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Brand Activism and Gender: Nike as a Case Study

Kirsten Rasmussen

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science

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ABSTRACT

Brand Activism and Gender: Nike as a Case Study

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Nike is a prominent company that engages in brand activism, a marketing approach wherein they brand themselves as socially progressive by adopting public stances on controversial social issues. Because Nike resides at the intersection of media and sports, both of which are institutions that gender plays an important role in, an exploration of how Nike constructs gender in its commercials may illuminate the authenticity of its brand activism and progressive politics. Through a content analysis of 131 commercials released by Nike in the past decade, I explore whether their reputation as a socially progressive company extends to genuinely diverse and inclusive portrayals of gender in their commercials, or if they instead continue to rely on gender stereotypes. My results indicate that Nike commercials continue to treat sports as a predominantly masculine realm in which male athletes compete, therefore marginalizing athletes who are female or who do not display traditional masculine qualities. I also find that the bulk of athletes portrayed by Nike are those that adhere to gender stereotypes, indicating that Nike chooses to reinforce hegemonic masculine ideals rather than being genuinely inclusive and progressive in regard to gender.

Keywords: brand activism, gender stereotypes, sport typing, content analysis, Nike

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INTRODUCTION

Media and sports are both domains in which masculinity and femininity are constructed and reinforced, and Nike resides at the intersection of these areas. Nike is one of the most recognizable and valuable brands in the world, and they are well-known for their influential and inspiring advertisements (Grow 2008; Kim 2020). Nike has been identified as a company that engages in “brand political activism,” wherein they enter the sociopolitical sphere by taking a non-neutral stance on controversial social issues (Moorman 2020:388). While this is a growing practice that companies continue to adopt, it is yet unclear how far corporate activism efforts extend and whether companies will espouse progressive ideals that may negatively impact their sales or popularity with consumers. Nike’s image as a socially progressive company therefore makes their commercials an interesting site to explore whether there is a limit to a company’s brand activism efforts. Because gender plays an important role in both media and sports, which Nike resides at the intersection of, an exploration of how Nike constructs gender in its commercials may illuminate the authenticity of its brand activism and progressive politics. By examining the commercials Nike produces I will explore whether their reputation as a socially progressive company extends to genuinely diverse and inclusive portrayals of gender in their commercials, or if they will instead continue to rely on gender stereotypes to sell their products.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender and Media

Mass media exists as a major agent of socialization in our society, with the power to influence what behaviors and values are seen as socially acceptable, as well as affecting how we perceive and interact with the world around us (Genner and Süss 2017). While new forms of media continue to develop and evolve, television commercials remain the most prominent form

of advertising that consumers are exposed to, with some estimates suggesting consumers are exposed to close to 29,000 commercials a year (Hatzithomas, Boutsouki, and Ziamou 2016; Jin and Lutz 2013). Because commercials contribute to and reflect societal norms, understanding how gender is portrayed in commercials is key to understanding what gender stereotypes exist and what behaviors and roles are viewed as socially acceptable (Hatzithomas et al. 2016).

Considering that most ads on television are 30 seconds or shorter, commercials are especially likely to utilize gender stereotypes owing to their ability to quickly convey information to consumers (Jin and Lutz 2013). Stereotypes refer to the shared beliefs about the behaviors and characteristics of a social group, which are often internalized by individuals, subsequently affecting how they perceive themselves and how they behave (Chalabaev et al. 2013). Gender stereotypes specifically refer to the traits and behaviors that are appropriate for male and female individuals in a society, and can be context-specific, such as the existence of gender stereotypes in sport (Chalabaev et al. 2013).

Although men and women are becoming more equal in the number of appearances in commercials, it has been found that the nature of their appearances still differ by gender (Grau and Zotos 2016). Commercials enforce traditional gender roles by depicting individuals in a stereotypical manner, such as presenting women in more decorative roles or in ways that emphasize their visual and aesthetic appeal, or portraying men as authoritative and in positions of power (Ganahl, Prinsen, and Netzley 2003; Grau and Zotos 2016). Companies use commercials to build interest and awareness for their product and are unlikely to include any content that may hinder this goal, such as depicting gender in an unexpected way that may confuse or distract the audience from the product. Because the use of gender stereotypes may

make it easier for companies to achieve their advertising objectives, they would likely be disincentivized from presenting gender in a way that deviates from stereotypical expectations.

Gender and Sports

Advertising is not the only space in which gender stereotypes are perpetuated, as traditional forms of masculinity and femininity continue to be constructed and enforced through sports. The field of sports has historically been considered a masculine realm that women were excluded from and is still identified as one of the most male dominated institutions in the United States (Adams, Schmitke, and Franklin 2005). The world of sports therefore operates as an institution that teaches hegemonic masculine values to male athletes and reinforces a strict definition of masculinity and heterosexuality (Meân and Kassing 2008; Trujillo 1991).

Masculine hegemony refers to the “culturally idealized form of masculine character,” which includes a focus on competition, physical force, heterosexuality, and the subordination of women (Connell 1990:83; Trujillo 1991; Hanke 1990). This hegemonic form of masculinity reinforces gender stereotypes, producing a narrow definition of “what it means to be a man,” and what sort of masculine behavior is acceptable (Hanke 1990:232). Hegemonic masculine ideals are strictly constructed and reinforced in athletics, indicating that many sports and athletic values are not appropriate for women to engage in (Meân and Kassing 2008; Plaza et al. 2017; Trujillo 1991). For example, while the passage of Title IX and increased female participation in athletics may indicate that access to sports has progressed for women, there is evidence that female athletes and women’s sports remain marginalized and trivialized in comparison to their hegemonic masculine counterparts (Fink 2015; Meân and Kassing 2008). Overall, sports continue to be a male-dominated institution wherein hegemonic masculine ideals are constructed and celebrated,

and sports that do not reinforce these ideals, such as sports associated with women, are often undervalued or ignored.

Despite changes in athletic participation by gender, most sports are still characterized by masculine traits, making them appropriate for only male athletes to participate in (Plaza et al. 2017). For example, it remains common for sports to encourage masculine ideals such as competition, toughness, domination, and physical strength, leading sports in general to be viewed as inappropriate for women to fully participate in (Koivula 2001). As a result, female athletes have been marginalized and pressured into specific sports that emphasize their femininity and are undervalued compared to more masculine sports, therefore allowing women to participate in sports without contradicting the masculine hegemony.

The gender appropriateness of a given sport is based on gender stereotypes and how each sport conforms to what types of behavior society views as socially acceptable for each gender (Riemer and Visio 2003; Wearden and Creedon 2002). These distinctions are mainly based on the physicality of the sport, and qualities such as level of aggression, physical force, and strength, have been previously identified as criteria for a sport being considered masculine or feminine, and the division of sports based on these qualities have remained largely the same over time (Hardin and Greer 2009; Metheny 1965; Riemer and Visio 2003). For example, American football involves physically overpowering an opponent, high levels of physical contact and aggression, face-to-face competition, and elements of violence, all of which are aspects of the hegemonic masculine ideal, therefore leading football to be characterized as a masculine sport (Koivula 2001; Plaza et al. 2017). Conversely, gymnastics is a nonaggressive sport that emphasizes aesthetically pleasing movements and an individual's beauty and gracefulness, and

this focus on visual appeal reinforces traditionally feminine qualities, leading to the classification of gymnastics as a feminine sport (Koivula 2001; Plaza et al. 2017).

