 2010). Nike uses quotes within their captions to create an overall mood and commodify corporate identity. Nike creates the mentality that people are achieving more by believing in themselves. Often the brand uses this emotive enthusiasm within their post to create an overall mood. The framework of these post begins with a direct quotation from the athlete depicted in the image. As the text progresses, the format shifts from the use of first-person narrative language, to second person narrative language (see Figures 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13).



Figure 8.



Figure 9.



Figure 11

Figure 10.



Figure 12.



Figure 13.

The use of citations related to the text, allows the viewer to read the posts in the voice of the athlete depicted in the image. Nike affords a personal touch to be felt by using direct quotations from athletes. Rather than using words like “we” and “us”, these posts are personified by using words like “you” and “your” to create a motivating tone and address a widespread audience of individuals. After the quotations, followed by a few spaces between the texts, Nike then reinforces the message in third person narrative and concludes the overall message that is being represented. By reinforcing and reflecting on the quotations, Nike can portray the athletes’ identities as being in line with Nike’s core values. Nike’s mission is “To bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world while doing everything possible to expand human potential” (Nike, n.d). Nike’s core values are reflected by the language of the athletes because they hold large amounts of social power. Nike's posts have minimal mention of their product but focus on telling a story, to reach the emotional part of the consumer. Nike uses adversity, to tell stories of the struggle and perseverance of an individual, whether professional (Figure. 8, 9, 10, 11) or average-day citizen (Figure 12 and 13). The emotional branding empowers consumers to

find their own "greatness" and follow their own personal dreams. Through individual lifestyles you can see a reflection of a person's values, life vision, aesthetic style, and life goal, Nike reflects their brand message through the lifestyles and identities of others (Vyncke, 2002).

An example of this is reflected in Figure 13, where Nike shares a direct quote from professional soccer player Raheem Sterling: "Players are role models for a lot of people. You know, once you get on a football field, to see all of the different backgrounds on each team, it's quite a remarkable thing. I do think that sport, football, plays a big role." Nike can create a meaningful connection through Sterling's idea of diversity and teamwork and it generates positive associations for the brand. By reflecting actual athletes'/peoples' thoughts Nike is able to come alive to create meaningful connections and relationships. This lifestyle-related content gives consumers something to identify with or something to utilize in their life, giving the product both meaning and use.

#### *IVd. Nike- Adversity*

The data collected, indicated that five posts were related to one of Nike's campaigns. January's posts featured the Fight for Your Dream Campaign, March featured the Dream Crazier Campaign, June featured the Dream Further Campaign, November featured the Just Do It Helden Campaign, and December featured the Birth Place of Dream Campaign.

January's post, which featured Nike's "Fight for Your Dream Campaign," highlighted an inspiring story using still pictures and IGTV to tell the inspirational story of female Somalian refugee and boxer Ramla Ali. The posts included a timeline of events as she shared what challenges her yesterday, inspires her today, and what she fights for tomorrow.

The “Dream Crazy Campaign” was featured in March’s post. The post shines a light on the Alabama State University Honeybeez, a group composed of talented, plus-size female student dancers. Through the use of IGTV, post highlights how the Honeybeez has broken barriers of body image, brought people together through their performance, and inspired generations of athletes to chase after their dreams through personal stories.

June’s post featured the “Dream Further Campaign” The posts featured a picture of 10-year-old girl Makenna Cook, the caption encourages young girls everywhere to follow their dreams as the caption quoted by Makenna Cook read “It’s important for girls to believe in themselves because if you believe in yourself, that means you can do anything.” The post sets to inspires the next generation of young female athletes and endorses confidence to follow your dreams.

November’s post featured an IGTV celebrating German athletes working hard on and off the pitch and track and in their communities to push society forward. Nike's “Helden Campaign” unites people through presenting thirteen different athletes including both men and women. The post aims to inspire as athletes share the hardships and triumphs they endured to become heroes themselves.

The final campaign featured in December was Nike’s “Birthplace of Dreams.” The post uses IGTV to explore male soccer player Virgil Van Dijk’s past and present experiences. The video takes viewers back to where it all began in Dijk’s hometown of Breda, The Netherlands. The video also highlights the challenges he has faced throughout his career and how that has made him the player that the world knows and loves today. Virgil Van Dijk’s message is clear: Always believe in your own ability and never give up on your dreams.

Nike is constructing ideas of adversity, success, and inspiration by telling the story of a hero pitted against a great challenge, and after a great struggle, emerging triumphant. Nike is using emotional branding to inspire their audience. Nike is showing how athletes overcame challenges and imply to the audience that they too can overcome challenges. These posts use the word 'believe' to show signs of acceptance and truth of one's self-worth and the word 'dream' to create a vision of a desired outcome. These posts show the emotional branding technique of heroism: the hero starts from humble beginnings, endures a great challenge and against all odds, prevails. By identifying multiple challenges the audience can identify with the emotions being felt. Through this Nike is building stronger customer loyalty by drawing on an emotional appeal. Nike also capitalizes on using "unknown", athletes that are only widely known in their communities. Many of the athletes depicted in Nike's posts are not instantly recognizable but are rather 'smaller named athletes' who have built an 'above-the-average' following on Instagram. Using athletes that are not known worldwide creates a more genuine endorsement because they can be viewed as small but fiercely loyal because of their credibility.

## **V. Conclusion**

Nike is commodifying empowerment through adversity, identity, and inspiration while drawing on an emotional appeal. Nike's version of empowerment is emotionally empowering, yet Nike's messaging ignores structural issues that might prevent people from "Just Doing It". While many of Nikes post reflect issues of inequality and create discourses of empowerment, they don't suggest ways to fundamentally break or challenge unequal conditions. Nike has made clear that the definition of sport is far more than the physical activity; it's an experience that challenges us as humans and provides lessons in collaboration, discipline, sportsmanship, and countless other values fundamental to who we are as people. While all their messages hint

towards creating an equal playing for all, they inadequately address how to conquer those larger cultural challenges as a society. Their messages make us feel good and empower audiences, without doing anything to change the systems. Nike leads a cultural conversation that is meaningful and relevant to the lives of many but leaves it up to individuals to act upon such actions. Ultimately, Nike packages its brand to be emotionally empowering by reflecting the lived struggles and triumphs of individuals and delivers that message through personal values and experience while vocally and visibly shaping culture by highlighting such issues.

Social media advertising is so crucial for Nike because the brand has an enormous influence on viewers and thus holds enormous opportunity to influence social and political change. Nike takes an issue and gives it a platform without offering a solution, they are taking sociopolitical issues, generating publicity by telling an empowering story and profiting from it. Nike sells a lifestyle by tapping into the emotional part of the consumer by inspiring them to find their own "greatness" through other athletes' success stories. Social media advertising gives Nike a global platform to humanize its content, showcase products, and inspire their audience to help grow a massive online community of athletes, influencers, and everyone in-between.

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