Brand Activism, the Relation and Impact on Consumer Perception: A Case Study on Nike Advertising

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Abstract

Recently various brands have been promoting their products through social issues that consumers are engaging with, by moving from social corporate responsibility to leadership and harnessing the brands' power to inspire social and environmental problems and change. Whether brands are creating social leadership campaigns to raise profit margins, or because they simply care about the issues they discuss, several brands have been playing this role through their campaigns, as seen for example with brands like Nike, Under Armor, Gillette, and Uber.

This paper follows the qualitative methodology by proposing an analytical study of the advertising messages and concepts through a case study of Nike advertising promoting their products through social leadership campaigns, and an analysis which aims to measure the impact of these campaigns on brand image, profit margins, and the means the social causes are being perceived by the consumers.

Keywords: advertising, brand activism, brand image, cause marketing, consumer perception, social cause, social leadership campaigns

1. Introduction

With the vast amount of product ads consumers are being exposed to on daily basis, whether print, broadcast or social media, consumers have become more belief driven. While the cornerstone of successful advertising is getting to know the consumer first, the ideas that predominate in consumers' minds are perpetually changing, the way they believe in certain products and how they change their minds towards others makes it imperative for advertisers to clearly recognize and identify these changes, and create new effective advertising strategies to cope with these changes. Looking at social media, consumers are being daily exposed to uncountable number of ads, as well as the ads that play before Youtube videos which in most cases are being skipped by viewers, unnoticed and unremembered.

Brands that have been in the market for decades started finding themselves facing a fierce competition with younger brands that are showing themselves as purpose-driven that are dedicated to a better world. With this, brands needed to change their strategy and stand out, showing responsibility and taking a stance on the most important key social causes in a way to build brand loyalty and trust between the brand and the target audience. As competition rises between brands where quality and price are quite similar, many brands started heading towards the so called social-cause advertising reaching out to the target audience through the issues that matter to them the most, promoting ideas such as confidence, women empowerment, social justice, feminism, climate change, racism, and political issues where brands state their view on a particular cause which in some cases goes beyond only advertising, but donating towards specific charities or values. However, there's a thin line between being relevant and controversial which may backlash negatively on the brand, daring some brands to address any social causes. As consumers are being more sophisticated about framing and purpose which demands brands to be more involved in social and political issues, it needs to be taken into consideration that if the cause is not one that the brand had been advocating or promoting before or is not fit or tied in to the nature and value of the brand, consumers will react negatively. Playing on brand identity, credibility, loyalty and connecting with the consumers intellectually and emotionally, the idea of advertising to only sell the product and make profit is no longer sufficient, while brands exist as business firms to earn profit, consumers are constantly seeking to belong and identify with the products they buy. Some brands are adding the influential ingredient to their advertising by being associated with social causes to show the consumers that they can resolve their problems, which in some

cases consumers believe their governments cannot confront.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Brand Activism and Advertising

Brand activism is an evolution of Corporate Social Responsibility, where brands make decisions and create content that benefit the societies and audiences affected by their products. Taking CSR a step further, brands become active as visible identities leading a way towards a certain cause. These movements are generally focusing on social, environmental, economic, or political issues. As target audiences are usually limited by interest, income, and demographic statuses, they typically have certain issues they care about over others, and while several brands worry about making political or social statements fearing the backlash that may occur from taking a polarizing stance leading to an isolation of a percentage of their target audience, other brands have found several benefits to using brand activism. These benefits include setting the brand apart from the pool of competition, increasing exposure by third party blogs and influencers, increasing customer loyalty as the brand aligns with their values, creating opportunities for the consumers to become brand ambassadors by sharing advertisements and social media content to raise awareness and support their values, and a larger hiring pool due to the increased awareness of values.

Sarkar and Kotler (2018) state that brand activism consists of business efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to promote or impede improvements in society. Identifying six broad categories for brand activism: Social activism includes areas such as gender equality, education, healthcare etc. Political activism includes lobbying, voting, privatization, policies etc. Economic activism includes tax policies, income equality etc. Workplace activism deals with labor and organizational issues etc. Environmental activism which includes air and water pollution, emission control issues, environmental policies etc., and Legal activism dealing with citizenship and employment laws and policies etc. (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). Brand activism has played a vital role in brand preferences and purchase decisions, buying a product has become a way of having a voice, making a statement and exercising power. Consumers consider the products they buy as an extension of their view, values, beliefs, and lifestyles, considering it a form of political and social act, and an opportunity to make an impact.

