NIKE'S ADVERTISING STRATEGIES:

What's the problem?



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Nike trivializes the socio-structural roots of women's depression with the suggestion that if you let women play sports, "[they] will suffer less depression."

Nike's advertisement: A sweet, powerless, almost destitute little girl sits pensively on an outdoor swing. Her hair is blondish-brown, her eyes appear close to black against her otherwise depressed complexion. She has a freckle on her left cheek, adding to the generally infantilized texture of the mise-en-page. She is wearing a white corduroy top, decorated with pink and blue floral patterns. Her small, weak hands feebly clutch the only part of the swing visible on the page: a large, protruding black chain. Superimposed is the Nike swoosh and the text "If you let me play." At the bottom of the page, in much smaller print, one can read the alleged benefits of "playing sports": "I will like myself more. I will have more self-confidence. I will suffer less depression. I will be 60% less likely to get breast cancer. I will be more likely to leave a man who beats me. I will be less likely to get pregnant before I want to. I will learn what it means to be strong."



For the critically inclined, the "If you let me play" advertising campaign represents an insidious reformulating of conservative body politics. The explicit request for permission by a young girl to a presumed white male reader/consumer is complicated and problematic when viewed in progressive theoretical terms. Indeed, the request for permission seems sufficient in itself to render impossible a feminist reading of the advertisement. The dubious implications of this advertising strategy, however, range far beyond the problematic plea for permission. In this brief article, I will endeavor to discern the often elusive mechanisms through which the "If you let me play" campaign reproduces dominant forms of masculine, racial, and sexual privilege. To do so, I will examine the subtle insinuations contained within each section of the advertisement's textual content.

"I Will Suffer Less Depression"

To better tackle the implications of this narrative, one must first examine some of the causes of women's depression: violence, poverty, and the kinds of work typically performed by women (Walters et al., 1995). When these are taken into consideration, one realizes that Nike trivializes the socio-structural roots of women's depression with the suggestion that if you let women play sports, "[they] will suffer less depression."

In Canada, recent studies (Comité canadien, 1993; Statistics Canada, 1995) show that violence against women is endemic, despite the fact that 62% of sexual assault victims do not report assaults to police. A recent Canadian study (Comité canadien, 1993) notes that: "taking all three kinds of sexual assault as defined in the Criminal Code into account . . . two out of three women, well over half the female population, have experienced what is legally recognized as sexual assault" (p. 28). Moreover, "The short and long term effects of sexual assault include depression, anxiety, trouble with interpersonal relationships, reduced job effectiveness, diminished sexual satisfaction, sexual dysfunction and sleep disorders, and increased use of sedatives and sleeping pills . . . with that comes a profound loss of self-esteem and self-worth" (Comité canadien, 1993, p. 29).

In terms of poverty as a cause of depression, it is noteworthy that recent studies (e.g., Health Canada, 1996; National Council of Welfare, 1996; Walters et al., 1995) have confirmed socioeconomic status as the major determinant of physical and mental health. Even in a country with an almost universally accessible health care system, inequalities in health status persist. The latest Report on the Health of Canadians could not be clearer: "The rich are

healthier than the middle class, who are in turn healthier than the poor" (Health Canada, 1996, p. iii). It is also germane that women are over-represented among the poor, and this trend is worsening. This is because when one examines the current research on the Canadian work force, one finds that women dominate the lower ranks of all types of employment. Women are paid substantially less than their male counterparts, and women's work in both private and public sectors is more often than not defined by monotony, low pay, job insecurity, and poor working conditions (Armstrong & Armstrong, 1994; Clement & Myles, 1994; Ng, 1993). In these circumstances, it is entirely understandable that "on measures of self-rated health, psychological well-being, stress, and depression, women do not score as well as men" (Health Canada, 1996, p. 27). When some of the structural causes of mental illness among women are seen and understood, Nike's suggestion that playing sports will resolve the problem of female depression appears simplistic and even insulting. I would argue that Nike's advertisement tends to trivialize and obscure the structural oppressions that many women experience, and how these contribute to depression.

