



Colin Kaepernick, Nike & Dreaming Crazy

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Abstract

This paper examines the aftermath of Nike's 2018 advertising campaign, "Dream Crazy", featuring the polarizing ex-NFL player Colin Kaepernick. Nike's choice to feature Kaepernick was a groundbreaking one, as Kaepernick was at the forefront of the Black Lives Matter movement. In contrast, it was also hypocritical, in terms of it being driven by the quest for profit and enhanced brand recognition, as much as by concerns for social justice. "Dream Crazy" was also hypocritical when contrasted with Nike's previous brand actions, which suggests that their actions were even more disingenuous than they first appear. This paper uses theoretical concepts such as media framing, hegemony, and racial capitalism, and applies a case study approach to the launching of "Dream Crazy" to evaluate Nike's actions as a brand. Through this analysis, it is found that despite appearing as a progressive brand siding with the quest for social justice, Nike's actions were arguably more self-serving than selfless. Compared and contrasted with the behaviour of other comparator brands, it seems evident that Nike opportunistically capitalized on Kaepernick's activism. This is important, as more and more brands adopt activism as a marketing tactic, it is integral that they remain sincere with their actions, as power dynamics have shifted from corporation to consumer.

Keywords

Nike, Colin Kaepernick, Dream Crazy, case study, brand activism, media framing, hegemony, racial capitalism



It is often said that within sports, “there is no place for politics” (Thoburn, 2021). Most of the time, this unspoken rule is obeyed. Outwardly, the sporting world is the embodiment of glitzy, showy patriotism, with national anthems, giant flags, and military flyovers. Sports media and the American public often frame these acts as nationalistic, but politically neutral. A 2021 New York Times article demonstrates this, by stating, “The playing of the national anthem and ‘God Bless America,’ patriotic ceremonies are as ubiquitous at sporting events today as first downs, home runs and slam dunks” (Adams, 2021). It is argued that love for a country has no political party, and every individual can join together in paying respect to the flag and singing the national anthem. The reality, however, is that there is an inherent tension between entertainment, profit, and morals in today’s world of sports. Moreover, the nature of our capitalist system is that at the end of the day, corporate interests are prioritized over other things, such as social justice issues. However, when former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick took a knee during the playing of the national anthem at a preseason game in 2016 in protest against police brutality in the United States, the sports world was dramatically altered forever. The facade of political neutrality in sports was no longer possible to maintain.

Kaepernick’s protest was tremendously polarizing, as was made evident by the sharp contrast in reactions following the kneeling. Sports fans, politicians, and the general public all held stances on Kaepernick, which reflected a deep divide within American society (Boren, 2020). On one side were those aligned with retaining what was claimed to be a sense of “dignity” and respect for their country. On the other were social justice activists concerned with making systemic changes to a society which they felt to be inherently racist (Sangha, 2019). When Nike made the controversial—and extremely polarizing—decision to feature Kaepernick, amongst other individuals belonging to minority groups, in an extended advertising campaign titled “Dream Crazy,” it seemed that the company was endorsing social activism, considering the American political climate at the time (Bacon Jr., 2016, para. 17). Although Nike’s advertising campaign was seen by some as groundbreaking, specifically in taking a public stance against a form of cultural hegemony that disadvantages minority groups, it was also arguably self-serving and hypocritical, as Nike’s main objective of the campaign was to boost brand recognition and profits.

In 2016, the Black Lives Matter movement gained significant traction on a global scale, stemming from a series of American Black men being shot by police officers that summer (ABC News, 2016). As numerous protests erupted, America's omnipresent racial tension reached a near-boiling point. In addition, critical race theory, the idea that racial inequities are a key shaping factor of society and law, came to be a heated topic of debate within American society (Zurcher, 2021). 2016 was also the year that Donald Trump was elected President of the United States. American society became highly politicized, pitting those believing in and fighting against racism and injustice, against those in denial.

At the same moment, Colin Kaepernick was the starting quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers. Kaepernick's series of protests began during two 2016 pre-season games, with Kaepernick choosing to kneel instead of stand during the national anthem. During the third game, on August 26th, Kaepernick's actions were noticed by the public, specifically on Twitter (Boren, 2020). After the third game, when his protest began to be scrutinized within both traditional and social media spheres, Kaepernick publicly addressed the controversy. He was adamant that his protest was aimed at dismantling the injustice that Black people and people of colour face in America (Doehler, 2021, p. 46). He said that his aim was not to disrespect the national flag or the U.S. military (who often performed the flag ceremonies at NFL games). Nevertheless, Kaepernick's protest made him into a de facto spokesperson for the Black Lives Matter movement, and thus a controversial public figure. This was only exacerbated by the media's subsequent framing of him and his cause.