Figure 1 explains the interaction and connection between brand values and human beings. The brand adopts and addresses certain values and society-based issues which are transformed into action and collaboration with the society, through personalized messages, involving the audience into discussions, co-creation of the content, and collaboration. The form of advertising used and proper media selection act as an opportunity for brands to reach out and partner with the audience. They hence evaluate and participate in sharing these values that have touched their inner beliefs.
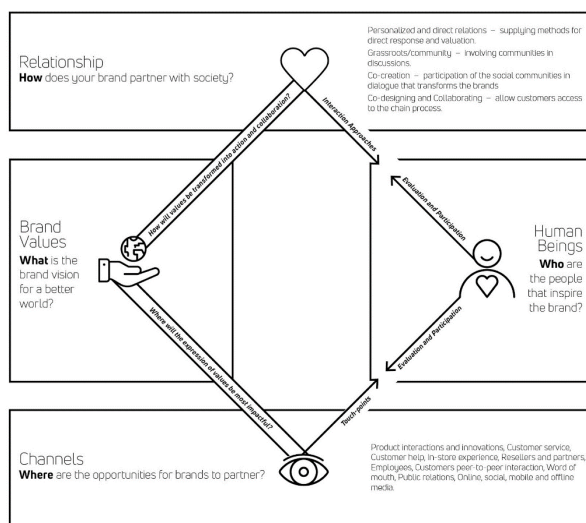

Figure 1. Framework defining the brands' values and proving them into action

Source: https://www.marketingjournal.org/brand-solidarity-collaboration-in-a-time-of-crisis-ivan-gurkov/

Brand activism does not only grab the attention and collaboration of their key target audience only, but it works on creating a thrill around the brand. This helps the brands to gain a favorable impact on their profits, customer loyalty, and connect with people who share common values and beliefs. Moreover, this emotional connection and bond goes beyond the product quality and price. It is yet imperative to mention, if the activism of the brands is not in complete sync and match their core values, ethics and vision, it may be seen as mere advertising and marketing gimmick and may alienate core customer base (Shetty et al., 2019). These failed campaigns may lead to a backlash and in some cases boycotting of consumers who have different social, political and environmental beliefs. This would result in a decrease in sales and profits, may affect the brand image and reputation, as well as negatively affecting consumers' attitudes towards the brand and a decrease in purchase decisions (Klein et al., 2003)

2.2 Social Responsibility and Brand Trust

Brand trust is a key factor to brand loyalty, consumers buy products in which they have faith. Social responsibility and brands have several ties, trust, brand reputation, and consumer provenance. In 2009, Gurhan Canli and Fries developed a model linking between social responsibility and brand outcomes, suggesting that consumer awareness, personal judgement and brand reputation are considered the main factors influencing the brand outcome, which includes the value of the company in which brand trust would be reflected. Stressing on the point of importance of the fitness between the social responsibility act and the brand itself which highly affects consumer perception (Yoon et al., 2006) Consumer awareness of social responsibility provides an influence on attitude, attribution and purchase decisions (Pomering & Dolcinar, 2009), the level of awareness among consumers is associated with the brand's leadership ability to create cause marketing with a fitting strategy that has a direct influence on the brand identity and perception, which in turn increases the level of brand loyalty among existing consumers, attract new consumers and influence the marketing power for the brand.

Du et al. (2007) suggested that brands that position themselves as social responsible brands can impact and improve consumer awareness levels in contrast to brands that simply engage themselves in CSR activities, having a greater influence on outcomes internal to a consumer such as awareness and attribution which are easier to target than purchase behavior, identifying corporate reputation as a moderating consumer suspicion (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). Yoon et al. (2006) identified consumer suspicion as a factor influencing the positive or negative attribution towards the company. The fit and legitimacy between the social cause and the brand affects the consumer feedback and attribution towards the brand, if the consumer feels the company's motives are self-centered rather than rightfully standing for the cause the effect with be negative, diminishing brand equity, loyalty and trust.

