

Sports advertising and Motivation

Research Question

To what extent and how could the Nike campaign affect motivation and performance of female runners?

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Introduction:

In recent years, coverage of women's participation in sport has been a recurring topic in the media. Currently only "4% of sports media coverage features women" (Person, 2018), meaning that 96% covers male sports. General media coverage focuses on the physical traits of female athletes, rather than their sports performance. For example, during the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, Amy Acuff, a female high jump competitor, was described as a "6ft 2in blonde, part-time model" (Bernstein 2002) whose true ambition was to model for a "Sports Illustrated swimsuit edition" instead of winning the gold medal, as she claims "people get a lot of attention for that" (ibid). Acuff was the "most photographed female athlete" (ibid), instead of fellow competitor Marion Jones, who ultimately won 3 gold medals and 2 bronze medals (ibid). Sports advertising in particular has been a lucrative sideline for female athletes, with Maria Sharapova earning more from sponsorship than from tennis, for example (Badenhausen, 2016).

Major companies, such as Nike aim to sell their products through sponsorships and advertising. In 2009, they produced a new campaign, using models, male soccer players and female actresses under the slogan "Men vs Women challenge". The premise of this was to pitch men and women against each other in a performance running competition. As early as 1898, Triplett's theory of social facilitation noted a positive difference in performance when cyclists performed alongside other athletes, which consequently argued that the environment in which an individual is placed in has an effect on the way they perform the activity layed out to them (Psychestudy 2018).

This is important because, the persuasiveness of this sale, may it be of a product, service or idea, is what drives the underlying psychological techniques used in advertisements which gives them their strong influential power. For example, techniques such as "affective conditioning" (Markman 2010) which makes audiences associate a particular feeling or emotion on what is being sold when actually these feelings are associated with the supplemental parts of the advertisement (ibid). This is merely one of many exemplary techniques that go into crafting advertisements, thus showing how deceptive they can actually be, and how it can cause feelings or even materialistic desires (in case of product-focused advertisements) to subliminally arise.

Another theory that explores the effect of the external environment (the world of sports - particularly sports advertising) on athletes' intrinsic motivation is the Self-Determination Theory which argues that, although intrinsic motivation derives mainly from one's self, there are "innate psychological needs that are the basis for their self-motivation" (Richard and Deci, 2000) which external factors may have an impact on. These are: the need for "competence", "relatedness" and "autonomy" (ibid). Competence refers to "social-contextual events" that "conduce toward a feeling of competence during action" (ibid), such as being able to run a certain distance in a certain time. Relatedness refers to being acknowledged instead of "ignored" (ibid) for accomplishments, and autonomy refers to one's personal control over their performance and interest on the activity being performed.

The Self-Determination Theory can be used to argue that the exposure to sports advertising could affect belief about competence. The aim of this extended essay is to explore the

extent to which sports advertising, specifically the Nike 2009 campaign could influence a female sportsperson, particularly female runners and the way in which their representation in the advertisement could affect their motivation and competence beliefs, as well as its consequential effect on their performance, thus leading to the research question: To what extent and how could the Nike campaign affect motivation and performance of female runners?

Main Body:

In 2009, an event that took over the sports media was the Nike "Men vs Women Challenge". It consisted of a series of printed advertisements (see below) and one televised commercial appealing to young male and female runners to join the race against each other, with an underlying purpose of selling running shoes for said race. In the televised advert, we see men and women running around streets childishly trying to sabotage their competitors from the opposite gender by throwing water at each other, taking out each other's headphones, throwing away each other's shoes among other things. In 1993, sociology professor Barrie Thorne published a book with classroom and playground observations of how young girls and boys interact and got to the conclusion that children use "friendly competitive frameworks" to address underlying gender-related issues of masculinity vs femininity (Thorne, 1993 in Gould, 2011). This behavior is exactly what is subconsciously being explored in the Nike televised advert through an implicitly psychological "battle for dominance"(Gould 2011).