Athletes that participate in sports viewed as appropriate for their gender are able to conform to societal expectations and are therefore allowed to compete without compromising their gender identity (Koivula 2001). Because these athletes comply with gendered expectations they are perceived much more positively by society than nontraditional athletes who defy gender stereotypes by competing in a sport seen as inappropriate for their gender (Jones and Greer 2011). In addition, since sports have been associated with masculinity for most of their history, female participation in most sports is still generally viewed as unfeminine and deviating from gender stereotypes (Davis-Delano, Pollock, and Ellsworth Vose 2009).

Breaking gender norms in sports can lead to judgement of the athlete based not on their athletic competence but instead on the conflicting nature between their gender and their sport and what this may indicate about them and their sexuality (Alvariñas-Villaverde et al. 2017; Riemer and Visio 2003). The gendered division of sports and associated stereotypes have been naturalized and deemed as conventional, with anyone straying from them being viewed as nontraditional and deviant (Trujillo 1991). For example, female athletes who act too masculine represent deviations from the norm and are ascribed negative stereotypes to further stigmatize them for contradicting gender expectations (Adams et al. 2005; Sartore and Cunningham 2009). Because of these negative responses to nontraditional athletes, some athletes may engage in compensatory acts that emphasize how they conform to gendered expectations in other ways. This is especially common for female athletes, who highlight their femininity and heterosexuality as a way of apologizing for participating in a masculine activity (Davis-Delano et al. 2009). Some examples of these apologetic behaviors include female athletes downplaying

their athleticism, highlighting their femininity in how they dress or present themselves, and concealing lesbian or bisexual identities (Davis-Delano et al. 2009). Because gendered divisions are seen as natural and the masculine hegemony is seen as the ideal, sport as an institution simply continues to reproduce and reinforce these gendered trends, indicating that nontraditional athletes who deviate from these stereotypes are likely to be marginalized and ignored by mainstream media. This disinterest and even aversion to nontraditional athletes become salient when we consider what depictions of athletes are presented in the media.

Gender, Sports, and Media

The nexus of sports and media has been termed the “sport-media-commercial-complex,” wherein sports are not an isolated organization but instead belong to a larger economic network that utilizes sports as a way to advertise a wide range of products to consumers (Fink 2015; Messner, Dunbar, and Hunt 2000:391). While the presence of gender stereotypes is something that exists in media generally, there is evidence that gender bias exists in the sports media commercial complex as well (Fink 2015; Grau and Zotos 2016). Despite female participation rates in sports increasing over time, the related media coverage has not evolved to match these trends, and in some cases has even declined (Fink 2015). Studies have found that the bulk of media attention is afforded to male athletes and typically masculine sports, with only a small proportion being dedicated to female athletes and sports (Fink 2015). Beyond media coverage of sporting events, athletic advertising continues to exhibit this same gender bias as well. For example, the bulk of athlete endorsers are male, and female athletes continue to be underrepresented in both product endorsements and marketing campaigns for their sport (Fink 2012; Grau, Roselli, and Taylor 2007). Additionally, athletic advertisements that do include female athletes are more likely to feature the most stereotypically attractive and heteronormative

athlete rather than the most athletically competent (Fink 2012). These patterns may indicate that men continue to be treated as the main audience of sports media, providing evidence that the sports media complex will favor more traditionally masculine sports and athletes as a way of appealing to their audience.

One way in which sports media perpetuates gender bias within the institution of athletics is through emphasizing the biological differences between the sexes. Through maintaining these 'natural' distinctions between male and female athletes the media reinforces the masculine hegemony in which male athletes and masculine sports are privileged over female athletes and feminine sports (Daddario 1994). This distinction also serves to normalize sport as an institution that is segregated by gender, wherein male athletes exist in an entirely different milieu than female athletes (Grow 2008). This separation of male and female athletes becomes increasingly problematic when we consider that masculine athletic culture is highlighted and celebrated in the media, whereas female athletes and sports are excluded from mainstream media attention. This differentiation of gender in sports media is also something that is reflected in the commerce side of sports as well. Athletic apparel companies typically sell men's and women's clothing that are marketed and sold separately. This separation in their products may incentivize companies to reinforce and emphasize a gender dichotomy in their advertisements, as a way to distinguish between their men's and women's apparel.

Furthermore, there is evidence that audiences react differently to nontraditional female athletes than they do to athletes whose gender is congruent with their sport. Athletes whose gender is in harmony with their sport have generally been found to garner a more positive response than their nontraditional counterparts do, although this varies by the gender of the audience. Research done by Jones and Greer (2011) found that men's interest waned when

viewing a female athlete who competed in a traditionally masculine sport or who did not conform to gender stereotypes. Companies may therefore be incentivized to embrace gender stereotypes, so that their audience will be more likely to maintain interest in the ad and the product being sold. However, while these findings were true of male viewers, female audiences showed an opposite effect wherein they were more interested when a female athlete was shown participating in a traditionally masculine sport (Jones and Greer 2011).

Therefore, while portrayals of nontraditional athletes in commercials may cause disinterest in a male audience, female audiences may find these types of commercials to be more appealing and engaging (Angelini 2008; Jones and Greer 2011). This was found to be true only for depictions of female athletes, however, indicating that nontraditional male athletes may still garner negative reactions from both male and female audiences. While companies may employ gender stereotypes to encourage the audience to focus on their product rather than the gendered implications of their commercial, these findings suggest that the portrayal of certain nontraditional athletes may be able to accomplish this goal without relying on stereotypical depictions. However, most companies appeal to both male and female consumers and would therefore be unlikely to include an image in their commercial that would cause disinterest in half of their viewers.

It has also been found that media consumption is tied to an increase in sex-typed perspectives and behaviors, indicating a pattern in which gendered messages in commercials are embraced by consumers (Ward and Friedman 2006). This adoption of gendered perspectives and expectations is consistent across age groups, although young adults are especially likely to gender stereotype sports (Plaza et al. 2017). Similarly, these patterns have been found to be consistent over time, regardless of Title IX and changes in participation rates (Hardin and Greer

2009). While young adults have had different experiences with media and access to sports than previous generations have had, they are just as likely to stereotype sports as either masculine or feminine (Hardin and Greer 2009). In this sense, advertisers have no incentive to break gender stereotypes and include more socially progressive content concerning gender in their commercials. Considering that young adults make up an important target demographic for many companies, reinforcing gender stereotypes in sports may be one way in which advertisements appeal to their audience.