2.3 Cause Marketing and Brand Trust

The process of advocating CSR in marketing communications is known as cause-related marketing. Mullen (1997) defines cause-related marketing as a process of formulating and implementing marketing activities that are characterized by contributing to a designated effort that causes consumers to engage in revenue-providing exchanges. The process of aligning the brand to with a social cause to appeal to consumers, correlating the brand with a social or environmental issue as an opportunity to expand CSR by affiliating with causes that are fit with the brand identity. A dramatic way to build brand equity as it creates the most added value which directly enhances the financial performance (Mullen, 1997). Societal marketing can generate the long-term value needed for a brand to survive and achieve competitive advantage (Collins, 1993). This form of marketing has a great potential in helping brands to stay in tune with the mood of the consumers as it is more sensitive and trustworthy to the society (Duncan & Moriarity, 1997). In a survey conducted by Duncan and Moriarity (1997), results have shown that consumers are more likely to switch to a brand that has a cause related marketing approach. Ptacek and Salazar (1997) state that cause-related marketing is a good way to solve social problems, and that consumers have a more positive image of the brand if it is taking an action to make the world a better place. Barone et al. (2000) state that a brand's support of a social cause has a direct impact on consumer choice, brand perception and trust. While the level of skepticism towards some cause marketing activities and campaigns remains high, Webb and Mohr (1998) assume that this sort of skepticism is mainly resulting from consumer's cynicism towards advertising; therefore developing advertising strategies need to have a precise and thorough understanding of the target audiences' level of beliefs and doubts.

2.4 Social Cause Advertising and Marketing 3.0

Successful traditional marketing targets the basic needs of the target audience, in accordance with Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the physical needs, rational needs, emotional needs and spiritual needs. Marketers find a

way to insert their brands into the minds of the consumers as well as working hard to evolve their emotions through the brand they are trying to sell. To achieve this, an excellent brand image is required to be developed with a perception that targets the consumer's rational and emotional needs.

According to Kotler, Karatajaya and Setiawan (2010), marketing 1.0 was considered the Product-Centric Era, where marketers appealed to the consumers' minds. Marketing 2.0 was the Consumer-Centric Era, where marketers appealed to the consumers' emotions. Then came Marketing 3.0 known as the Value-Centric Era, where marketing, advertising, and brands create a deep connection with their audience through transparency and social responsibility. Instead of dealing with the concept of targeting the consumers only with the brands they need to sell, they are being approached as human beings with minds, hearts and spirits. Consumers search for brands that address their deepest needs and values for social, economic, political and environmental consciousness and justice.

Marketing 3.0 works by establishing brand integrity (Kotler et al., 2010) which can be established by building trust for the brand and working in accordance with certain values communicated through the brand identity and image. It becomes vital that brands show their audience that they have a powerful mission to communicate, a mission that involves presenting innovative ideas that can cause change to the consumers' lives, and can achieve a social, emotional, mental, and political difference. For this to happen, brands build a compelling narrative or a brand story working on three main elements: character, plot, and metaphor. The brand creates a character by representing certain ideas that are valued by the society, the relevance of the character to the lives of the people requires a captivating plot, a story where the brand battles a stronger opponent and wins. This is accomplished by using specific metaphors to grab the audience's attention. As consumers feel defined by and connected to the brands they consume, they value brands that are both functional and carry an emotional and spiritual weight. Demanding those brands to deliver more, Kotler et al. (2010) state that spiritual marketing was introduced as a new emerging trend in Marketing 3.0. The concept of spiritual marketing gained relevance because it is said to be tackling the age of creativity and forms an opportunity for this trend (Erragcha & Romdhane, 2014). Spiritual marketing and advertising have the goal of not only satisfy consumer needs, but touch their spirit and supply individual and societal meaning to marketing activities (Kotler et al., 2010).

Malhotra et al. (2012) state that companies are increasingly getting the consumers involved in the creation and development of their products. This form of co-creation creates new product experiences through collaboration between the brands and their consumers, suppliers, and stakeholders through a network of innovation (Liu et al., 2012). Recently, brands are using their online presence and several media platforms to engage their audience into the creation of their products, resulting in personalized experiences which create value for both the brand and the consumer. Kotler et al. (2010) created a three-step process to generate this form of co-creation. First, a platform should be developed by the brand that represents a generic product that can be customized further. Second, consumers within their network get the ability to customize the platform according to their identities. Third, the brand asks the consumers for feedback to enhance the product platform and unify customization efforts (Kotler et al., 2010).

3. Research Methodology

The research follows the qualitative descriptive method of analyzing the key case study of Nike, the brand has been specifically chosen based on its history and leadership of taking a stand on socio-political issues in its ads. Nike succeeded in branding itself by tackling social issues instead of promoting their products solely, by utilizing emotional branding and playing on the idea of heroism, telling stories of struggle and persistence, where their deep-rooted slogan "Just Do It" serves as an intonation for people to claim when they challenge their goals.

