

# Nike Sportswear: Investing More in Performance Activism Than Their Workforce

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Reflexive modernity allows corporations to sell meaning through advertising; the consumer is sold a representation of individual identity within the confines of their brand (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012). By shifting funding from manufacturing to marketing, companies use branding to lead customers to believe they

are buying something of greater significance than the physical product itself (Klein 2008). In postmodern society, individual identities, political views, social change are represented by



an endless circulation of signs (Han, Nunes and Dreze 2010). Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2012: 25) argue that social activism is becoming a marketable commodity: “The creation of value is what drives capitalism, always adding meaning and value to commodities.” In consumer society, the most common way to participate in activism is to purchase goods that represent social progressive ideas. By adding value to commodities, companies exploit the consumer to believe their “responsible” purchase is progressing society (Gordon and Frank 1997). Savevska (2014) argues that in contemporary society there is a redefining of the neoliberal business model, whereby businesses have to appear socially

responsible. This is due to purchasing habits largely centred around individuals’ political views (Higgins, Tadajewski 2002). As society progresses and values change, companies cannot afford to be perceived as unethical. Corporations increasingly

commodify key social and political movements to sell products, all under the ruse of social corporate responsibility (Shamir 2005). Klein (2008) also argues that corporations ‘piggy-back on culture’, by using topics that are current in order to make their brands appear socially relevant.

This critical reflection will highlight how the sportswear giant, Nike, uses postmodern branding to feign the guise of corporate social responsibility in the pursuit of profit. While contrarily employing neoliberal practices, which do not reflect these marketed values.

These hypocritical practices are evident in a variety of companies. For example, women’s fashion retailers using feminism as a marketing strategy (PrettyLittleThing, 2018; Tinic, 1997). Yet their practices are contradictory to feminist values as they exploit ethnic minority women in their factories (Cole, 2020). Nike is the prime example of this phenomena, as their branding strategies are often highly inspirational, political and controversial. In

2018, Nike released a video depicting athletes from different minority backgrounds playing sports. The key moment of this advertisement is when NFL player Colin Kaepernick states:

“Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything”.

This section caused mass controversy and outrage as this video was released after Kaepernick refused to stand during the American national anthem. This was a form of protest against police brutality towards black people in America. Since this incident, Kaepernick has been blacklisted from the NFL and his career as a football player has ended. Although many showed support for Kaepernick, some Americans chose to burn or throw away their branded Nike gear to show their disapproval (Bostock, 2018). Consumers believed that Nike represented something more than the commodities they sell.

Nevertheless, Nike’s sales grew by thirty one percent the day after the advertisement was released (Edison Trends, 2018).

Consumers believed that by buying Nike products they showed support for Kaepernick and a more general support for the Black Liberation Movement (BLM). This social movement has become commodified as people were influenced to show support for BLM by purchasing Nike gear. Yet, Webster (2014) argues that the signs behind commodities are inauthentic and consumers are completely aware of this fact. Rather, consumers simply want to be entertained by advertisements, such as ones produced by Nike.

The advertisement also shows tennis player Serena Williams with this narration:

“And if you’re a girl from Compton, don’t just become a tennis player. Become the greatest athlete ever.”

Nike uses a black female athlete’s success to promote their values of determination and dedication in sport, to sell products. If she can “just do it”, so can the consumer. This statement reinforces neoliberal values of individualism and meritocracy. Twenty percent of Compton USA residents live below the poverty level and sixty two percent are Black and Ethnic Minority (U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts, 2020).

Williams is celebrated for overcoming adversity and working hard to become ‘the greatest athlete ever’, despite her background. Yet, Nike fails to celebrate or even pay a living wage to the ethnic minority women who produce their clothes in developing countries.

It is not simply the fact that Nike commodifies protests and political ideas, it also associates itself with values that do not adhere to its own

practices. Nike employs a neoliberal business model to expand their business and make more profits. Historically,



neoliberalism breeds inequality, especially for ethnic minorities (Navarro, 2007). Nike outsourced most of their labour in the early 1990s to countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia and Malaysia (Rothenberg-Aalami 2004). These countries have very little trade regulations and low workers’ rights which allow western companies to make higher profits out of exploiting cheaper labour. Working conditions in these factories are extremely hazardous (Bhatnagar, Rathore, Moreno Torres, and Kanungo, 2003) Kish, (2016; n.p) states:

“The toxic solvents and glues used in manufacturing caused dizziness, nausea, and respiratory ailments among workers.”