Brand Activism

Another way in which companies have begun to appeal to their consumers is by trying to brand themselves as socially progressive. While most corporations have historically avoided taking a stance on controversial issues, it has become increasingly common for companies to enter the sociopolitical sphere (Vredenburg et al. 2020). This trend represents an adoption of “brand political activism,” which is a marketing tactic wherein companies use their brand and cultural power to publicly adopt a non-neutral position on a partisan issue (Moorman 2020:388). For example, Ben & Jerry’s engaged in brand activism by publicly calling on Americans to “dismantle white supremacy” following the death of George Floyd in 2020, therefore taking a public stance on a controversial issue (Vredenburg et al. 2020; Ziady 2020).

Although both consumers and employees increasingly expect corporations to do this, the controversial nature of the issues mean that brand activism attempts may often garner negative reactions (Hoppner and Vadakkepatt 2019). Additionally, consumers may view brand activism as simply “woke washing” or an inauthentic marketing ploy in which companies appropriate social justice movements to appeal to consumers without any reflection of these same values in their purpose, ethics, or corporate practices (Sobande 2019; Vredenburg et al. 2020:445). For

example, Pepsi released an ad in 2017 featuring Kendall Jenner that co-opted the Black Lives Matter movement as a way of attracting consumers, despite having no values or sociopolitical history as a company that aligned with this movement (Vredenburg et al. 2020). Engaging in brand activism may therefore encourage consumers to scrutinize the disconnect between a company's advertised message and their corporate practices rather than the intended purpose of building interest in a brand or product (Vredenburg et al. 2020). This scrutiny may be detrimental to a company whose brand activism is viewed as disingenuous, as perceived authenticity had been found to be an important predictor of marketing success (Becker, Wiegand, and Reinartz 2019).

With more and more corporations entering the sociopolitical sphere and acting as a moral authority on controversial issues, it becomes increasingly important for them to do so in an authentic way that is consistent with their brand if they hope to appeal to consumers (Hoppner and Vadakkepatt 2019). As brand activism becomes common practice the role of perceived authenticity will become even more important to the success of their marketing campaigns, sales, and overall brand image (Moorman 2020). For example, gender equality is a controversial issue that is often in the public arena, and companies that engage in authentic brand activism, by supporting gendered policies that reflect their ethics and practices as a company, will resonate more with consumers and increase the positive consequences of their activism, such as a boost in sales (Moorman 2020). Companies that avoid taking a public stance or do so as a form of virtue signaling will likely experience negative outcomes, as consumers increasingly seek out companies whose values align with their own (Hoppner and Vadakkepatt 2019; Moorman 2020).

Although there is a rising body of research that is exploring brand activism and its presence in marketing campaigns, it is still relatively unclear how genuine and extensive brand

activism efforts are. Some companies may be vocal about one issue while ignoring others entirely, indicating that there may be certain issues, such as gender equality, that are passed over in favor of other forms of activism. For example, the tendency of corporations to emphasize gender differences in the media may indicate that their progressive politics will not extend to practices that work against their business interests, such as avoiding nontraditional depictions of gender when they are trying to sell distinct men's and women's clothing. Gender inequality is an important issue that is manifested in many institutions, making the intersection of several of these fields, such as in the sports media commercial complex, an interesting lens through which to determine how far a company's progressive politics will extend.

Nike as a Case Study

Sports, media, and business are all sites wherein gender is constructed and enacted, making the convergence of these areas important for understanding the social construction of gender in our society. Because Nike resides at this intersection of retail commerce and sport, their advertisements provide an interesting site for exploring the construction and presentation of gender in the context of brand activism. Nike is known for their influential commercials and is an oft-cited example of a company that engages in brand activism campaigns (Grow 2008; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Nike's publicized commitment to progressive ideals and equality is evident through the company's stated purpose, which includes creating "an equal playing field for all," and "breaking down barriers for athletes" (Nike 2020). Though they have become a visible and vocal proponent of equality and civil rights, some may view these claims as inauthentic. For example, Nike made the controversial decision to endorse noted Black Lives Matter supporter Colin Kaepernick as the spokesperson for their 30th anniversary 'Just Do It'

campaign, while simultaneously continuing to sponsor the NFL team that had rejected Kaepernick for his protests (Chadwick and Zipp 2018; Vredenburg et al 2020).

Further inauthenticity claims may be supported by criticisms of Nike's culture of gender discrimination and inequality at their headquarters in Oregon (Creswell, Draper, and Abrams 2018). For example, female employees reported being excluded from leadership positions within critical divisions, such as basketball, and marketing campaigns for women's categories were reported as receiving smaller budgets than traditional men's sports (Creswell et al. 2018). Nike as an organization is inherently shaped by the patriarchal world of sports it supports, indicating that the commercials Nike produces and the values they profess may reflect the masculine hegemonic trends seen in the overall athletic sphere as well as their corporate offices (Grow 2008). These inconsistencies between Nike's brand activism efforts and their company practices call into question how progressive Nike actually is, especially in regard to gender equality. Therefore, while Nike may present itself as a feminist company, there is evidence to suggest that this progressive nature might not extend to the inclusion of nontraditional athletes whose gender presentation deviates from stereotypical expectations of gender in their commercials.

The messages about gender that commercials convey have been found to be embraced by consumers, indicating that Nike has the power to perpetuate or discourage the adoption of gender stereotypes in society (Ward and Friedman 2006). Despite their purported progressive ideals, Nike likely benefits more from the continuation of these trends than any changes to them. If Nike's audience adopts the stereotypically gendered trends they see portrayed, they will presumably expect to shop with a brand that clearly distinguishes between men's and women's clothing, wherein they can purchase gendered clothing that allows them to align with the stereotyped representations they have seen. However, if nontraditional athletes who cross the

gendered lines of sports became much more common and were prominently displayed in Nike commercials, the approach Nike has taken of clearly delineating their products by gender may seem problematic and be called into question. Therefore, despite their professed commitment to equality, there is evidence to suggest that Nike's commercials will instead perpetuate gender divisions by only depicting athletes in sports that are seen as appropriate for their gender.

Despite Nike's success in the athletic apparel market and influence as an acclaimed advertiser, relatively few studies have explored the implicit messages included in Nike commercials. The few that have examined these ads did so prior to 2010, missing much of Nike's renewed push to brand itself as a socially progressive company. This study will therefore attempt to address this gap in the literature by examining video commercials produced by Nike in the past decade to determine if their brand activism efforts and purported commitment to gender equality is reflected in their commercials. If they are as progressive in regard to gender as they claim to be, we would expect to find equal representation of both male and female athletes, as well as depictions of athletes competing in sports that are nontraditional for their gender and defying gender stereotypes in general. Gender equality in the commercials will be determined by examining an athlete's gender, their gender congruency with their sport, gendered markers, and their presentation overall. This analysis will therefore allow us to determine whether Nike's brand of inclusion and equality is reflected in progressive representations of gender in their commercials, or if they will instead continue to rely on gender stereotypes to sell their products.