Using its very first slogan "Just do it" to launch its campaign in 1988, addressing ageism by featuring an 80-year-old Bay Area Icon, Walter Stack, running approximately 62,000 miles throughout his lifetime. Again in that year, Nike plays on the culture of normalizing unconventional business discourses by releasing their TV ad "Revolution", which was the first ever pseudo music video ad by a major sports-wear company (Bain, 2018) the ad was precedented as it included the famous Beatles song "Revolution", which pioneered the idea of ads attracting consumers by appealing music preferences (Bain, 2018). A year later, Nike advocated for the people with disabilities with another ad. In 1993, after its popularity had slipped between teenage male consumers, with the need to raise sales again Nike releases its ad "I'm Not a Role Model", the first instance of a superstar athlete, Charles Barkley, purposely neglecting their social responsibility of goodwill (Eisenberg, 2019), pointing that parents are better positioned than athletes to teach values to kids. The ad came after his incident when he tried to spit on a racist attacker but ended up knocking an eight-year-old girl.

In 1995, the "Just do it" campaign launched a series of ads tackling sexism, gay rights, and advocating gender

issues. With an ad stating "If you let me play" (Figure 2) Nike addressed the benefits of organizing sports for girls and how it can benefit and enhance their lives. The ad contained words spoken by different aged girls expressing the benefits of playing sports, how it can increase their self-confidence, protect them from certain diseases, push away depression and make them stronger, being particularly important at that time as girls and young women were not permitted to participate in organized sports events as much as men would. Audience were attracted and repelled by the ad, attraction came from the fact that the national viewing audience might at last recognize the importance of providing sports opportunities to girls, but were repelled by the fact that yet in 1995, and girls still had to beg for opportunities. (Yarbrough, 1996) The ad was the opposite of highlighting glory of women athletics; instead it gave a powerful message encouraging girls to play sports which can profoundly enhance their lives, their confidence and resilience.
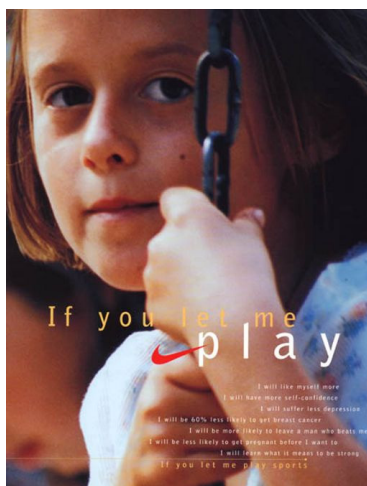

Figure 2. Nike 1995 "If You Let Me Play" ad

Again in 2007, the "Just do it" campaign featured the National Wheelchair Basket-Ball Association player, Matt Scott, advocating for people with disabilities. Gender issues were again tackled in 2012 with its ad "Voices" celebrating the determination of female athletes and celebrating the 40th anniversary of Title IX (a 1972 US Federal Civil Rights Legislation mandating equality in education for girls and boys, and although it was understood that it should be applied as well to athletic opportunities, the debate remained about this issue until 1996). Again in 2012, Nike launches its "Find Your Greatness" campaign (Figure 3), with a powerful message to inspire anyone who wants to achieve greatness in sports, seeking to inspire every athlete in their own personal achievements. The ad voice over highlights that greatness is not reserved for superstar athletes, but a part of what everyone can aspire to and achieve.

