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# Stories of Community: The First Ten Years of Nike Women's Advertising

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# Stories of Community: The First Ten Years of Nike Women's Advertising

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## **Abstract:**

*This semiotic analysis of early Nike women's advertising explores the evolution of the women's brand from its launch in 1990 through 2000, and includes twenty-seven print campaigns. The semiotic analysis is enhanced by in-depth interviews of the creative team. The study is framed by a single research question. What symbolically ties these ten years of advertising into a cohesive whole and how? Ultimately, three distinct mediated communities emerge. The story behind these communities, expressed semiotically and orally, suggests that the power of this advertising lies in its mediated construction of community life. The resonance of these ads is rooted in the creatives' ability to construct signifiers that reflect the cultural and social experiences of women, with storytelling as the single most binding force across this ten-year period.*

They asked us to build a community of strong and healthy women.  
- Josie (pseudonym) Art Director, May 2000

## **1. Nike as Community**

If there is one area that exemplifies the gender-bound experience of community, it is sports. It is the gender-bound experience of sports that frames early Nike women's advertising in the first decade. Today, females' participation in sports is greater than ever before (Women's

Sports Foundation). One of the crucial factors increasing female participation in sports was the passage of Title IX in 1976. Title IX created opportunities in the sports arena previously unavailable to women. Females' participation in sports grew slowly in the years immediately following its passage. However during the 1990s females participation in sports began to steadily climb (Women's Sports Foundation). This is also the same period during which Nike women's advertising debated.

Unfortunately, many scholars misunderstand the genesis of Nike women's advertising (Cole and Hribar 1996; Goldman and Papson 1998; Helstein 2003; Lafrance 1998; Lucus 2000) and thus make erroneous assumptions sometimes incorrectly dating or naming ads and/or campaigns. Other times erroneous assumptions are made about how and why the ads are produced, without any apparent discussion with the individuals who produced the ads. Clearly, during the 1990s Nike engaged in questionable labor practices and saw their corporate image tarnished (Anderson 1995; Korzeniewicz 1994; Stabile 2000). Nonetheless, there is value in semiotically analyzing this body of advertising, without the undue influence of Nike's labor practices. With this caveat in mind, I suggest that the advertising produced, for the women's brand, during the 1990s played a significant role in shifting the way females were represented in mediated images in the United States. While Nike's evolution is an intensely layered story, "a complicated network of economic, cultural and psychic relations" (Cole and Hribar 1995: 349), the lack of discussion that incorporates the voices of those individuals who actually produced the advertising is troubling. Juxtaposing their voices against other critical methods has rich possibilities for bringing forth a deeper understanding of advertising texts and their semiotic function. While the focus of my research is semiotic, I hope to illuminate the depth and breadth of signification through the modest inclusion of the voices of the people who created the ads. For as McFall suggests, "little can be surmised . . . without regard to the circumstance in which they (advertisements) were produced" (2004: 5).

## *1.1 Mediated Communities*

Living in community is essential to the human experience (Anderson 1997; Glenn and Keith 2002; Theodori 2001). "People are

by nature social beings with a drive to belong; as such they seek so become a part of the social whole" (Glenn and Keith 2002:13). Being socially whole is based upon community experiences that are shaped by many variables, with gender being a highly significant variable (Anderson 1997; Glenn and Keith 2002).

It is imperative to understand that community entails a historical analysis. How we make sense of females' cultural and social experiences and attitudes about fitness and sports today are distinctly different from how these issues were understood nearly fifteen years ago (Roberts 1998). The overarching question that frames my analysis is simply this: What ties the first ten years of advertising into such a powerfully cohesive body of signification? The answer is that early Nike women's advertising, which debuted in 1990, systematically constructed women's athletic experiences within a series of mediated communities. These communities evolved through the use of images and words - iconic, symbolic and indexical signs - that definitively shaped the concept of women in community, framed within fitness and sports, yet not to the exclusion of other gender based experiences. While these communities were constructed around fitness and sports, it is the integration of signs emerging from the everyday lives of women that gives these campaigns their resonance and impact. In a sense, for these campaigns, sports and fitness are secondary to the creation of a mediated feminine community - the communal bond that brought many women together, tied as one by the Nike swoosh.

The creation of these communities is predicated on the use of iconic, symbolic and indexical signs to construct an identity that previously had not existed in the female experience of community - that is, females finding a mediated communal reality in fitness and sports. Conversely, constructing an athletically bound community of females is necessarily predicated on symbolically rooting that community in female experiences. The single iconic sign that binds these two oppositional experiences together is the emblematic swoosh. In that sense, Nike becomes the mediator of these gender-bound communities. This advertising weaves together known everyday life experiences of females and spins them into new, previously little known, experiences in the athletic arena.

## 2. Semiotic Criticism Matters

McFall suggests there lies a paradox in semiotics, "while the theory understands meanings reside within the structural relations persisting across a system of representations, on the whole the method tracks meaning within individual texts" (2004: 23). Further some scholars (Leiss, Kline, and Jhally 1986; McFall 2004; Moeran 1996; Nava, Blake, MacRury, and Richards 1997; Soar 2000) suggest that critiques using semiotics are often hampered by too much focus on meaning and not enough focus on practices or production. Nonetheless, most scholars contend that semiotics has a place in advertising criticism because of its unique ability to expose how social systems are influenced and/or reproduced (Barthes 1972; Culler 1981; Dyer 1982; Goldman 1992; Leymore 1975; Williamson 1978). In fact, it is often argued that social realities are "corrupted" by advertising because of its inherent and historical development within a "capitalist political economy" (Goldman 1992). In this sense advertising is inherently hegemonic. Thus, it is advertising's systemic embedding within the political economy that makes semiotic analysis such a rich resource.