METHODS

Data

To determine the representation of gender in Nike commercials as it relates to their brand activism I performed a content analysis of commercials released by Nike from 2010 to 2019,

inclusive. Video commercials were chosen over other forms of advertising due to their ability to reach wide audiences through their accessibility on both television and the internet. Additionally, because of my interest in Nike's efforts to be seen as socially progressive, I have limited the commercials in my sample to only those released in the past decade, as these years capture recent brand activism efforts, such as partnering with Kaepernick in 2018. These commercials were accessed through adforum.com, an online repository of advertisements, which hosts just over 200 video commercials released by Nike in this timeframe. In my sample I included only English-language live-action video commercials that portrayed at least one athlete. For the purpose of determining my sampling frame I define an athlete as either a professional athlete that is shown in any activity or an actor that is shown in an athletic capacity. A commercial must include at least one of these depictions to be included in my sampling frame. This results in a total sample of 131 advertisements.

More than one athlete from each commercial was included in my analysis, resulting in a total sample of 675 athletes. An athlete was included in the analysis if they met a series of criteria. First, they must meet the guidelines outlined above, of either being a professional athlete or an actor shown in an athletic activity. All professional athletes shown in a commercial were included in the sample, and any athlete—professional or otherwise—shown on screen by themselves was also included. If there was more than one athlete on screen then an athlete's inclusion in my sample was determined based on whether they were in the foreground, had speaking lines, played a central role, or were otherwise distinguished from the other athletes on screen (see Scharrer et al. 2006 for a similar approach). Nike is unlikely to defy gender stereotypes through an athlete in the background, which is why only athletes that played a prominent role in a commercial were included.

Coding Approach

I adopted a two-stage coding approach for each commercial. The first stage involved identifying initial codes of interest, which largely comprised of discerning demographic details for each athlete, such as their gender, race, and sport. The second stage involved identifying the broader themes and implicit messages unique to each commercial, which were ascertained by noting the visual images, audio cues, and overall portrayal of each athlete (Bretl and Cantor 1988; Craig 1992; Ganahl et al. 2003; Hatzithomasa et al. 2016).

Initial Codes of Interest. The first code of interest was the gender that each athlete presented. Because it is impossible to confirm every athlete's or actor's gender identity, I rely on secondary sex characteristics and the presentation of stereotypically masculine or feminine traits to categorize an athlete as either male-presenting or female-presenting (hereafter referred to as male or female; Klomsten, Marsh, and Skaalvik 2005). Gender presentations outside of the male-female dichotomy were only possible to confirm for professional athletes whose personal information was accessible online, all other athletes were categorized based only on their appearance and behavior in the commercial. Examples of stereotyped depictions include female athletes having longer hair or wearing makeup, and male athletes having defined muscles or facial hair (Adams et al. 2005; Fink 2012; Hatzithomasa et al. 2016).

Because race and gender are both constructed through sports, I also identified the race of each athlete. A variety of methods were used to assign a racial category to each athlete, including pictorial evidence, articles written about the commercials, information about what country the commercial was produced in, and online biographies about professional athletes. Athletes were ultimately assigned to one of six categories: Black, White, Latinx, Asian, Multiracial, and Other. The Other category represents individuals who are not White but whose racial identity I am

unable to confidently determine. Additionally, I employ an ‘unknown’ category in situations where there is an obstructed view or face covering that inhibits me from identifying their race.

Following the gender and race of each athlete I then distinguished the sport or athletic activity they were portrayed in and assigned them to one of 30 possible categories. The bulk of these categories represent specific sports (basketball, softball), while one is non-specific, for generic athletic activities that are not tied to a specific sport, such as working out. The full list of sports is displayed in Table 1. I then categorized the gender associated with each sport as either traditionally feminine, masculine, or neutral. These classifications are determined following methods used in previous research (see Hardin and Greer 2009; Koivula 2001; Riemer and Visio 2003), as well as high school participation rates by gender from the 2018-2019 school year (NFHS 2021). Attributes of typically masculine sports include high levels of bodily contact, force, strength, and aggression (Klomsten et al. 2005; Koivula 2001). These sports are viewed as appropriate for male athletes to participate in, and include football, weightlifting, rugby, basketball, skateboarding/BMX, snowboarding, surfing, baseball, boxing, wrestling, lacrosse, cricket, karate, fencing, hockey, and water polo. Traditionally feminine sports usually do not involve high levels of physical contact or face-to-face opposition and instead are often individual activities that emphasize aesthetically pleasing movements (Metheny 1965; Riemer and Visio 2003; Hardin and Greer 2009). These sports are viewed as generally suitable for female athletes, and include gymnastics, volleyball, softball, dance, and ice skating. Though not a sport in the traditional sense, the inclusion of yoga in Nike’s commercials also led to the classification of yoga as a traditionally feminine sport. Neutral sports are viewed as acceptable for either gender to participate in, and include soccer, swimming, track and field/running, cycling, triathlon, tennis, and golf (Hardin and Greer 2009). While some may view these sports as slightly more

masculine or feminine, high school participation rates in the U.S. indicate that these sports are popular for both genders (NFHS 2021). The non-specific category of working out is also considered gender neutral.

Finally, after discerning each athlete's gender and the gender of their sport, I determined whether the individual's gender presentation aligned with the gender traditionally associated with their sport. An athlete was considered gender congruent if they were a female athlete competing in a traditionally feminine sport or a male athlete competing in a traditionally masculine sport. Examples of gender congruent athletes include female athletes shown dancing or doing yoga, or male athletes depicted playing football or basketball. Any athlete depicted in a gender-neutral sport was also considered gender congruent, such as a female athlete playing soccer or a male athlete playing tennis. A male athlete participating in a traditionally feminine sport or a female athlete participating in a traditionally masculine sport was considered nontraditional and gender incongruent. Examples of nontraditional athletes include male athletes dancing or ice skating, or a female athlete boxing or playing hockey.

Broader Themes. A variety of other important factors beyond these initial codes were accounted for in each commercial, both regarding the individual athletes as well as the commercial overall, which helped illustrate the implicit messaging and presence of gender stereotypes in each commercial. Details regarding the specific portrayal of each athlete helped me assess these broader themes. How the athlete is dressed, such as wearing baggy or form-fitting clothing, and camera focus on specific body parts, such as their torso or legs instead of their face, can convey a great deal about how an athlete's gender is constructed. Similarly, how the athlete moves on screen and their level of activity, such as whether they are shown sitting or sprinting, and their exertion level, as indicated by labored breathing or perspiration, can

additionally illustrate gendered differences in presentation. Furthermore, how an athlete interacts with other athletes, such as helping a teammate or struggling against an opponent, and their overall attitude and emotion, whether it be aggressive, excited, or frustrated, can also reveal how an athlete's gender is affecting how they are portrayed.