Figure 3. Nike 2012 "Find Your Greatness" ads

In 2017, an equality campaign was released featuring black athletes along with actor Michael Jordon discussing the parallels between equality in sports and equality in the broader world (Figure 4). Another 2017 campaign titled "What will they say about us" (Figure 5) was released featuring five Middle Eastern women pushing social norms to succeed in sports such as boxing and skateboarding.
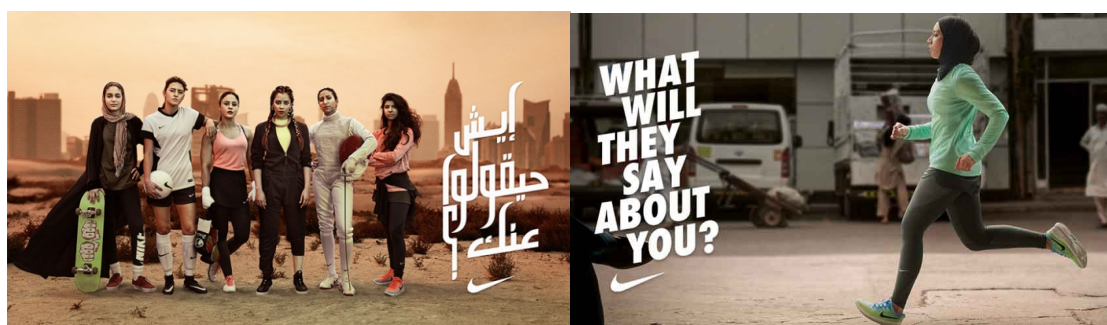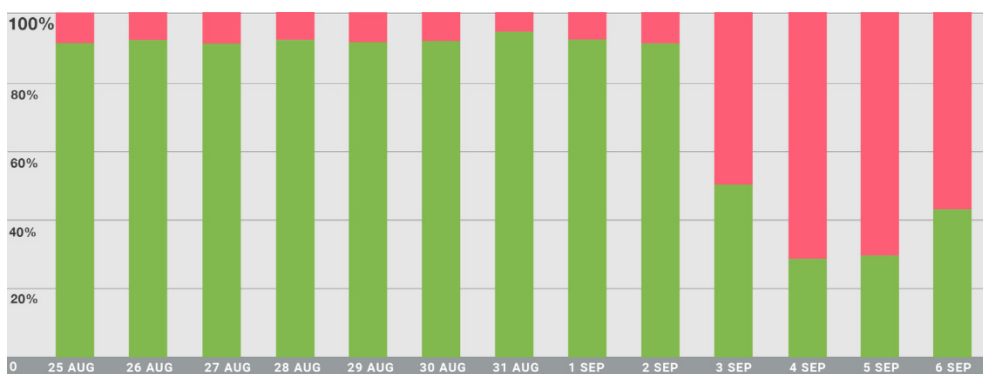
Figure 4. Nike 2017 Equality Campaign

Figure 5. Nike 2017 Campaign "What Will They Say About Us" featured in Arabic and English

In September 2018, Nike launched their Dream Crazy campaign with American athlete Colin Kaepernick as the face of the campaign (Figure 6). Kaepernick famous for his activism, particularly, for taking a knee before the NFL games during the American national anthem to protest police violence against black people. He was featured in the video commercial and on posters. There was an immediate backlash against Nike upon the release of the campaign, with the perspective of Kaepernick as an extremely controversial figure, some people felt that Nike should not have supported him. The number of Nike mentions reached the two million mark on September 6, with a negative reaction occurring. The hashtags #nikeboycott and #boycottnike gathered more than a billion impressions and were the third and fourth most popular hashtags in the conversation around Nike after #justdoit and #nike. Social media users posted videos and photos portraying them destroying Nike's products. The campaign went viral and generated a huge amount of publicity for the brand. Bloomberg reported that just ten days after the campaign launch, Nike reached its all-time high on the stock market and made six billion dollars. (Eben Novy-Williams 2018, September 14 https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-09-13/nike-erases-short-lived-kaepernick-dip-hits-all-time-high)

Figure 6. Nike 2018 Colin Kaepernick ad

Sentiment ratios around Nike shifted after the ad

Sentiment-categorized mentions tracked 25 August - 6 September 2018

POSITIVE   NEGATIVE

Figure 7. Sentiment ratios shifted around Nike

Source: Brandwatch.