Some suggest that a semiotic approach to advertising research is inherently structural (deSaussure 1959; Leymore 1975). Others suggest it is more fluid or post-structural (Dyer 1982; Goldman 1992; Williamson 1975). Interestingly Barthes' (1972) work moves seamlessly between structuralism and post-structuralism. He suggests the social critique is necessarily rooted in semiotics. As a method, semiotics operates within social and cultural referent systems. The content of texts should be studied independently, yet should be analyzed within a universal context. "The more a system is specially denned in its forms, the more amenable it is to historical criticism" (Barthes 1972:120). At its core, semiotics offers us a rich critical methodological resource.

While advertising emerges from a hegemonic system, it has a range of intertextual meanings that are often negotiated across time, place, and experiences (Goldman 1992). McFall (2004) argues that historical meanings can sustain myth. Barthes (1972) suggests that myths are translated into history and then become naturalized. Thus, the idea of myths as represented in advertising texts and "discovered" through semiotics is compelling. Semiotics invokes "a more universal

explanation of social order through reference to the ideological nature of meaning-making" (McFall 2004: 17). Barthes (1972) suggests that this the merging of semiotics and ideology, while Goldman (1992) suggests a systemic hegemonic structure to advertising. Leymore's (1975) conception of advertising is that it shares "myths" with the more universal social world in which it resides is clearly influenced by Barthes (1972). What these scholars all have in common is the belief that products have little social meaning without advertising.

Branding, applied through advertising and marketing, is a means of defining products. Advertising is the structural tool that builds brands and symbolically defines products as associated with those brands. In this way, the actual products recede into the background as the brands become enmeshed with the cultural and social referents embedded within the ads. The more embedded the cultural and social referents the more significance is attached to their meaning. "Advertising is thus a necessary companion to the evolving needs of capitalist societies" (McFall 2004: 22).

Needless to say, advertising is intimately intertwined with consumption. At the same time, consumption evolves to become the symbolic exchange of signs - signs rooted in cultural branding. In this process, advertising takes cultural and social experiences and uses them to create referents, spinning signs into brands. These brands subsequently take on a greater degree of significance than the actual material products themselves. Advertising creates a structure of meaning that allows for consumption of brands as part of our social relationships (Domzal and Kernan 1993; Dyer 1982; Elliot and Wattanasuwan 1998). "Contemporary consumption is all about the desire for difference and the expression of identity through the display of sign values" (McFall 2004:4). Thus, the significance of the brand outweighs the significance of the material product itself (Domzal and Kernan 1993; Elliot and Wattanasuwan 1998; McFall 2004). It is the act of identifying with brands in which consumers often find a sense of personal and communal identity (Baudrillard 1989a; Barthes 1977; Dyer 1982; Goldman 1992; McFall 2004).

Methodologically, the central concern of semiotics is to investigate how signs are selected and organized to lead individuals to read a limited range of meanings into the text, thus creating signification. De

Saussures (1959) suggests that signs are selected and organized into bundles. This process begins with the creation of chains that bind together signs and form paradigmatic chains. Central to the evolution of paradigmatic chains are cultural and/or social experiences from which the signs emerge. Thus, even the simplest sign has a meaning relevant only to those with knowledge of the social and cultural context in which it emerges. In that sense we can see that advertising is not solely a process of manipulation. Rather, it is a value laden participatory process (Domzal and Kernan 1993; Dyer 1982; Elliot and Wattanasuwan 1998) rooted in the economic, political and social, constructs of our world.

Manning's (1987) work, inspired by Peirce, suggests there are three types of signs: iconic (illustrative forms that are associated with particular objects), indexical (logical, systemic signs whose connections are based on shared understandings) and symbolic (signs that emerge out of cultural and social practices). At a basic level, it is the iconic, indexical and symbolic signs that form the foundation for my analysis. However, signification emerges only out of an understanding of the much more complex and universal structure in which advertising functions (Barthes 1977; Baudrillard 1989b; Dyer 1982; McCracken 1993; McFall 2004). Further, Barthes suggests that, "In advertising the signification of the image is undoubtedly intentional; the signified of the advertising message is formed a priori by certain attributes of the product and the signified has to be transmitted as clearly as possible" (1977:33). Cultural understandings are, without a doubt, imperative to semiotic analysis.

## *2.1 Weaving Images and Words into Communities*

Weaving the words and images into a cohesive series of signs that becomes a culturally resonant ad is crucial to the success of any advertising campaign. However, in terms of research, it is also crucial to weave together the words of those who create the ads with an analysis of the advertising text. Semiotic deconstruction of the ads allows scholars to "shake the sign" (Barthes 1972: 167). This type of critical deconstruction brings to life a much more complex semiotic "discourse" (Helstein 2003; Laclau and Mouffe 1987) that is predicated upon a systemic set of relations. Advertising discourse inherently forms "closed circuits" (McFall 2004). Within these closed circuits

"advertisers steer meanings but cannot guarantee interpretations" (McFall 2004:25). As such, there is an inherent weakness in semiotic analysis alone. Semiotic analysis may be insightful because it exposes the manipulation of the relations between what might be called meaning and reality. Yet, all too often there is a preoccupation with text that disregards "the context in which material practices were conducted" (McFall 2004: 5). Further McFall suggests, "little can be surmised... without regard to the circumstance in which they (ads) were produced" (2004: 5).

It is the interweaving of a semiotic analysis of the text with the words of those who produced the ads that creates the most value. Additionally, it is the clearest way to expose the evolution of community within this extensive body of early Nike women's advertising. As advertising can be a system of "closed circuits" (McFall 2004), it lends itself perfectly to the creation of mediated communities, communities that emanate from within the social, political, and economic systems that are universal. While some advertising may form a closed system, the referents emerge from universal systems, or broader cultural communities. It is the individual experiences within that universe, which form self-schematas and emerge as indexical and iconic signs, that bring resonance to these shared mediate messages. "Self-relevant information thus copied onto self-schematas is known to be more meaningful and memorable to people. So, when advertising seems to be addressed to 'us,' we are more likely to attend, perceive and process it deeply" (Domzal and Kernan 1993: 4). Thus, mediated community can be born. In the end, semiotic analysis supported by the voices of those who create the ads clarifies and accentuates meanings found within the texts. Semiotics is the ideal way to explore the signifiers, which create the three mediated communities that ultimately came to symbolize the Nike women's brand.