"I Will Be 60% Less Likely to Get Breast Cancer"

Recent medical studies show that heightened breast cancer rates are largely attributable to environmental pollutants and to drugs commonly prescribed to women (e.g., hormone replacement therapy), and not to individual predisposition (Castleman, 1994; Worcester & Whatley, 1992). There is little evidence that exercise is a significant factor in breast cancer, and Nike's contention that "playing sports" will significantly reduce breast cancer occurrence again misrepresents women's illness as an outcome of individual choices, an individual problem with individual solutions.

"I Will Be More Likely to Leave a Man Who Beats Me"

"I Will Be Less Likely to Get Pregnant Before I Want to"

[...] The aforementioned statements intimate that women can freely and without difficulty leave the men who beat them, rape them, harass them in the workplace, and/or coerce them into sex. Indeed, the advertisement's text in this instance omits any suggestion of the economic realities associated with male domination, or the psychological manipulation experienced by abused women. Most importantly, these Nike narratives once again locate the source of crucial social-structural problems within individual, allegedly free-willed women. In this sense, the advertisement represents a textbook mobilization of the neo-conservative "blame-the-victim" discourse.

"I Will Like Myself More"

"I Will Have More Self-Confidence"

There is a well-known correlation between physical activity and a positive self-concept. However, both sociologists and those responsible for equipping themselves and their family members with sporting gear can attest to the increasingly exclusive and inaccessible nature of organized sports. Not only are the costs of sporting equipment and apparel increasingly intolerable, but Nike has contributed in a significant way to this escalation. It does not any longer suffice, in the imagery popularized by Nike and other major 'leisure wear' brands, to throw on a pair of old running shoes, pick up a baseball bat and head to the park. Contemporary advertising has created norms whereby even recreational athletes feel they must suit themselves up in expensive attire, pay the bus fare to the closest sport complex, pay an entry fee, and then pay a fee for participating in the chosen sporting activity. For those women who have children, or who are balancing multiple jobs, these costs may also be compounded by the baby-sitter's fee. For many, then, the costs associated with regular sport or fitness-related activities become prohibitive.

Nike claims that improved self-esteem will result from girls and women being "permitted" to play sports. Even a cursory examination of the research conducted on female populations, however, reveals that girls and women do not need anybody's permission. What they need is concrete access to sporting spaces. According to Harvey and Donnelly (1996, p. 4), what girls and women require is the eradication of the "systemic barriers" to physical activity. These include "infrastructural barriers" (e.g., high costs, lack of transportation, lack of time, etc.), "superstructural barriers" (e.g., sexist policies, lack of role models and/or pro-women facilitators, etc.) and "procedural barriers" (e.g., lack of social support, lack of rights to services or opportunities, etc.).

Given the existence of these systemic barriers, it is possible to suggest that adult women who do participate in physical activity and sports are a "breed

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apart." In Canada, women who participate in sports are most likely financially comfortable, and probably enjoy decent living and working conditions and access to regular leisure time, and it is most likely these positive socioeconomic conditions that explain the higher level of self-esteem, self-confidence, and mental and physical health that are found among physically active girls and women.

General Problematization of Nike Narrative(s)

First, one must interrogate Nike's obscuring of class-related issues. Those most acutely affected by the issues highlighted in the "If you let me play" campaign inhabit the economic periphery of Western societies. Yet, Nike proposes a solution (i.e., the consumption of expensive sporting goods) that is realistically open only to those who make up the dominant economic class. This attests to the paradoxical if not bogus character of Nike's "concern."

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Second, the Nike advertisement is a blatant appropriation of "women's" issues. That is, Nike has managed to effectively re-articulate the solution of "women's problems" with individual, consumer choices (Cole & Hribar, 1995). In each section of the advertisement's text, the gendered problem delineated is individualized, de-politicized and naturalized. Where grass-roots movement feminism saw unwanted pregnancies, violence against women, and low self-esteem as assuming an inherently systemic and historical character, Nike remakes these phenomena into issues of personal choice remedied by individual agency. Where movement feminism asked women to interrogate their sexual identities and beliefs, and to fight against the complex systems that oppress them, Nike proposes a far easier and more comfortable solution: no trouble in the class room, no clothing or food boycotts, no late-night strategic meetings, no stress when reading the newspaper, no perplexing critical thought. All Nike asks for is your money. When one sits down with the facts in front of her, Nike's "pro-woman, pro-self-esteem" image emerges as fraudulently immoral. ■

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