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Institut für Anglistik


Seminar: Controversial Advertising: Nike, Gillette & Co

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# Reading Journal

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## **1. Introduction**

“Controversial Advertising: Nike, Gillette & Co.” - reading the seminar title for the first time instantly caught my interest and I knew that I wanted to take this course for my cultural studies module. I really liked that I could already guess which advertisements and brands would be discussed in class because brand names like Nike and Gillette were mentioned in the title. To my mind, advertising is something that can deeply interact with your emotions and therefore can be used as something meaningful.

Regarding the sports and lifestyle brand Nike, its appearance in the seminar title made me look forward to the class because as a young woman who has played soccer since her late childhood and early teenage years, I have been familiar with the brand Nike for a long time. Even though my preference would be Adidas when it comes to soccer, I still have a strong connection with Nike because of their various products. Furthermore, I am interested in taking a closer look behind the advertising strategies of such an internationally successful company. I could not really imagine to what extent we were going to talk about the global player Nike but I was extremely excited by the prospect. This class was my first seminar in which I was going to engage with different kinds of media studies.

As no one is able to escape advertising these days, I was eager to gain more knowledge about the deeper meaning behind advertisements, learn about different conceptions of brand marketing and how advertising in general has shifted over the last years, probably over the last decades. Thinking about the seminar before it had even started, I was hoping to gain this knowledge by discussing advertisement campaigns which have been launched and released recently.

In my reading journal I want to highlight the sessions that I found of utmost interest and from which I gained the most knowledge for this seminar and my further academic work. Nevertheless, I am very happy with my choice to attend this seminar as I have not only extended my knowledge but also engaged with a very communicative class in which our weekly discussion revealed new perspectives for me.

## 2. Classes

### 2.1 Class 1/2, October 16/23: Nike's "Dream Crazy" Campaign

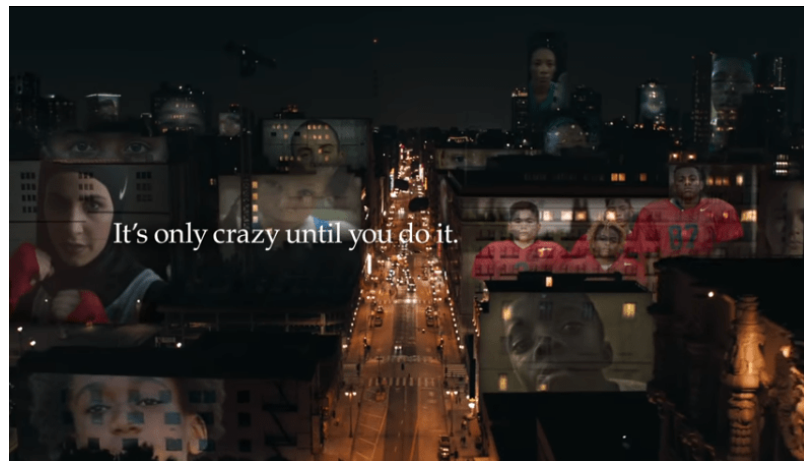
The first two sessions in our seminar "Controversial Advertising: Nike, Gillette & Co." were not quite as mild as I was used to in other seminars I have joined in my academic studies so far. We dived right into Nike's controversial advertisement "Dream Crazy" with Colin Kaepernick, a former player of the National Football League (N.F.L.), who functions as the main character and narrator of the campaign. The advertisement was released in 2018 just a few days before the start of the N.F.L. season (Draper, Belson 2018: n. p.) and can be seen as one of the most controversial ads Nike has ever released. Especially by choosing Colin Kaepernick as the face of the "Dream Crazy"-campaign, Nike has made a polarizing move that still leads to discussions. Colin Kaepernick kneeled down during the national anthem in 2016 in order to "protest racism, police brutality and social injustice" (Draper, Creswell, Sapna 2018: n.p.).

At the beginning of our first class we talked about the goals of advertising. Advertisements usually use a utopian style which works by suggesting that the buyer is happier and more beautiful when the advertised product is purchased. Therefore, the advertisement creates a chance of a better world. By using a utopian style the producer makes sure that the buyer who sees the ad develops a certain desire for the product (cf. Class Discussion Oct. 16. 2019). Furthermore, creating an affect or an emotional hook is seen as a goal of advertisement as well. Speaking of affects, we gained the knowledge that emotions are one way to produce a successful advertisement because by creating emotions the brand shows what they want to stand for and the audience gets the chance to identify with the depicted imagery (cf. Class Discussion Oct. 16. 2019).

In preparation for the discussion of the controversial Nike's "Dream Crazy" advertisement, we watched the long version of the campaign on YouTube together to make sure that everyone in the class had seen the ad and was on the same page. I was one of the few students who had not seen the campaign with Colin Kaepernick



beforehand and I was strongly impressed by it. Only once before have I experienced that a television ad brought me to tears. At the beginning of the advertisement I recognized that I was deeply influenced by the music which gave me goosebumps right away. I felt very emotional and moved but not only in a sad way. I felt several emotions at once: happiness, anger, sadness, and unfairness. At the end of the ad I was choked up and I remember strongly that I was not able to put my thoughts and feelings into words.