### **3. Methodology**

Print ads were collected from the advertising archives at Nike's corporate headquarters in Beaverton, Oregon, a suburb of Portland. Copies of every print ad from the first ten years of Nike women's advertising, 1990-2000, as well as copies of creative briefs for each campaign were obtained. In addition, copies of every commercial from



this period were acquired from Nike's two advertising agencies: Wieden & Kennedy and Goodby Silverstein. In all there were twenty-seven campaigns: ten for the empowered community, ten for a community of athletes, and seven for a divided community. The majority were print campaigns. When referring to print, I mean image ads versus product ads. Although much of Nike's image advertising was supported by product oriented advertising, I focus on Nike's image advertising. In the first four years, only one of the ten campaigns involved television and one was exclusively product oriented. In the next six years, of the seventeen campaigns produced fourteen had a television component or were exclusively for television, while one was exclusively product oriented and that campaign appeared within the divided community. As nearly every campaign had image ads as print executions, the highest media visibility was clearly in the print medium. Thus, my semiotic analysis focuses exclusively on image print (magazine) campaigns, which are identified in italics, as are the names of individual ads. Due to space limitations, only one ad per campaign is featured; with multi-page ads only part of the ad is shown, usually the first and last pages.

In-depth interviews were systematically conducted in both 1998 and 2000 with virtually every creative person (art directors, copywriters and/or creative directors), hereafter referred to as "Creatives" (as they are known in the advertising industry), who worked on the account between 1990 and 2000. Interviews of Nike's marketing and advertising teams were also conducted at the same time. Interviews were conducted on site at Nike headquarters and at Wieden & Kennedy (Nike's advertising agency from 1990 to early 1997) and by phone with individuals from Goodby Silverstein (Nike's agency from mid-1997 to 2000). All subjects were granted anonymity at the time of the interviews. Only later, after reviewing my work, did some of the creative staff grant permission to use their real names. Thus, both pseudonyms and actual names are used. If a pseudonym, it is noted after the name.

Juxtaposing these interviews with a semiotic analysis opens up an entirely new understanding of Nike women's advertising. For this analysis, the focus remains primarily semiotic. Nonetheless my research is influenced by the intimate knowledge of production gained phenomenologically through indepth interviews. To that end, the

stated intentions of the creative team are demonstrated by select quotations to explicate the production process and highlights how semiotics and production based analysis can be successfully blended as a semiotic phenomenology.

## **4. Results**

The question that drives my inquiry is this: What symbolically ties this ten years of advertising into a cohesive whole and how? Recall that through a semiotic analysis of early Nike women's advertising, three distinct mediated communities emerge: the empowered community, a community of athletes and a divided community. These communities are not "place communities" created by physical proximity, nor a real-time social community. Rather, communities are created by mediated associations created with the signs and symbols that are systematically embedded within the advertising imagery, transmitted via media, shared through personal experiences, culturally embedded through consumption and shared once again through personal experiences with the brand. This body of advertising demonstrates the powerful circular process of production and consumption (Johnson 1986). Across all ten years community becomes an associative system based upon consumption and bound together with the Nike swoosh; Nike's iconic corporate logo found of everything its produces and virtually every ad it produces.

For consumers, community is created first, through an association with the Nike brand and the symbolic meanings embedding in that brand by consuming the products; second, by sharing their branded experiences. Through advertising, community becomes a mediated experience rather than a lived-reality. It is, nonetheless, community. All three of these communities begin in real-time social community, as the Créatives tap into their everyday live experiences. Yet, each ends as distorted, but highly powerful, reflections of the everyday female communities - always bounded by the process of mediation. The integrated power of production and consumption cannot be overemphasized.

## 4.1 *The Empowered Community*

Nike initiated women's advertising in 1990. The empowered community begins this ten-year odyssey with ten campaigns starting in fall 1990 with List and ending in fall 1994 with the Just do it Stories. Eight of the campaigns were image print campaigns, one was a product only print campaign and the other was television. For clarity, let me state that while some scholars such as Cole and Hribar (1995) and Helstien (2003) suggest that Nike produced television spots for women before 1990; that is incorrect. While some television spots with women in them appeared before 1990, no television was produced for the women's brand until spring of 1993. "Women's magazines were full of ways to 'fix' ourselves.... Nobody suggested you try something that you could do for free. Nobody used photographs of women over eighteen. There was a big hole. There was a big something ripe for debate. There was a space to be claimed. So we claimed it" (Charlotte Moore, Associate Creative Director, May 2000).

Thus, the stage is set for the debut of the empowered community. For the creative team, advertising was about making a difference. As Moore commented, "We were there to say things and make things. To shake things up. Create controversy when and where it was appropriate to do so" (May 2000). How ironic that they should want to "shake things up", when Barthes suggests nothing less than using semiotics because "the sign itself must be shaken" (1972:167). And so, signs are shook and a community is born.

What better way to "claim" a space than to focus on community;<sup>1</sup> With this in mind, their work began. List, the first campaign is a visual cacophony of words - all the "shoulds" women are continually accosted by in print media. The text of the ad is a simple listing of the shoulds. "Your padded bra ... your control top pantyhose... your black anything." The copy, blocky and reversed out of edgy blurred backgrounds, fill the left side of the spread ads. The right side of the spreads simply state, "Self-Support from Nike. Just do it." Thus the shoulds, as visual texts, become indexical signs that emerge out of a communal understanding of the cultural practices of femininity. The words, the text itself, become symbolic representations of womanhood. The indexical signs transform into signifiers of cultural resistance, supported by Nike with its iconic swoosh. "Women had

begun responding to the 1-800 number and their response was powerful. Their heads had been turned. They were hanging the 'lists' (the ads) on their refrigerators. They were showing it to their daughters. They were buying Hikes (Moore May 2000).