Another study showed that workers are paid on average ten dollars a week (Donado, 2015), which is just over one dollar per day of work. In developing countries, female labour is often cheaper, therefore seventy five percent of workers in Nike sweatshops are women (Bensusán, and Tilly, 2010). It is extremely problematic that Nike portray a socially conscious and progressive image yet refuse to pay the women who make their products more than two dollars a day.

Neoliberalism thus promotes not only the exploitation of workers overseas, but also anti-racism. The new political agenda for neo-liberals is not to address the history of racism in developed countries such as the US and the UK but erase it completely (Goldberg 2009). Our society claims meritocracy and individual responsibility yet ignores structural inequalities that create the gender and race pay gap, limited opportunities, and also racially motivated hate crime. Due to neoliberal values, individuals are forced to take on all responsibility for their life chances, even if these are heavily influenced by factors outside of individual control, such as structural inequality and institutionalised racism.

“We are asked to give up on race before even addressing the legacy scars of racist histories, all as a result of neoliberalism (Kapoor 2013: 1043)

Kapoor argues that the anti-racist movement has been replaced in developing countries by anti-racism. By removing the topic of racism

from society’s discourse, neoliberalism effectively takes away the responsibility of tackling racism from institutions of power and places this on individuals. The Nike advertisement is a perfect example of this in practice. There is a section in the video that shows professional football player Alphonso Davies with the quote:

“If you are born a refugee, don’t let it stop you from playing soccer for the national team[...].”

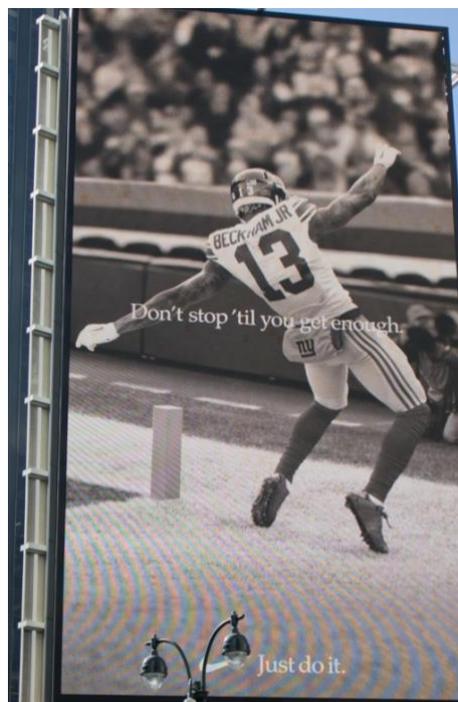
Davies is celebrated for his individual ability to overcome his extremely disadvantaged position in society as a refugee. Nike employ neoliberal values to support the supposed meritocratic nature of capitalist society. They argue social barriers can be overcome with hard work, no matter the individual’s socioeconomic or ethnic background. In doing so, they suggest the physical and artificial barriers that are in place to prevent refugees

from succeeding in western society are not real and can be easily overcome by individual action. Yet, due to mass inequality, social mobility for many refugees and ethnic minorities is extremely low (Social Mobility Commission, 2018).

Nike use Alphonso Davies and Colin Kaepernick as neoliberal propaganda to sell products because they have overcome racial inequality and poverty through hard work and dreams. They are paid millions to be brand ambassadors and their

sponsorships accumulate mass amounts of wealth, all at the expense of extreme exploitation of ethnic minority workers. Marx (2002:116) argues that:

“Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of



misery, agony of toil slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole [...]"

Due to global capitalism, mass wealth can only be accumulated through some form of exploitation. By employing globally neoliberal business models, it can be argued that Nike actively reproduces the inequality it is supposedly challenging in their advertisements. Thus, Nike commodifies these key social movements in order to appear current, instead of truly opposing inequalities that social protestors attempt to highlight and work against.

To conclude, Nike promotes neoliberal values by suggesting any individual can succeed, only if they dream hard enough. This successfully emotes and inspires the consumer through powerful and socially progressive adverts representing ethnic minority athletes. By commodifying key social movements, such as the Black Liberation Movement, Nike is profiting from activism. This is highly problematic and unethical as their neoliberal practices do not reflect their anti-racist brand values. This one case study has shown how oligopolies and large companies use expert branding strategies to fool the socially and ethically conscious consumer into purchasing their products. When the unfortunate reality is that by buying these products, the consumer is actually furthering inequality and the exploitation of ethnic minorities in developing countries.

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