"Media framing" is a concept first popularized by Robert Entman in the 1990s. It describes the process by which the media tells their audience which perspectives are the "correct" ones to have regarding certain issues (Doehler, 2021, p. 47). Research has found that the 2016 coverage of Kaepernick in the mainstream press was largely homogeneous, and mostly negative (Sangha, 2019). Moreover, key media frames were principally focused on negative coverage of Kaepernick's action itself, rather than on the issues he was concerned with (Sangha, 2019). As media sites and even former president Donald Trump continued to frame Kaepernick in a negative manner condemning his protests, Kaepernick filed a grievance against the NFL in 2017. Despite that, he ultimately was forced out of the sport in 2019 (Boren, 2020).

In 2018, Kaepernick became involved in Nike's "Dream Crazy" campaign. He began with a simple tweet of a black and white image of himself, accompanied by the caption "Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything. #JustDoIt" (Sangha, 2019). Coinciding with the 30th anniversary of Nike's trademark, "Just Do It" slogan, Nike then released a commercial of Kaepernick, in which he urged individuals to follow their dreams, regardless of what society might say (Kemp, 2022, para. 4). In the commercial, Kaepernick shared the stories of NBA player LeBron James and American tennis player Serena Williams, and the racism they have faced throughout their careers. The commercial also featured lesser-known athletes belonging to disadvantaged minority groups, such as wrestler Isaiah Bird who was born without legs (Kemp, 2022, para. 5). Throughout the video, Kaepernick shared messages of empowerment, for example stating, "What non-believers fail to understand is that calling a dream crazy is not an insult, it's a compliment" (KPIX CBS SF Bay Area, 2018, 0:27). Along with Kaepernick's graphic, Nike also released a number of other photographic advertisements featuring systematically disadvantaged athletes who had made societal breakthroughs through their respective sports (Wieden & Kennedy, 2018).

Reflecting the criticism that Kaepernick received when he first kneeled in protest, Nike faced significant amounts of backlash over their "Dream Crazy" campaign. Some Twitter users went so far as to post videos of themselves burning their Nike apparel (Bostock, 2018). As a sign of the depth of the controversy, Nike stock fell by 3.2 percent in the immediate aftermath of the Kaepernick commercial (Thomas, 2018). President Trump also took to Twitter to denounce Nike, asserting that both Kaepernick's and Nike's actions were unpatriotic (Sangha, 2019). However, after a short time, public opinion began to turn, and "Dream Crazy" began to see a positive response, with Nike's online sale figures rising 31 percent over a two-day period, and their social media presence rising by an extraordinary 1,678 percent (Linnane, 2018). Part of the explanation for the turn-around is that a significant proportion of Nike's core demographic consists of those belonging to ethnic minorities: 19 percent Latino, 18 percent African American, and 5 percent Asian (Munoz, 2019). In response to the divided opinions on "Dream Crazy", Nike CEO Phil Knight stated, "It doesn't matter how many people hate your brand as long as enough people love it" (Kemp, 2018).

Though featuring a polarizing figure like Kaepernick bore a significant element of risk as a marketing decision, Nike was able to brand itself as a socially responsible company that was seeking to help break down barriers to participation in sports— in this case, racial barriers. Nike has an extended history of utilizing celebrity endorsements within their advertisements, including basketball legend Michael Jordan (Spence, 2009, p. 7). Nike’s 1984 endorsement deal with Jordan proved to be one of the most successful ever to that point (Spence, 2009, p. 10). It was estimated to have increased its revenue by over one million dollars (Spence, 2009, p. 10). But the Kaepernick campaign was different. It was openly political in that it was framed around, and thus intended to shed light on, social inequality, while simultaneously improving their rapport with current and potential customers. They were even able to use the controversy to “freshen” their brand slogan of “Just Do It”. Through “Dream Crazy”, Nike re-identified itself (and thus its customers) with values of determination and grit. Natalie Welch, a former employee of Nike’s advertising firm Wieden and Kennedy, once stated “that even in a primarily white-dominated industry, Wieden and Kennedy's early emphasis on diversity and inclusion helped foster creativity” (Restrepo, 2022, para. 17). It is important to note that “Dream Crazy” was not meant to be a radical departure from Nike’s traditional brand messaging. Instead, the Kaepernick ad campaign was built on Nike’s previous marketing decisions. Yet it took their impact to a higher, and much more overtly politicized level. Following the public’s shifted reaction to “Dream Crazy”, Nike stated that “the company stood against racism and discrimination in any form,” and that it believed “in the power of sport to create an equal playing field for all” (Urvater & Vandegrift, 2021, para. 23).