Factors not specific to a single athlete but to the commercial overall were additionally important in developing the general themes of a commercial. A transcription of dialogue and narration as well as a description of visual images were recorded for this purpose. The auditory qualities of a commercial, including the genre of music employed, such as hip hop or classical, the gender of the narrator, the explicit message spoken by a narrator or actor, and diegetic sound emanating from the athletes and activities on screen, such as an athlete grunting or cheering from a crowd, all work together to create an implicit gendered message. Similarly, visual qualities, including the setting, such as a house or a gym, background characters, such as families or teammates, and the overall environment, including stormy weather or muted colors, also contributed to the gendered themes of each commercial and were therefore included in analysis.

RESULTS

Sports as Masculine

The results of my analysis indicate that Nike continues to treat sports as a predominantly masculine realm in which male athletes compete. There was a total of 675 athletes featured in my sample of commercials, of which 65 percent were male athletes, 35 percent were female athletes, and 3 athletes (0.45 percent) were outside of the male-female binary. In addition to depicting almost twice as many male athletes as female athletes, close to half (47 percent) of the commercials in my sample did not include any female athletes at all. In comparison, only 21 percent of commercials featured no male athletes. These proportions begin to illustrate a

preference in Nike's commercials for male athletes, and an analysis of the sports these athletes are shown in indicate similar trends. In regard to the representation of different sports, less than 6 percent of athletes were shown competing in a sport that is considered appropriate only for female athletes, despite 20 percent of all sports presented by Nike being categorized as traditionally feminine. Additionally, female athletes were more frequently shown in masculine sports (22 percent) than they were in feminine sports (14 percent), indicating that Nike underrepresents feminine sports in favor of privileging masculine sports, even among female athletes. These trends in representation of both different athletes and different sports indicate that male athletes and masculine sports continue to hold the preeminent position in Nike's advertising, and that Nike's brand activism efforts do not extend to gender equality in their commercials in ways they might profess.

[Table 1 about here]

A comparison of race and gender also illustrate interesting trends in Nike's commercials. The majority (67 percent) of athletes portrayed by Nike are nonwhite, indicating that Nike may care more about portraying a racially diverse cast of athletes than they do portraying equality between male and female athletes. For instance, almost all nonwhite racial categories, including Black, Asian, Latinx, and Multiracial, include at least twice as many male athletes as female athletes. Therefore, while Nike seems to embrace racial diversity in its commercials, this is seemingly done at the expense of including female athletes of color. For example, the single largest category of athletes are Black male athletes, who are included in Nike's commercials more than three times as often as Black female athletes are.

This trend, however, may merely be reflecting Nike's investment in the NBA and its players, 74 percent of which are Black (Lapchick 2020a). However, the WNBA is similarly 69

percent Black, and yet Nike continues to underrepresent female athletes of color, indicating that the disparity in representation is due to Nike's own preference for male athletes and sports, rather than a shortage of nonwhite female athletes (Lapchick 2020b). Furthermore, the differences in representation of athletes of color compared to White athletes indicate interesting trends regarding the intersection of gender and race in sports. For example, though female athletes are generally underrepresented in Nike's commercials, the White category is the only racial category in which representation is evenly split between male and female athletes (51 and 49 percent). This may indicate that there are privileges afforded to White women that are not similarly granted to women of color, such as being viewed as normal athletes and featured in Nike commercials at the same rates as their male counterparts.

[Table 2 about here]

Reinforcement of Gender Divisions

The vast majority of athletes included in Nike's commercials adhered to gender stereotypes in sports, with 92 percent of all athletes competing in a sport that aligned with their gender presentation. Male athletes were shown in traditionally masculine sports 70 percent of the time and in neutral sports 29 percent of the time, while female athletes were depicted in neutral sports 65 percent of the time and in masculine sports 21 percent of the time. Traditionally feminine sports comprise the smallest proportion of athletes, with 14 percent of female athletes and just 1 percent of male athletes shown participating in a feminine sport. These trends provide further evidence that Nike privileges male athletes and sports, as the majority of sports portrayed were ones that are acceptable for male athletes to participate in. Kevin Durant and Serena Williams are both elite athletes who are each featured in nine of Nike's commercials, and they typify how male and female athletes in gender appropriate sports are portrayed. Commercials

that feature Durant, a professional basketball player, are characterized by fast paced footage of him playing basketball, which frequently show him training hard and dominating his opponents. He is often shown wearing loose fitting clothing, and the commercials emphasize his nature as the 'baddest' player. Williams, a professional tennis player, is conversely often depicted in skirts and jewelry, and the themes of her commercials are more often about her identity as a female athlete. Furthermore, her commercials are slower paced, and portray her as physically distanced from her opponents and other athletes. While many of the distinctions between how Durant and Williams are portrayed may be attributed to the differences inherent to their sports, their portrayals illustrate how Nike chooses to highlight athletes competing in sports in which their behavior aligns with gendered expectations.

Additionally, comparisons between male and female athletes within the same sport are difficult given the disparity in their representation. For example, Nike portrays 19 different NBA players in this sample of commercials, while only including 4 WNBA players. The variations in their representation also illustrate the different approaches Nike takes when portraying male and female athletes in the same sport. Because basketball is a traditionally masculine sport, the male basketball players are viewed as normal and are allowed to embrace the masculinity of their sport, leading to the inclusion of footage of players like LeBron James and Kobe Bryant dunking on opponents and making impressive shots. Conversely, female basketball players are seen as nontraditional and there are subsequently only two instances in the entirety of this sample in which a WNBA player is shown actively playing basketball.

One of these instances is in the 2011 commercial *Spotlight*, which features footage of 12 individuals playing basketball around the United States. One of these athletes is WNBA player Sue Bird, who is shown shooting baskets in a pop-a-shot game in an arcade, while NBA players

such as Dirk Nowitzki and Kevin Durant are conversely shown making three-pointers. Her portrayal in an arcade serves to trivialize both her accomplishments in the WNBA and her skills as a basketball player, especially in comparison to her NBA counterparts. Additionally, because she is not portrayed on the basketball court, Nike is able to portray her with her hair down and wearing non-athletic clothing, which serves to further minimize her identity as a professional basketball player.

The only other example of a WNBA player actively playing basketball is in the 2019 commercial *Dream Crazier*, which features footage of Lisa Leslie dunking during a 2002 WNBA game. Though this portrayal is certainly more progressive than Sue Bird's depiction, Leslie is depicted with ribbons in her hair, a common apologetic approach used to emphasize an athlete's femininity. This commercial also features no less than 24 other athletes, indicating that Nike will highlight female athletes in masculine sports when they are able to emphasize the athlete's femininity and surround them with a variety of other athletes that help mitigate their nontraditional nature. Furthermore, the inclusion of a female basketball player dunking in one commercial is hardly comparable to the assortment of commercials that are devoted to individual NBA players, such as the 2018 commercial *Rise. Grind. Shine. Again.*, which focuses solely on Durant's dedication and abilities as a basketball player and shows him dunking seven times. Overall, despite the fact that Nike does include a handful of female basketball players, the fundamental differences between the portrayals of WNBA and NBA players indicates that Nike depicts male and female athletes differently, both within and across sports. This commitment to treating male and female athletes differently in accordance with masculine hegemonic ideals indicates that Nike's brand activism is likely a marketing approach used to appeal to consumers, and not a genuine reflection of progressive values.