Empathy represented the "list of all lists" (Janet Champ, Copywriter, May 1998). This single eight-page ad contextualizes the evolution of women in community using images of girls and women across a spectrum of ages to signify empowerment. The opening page depicts an image of a young girl, while the closing page depicts an image of a middle-aged woman. The symbolism of transformation is embedded in the striking similarity of the two images. The females are depicted in similar poses. Each has similar features. Yet, the young girl appears tentative, while the older woman exudes confidence. Thus these two females form indexical signs of transformation. The images on the interior pages further contextualize the transformation of women into an empowered community. Active images of women with copy sharing "their" stories come to signify the communal female experience." You became significant to yourself," states the copy. Building a paradigmatic chain each woman becomes an indexical sign, part of a greater system of communal identity. Together the copy comes to signify the lives of women, yet to be fulfilled, through empowerment. The ad suggests, "And it's never too late to change one (your life)." According to Moore, " We had found our home and our voice, and wed found the most fertile ground for the brand" (May 2000).

In many ways, the symbolic resonance of Dialogue I&II rests in the act of metaphorically asking readers to sit down for "a cup of coffee" (Champ May 2000). Each campaign consisted of three ads, Dialogue I with two-page spreads and Dialogue II expanding into four-page spreads. "It was one long (and expanding) dialogue", said Moore (May 2000). The ads are about, "the kind of tiny, itty bitty truths that created our generation. To say the truth back to people in a way they didn't hear before. We wanted to examine why we are what we are and why we do what we do" (Champ May 1998).

Visual signifiers of physical and emotional transformation: mother/child, adolescent girls, goddesses and a sexual icon, are juxtaposed to resonant copy all forming paradigmatic chains leading to

empowerment. In some ads the visual images form indexical signs, as in Janet's Mom, where child and mother sit side by side, or P. E. Class, where a young girl is shown climbing a rope in an old physical education uniform. She is the first African-American model to appear in Nike women's advertising, signifying Hike's support for the empowerment of the African-American community as well. Both images are rooted in a shared historical understanding of female cultural experiences. In Marilyn and Goddess symbolic signs emerge out of cultural and social practices, Marilyn Monroe, from cinematic culture, and the goddess, from mythological practices within female culture. Using their own self-schematas (Domzal and Kernan 1993) - quite literally so in Janet's Mom, which features the copywriter's mother - the Creatives make advertising a vehicle for women's self-empowerment through communal associations bounded by shared understandings of female culture. The poetic copy challenges women to reexamine gendered myths and to recast these stories with their own stories of empowerment. In essence the ads beckon women to participate in this newly formed mediated community." You decide," reads the copy, while reassuring readers that they are not alone because they belong to the symbolically empowered community - a community of women bonded through common experiences in the mediated world of Nike. The indexical and symbolic signs within the ads signify fitness, while the iconic Nike swoosh becomes the globalized signifier for empowerment through "closed circuits" (McFall 2004) of female community.

Emotional, in fall 1993, is another multi-page campaign. Reminiscent of the Dialogue campaigns, Emotional and Boy, the two ads are highly personal. "The dialogue we had established was now a very intimate dialogue," said Moore (May 2000). In Emotional the model literally sees her own reflection, thus signifying all women. She embodies community. The use of a mirrored image firmly roots this indexical sign in women's shared communal experiences. Boy uses the image of a young girl with a baseball mitt, waiting on a bench and the headline reads, "Did you ever wish you were a boy?" The copy fuses the image to female experiences of sports culture - an experience that often negated females' participation. There is, of course, an intense bond in experiencing both negated and actual participation. "We were women, we were young, we loved, had sex, had affairs, knew about failed marriages, the risk of AIDS, sexual harassment, body-image

issues... We knew what we were. We knew the shallow stuff, the deep stuff, and the new and improved stuff" (Moore May 2000).

With the Commitment & Accomplishment campaign, symbolic signs are absolutely rooted in women's experiences of social and cultural practices, through the use of celebrities and ordinary women who work out. Using Helen Hunt, Sheryl Swoops, and Gabby Reece, along with four non-celebrities, these ads enmesh celebrity culture into female community by speaking to the heart of the female experiences of fitness and sports in a "personal" way. In the process the ads link all seven people into the communal experience of fitness. These black and white ads with images of the women on the right and a "fact sheet," hand-written by each woman, on the left signify Nike as the purveyor of empowerment through fitness and a bonded female community. Signification emerges through the hand-written response to the fact sheet and the "snap shot" black and white images, always embedded with the iconic swoosh. Using ordinary women, athletes and celebrities, juxtaposed to their own words or a stick drawing of a figure doing yoga (in the case of Hunt), readers are symbolically brought face-to-face with women who symbolically represent sisters, cousins, friends and ultimately the very "self-schematas" (Domzal and Kernan 1993) of the readers themselves - all members of Nike's mediated community.