“Dream Crazy” proved to be a groundbreaking advertising campaign, as it called for a fight against cultural hegemony. Hegemony as a concept was explored by the early twentieth-century Italian Marxist philosopher, Antonio Gramsci. He described it as the means by which the ruling political class secures consent to dominate others through cultural, political, and economic means (Bates, 1975). Cultural hegemony leads to, and builds upon, societal inequalities such as classism, racism, and patriarchy (Cole, 2020). According to a Gramscian analysis, those who were critical of Kaepernick and “Dream Crazy” were perpetuating hegemonic ideals, while Nike, through their implicit support of the Black Lives Matter movement, directly opposed them. Considering the fact that a large number of existing and potential Nike customers sided with social activism, the “Dream Crazy” campaign was brilliantly

conceived. It also had significant positive impacts on the brand. Most significantly of all, it suggested a turning point in the art of branding. 66 percent of respondents in a post- “Dream Crazy” Sprout Social survey indicated that they wanted brands to take public stands on social issues (Urvater & Vandegrift, 2021, para. 9). Even more dramatically, 80 percent of teenagers, a major portion of Nike’s demographic, sided with the Black Lives Matter movement (Urvater & Vandegrift, 2021, para. 9). Because Nike appealed to their main demographic by outwardly supporting social justice activism, the advertisement not only won an Emmy in 2019 but also elevated Nike’s top scores of customer recommendations, according to Bloomberg (Watson, 2020). This was very different from the conventional understanding of that point, which held that consumer brands should avoid partisan political controversy (Meyerson, 2021, para. 3).

Despite Nike’s advertising being groundbreaking in terms of smashing traditional industry boundaries to advocate for social justice, one may wonder whether the Kaepernick ad was also a smartly calculated move, perhaps with ulterior motives behind it. Using Kaepernick as their celebrity spokesperson may have been a marketing decision that had Nike’s corporate interests prioritized over any social justice responsibility concerns. Barry Sangha (2019) has argued that Nike has a history of profiting off Black popular culture, which implies a level of inauthenticity behind the whole campaign. In that characterization, “Dream Crazy” could be argued to be a textbook example of “racial capitalism”. Nancy Leong (2013) describes this as the process of deriving social and economic value, typically through the exploitation of radicalized groups in society. The concept of racial capitalism connects value to racial identity, which implicitly has colonialist roots (Melamed, 2015, p. 77). That is why some say that Nike saw Kaepernick’s fight for justice as a marketing opportunity, rather than an opportunity to show a true affinity for the cause (Munoz, 2019). The argument also holds that Nike recognized that their demographic included a significant number of individuals who were engaged in activism, which could have been an integral part of their decision to launch the campaign.

The whole conception of “Dream Crazy” was arguably contradictory to its premise. “Dream Crazy” was ostensibly targeted at the hegemony of sport. Yet hegemony and capitalism go hand in hand. As a vehicle of the capitalist system, Nike’s principal motive behind advertising is to increase brand popularity, and through that, to increase profitability. It is not too cynical to argue that Nike and its sister companies are willing to jump on political bandwagons if it is felt

that that can increase market share. Journalist Dave Zirin puts it this way: “Nike has used the image of rebellion to sell its gear while stripping that rebellion of all its content” (Carrington & Boykoff, 2018, para. 8). This captures the contradictory nature of Nike recognizing the system of oppression they are fighting, yet at the same time, their business model may contribute to the social issues they are supposedly against.

Another contradictory aspect of Nike’s self-ascribed brand persona of “social awareness” is the fact that they themselves have come under fire for human rights violations. Nike has an extensive history of being accused of using sweatshops and sweated labour to make their products (New Idea, 2019, para. 2). They have also faced numerous allegations of gender discrimination (Carrington & Boykoff, 2018, para. 9). One example of this was in 2017 when presumably “Dream Crazy” was being conceived, there were reports of a Nike sweatshop incident in which 360 female Cambodian workers collapsed, due to exhaustion as a result of being overworked (McVeigh, 2017, para. 2). Furthermore, it was reported that at one point, Nike was on the verge of dropping their endorsement deal with Kaepernick because of his controversial reputation (Bain, 2018). Considering the fact Nike has had previous brand scandals for discrimination, and the fact Kaepernick was almost dropped prior to “Dream Crazy”, Nike’s corporate actions appear even more cynical and hypocritical.

In 2018, a survey found that 64 percent of consumers are driven by what is described as the “belief mindset”, in which they reward brands that are vocal about issues they are interested in (Edelman, 2018). Another Edelman survey found that the majority of millennials are belief-driven buyers and that 53 percent pay attention to how companies respond to political and social matters (Urvater & Vandegrift, 2021, para. 9). Following the success of “Dream Crazy”, other companies have emulated Nike. For example, in 2020, the makeup brand L’Oréal Paris shared an Instagram post expressing its support for the Black Lives Matter movement. The post consisted of a graphic stating, “Speaking Out is Worth It”, and the brand captioned the post by stating “L’Oréal Paris stands in solidarity with the Black community, and against injustice of any kind. #BlackLivesMatter” (Elan, 2020).