Nontraditional Depictions

While the vast majority of athletes Nike portrayed adhered to gendered divisions in sport, 8 percent of the athletes are portrayed in a manner that is non-stereotypical. These include athletes who are depicted in a sport that is not congruent with their gender presentation, as well as athletes whose gender presentation does not align with the gender binary. The bulk of these nontraditional athletes are female athletes who are competing in a traditionally masculine sport, such as basketball or boxing. Considering that sports have historically been a masculine realm and the majority of sports are considered appropriate for male athletes, it follows that female athletes would therefore be more likely to break a gender stereotype and compete in a sport characterized by masculine traits. Furthermore, female athletes already break one gender stereotype by competing in sports in the first place, indicating that the barrier for them to break a gender stereotype and compete in a sport characterized by the opposite gender may be less than it is for male athletes.

The portrayals of these nontraditional female athletes vary from case to case. Some take a compensatory approach, emphasizing their femininity as a way of apologizing for the masculine nature of their sport (Davis-Delano et al. 2009). Rebeka Koha and Lauren Fisher, for example, are both weightlifters who are featured in Nike commercials (*Just Don't Quit* and *Snow Day*, respectively). They are both fairly inactive in their depictions, and rather than seeing perspiration or labored breathing like we do with other athletes, these female weightlifters are presented with pristine hair and makeup, and also wearing jewelry and clothes that emphasize their femininity. These portrayals therefore call attention to their femininity as a way to offset the masculinity that characterizes their sport. Another example of Nike employing feminine markers comes from a 2018 *Just Do It* commercial featuring Caster Semenya. Though her role as a middle-distance

runner is congruent with her identity as a female athlete, Semenya is viewed as nontraditional because her naturally high levels of testosterone indicate to some that she is too ‘masculine’ to compete with other female runners (Longman 2016). Nike’s commercial celebrates Semenya while also using feminine markers to reinforce her identity as a female athlete, such as depicting her as a baby wearing a pink onesie. While some depictions of female apologetic behavior are more blatant than others, their usage implies that there is something incorrect about these athletes that needs to be compensated for.

Other nontraditional female athletes, however, are not portrayed using an apologetic approach but instead are depicted in a way that does not curtail the masculine nature of their sport. For example, the 2019 commercial *Dream Crazier* features several female athletes competing in masculine sports without any emphasis on their femininity. On screen we see snowboarder Chloe Kim landing a double cork 1080, football player Sam Gordon tackling a player, and a young basketball player dribbling two basketballs, and none of them are dressed or presented in a way that highlights their femininity or minimizes the masculinity of their sport. It is interesting to note, however, that this commercial specifically celebrates female athletes who have broken barriers in sport, perhaps indicating that apologetic portrayals can only be avoided in specific contexts. Overall, while the inclusion of nontraditional female athletes may highlight Nike’s commitment to equality in sport, the fact that these athletes are often depicted in a way that tries to bring them in line with gendered expectations indicates that there is a limit to Nike’s brand activism efforts.

While most of the nontraditional depictions involve female athletes, there are five male athletes who were shown participating in traditionally feminine sports, though the contexts of these depictions indicate that male athletes are only allowed to participate in feminine sports in

particular circumstances. For example, three of these nontraditional male athletes are depicted together as dancers in a commercial for Nike's 2017 *Be True* campaign, released for Pride Month and featuring Leiomy Maldonado, a transgender woman. Although I cannot confirm these male athlete's sexual identities, Nike is clearly positioning them as gay by including them in an advert that celebrates LGBTQ+ pride, indicating to the audience that these athletes deviate from gendered expectations through their sexual identities. Since gay men are marginalized in the masculine hegemony and subsequently labelled as nontraditional and deviant, Nike is then able to diverge further from the dominant form of masculinity and portray them as participating in a traditionally feminine sport. This indicates to the audience that it is acceptable for male athletes to compete in a typically feminine sport only when the athlete has already been marginalized in other ways by hegemonic masculinity.

Another example of a nontraditional male athlete comes from the 2013 commercial *Possibilities*, in which athletes are encouraged to push their limits in sports. A male athlete is shown dancing, and the narrator tells him, "if you can move your hips, if you can dance, move your legs, move your feet, move the ball," while on screen we watch him go from dancing on a beach with friends to playing in a professional match with soccer player Gerard Pique (Nike 2013). In this case the athlete's depiction in a feminine sport serves only as a starting point he is told to move on from, towards the gender-neutral, and therefore more appropriately masculine, sport of soccer. Though appropriate for both male and female athletes to participate in, the sport of soccer embodies more masculine qualities than dance does, making it a more acceptable choice for a male athlete to participate in. Not only is this athlete told to change sports, but he is then rewarded for switching by being shown playing at the professional level and scoring a goal alongside Pique and the Barcelona team. This depiction implies to the audience that athletic

success can only come when an athlete is in the right sport, which in the case of male athletes is not dance, but is instead soccer, a sport more closely aligned with the masculine hegemony.

The final example of a nontraditional male athlete is in the 2012 commercial *Find Your Greatness*, in which we see a male athlete playing volleyball. It is interesting to note, however, that the athlete jumps in the air to kick the ball rather than hitting it with his hands, more closely resembling the sport of soccer than volleyball. As established previously, soccer embodies more masculine qualities than traditionally feminine sports such as dance or volleyball do, making it a more appropriate sport for male athletes to participate in. His participation in a feminine sport is therefore more acceptable, as he is choosing to embody more masculine traits as he plays. These five examples illustrate that Nike continues to reinforce gendered expectations and stereotypes for male athletes, with only an extremely limited number of specific contexts in which participating in a feminine sport is allowed. Furthermore, while some depictions of female athletes do appear to be genuinely progressive, the same cannot be said for male athletes, who have harsher limits imposed on what is an acceptable portrayal of masculinity, evincing a clear limit to Nike's brand activism.

In addition to these athletes who are shown participating in a sport nontraditional for their gender, there are also three athletes whose gender presentation does not adhere to the gender binary. These athletes include Chris Mosier, a transgender man; Leiomy Maldonado, a transgender woman; and Leo Baker, who is nonbinary. It is interesting to note that Nike chooses to emphasize the nontraditional nature of these athletes rather than obscuring them. For example, Chris Mosier is a triathlete who is featured in the 2016 commercial *Unlimited Courage*, and his identity as a transgender athlete is explicitly discussed throughout the commercial. Additionally, as previously mentioned, Leiomy Maldonado is a dancer who is featured in a 2017 commercial

celebrating Pride Month, and though her transgender identity is not explicitly discussed in the same way Mosier's is, LGBTQ+ identities are celebrated generally in the commercial. Nike additionally uses the dress and appearance of these athletes as a way of confirming their gender identity, such as depicting Mosier with his shirt off or portraying Maldonado with long hair and an exposed midriff. These portrayals reflect a more genuinely progressive approach to gender, given the controversy surrounding transgender athletes, indicating that there may be some authenticity in Nike's brand activism (Krane, Barak, and Mann 2012).