More than any campaign *Falling in Love*, in fall 1994, speaks to "self-schematas" (Domzal and Kernan 1993) - a self-schemata of love. The symbolic references are rooted squarely in mythology about females' experiences of love. This twelve-page ad captures an old myth, Narcissus, but takes a postmodern turn. It is passionate self-schemata of love, embedded in a communal understanding of love. The right page copy with capitalized headlines, "LUST, FEAR or TRUTH," form simple iconic signs signifying the intensity of the love experience. The body copy, in upper and lower case, forms a sign of lowered significance, while Nike bears the highest significance with the bolded capitalized letters of the headlines anchored by the swoosh always above the copy. On the left page, color images of women signify the headline "LUST, FEAR or TRUTH" and form symbolic referents for readers. The models' eyes, their poses, their clothing (or lack there of) are all embedded with females cultural and social knowledge about lust, fear and truth. By using the text as an

intermediary, the Creatives engage in the reconstruction of the communal myth of love. The metaphors of love and fitness twist and turn. "The Truth. Love is hard work. And, sometimes, hard work can really hurt...the heart is the most resilient muscle. It is also the stupidest." The visual signs are rooted within the context of females' experiences of love. The signs come to life in the communal sharing of that experience, whether its love of self, love of the beloved, or love of sports and fitness. Nike becomes the purveyor of love - the lover signified.

Just do it Stories, also from fall 1994, signals the transition to a newly emerging community - a community of athletes. Yet even as this campaign shifts toward athletes (Mia Hamm and Jackie Joyner Kersee) the use of stories to create community continues, as does the inclusion of non-models (Canoeists). The use of iconic and indexical signs are, as always, highly influenced by the Creatives' own lives. "The key to communication was our own knowledge and instincts," said Moore (May 2000).

The three ads of this campaign feature montages of the athletes, or the canoeists, that fill the left page, while the eyes of the featured individual(s) peer out at the reader. The montages, using childhood photographs in the case of the athletes, are toned with subtle coloring. Keeping them soft or perhaps "pretty", which was a requirement forever foisted upon the creative team by Nike. On each right page the athlete, or canoeist, is featured in motion with copy that tells her story. The copy wraps around her forming both iconic (in the person) and indexical (in the copy) signs; ultimately signifying Nike's enfolding support for women. As with *Falling in Love*, this campaign features dualities. The dream of the parent, signified by the childhood photographs on the left page, is juxtaposed to the dream of the child/athlete, signified by a single photo of the athlete in motion on the right page. For Hamm it was her mother's dream that she become a dancer, while she dreamed of being "free, you are free, you are absolutely free to be who you want. To go where you can. To be wild, to be loud, to fly in the mud and run in the rain...like a dancer." For the canoeists, lesbians (unbeknownst to Nike), it is the duality of sexual orientation and age. "You are older, it seems, than some people, and so they call you old.... You have a canoe. And that canoe

has a river. And that river does not end.... And there is so much water left to be crossed."

On the surface, it appears that the Just do it Stories signal the beginning of a community of athletes. This is true. It is a signal - a signifier of what is to come. Yet this campaign barking back to themes of evolution (Empathy and Dialogue), only this time using athletes as the evolutionary iconic symbols. In the final analysis, the Just do it Stories are the transitional campaign between the empowered community and a community of athletes.

Like so many of the campaigns in the empowered community the systematic embedding of signifiers of empowerment and community transcend each of the individual ads. The signifiers intrinsically bind one story to another through the mediated communal forum. It is this mediated binding that more forcefully establishes community. Within the empowered community evolution occurs; young girls become women and women become lovers - lovers of themselves, of others and of the Nike brand. Women find love and empowerment through fitness.

Throughout this first four years of Nike women's advertising, paradigmatic chains are formed, one upon the other, all rooted firmly in females' experience of culture and spun back to women in mediated forms. Nike is the signified, always imploring readers to join its community of empowered women. It is now time for the creative team to embrace and construct the next community - a community of athletes.

## *4.2 A Community of Athletes*

"Men and women do this (sports) for the same reason...It's fucking hard work.... It was truth. We weren't selling a damn thing. Just the truth" (Champ May 2000). This, along with the possibility of a significantly larger market share, drove Nike's strategic decision to embrace female athletes. In order to accomplish this and keep equity across the brand, it was imperative that Nike sign female athletes as spokespeople. The first to join the Nike ranks was Mia Hamm in 1994, ten years after Michael Jordan became the first male athlete to sign with Nike.



"We are hedonists and we want what feels good." With this headline the Hedonists campaign is born in spring 1995. This series of ads, mostly two-page spreads features a mix of high school athletes (runners), teacher/ trainer (aerobics) and professional athletes (Mia Hamm), and sets the stage for team sports. "The big idea was the idea of team'... us, teamwork, we're married to each other and our sport" (Champ May 2000). The concept of teamwork emerges in the television component of this campaign and in the print campaign of Vignettes that follows. Hedonists lays the groundwork. The left page always features black and white image of the athletes with part of the headline reversing out in white. "We are hedonists..."The copy is always plural, "we" versus"!", thus signifying the team. The bold use of white against the stark grayed images signifies power (Hedonists) and community (athletes never appear alone). Further the copy and images are juxtaposed to the iconic swoosh, which always rest high atop the creamy yellow right page, larger and darker than any of the copy. Reading the ad left to right a chain of signifiers (team, power, community) paradigmatically defines athletes within a mediated community bound together, quite literally, by the iconic swoosh.

Vignettes I and II although mostly television, also feature a small print component. Vignettes I follows the format of Hedonists. The major difference between Hedonists and Vignettes is that Vignettes exclusively features professional athletes. Again in Vignettes I the left page is black and white, signifying power, with the right page a creamy yellow, maintaining significations of femininity. The headlines vary, but are always a question and focus on a competitive aspect of sports, thus forming signifiers of the team - a community of athletes. Below each image of the featured athlete is a small block of copy identifying their accomplishments. Moving beyond fitness, signification emerges framed by athleticism and bound to Nike. The placement of the copy - "wins," "fast," "furious," and "unafraid" - literally on the athlete, embeds the power within the athletes and paradigmatically links it to Nike.

"We were using Nike to get across our own views on the matter and experience. Nike just got lucky" (Rachel Manganiello, Art Director, May 2000). Having worked with athletes in the previous campaign, the creative team used their own intuitive perceptions - their "own views on the matter" - as they constructed Vignettes II.