In 2019, Nike introduces its campaign "Dream Crazy" tackling gender stereotyping, how women need to break barriers, challenge norms and tolerate being called crazy in pursuit of their dreams (Figures 8 & 9). The Nike ads stand tall in women's insolence of the society's outdated and unrealistic expectations of them. With Serena Williams voicing the ads, states that women are being perceived as 'dramatic' when they try or show their emotions, 'delusional' when they demand equality, 'crazy, 'irrational' and 'hysterical' if they show anger. The ad features actual footage of sports events where women are seen taking the lead, demanding rights and expressing their feelings. The ads played on the deep-settled beliefs of the feminist movement, tackling the wide cultural discourse of women empowerment, inviting audience to dream of a world in which women have same opportunities as men, the ads aimed to redefine the label "Crazy" which women in sport is often negatively defined with. The most popular video within this campaign generated 10,558,022 views on Youtube, with 93,000 likes, with an accumulation of 193,000 retweets and 450,000 likes on Nike's Twitter account on February 2019.
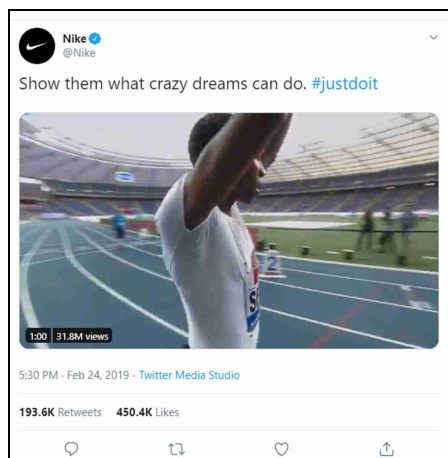
Figure 8. Nike 2019 "Dream Crazy" ads, from Nike's official Twitter account

Figure 9. Nike 2019 "Dream Crazy" ad featuring Serena Williams

Throughout the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, Nike worked on creative ways to keep people's spirits high by producing several ads. In April, Nike released the campaign "Play For The World" to stress the need for social distancing, within an hour of the campaign release, a number of athletes including Cristiano Ronaldo and Tiger Woods had posted it on their social media channels. In May, Nike composed a film featuring several sports triumphs as an inspiration for people enduring through tough challenges, the film was narrated by the NBA legend LeBron James.

"You Can't Stop Us" Campaign was released in July 2020 to correspond with the NBA's return. The campaign featured a group of everyday and influential athletes in a split screen to illustrate the parallels between sports and the social causes athletes stand for. Featuring 53 stars with several icons include Megan Rapinoe, Cristiano Ronaldo, Serena Williams, and Colin Kaepernick to celebrate sports as a source of inspiration.

Figure 10. Nike 2020 "Play for The World" ad seen posted on Tiger Woods official social media channels
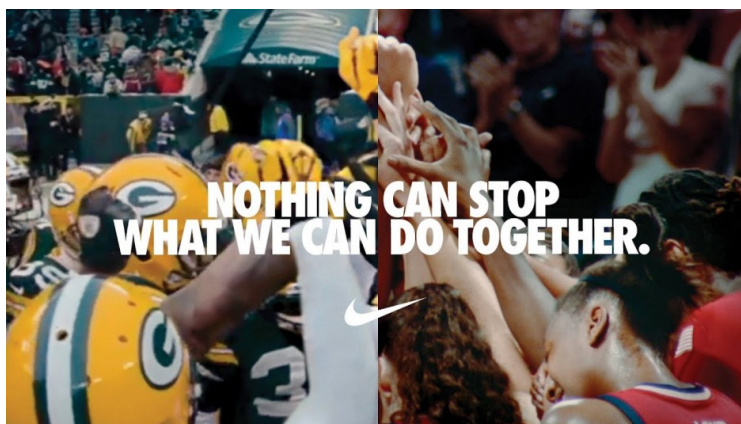

Figure 11. Nike 2020 "You Can't Stop Us" Campaign

In May 2020, Nike released the 60-second video ad "For Once, Don't Do It" to support racial justice, the video contained a message asking people to stop pretending there is no problem in America concerning racism. Using an inverse of their slogan "Just Do It", Nike stakes its position to inspire people not to be silent about racism and social justice, supporting the anti-police brutality against black people protests around the US. With this ad, Nike takes credit for stepping up and sharing the people's pain and hope, working on shaping a mindset people were seeking, to rise above the challenges the country was facing. The final words of the ad stated, "Don't think you can't be part of the change, let's all be part of the change".

Figure 12. Nike 2020 anti-racism ad "For Once, Don't Do It"

4. Nike Advertising Impact on Brand Image and Profit Margins

The 2018 Edelman Earned Brand Study has reported that, based on a survey of 8,000 people within eight different markets, consumers believe that brands are more powerful in creating societal change than governments. Where 53% believe that brands can have a more powerful stance to solve social issues than the governments, and 54% believed that it's easier for people to get brands to tackle their social problems than to get the governments to take an action, 64% of consumers worldwide stated that they would buy or boycott a brand primarily because of its social and political stance (Edelman, 2018, October 2 https://www.edelman.com/news-awards/two-thirds-consumers-worldwide-now-buy-beliefs).