Image 1



Image 2



Image 3



Image 4



Image 5

The remaining adverts for this campaign are divided into their specific audiences, with two being directed at young female runners, two at young male runners, and one directed at all young runners - who are the campaign's overall target audience (all adverts shown above). In the first male advert, the message displayed is "One more thing for men to rule", which, by itself, has a sexist connotation. When juxtaposed with the first female advert which says "Ladies first. Men second.", it is clear that the intended tone of these adverts combined is very provocative, given the competitive atmosphere it creates. However, despite the intended purpose to present male and female runners as superior to each other in these adverts when separate, there is still a somewhat patronizing tone in the female one, as "Ladies first" alludes to the antiquated chivalry behavior of men allowing women to come first, instead of recognizing their capability to do so without them.

The same attempt at an equally powerful portrayal is seen in the remaining two Nike adverts, and yet again it is not accomplished successfully. The second male advert displays the message "You're cute when you're losing", which has a derisive tone, as "cute" is typically an endearing word used by men to describe women, yet here it is implying that the men are "cute", and therefore woman-like, when they are losing, thus suggesting that the women will lose this "battle" (Gould 2011). On its own, this advert sustains its purpose of portraying male runners as superior, however, it is in the complementary female advert that the campaign fails once again to portray women as equally superior by displaying the message "Custom fit for girls. Trouble for guys." when referring to the "Air Span+ 6" shoe Nike is trying to sell, which somewhat suggests that women need a custom fit shoe to win the battle against men. This is reinforced by the contrasting visual details in both adverts, as, in the male advert, there is a large man in the background taking up the whole picture with his arms crossed and his chin up, which is a fairly empowering pose when contrasted with the fact that the female advert has only an enlarged image of the shoe. This adds to the underlying sexist tone of the campaign because, whereas the empowering factor in the male advert is the man himself, in the female advert that is a custom fit shoe.

The visual details in the two initial advertisements also add to this sexist tone through the physicality of the runners depicted in each scene. In the first male advert, the runner behind the message "One more thing for men to rule" shows a very strong physique, with his frowned facial expression seemingly focused and his right hand in a "thumbs-up" (Gould 2011) like manner to

the photographer, all which bring out his confidence and consequently the confidence of the male gender he is representing. On the other hand, the female runner behind the message "Ladies first. Men second" shows an effortless facial expression, with her hands flat and straight in the air, and her left hand precisely captured by her hips (Gould 2011). This is a very Barbie-like portrayal, which is clearly not as competitive and empowering as the portrayal of the male runner.

These ideas that separate the genders are then tied together in the last advert directed at both the male and female runners. In it, the runner from the first female advert is seen slightly ahead of the runner from the first male advert; her facial expression has slightly changed and her hands are now softly bent, which expresses delicacy when compared to the tightly held fist by the male runner. Additionally, whilst her gaze is still facing forwards, the man's gaze is now locked on the woman, which, if interpreting the gaze as the aim for each runner's goal, considering they were both facing forwards in their individual adverts beforehand as if looking at the finish line, the man's gaze expresses a predatory nature, which consequently depicts the woman as the prey which could impact on her competence.

Overall, this shows how despite Nike's all-empowering intentions to promote a fun healthy competition between male and female runners, there is a coded sexist message being transmitted through its adverts when analyzing the different portrayals of men and women in the Men vs Women challenge campaign. By applying the self-determination theory to this unequal portrayal of the female runners, it could be argued that their competence is being subverted by

the external environment (campaign), which consequently affects the intrinsic motivation, as well as the performance of the female runners within Nike's audience.

This portrayal could be given due to the long existing belief that women can physically perform as well as men. This can be seen through events such as the 1973 Battle of the Sexes between Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs, or the famous tennis challenge between Karsten Braasch vs the Williams sisters in 1998, which, although do not convey female runners specifically, still show how female athletes had to battle men to prove their worth. This belief is possibly what gave rise to the unfair comparison and resulting perception of female athletes presented in the sports advertising industry, which is now transmitted through advertisements such as Nike's campaign advertisements.