The two-page spread format continues, as does the use of professional athletes. The significant difference is that the headlines form the symbolic answers to the questions (headlines) of the previous campaign. These headlines, as simple statements, are extraordinary powerful and highly symbolic. Their power lies in placement and simplicity. The headlines rest under (beneath the active body) or within (reversed out below a piercing eye) the body of the athletes. The signification of their placement, embedded within the athlete, is remarkable. The lower case copy reads "if you lose you have no one to blame but me (the athlete) ... the wind howls because it knows it has to race me (the athlete)." The copy suggests that power is rooted within the athlete, while the placement visually signifies this. With the swoosh resting at the end of each headline, which is the only copy (expect the athletes name), it becomes both an iconic and symbolic sign of athleticism. Paradigmatically, power ultimately resides in the swoosh. Thus, through the visuals and copy of these ads, the merging of female athletes into the broader Nike brand leads to the signification of female athletes as part of normalized cultural practices. Combined with television and featuring professional athletes, these two campaigns symbolically solidify Nike as the purveyor of community for female athletes. As Barthes suggests, "In advertising the signification of the image is undoubted intentional: the signified of the advertising message is formed a priori... and the signified has to be transmitted as clearly as possible" (1977: 33). Female athletes in community, bound by Nike, are "a priori".

If there is one campaign that nearly every student of popular culture remembers it is the Participation campaign of fall 1995 and spring 1996. The genius of this campaign is linking Nike to the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of Title IX, in 1996. To do this the Creatives constructed paradigmatic chains that symbolically link young girls to future athletes, always within the confines of female community - ever bounded by Nike. "We wanted to get the story out. That sports and fitness starts young. We wanted to strip the bullshit away. Finally I just went in and typed up literal facts. Facts we could back up if we had to. And put them in the mouths of babes'" (Champ May 2000). Binding young girls to sports meant linking them to a community of athletes - a community the Creatives painstakingly constructed throughout the previous advertising. Additionally, they tapped into the symbolic references that had emerged during the

construction of the empowered community. Marrying these two communities in the Participation campaign determined its success. One could not exist without the other. Nor, can they exist without Nike.

The print component of Participation consists of two print ads. The first is *If You Let Me Play*. This one-page print ad spins directly out of a highly successful television spot by the same name. The second ad, *Girl in America*, is a one-page black and white ad. Both ads support the television component of the Participation campaign. *Play* uses a still photograph of the girl featured in the television spot and *Girl* features a black and white photo of an African American girl.

Both ads use iconic signifiers of play. In *Play*, the girl holds the chain of a playground swing. In *Girl* the girl holds a basketball. Both peer intently into the camera. The juxtaposition of their penetrating eyes against the starkly reversed headline reading (in part) "a girl" and "play" form oppositional messages signifying the lack of such opportunity. The body copy from *Girl* transmits the opposition quite clearly. "There is a girl being born in America. And someone will give her a doll. And someone will give her a ball. And then someone will give her a chance." The background is stark and she is alone holding her basketball. The girl is visually anchored to the page by the Nike swoosh, which is positioned just below the basketball at the bottom of the page and nearly touching her leg. In *Play* the copy speaks of confidences gained through sports. "I will like myself more. I will have more self-confidence.... I will learn what it means to be strong. If you let me play sports." In this ad the red swoosh intersects with the word "play," signifying the power of playing sports - with the support of Nike. The copy superimposed over, or reversed out of, the actual images of the girls, shot in close-up (tightly cropped or shot in an empty background), form paradigmatic chains that lead directly to the swoosh. It is the swoosh that contains the ultimate signification of power in athleticism. Bundled into paradigmatic structures the girls are powerless without the swoosh to guide them. "We just wanted to present girls as multifaceted creatures; that it was the responsibility of those who are guiding them along to give them opportunities to tap into all of the potential that they have (Manganiello May 2000).

In Participation signification of females as empowered is relocated within girls - potential athletes. Once their potential is tapped, the girls

too become members of Nike's community of athletes. In this campaign empowerment and athleticism coexist in symbolic harmony. "The signified has to be transmitted as clearly as possible" (Barthes 1977:33). Girls, young female athletes, are the clear transmitters. Symbolically they lead readers to the mediated community of athletes and Nike. The paradigmatic chains that form community are linked to Nike, and thus in the Participation campaign. Nike becomes signified as the beloved parent - the purveyor of community.

In multi-page format *Stories We Tell*, the last campaign of a community of athletes, harkens back to earlier work such as *Empathy*, *Emotional* and *Falling in Love*. In this two ad campaign (*Throw Like a Girl*, a six-page ad, and *We are the Stories*, a three-page ad) professional athletes are interwoven with young girls to tell stories. The interweaving of iconic signs, residing in the athletes, and indexical signs, residing in young girls, ultimately create symbolic signs signifying a community of athletes. The interweaving of girls and professional athletes makes this campaign a clear extension of *Participation*. The transformation of young girls into future athletes is signified in the photographs of the professional athletes that form iconic signs of an athletic community.

This transformation is powerfully signified in the six-page ad, *Stories*. The front and back cover of the foldout ad are embedded with visual images of young girls - future athletes. The front cover copy states, "If someone says you run or throw like a girl, ask them which girl." Open the ad and the answer is iconically provided by copy embedded with images of Mia Hamm, Jackie Joyner-Kersey, Monica Seles and Lisa Leslie. Each professional athlete is symbolically that "girl." "Could it be the girl who has won nine Grand Slam title (Seles)?" "Or the girl who was a three-time All-America, won a gold medal and can dunk a basketball (Leslie)?" The back cover contains the athletes and bundles the signifiers into a "closed circuit" (McFall 2004) with the swoosh and a single image of a young African-American girl in a dugout looking into the camera. The copy reads, "If some says you run or throw like a girl, ask them to be a little more specific." The tagline "Just do it." and the swoosh rest below the image of the girl. The fluid script font is reminiscent of hand-lettering, further signifying the female athletes stories as personal stories shared in community. It is

not only their faces and their stories, it is their hands that touch the balls and write the words. In *Stories* the act of picking up a ball becomes symbolic for being a member of this community of women - a community of athletes. "It's meant to be an inspirational thing for all women not just super athletes.... We didn't have to tiptoe around men athletes being real jocks and stuff" (Manganiello May 2000).