Nike's campaigns had several controversial responses from consumers, "Dream Crazy" campaign with the most controversy, consumers were seen burning Nike products on social media along with messages and hashtags indicating boycott. Yet, Nike achieved a sales increase of 31% in 2018 compared to the same time of 2017 (Martinez, 2018). Within 24 hours of the release of the "Dream Crazy" campaign, Nike had been mentioned 2.7 million times on social media, and more than 5.2 million times within 72 hours (Munoz, 2019). This exposure was valued at approximately 43 million dollars, as well as being awarded for the 2019 Outstanding Commercial at the Creative Arts Emmys (Emmys, 2019), within seven days of the ad's release, Nike gained 170,000 followers on Instagram (Thomas & Golden, 2018). This all led to a six billion dollar increase in Nike's brand value in 2018 (Linnane, 2018). Nike's stock price rose by 31% based on its average price in 2019, which had mainly attributed the media exposure (Munoz, 2019). The ads' approval rating soared from 38% to 78% between the first and second week of its release (Linnane, 2018). Nike played on Black politics and culture as a way to amplify their own status.
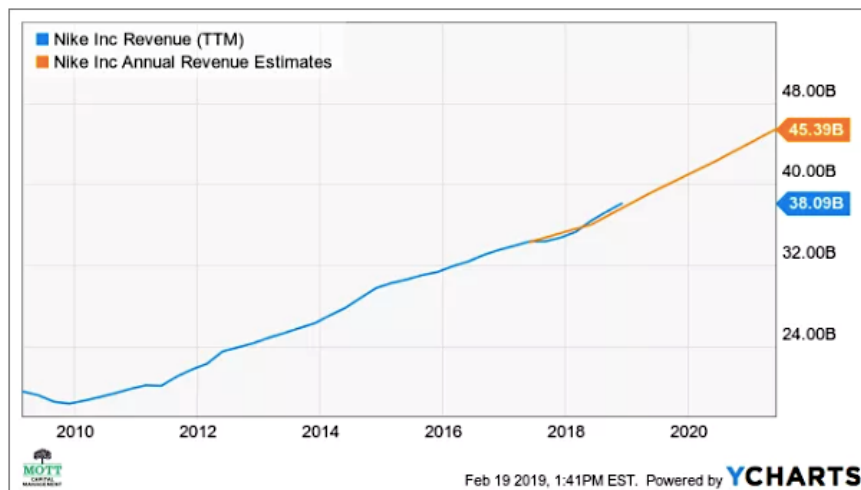
Figure 13. Chart showing Nike increase in revenues and revenue estimates after the release of the "Dream Crazy" Campaign (February 19, 2019)

Source: https://www.singlegrain.com/marketing-strategy/nikes-39-billion-marketing-strategy-just-do-it-like-nike-does/

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the ads reveals how the hyperconnectivity and social media have provided contemporaries with a platform for engagement in activism, re-establishing a power of dynamics between consumers and brands (Bain, 2018). Consumers are no longer passive receivers of information provided through advertising, they have become more interactive and share their values and beliefs that every brand must consider. Brands need to prove their ethical responsibility by linking themselves to social causes, follow the concept of cause marketing and activism, in relevance to the company's mission, vision and values.

Modern society is becoming increasingly aware of the necessity to behave in a sustainable manner which resulted in higher expectations towards sustainable practices of businesses. This is why the emergence of Marketing 3.0, a concept developed by Kotler, Kartajaya, and Setiawan (2010) which takes a more sustainable approach towards marketing, received an increasing amount of attention in advertising. With increasing technologies, communication between consumers and brands has radically improved, giving consumers the opportunities to be part of the content creation and act as brand activists. Although the concept of Marketing 3.0 does not totally compensate for the traditional marketing and advertising approaches, it is likely to contribute to establishing brand activism and activism advertising in a positive way which impacts consumer preferences, purchase decisions, brand image, and profit margins (Susilo et al., 2015).

6. Limitations and Future Research

The study of Brand Activism has limitations within the MENA region. The lack of the brand activism concept presents a challenge for activism advertising analysis. A focus on societal issues and concerns with linkage to certain brands is desirable for future research. Another limitation is the lack of analytical and empirical data related to the region. It is recommended to strengthen the study and implementation of activism advertising which can provide policymakers, marketers and advertising creators with keen strategies that can have a strong positive impact on brand images and purchase decisions.

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