The portrayal of Leo Baker, however, is slightly different from that of Mosier and Maldonado. Baker is featured in the 2018 commercial *Dream Crazy*, and they are shown skateboarding while the voiceover announces, "don't believe you have to be like anybody, to be somebody," a fairly subtle indication that there is something unique about them (Nike 2018). Baker's nontraditional identity is not celebrated in the same way Mosier's and Maldonado's are, and instead Nike uses traditional gender stereotypes in how it portrays Baker. Because skateboarding is a sport viewed as appropriate for male athletes, Nike portrays Baker in loose-fitting clothing and short hair as a way of adhering to the gender stereotypes of what an athlete in a masculine sport should look like. Therefore, while Nike does feature a nonbinary athlete, they utilize gendered clothing and hairstyles as a way of ensuring that they have not strayed too far from hegemonic masculinity, illustrating another limit to Nike's brand activism.

Featured Nontraditional Athletes

All of these nontraditional athletes, including both those in a sport nontraditional for their gender and those who do not adhere to the male-female binary, are overwhelmingly shown in commercials that use large casts of athletes; 84 percent of nontraditional athletes are presented in a commercial that has at least 10 athletes, while only 64 percent of traditional athletes are. This is

likely done in order to minimize the fact that they are defying gender stereotypes, as audiences may react negatively to Nike's brand if forced to confront female athletes who display masculine qualities, and vice versa. Interspersing these nontraditional athletes among more normative athletes who adhere to gendered expectations therefore likely mitigates their non-stereotypical nature, while still allowing them to be included. All nontraditional athletes are shown in a commercial with at least one other athlete, with two notable exceptions: Rebeka Koha and Chris Mosier are each featured in their own commercial. These commercials therefore provide an interesting opportunity to explore how gendered presentations differ between a nontraditional female and nontraditional male athlete.

Rebeka Koha is a Latvian weightlifter who is featured in a 2018 commercial as part of Nike's *Just Don't Quit* series. Weightlifting is a traditionally masculine sport that is viewed as acceptable only for male athletes, and Nike works to mitigate Koha's nontraditional classification as a female weightlifter by emphasizing her feminine qualities. Koha is fairly inactive in her own commercial; with light music playing in the background she spends more time walking and stretching than actually lifting weights. Additionally, her pristine hair and makeup serve to remind the audience she is a female athlete, and the narration's emphasis of how she feels at home and comfortable at the gym serves to invoke traditional feminine qualities such as belonging in the home. These feminine markers become even starker when we compare Koha's commercial to another 2018 *Just Don't Quit* commercial featuring Latvian boxer Zaur Dzavadovs. Dzavadovs' commercial is much more high energy, featuring upbeat music, quick cuts, and images of him sparring and pushing himself to his limit, as the narrator explains how kickboxing is a serious sport. These two commercials, although both featuring a Latvian athlete in a masculine sport, stand in direct contrast to one another, with Dzavadovs' highlighting the

masculinity of his sport while Koha's actively works to mitigate it. Despite a nontraditional female athlete being featured in her own commercial, Nike strives to compensate for Koha's nontraditional identity as a female weightlifter by emphasizing how she conforms to gender stereotypes in other ways.

Chris Mosier's commercial, *Unlimited Courage*, tells a different story about nontraditional athletes in Nike's advertising. Because Mosier is competing in a gender-neutral sport and Nike is able to sort Mosier into the male athlete group, Nike can invoke the privileges associated with normative male athletes and confer them onto Mosier, despite his transgender identity. These privileges include being featured in a commercial that celebrates his nontraditional nature and is solely focused on him and his abilities. The commercial opens with the narrator announcing that Mosier "is the first transgender athlete to make the men's national team," immediately indicating that they are in no way trying to diminish his nontraditional nature (Nike 2016). Even the commercial's title of *Unlimited Courage* indicates that there is something brave about Mosier's identity as an athlete that should be celebrated. The portrayal of Mosier is quite different compared to the depiction of Koha, providing further evidence that Nike privileges male athletes and sports in its commercials, even among nontraditional athletes.

The portrayal of Leiomy Maldonado, the only other transgender athlete included in a Nike commercial, also provides an interesting contrast to Mosier's commercial. Though the commercials were produced for different campaigns, making direct comparisons impossible, there are notable differences that may provide further support for the notion that Nike privileges male athletes over female athletes, even among those viewed as nontraditional. Most obvious is that Maldonado's commercial includes six other athletes, while Mosier's focuses solely on him. Mosier also speaks throughout his commercial while Maldonado has no spoken lines.

Furthermore, Mosier's transgender identity is explicitly acknowledged and discussed while Maldonado's is only obliquely referred to through rainbow text and the word 'equality.' These differences may be due to the fact that Maldonado is a female athlete shown participating in a traditionally feminine sport, which, as established previously, are two groups that Nike underrepresents in its commercials. Therefore, despite both of these athletes identifying as transgender, the fact that Mosier is nontraditional in a masculine way appears to grant him certain privileges in his portrayal that are not similarly afforded to Maldonado. While the inclusion of transgender athletes does indicate progress in Nike's commercials, the differences between male and female athletes—both among traditional and nontraditional athletes—illustrates that Nike values conforming to gender expectations more so than it does engaging in authentic brand activism and being truly progressive in regard to the portrayal of gender in its commercials.

DISCUSSION

The results of my analysis reveal that Nike commercials continue to employ gender stereotypes as a way of adhering to hegemonic masculinity, as evidenced through a preference for male athletes and the marginalization of feminine sports. These findings reflect patterns found in previous studies, that female athletes are underrepresented in media and that sports remain a site for the production of hegemonic masculinity (Adams et al. 2005; Fink 2015; Meân and Kassing 2008; Messner et al. 2000; Trujillo 1991). Nike's depictions of athletes in these commercials also illustrate similar findings found in gender and media studies in general, wherein women are presented more often in visually appealing ways, while their male counterparts are more often shown as powerful or strong (Ganahl et al. 2003; Grau and Zotos 2016). Portraying athletes in different ways based on their gender reinforces a masculine

hegemony that requires women to be subordinated to men, and separating male and female athletes promotes traditional gender stereotypes about what behavior is appropriate for men and women. Additionally, the vast majority of athletes Nike portrays adhere to gendered expectations in sport, indicating that Nike is unwilling to deviate too much from stereotypical depictions and hegemonic masculinity in its commercials.