This community of athletes is predicated on personalizing the experiences of professional athletes to form a "closed circuit" (McFall 2004). To form this circuit, resonant signs had to symbolically transmit community as personal. Using their understanding of non- professional athletes, including themselves, the Creatives tapped into their personal "self- schemata's" (Domzal and Kernan 1993). "You're relying on something exterior, you know. Yet, you have to find something inside yourself that's going to make sense" (Manganiello 2000). It is this sense making - the blending of professional and non-professional - that creates the symbolic and highly resonant community of athletes. Yet, just as a community of athletes was finding its footing as a mediated form, it came to a close. For in the midst of production for *Stories We Tell*, Nike ended its relationship with Wieden & Kennedy.

### *4.3 A Divided Community*

From fall 1997 to spring 1999 consumers would see very little Nike women's advertising in print. By now, Nike was truly a divided community. Labor issues led to advertising budgets being slashed, by half, across all brands (Kevin, pseudonym, senior creative director, May 1998; Paul, pseudonym, Copywriter, May 2000). Less advertising meant less media visibility. When Nike returned to print for women, they focused on product, connoting less emotion. Community connotes people and people signify labor. However, the product orientation splinters connections to community. Adding to the sense of division was the use of humor in television, which further splintered the symbolically resonant chain of signifiers that the empowered community and a community of athletes had built. As the women's brand struggled to find its voice, the sense of community it had build was left behind. In many ways this shift was protectionist. This tattered transformation from empowerment and communal identity to individualism and the product leads directly to the divided community. Finally, I suggest that Nike's own ads fueled the debated about their

labor issues and, thus, forced the emergence of a divided community. Nike, once symbolically connected to empowerment and community found itself in isolation. Focus on individualism and product, was only natural. In the process the only binding signifier that remains is the swoosh.

By spring 1999 Nike women's advertising was truly a divided community, with nearly a two-year absence from print media. Goodby Silverstein, their current advertising agency, was charged with rebuilding. How then, is this community of women rebuilt? The divided community was comprised of seven campaigns, three of which were image print campaigns: beginning in spring 1999 with Scrapbook and ending in spring 2000 with No Excuses. To begin, Nike "kind of wanted to get back to what they were doing in the early 90s... they wanted to bring back this community of strong women and bring back that voice" (Taya, pseudonym, Copywriter, May 2000). Thus the Creatives returned to themes of empowerment and again brought together girls and professional athletes, and for the first time introduced thematic heroes. "If you ask little girls who their heroes were, nine times out often they named men" (Paul, May 2000). Goodby Silverstein saw an opportunity.

Scrapbook attempted to reconnect with women and girls in community. There were five spread ads and one three-page ad featuring Mia Hamm to introduce this campaign. Of the five spreads two feature adult women. The Hamm ad and the two spreads with adult athletes as heroes. The other three spreads use young girls and focus on constructions of beauty as oppositional messages about becoming your own hero.

The ads are laid out to look like scrapbooks. Photos are placed on actual scrapbook pages. Faded glue, ribbons, pens, torn paper and spiral binding all create indexical signs signifying the personalization of each scrapbook entry. The photographs of the young girls or cutout images of an anorexic model pasted within the pages form iconic signs of future transformation. The headlines reinforce the hero theme: "Does a hero know she's a hero if no one tells her?" "Who are your heroes?" The copy along with the icon and indexical visual signs form a "closed circuit" (McFall 2004), signifying the hero. Other headlines signify the power of the hero within the self. "A magazine is not a

mirror" refers to the anorexic model, and "When do we start desperately wanting to be someone else." The tagline, "Just do it," is the only hand-constructed copy in the ads and clearly connotes that empowerment resides in the hero/the self and is always guided by Nike.

In fall 1999, a controversial campaign debuted introducing a new bra with a six-part campaign. Bra featured black and white photos of nude models, cropped at chin and hips, in both ads: Covered and Uncovered. "The publications were saying we can't run ads with women's naked breasts. Of course, they can run ads with naked women in perfume ads, but they can't do breast in a bra ad" (Taya May 2000)! Anticipating controversy, both versions were produced at the same time. They ran Uncovered first, replacing it with Covered after only one month. Apparently, after a couple of years of limited visibility Nike was again ready for high visibility.

The nudity had an unusual twist. "It's just the whole public service portion of it. The thought that it's an educational ad and that it's not meant to scare women. But, in a sense it does kind of light a fire under their ass" (Taya May 2000). The three Covered ads featured models holding their hands strategically covering their nipples. Their hands often symbolically referencing an athletic motion, such as grasping a ball. Other times a single arm rests across their chest holding the opposite arm. In Uncovered the models simply let their arms fall to their sides, completely exposing their breasts. The copy asks: "Do your breast make you uncomfortable?" The black and white ads reproduced in grey tones, signify lighting "a fire under their ass" by exposing images of young, firm breasts with questioning copy surprinted over the body of the model. The breasts are the iconic sign of beauty, the copy is the indexical sign of fear and the entire ad comes together as the symbolic referent of feminine athleticism - an athleticism that never negates beauty.

The final campaign of this study is also the final campaign produced by Goodby Silverstein. No Excuses returns to "real" women and moves away from athletes. The campaign focuses on why women work out, "there are such personal reasons for why you want to do that" (Rheanna, pseudonym, Copywriter, May 2000). It is the personal nature of this experience that drives the symbolic representations that

emerge in this campaign. We were "bouncing these ideas of what eats up your time, it becomes a much more personal project" (Rheanna May 2000). Thus, the time metaphor emerges.