Biologically, assuming that strength influential factors such as age, height, and weight are the same, men have a higher muscle mass than women, as well as stronger and denser muscles, tendons and bones (Burton 2012). Therefore, by placing men and women to compete against each other, just like Nike did with the Men vs Women challenge, advertisements set unrealistic expectations for sports spectators which then regard female athletes as less capable when they don't perform on the same standards - which is not true as, if analyzing male and female performance under the correct proportions, a female athlete might overperform. For example, a 12-year old boy, on average, can throw a ball "25.9" meters away, whereas a 12-year-old girl, on average, throws it "15.6" meters away (David 1989) ; therefore, technically, if they are put in a competition against each other, a boy will be stronger, however, if in this hypothetical

competition the girl throws the ball eighteen meters away whereas the boy throws it twenty-two meters away, the girl proportionally outperformed the boy.

Therefore, by putting male and female athletes to compete against each other, particularly within this campaign, the portrayal and consequential perception of female athletes in sports advertisement becomes denigrated. This is detrimental to the motivation of women who either view or study sports advertisement - such as myself, for example -, but also mainly to their target audiences, which, in this case, are female runners, as it creates a negative perception of competence and, consequently, a negative environment within the Men vs Women competition for them to participate in.

The comparison between the male and female runners is explicit not only through the general title and intended purpose of the campaign, "Men vs Women" (Bailey 2014) but also by the specific language used. In the male adverts, there is no reference to women at any point, yet in the female adverts, the excelling quality of their performances is measured by how much "trouble" they are "for guys", or by how far ahead of men in they are in the race, instead of generally how well they perform, thus showing how whilst male runner's sports skills are appreciated on their own, female runner's skills are appreciated depending on how greatly they compare to the men's.

One particular theory within sports psychology that can be used to explain the impact of the negative environment created by said comparison is the theory of Social Facilitation.

Essentially, it outlines how the environment in which athletes (in this case, runners) are placed in can have an effect on their performance, may it be positive or negative, which depends on the "nature of interaction" (McLeod 2011) present between the athlete and the observer(s). Consequently, by having their competence questioned through the subliminally sexist implications of Nike's campaign, the nature of interaction between the runners within Nike's target audience and their observers (watchers of the Men vs Women challenge) could be presented as negative, considering they are already being portrayed as the losing competitors in this race.

The importance of the nature of interaction between an athlete and the observer(s) within the theory of social facilitation is given due to the psychological "arousal" triggered by the presence of the spectators. Generally, when a person is being watched, a "psychological arousal drive" is triggered based on "evaluation anxiety" (McLeod 2011), or, in other words, they become more "physiologically alert, awake and attentive" towards their surroundings, because of the pressure associated with being watched - especially when by an audience you want to impress (Mitchell n.d.). In sports, one can argue this to be beneficial to improve an athlete's performance. However, evaluation anxiety, like any other type of anxiety, has its healthy limits which are likely dependent on the anxiety trigger. Therefore, when referring to female runners within this campaign, one can argue how by being in an environment where the audience (spectators of the campaign) has already been exposed to advertisements in which female runners are depicted as less physically capable than the male runners, the anxiety trigger exceeds

its healthy limits given the pressure upon them to exceed their audience's expectations, which is possibly demotivating and disruptive for their performance.

In addition to Nike's campaign adverts, another factor that affects the motivation and performance of female runners is the way in which female sports are generally advertised. Afterall, the way in which female sports are advertised contributes to the way female athletes are perceived by our society as a whole, regardless of whether they are runners or not.