Overall, it appears that Nike's brand activism may be an inauthentic marketing ploy used to appeal to their consumers. Nike's reliance on gender stereotypes and adherence to traditional gender expectations indicate that their purported commitment to "fostering an inclusive culture" and "breaking down barriers for athletes" does not extend to how they present gender in their commercials (Nike 2020). Instead of breaking down gender barriers in their portrayal of athletes Nike instead chooses to perpetuate stereotypes through reinforcing differences between male and female athletes. Furthermore, Nike's presentation of a racially diverse cast of athletes may indicate that they prioritize a focus on racial equality in their commercials rather than gender equality. Including a majority of nonwhite athletes in their commercials may be enough for Nike to feel it can label itself as progressive and inclusive, even if its activism seems to be limited to only racial equality. This form of activism, however, does indicate that Nike cares about social issues and works to be inclusive in their commercials, though it appears that this is done at the expense of genuine progress in other areas as well. Their efforts to be seen as a feminist company therefore come across as disingenuous when we consider that they choose to highlight and celebrate predominantly male athletes in their commercials, even in contexts that celebrate racial diversity. These commercials demonstrate that Nike is largely unwilling to take a progressive approach towards gender in their advertising, likely to avoid engaging in a controversy that could negatively impact their sales.

Nike's presentation of a small proportion of nontraditional athletes does provide some evidence that they have made efforts to be more inclusive in their commercials. However, the finding that the bulk of these nontraditional depictions are of female athletes indicates that Nike continues to adhere strictly to a masculine ideal that it is largely impossible for male athletes to deviate from. While a small number of female athletes are allowed to deviate from stereotypes and compete in traditionally masculine sports the reverse is not true for male athletes, who appear to be required to adhere to an even stricter definition of what behaviors and sports are viewed as appropriate for their gender. Furthermore, while Nike does include a small proportion of nontraditional female athletes, their use of apologetic approaches that attempt to compensate for deviations from hegemonic norms indicate a clear limit to their progressive politics.

Downplaying the athleticism of nontraditional female athletes and instead emphasizing their visual appeal and femininity ensures that these athletes adhere to gendered expectations in other ways, illustrating that Nike will diverge from the masculine hegemony only when this deviation is compensated for in other ways. Furthermore, the finding that Nike frequently portrays these nontraditional athletes in commercials with many other athletes illustrates that Nike will actively work to mitigate the abnormal nature of these athletes whenever it does include them. The limit to Nike's brand activism efforts is clear; they will, for the most part, only celebrate diverse and nontraditional athletes when the athlete's deviance can be curtailed or obscured in some way.

Despite this evidence that Nike's brand activism may be insincere, their authentic celebration of a few nontraditional athletes does indicate progress towards a more genuine brand activism. For example, the fact that Nike produced commercials that highlight Caster Semenya and Chris Mosier does illustrate that Nike is both capable and willing to take a genuinely progressive stance on gender issues. Some consumers may view aspects of these athletes'

identities as controversial, however, this did not prevent Nike from dedicating whole commercials to these athletes in ways that explicitly support them and do not make apologies for who they are. The issue with Nike's approach to brand activism, however, is that the support of these athletes is not often backed up in their other commercials. The inclusion of a handful of nontraditional athletes does not outweigh the fact that the overwhelming majority of athletes Nike presents are those that adhere to gender stereotypes. Nike grants more exposure and media attention to these athletes viewed as 'normal,' indicating that Nike cares more about aligning with hegemonic masculinity than they do breaking down barriers for nontraditional athletes.

LIMITATIONS

One limitation of my sample was the high variability in number of commercials produced in a given year. For example, there were 21 commercials produced in 2015 that met my criteria, but only 5 produced in 2019, making comparisons across time difficult despite the breadth in years of my sample. It may therefore be interesting for future research to look longitudinally at how Nike's marketing approach may have changed over the course of the company's history, potentially illuminating progress towards genuine brand activism over time. Another limitation comes through the fluidity of gender identities. An individual's gender may change over time and my reliance on pictorial evidence to determine an individual's gender may mean that some athletes were incorrectly classified. However, seeing as my research was focused on how Nike depicts gender in its commercials, I am confident that utilizing an athlete's gender presentation accurately reflects Nike's stance and representation of gender.

CONCLUSION

Overall, Nike's purported commitment to gender equality and inclusion is not reflected in their commercials. While certain aspects of their brand activism, such as being a proponent of

racial equality, may be authentic and reflect genuine values as a company, their activism regarding gender equality comes across as insincere. Consumers may therefore be skeptical of Nike and other brands that take similar stances, considering the evidence that these progressive attitudes may merely be a disingenuous marketing scheme. Hegemonic masculine ideals continue to be strictly reinforced in both sports and media, and my results provide evidence that even companies who engage in brand activism are restrained by this narrow definition of masculinity and reproduce it in their commercials. Furthermore, in light of Nike's prominent role in the world of sports media, their commercials may indicate that inclusion and acceptance of nontraditional athletes in mainstream media, and perhaps sports in general, has not been achieved in ways that we as consumers may be led to believe. As brand activism becomes an increasingly common practice, further research is needed to explore how the adoption of this approach may be affecting sales and brand image, as well as how consumers are interpreting and reacting to companies who engage in this approach.

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TABLES

Table 1: Percentage of Athletes Presented in Each Sport in Nike Commercials, 2010-2019

	Percent			Percent	
	Male	Female		Male	Female
Masculine Sports			Neutral Sports		
Baseball	3.0	0.0	Cycling	0.7	1.3
Basketball	34.9	6.4	Golf	4.8	1.7
Boxing	3.0	4.7	Working out	1.8	7.3
Cricket	8.0	0.0	Swimming	0.7	1.3
Football	9.3	1.7	Soccer	13.9	18.9
Hockey	2.1	0.9	Tennis	1.1	7.3
Lacrosse	0.9	1.3	Track/Running	6.2	26.2
Skateboarding/BMX	4.1	1.3	Triathlete	0.2	0.9
Weightlifting	0.2	2.2			
Wrestling	1.1	0.4	Feminine Sports		
Snowboarding	1.1	0.4	Dance	0.9	3.0
Rugby	0.7	0.0	Gymnastics	0.0	3.9
Fencing	0.0	0.9	Ice Skating	0.0	0.9
Water Polo	0.0	0.9	Volleyball	0.2	2.6
Surfing	1.1	0.0	Softball	0.0	0.9
Karate	0.0	0.4	Yoga	0.0	2.6

Note: Male $N = 439$; Female $N = 233$; two transgender athletes and one nonbinary athlete are not presented in the table

Table 2: Demographics of Athletes Included in Nike Commercials, 2010-2019

	Male		Female	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Gender of Sport				
Masculine	305	69.5	50	21.5
Feminine	5	1.1	32	13.7
Neutral	129	29.4	151	64.8
Nontraditional				
Traditional	434	98.9	184	79.0
Nontraditional	5	1.1	49	21.0
Race				
Black	187	42.6	57	24.5
Latinx	22	5.0	8	3.4
Asian	82	18.7	38	16.3
White	110	25.1	107	45.9
Multiracial	21	4.8	5	2.2
Other	14	3.2	16	6.9
Famous Athlete				
Yes	217	49.4	95	40.8
No	222	50.6	138	59.2

Note: Male $N = 439$; Female $N = 233$; two transgender athletes and one nonbinary athlete are not presented in the table. There are 3 male athletes and 2 female athletes whose race could not be identified.