By focusing on time, Nike returns to personal accomplishments and moves away from team concepts. This campaign, a series of color spreads, features iconic signs for time: a timecard, an e-mail list, a restaurant order form, and a television guide. Embedded with the iconic and indexical signs that help readers make sense of the ad through shared experiences. A line is always removed and an image of a woman working out is inserted. Thus the "self-schemata" (Domzal and Kernan 1993) of physical strength, or fitness, leading to personal accomplishment, is signified in the symbolical signs of shared cultural practices. The power of the signification is rooted in the Creatives understanding that, "You're not selling sneakers for Nike, you're selling human potential" (Rheanna May 2000).

Ultimately, the divided community is a mediated community, whose symbolic messages are far afield from one another: from young girls to athletes as heroes, to sensuous nudes, to independent and accomplished "real" women. Significations of community no longer exist because the signs that construct community are too disjointed. The circuits are open. Each campaign of the divided community circulates by itself in its own mediated space. The only signifier that binds them is the Nike swoosh. This time, the swoosh is not enough to bring the campaigns together into a cohesive paradigmatic whole - a mediated community.

Perhaps it was the outside labor issues, perhaps it was the lack of visibility in print, perhaps it was a new advertising agency, or perhaps it was the confused signifiers. I suggest it was all of the aforementioned issues that divided this final, mediated community of Nike women. Within this final body of work, the messages were neither compelling nor cohesive. Goodby Silverstein lost the account and, thus, a decade of Nike women's advertising comes to a close.



## 5. Discussion

I now return to the question that frames my analysis: What ties the first ten years of Nike women's advertising into such a powerfully cohesive body of work? The power of this advertising lies in its mediated construction of community life. The resonance of these ads is rooted in the Creatives ability to construct signifiers that reflect the cultural and social experiences of women. This is accomplished through storytelling in community. Storytelling is the single most binding force across these ten years.

Storytelling in community allows for the transformation of signs into symbols and symbols into signification. Paradigmatic chains transmit the signified via media, shared through personal experiences, culturally embedded by consumption and shared once again through branded storytelling. Community is created first through Nike the brand, the signified, and second through sharing of the brand experiences. Storytelling is the single most salient reference point that all three communities share. It is what forms the "closed circuit" (McFall 2004).

The empowered community and a community of athletes share this bond most tightly. In these communities, messages are based on the desire to "say things and make things. To shake things up." (Moore May 2000). Thus, the ads from these two communities literally "shake the sign," as Batches (1972: 167) suggests is essential for semiotic communication. In the process they feel like "one long dialogue" (Moore May 2000), which is exactly what the creators intended. Storytelling, personal, resonant and culturally grounded is the key.

Semiotically, girls and women became indexical signs bundled into paradigmatic chains. Yet, without the iconic sign of the swoosh, the girls are powerless. Nike, as the signified, had to be "transmitted as clearly as possible" (Barthes 1977: 33). Through all ten years, paradigmatic chains systematically take readers through each ad, from indexical signs, to symbolic signs, and finally to the iconic sign of the swoosh. Every circuit closes with the swoosh, the signifier of empowerment and athleticism, always grounded in community. For with Nike, "You're not selling sneakers . . . you're selling human potential" (Rheanna May 2000).

All three communities reflect the power of semiotic transference. In the empowered community transformations occur. Girls become women, women become lovers, and fitness becomes empowering. In a community of athletes, sport becomes a birthright. Individuals become teams, play becomes work, and fitness becomes athleticism. In a divided community empowerment and athleticism collide in oppositional messages. Product replaces image, humor usurps athleticism, and fear supplants empowerment.

Semiotic theory suggests that advertising is inherently political and hegemonic (Goldman 1992). The stories of girls and women that emerge in these ads surely confirm this, with lesbians undercover, women forever "pretty", and sport as anything but a birthright. Semiotics also suggests that social reality can be uncovered by deconstructing texts. The deconstruction of these advertising texts clearly demonstrates that women's social reality is highly constrained by their gender. Yet, these advertising texts, bound in community, struggle against the gendered hegemonic, political and social framework that sought to constraint and often negate female experiences.

In these three communities, even the divided community with all its dislocation and confusion, semiotic discourse comes alive through Storytelling. These stories bring "self- schematas" (Domzal and Kernan 1993) to life page after page. It is the stories of women that mattered most to the Creatives. "We were using Nike to get across our own views" (Manganiello May 2000). While advertisers may attempt to control meaning they "cannot guarantee interpretations" (McFall 2004: 25). Despite the limitations of advertising, these Creatives used advertising to embed new meanings about womanhood into mediated texts. For them, they "weren't selling a damn thing. Just the truth" (Champ May 2000).

Let me conclude with a brief comment about the focus of my study. Image print advertising is the sole focus of my analysis. Yet, television played a large role in constructing these mediated communities. In addition, Nike took great pains to showcase female athletes in their 1996 Olympics campaign, which technically falls outside of the women's brand. Without an articulation of television and campaigns such as the 1996 Olympics, the context of my analysis is limited.

Broadening the analysis to include all media and a wider range of campaigns may be a next step. Even considering my limited focus, no other study has analyzed Nike women's advertising in such depth. Further, this study helps us see advertising as part of a complex semiotic "discourse" (Helstein 2003; Laclau and Moufee 1987), while also exploring, albeit briefly, the circumstances of its production. Combining these two perspectives in one analysis is both uncommon and rich. My hope is that future advertising research can begin to explore the production side, in tandem with semiotic analysis. For as McFall suggests, "little can be surmised . . . without regard to the circumstance in which they (ads) were produced" (2004: 5).

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