Within the past decade, sports advertisement has turned to the sexualization of female athletes, which could be a demotivating factor as it detracts from the purpose of athletics. For example, the 2010 Hunky Dorys Irish Rugby campaign featured women dressed as rugby players, one specifically large-breasted woman bent down low enough so her cleavage is seen along with the message "Are you staring at my crisps?", and a significantly smaller image of the Hunky Dorys crisps on the bottom right of the advert. This implies that the "crisps" being referred to in the advert are not the Hunky Dorys crisps, but is actually an innuendo about the woman's breast. The advert then presents another message saying "Proud sponsors of Irish Rugby", and thus sexualized not only the women portraying rugby players in the advert but female rugby players in general (Hunky Dory 2011). Another example is the 2017 Argentinian women's basketball team advert, which was a video featuring an attractive model who did not "seem to be playing much basketball", and instead the video included mainly "close-ups of her body" (Terrell 2017). These are merely two examples of the many oversexualized adverts surrounding female athletes that have been fluctuating the media in recent years.

Therefore, by applying the theory of social facilitation to this oversexualized portrayal attributed to female athletes, we can explore how their performance has possibly been affected because of it. The less capable perception of female athletes when compared to male, seen from the Nike campaign adverts and oversexualized advertisements, adds to the disparaging environment for women in sports, which likely creates "conditions of cognitive-overload". In other words, the athletes' psychological arousal exceeds its positive effect, and instead of increasing attentiveness and focus towards how well they perform, it increases it too much to a point where it limits their "ability to focus on a competent performance of behavior"; that is, it leads them to focus on many things besides their performance.

This can be sustained further by exploring social psychologist Kurt Lewin's Psychological Field Theory, which is presented in the form of a mathematical equation where Behaviour is a function of the Person and their interaction with the Environment, in other words: " $B = f(P, E)$ " (Psychology notes HQ, 2013). This function essentially models the interconnection between all these three factors and therefore shows how the environment a person - in this case, a female athlete - is put in, has an effect on their behavior - in this case, their intrinsic motivation and consequently their performance. Depending on the person, or, in other words, their personality, the negative environment can have variable effects on the way their behaviour is impacted. That is, if an athlete is more susceptible to this negative environment, it is likely that the effect on their behavior will be mild, and vice versa. Therefore, we can see how the

demotivating, oversexualized environment provided to female athletes likely has been, and still is affecting their performance.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, we can see how the representation of female athletes in sports advertisements has been, and still is very demeaning, almost always portraying them as less noteworthy athletes - even if without the intention to, as seen in the Nike Men vs Women challenge campaign -, and therefore inferior to male athletes. This portrayal stimulates a negative environment for sportswomen, which, for psychological reasons, possibly obstructs their performance. However, advertisements' influence does not have an entirely negative effect on all women's sports performance. This is due to people's individual psychological response to stimuli, which in this case is the unhealthily excessive anxiety trigger female athletes experience given the pressure upon them to exceed their audience's expectations.

As with regular daily tasks, different people are affected by anxiety levels in different ways, that is, some overperform, some underperform, and some are not affected by it. The reason for this has not yet been established by psychology, however, what has been established is by social psychologist Robert Zajonc's 1956 experiment is that people manage anxiety better when performing tasks "they've had a lot of practice" (Psychestudy 2018) in, which is why, unlike

regular people with regular tasks, female athletes tend to be decreasingly less affected by their negative environment as they gain more experience within their sport.

Therefore, the extent to which female athletes are impacted by this consequential negative environment that is derived from sports advertising varies from one individual athlete to another, which is why it would be false to conclude that this environment fully impacts their performance, as, for some of them, there may be no impact at all. However, given the substantial evidence on how an environment affects an athlete's performance gathered from research within sports psychology, such as Kurt Lewin's Psychological Field Theory, the Theory of Social Facilitation, and the Self-Determination Theory, we can conclude that the negative environment created by the demotivating portrayal of female athletes in sports advertisements, and the resulting prejudiced expectations their audience holds upon them has an extensive impact on their performance in sports.

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