In comparison to Nike, L’Oréal Paris’s statement displayed aspects of “racial capitalism” and associated hypocrisy. L’Oréal Paris’ principal demographic consists of women aged 25-34

(SimilarWeb, 2022). This is a group that is often associated with concerns about racial inequities (Davis, 2019). Through L'Oréal's choice to be vocal about the Black Lives Matter movement, it can be argued that they attempted to utilize this to their advantage. Yet, L'Oréal was also hypocritical like Nike, for their public support of activism was arguably belied by their actions. For example, shortly after L'Oréal's post, Munroe Bergdorf, a Black transgender model, accused the brand of racial hypocrisy. In 2017, Bergdorf was fired by L'Oréal for speaking out against racism (Elan, 2020, para. 4). Bizarrely, given their ostensible stance, the company's assertion was that Bergdorf's actions did not "line up" with the brand's values (Elan, 2020, para. 5). Just as Nike has come under fire for discrimination in the past, so has L'Oréal Paris, yet both brands took public stances on social issues when it was convenient for their marketing strategies. Similarly, in 2017, Audi released a Super Bowl advertisement that advocated for equal gender pay, which garnered over 4 million views in two days (Lips, 2017, para. 6). Yet despite branding themselves with feminist messaging, Audi has no women on their executive team (Mahdawi, 2018, para. 7). This phenomenon, sometimes referred to as "woke-washing", has been demonstrated by countless other corporations, including Pepsi, and fashion brand Stylenanda (Mahdawi, 2018, para. 5). Although Nike's "Dream Crazy" and other campaigns like it outwardly supported the dismantling of oppression, these cases also display the short-term opportunism for brands to adopt an activist stance, solely driven by raising profits.

Through the analysis of "Dream Crazy", and similar cases that have followed it, it is evident that there has been a change in power dynamics within the marketing world. As noted in Bains' (2018) article, "Nike's Kaepernick ad is what happens when capitalism and activism collide", he argued that in the past corporations sat at the centre of the marketplace (para. 27). Changing values, demographic shifts, and the notion of "brand accountability" mean that now consumers occupy that position (Bain, 2018). If a brand executes activism successfully, it can prove to be extremely beneficial commercially, as exemplified by Nike's rising stock prices in the immediate aftermath of "Dream Crazy". But it is not always so simple; brand activism can backfire. As more corporations attempt to adopt a stance of brand activism, consumers are also using social media to hold them accountable to ensure that "authenticity" is a key factor behind their actions. An example of this is the 2020 "Pull Up or Shut Up" campaign, launched by Sharon Chuter, an executive in the beauty industry (Duarte, 2020). This campaign is only one of many, but it specifically targets "activist" beauty brands which are not transparent about the lack

of diversity amongst their employees. As consumers have shifted to being concerned with political and social activism, it can be beneficial for million-dollar corporations to take public stances on social issues such as racism or discrimination. To be perceived as a legitimate entity, it is integral that brands participate in tangible philanthropic activities and retain ethical labour laws in order to remain credible with their activism (Ganti, 2022). This in turn will not only raise company profits, but it will also ensure that a brand has a positive perception of its target demographic. In addition, visible brand activism demonstrates accountability, which is integral from an activist standpoint (Khan, 2021). For example, a 2018 Funterra Survey found that if a brand is not actively helping consumers improve their environmental and social footprint, it can run the risk of alienating 88 percent of its customers (Townsend, 2018). Despite its bottom-line success, “Dream Crazy” might have been even more profitable had Nike adopted (and lived by) ethical practices in every facet of their brand.

In conclusion, Nike’s “Dream Crazy” was both groundbreaking and hypocritical. Through the adoption of a polarizing stance by featuring a controversial figure like Colin Kaepernick during a time of significant social and political divide, Nike was walking a marketing tightrope. Nike wanted to be seen as a socially responsible brand that sided with racial justice. The messaging behind the advertisement campaign clearly resonated extremely well with Nike’s target demographic, as made evident by their boost in sales (Linnane, 2018). “Dream Crazy”, however, was inherently contradictory: an anti-establishment message being used to enhance corporate profit. Moreover, Nike is a corporation that has faced allegations of discrimination, yet it was aligned with an anti-discrimination message. Furthermore, the fact that Kaepernick was nearly dropped from his Nike endorsement shortly before the advertisement was released, and the fact that Nike had not demonstrated their efforts to support social justice movements prior to the campaign, raise concerns about what their true motives are. Some may have said in the past that there is no place for politics in sports. However, as the power in the market shifts from brand to consumer, and as more brands are expected to partake in activism, the lines between politics, sports, and making a profit will inevitably begin to blur. If billion-dollar corporations, and the media professionals working alongside them, choose to engage in activism, they should also be equally prepared to be held to a certain standard of authenticity by the consumers.

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