After watching Nike's "Dream Crazy" campaign we talked about our emotions subsequent to this ad and discussed the controversy revolving around it. While discussing the campaign, I realized that the ad has a far greater influence than I first suspected. The multivalence lies within all the different stories covered in the advertisement. It is not only about Colin Kaepernick for he is the one narrating the story but also about other well-known athletes like tennis legend Serena Williams, basketball player LeBron James, soccer player Alphonso Davies and several other athletes who had to face difficulties in their careers. The central message is that everything is possible if you truly believe in it and strive towards your dreams, dare to dream crazy and do not let others stop you (cf. Class Discussion Oct. 16. 2019). As the left picture above says: "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything." (Twitter Kaepernick 2018: n.p.).

Taking a closer look, the campaign also sheds light on discrimination and social injustice by featuring Zeina Nassar, a female German boxing champion, who "has faced discrimination in and out of the ring for being a Muslim woman

boxing“ (Heller 2018: n.p.). She is the first woman who stood up for her beliefs and fought for the right to wear a hijab while boxing. She changed the rules and said in an interview that “[...] this has opened many doors for other young girls“ (Heller 2018: n.p.). Moreover, the ad puts emphasis on overcoming limitations and breaking boundaries when picturing the 10-year-old wrestler Isaiah Bird who was born without legs but still competes in wrestling and other sports like surfing, swimming and soccer. According to him, there are “no excuses for not doing your best“ (Heller 2018: n.p.).

Referring to the story of Colin Kaepernick, the narrator of the story and face of Nike’s 30th anniversary campaign, the ad highlights that you should believe in your dreams and values and dare to take a stance for them even if it means sacrificing everything, as in Kaepernick’s case sacrificing his football career. In an interview he said that he will not stand up “to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses people of colour“ (Petrarca 2018: n.p.). Summarizing the different stories, Nike openly takes a political stance with this campaign and shows that it stands for tolerance in general. Nike is pro LGBTQ, Nike stands for disabled people, Nike is anti-racist and wants to overcome gendered boundaries as well as discrimination and systemic inequality.

When I realized the depth of the campaign and the far-reaching influence during our discussion in class and my engagement with the material at home, I felt overwhelmed. Nike has made a very successful and meaningful campaign which, to my mind, goes far beyond usual advertising because Nike also took a political stance and engaged with a wide ranging variety of concepts.

## **2.2 Class 5, November 13: Sport, Protest & USA**

When thinking about sports in general, I do not usually think about the term “protest“. Well, I did not think about it but after we have dealt with the way athletes and professional sportsmen and -women can protest within their sport or league, I certainly think about the term protest now when I am dealing with sports.

Before our fifth class began, I was already interested in what we were going to talk about concerning the subject of Sport, Protest and the USA. In order to dig deeper into this topic, we started to talk about the Nike campaign with Colin Kaepernick again but in a different way this time. In regard of Colin Kaepernick being a former player of the N.F.L., we discussed to what extent he resembles typical American values in the Nike advertisement and what Americanness means. The outcome was that, amongst other values, he presents neo-liberalism, resilience and self-actualization (cf. Class Discussion Nov. 13. 2019).

The beginning of the class sparked my interest but which interested me more was the question afterwards: What inspires us about athletes? As a young woman who has been playing soccer since fifth grade, I am very interested in team sports and also in athletes who are performing these sports. My whole family is deeply passionate about soccer, I grew up with it and can not remember missing a FIFA World Cup or a UEFA European Championship. As a lot of professional soccer players inspired me during my childhood and still inspire me today, I felt addressed by the proposed question.

To me, one of the most inspiring things about athletes is the ability to identify with them. Being successful in any kind of sports is not something given because you have to work really hard in order to achieve your dream. I do believe in given talent and that it is easier for some people to succeed in sports than for others but being a professional athlete requires a lot of discipline, hard work and strength. Therefore, I think identifying with an athlete is somehow easy because they are given the same opportunities you are. They are more or less people like us and they managed to achieve their dream which inspires me to keep striving to achieve mine. They have shown me that it is discipline and a non-stoppable belief in yourself which lifts you

to a higher level and helps you to achieve your goal. Moreover, they show that you can change the game if you want to and overcome difficulties. They highlight that giving up is not an answer even if you have to face discrimination, racism or gender ideologies.

After leaving the class, I could not stop thinking about the Commerzbank advertisement which featured the Women's German National Soccer Team. The ad was released in May 2019 in order to promote the Women's Soccer World Cup 2019 (DFB 2019: n.p.) and came to my mind after rethinking what I had just learned about athletes and how closely sports and protests are linked. The campaign is well-done and deals with many stereotypes referring to women playing soccer. The opening picture shows Dzsenifer Marozsán, Alexandra Popp and Melanie Leupolz, who are all members of the Women German National Team. They look straight into the camera and ask:

Alexandra Popp: "Do you actually know my name?"

Melanie Leupolz: "And mine?"

Dzsenifer Marozsán: "Right..."

Voiceover: "We are playing for a nation who does not know our names." (Ihr Spiel, Ihr Beat, Ihre Bank 2019: 0:00-0:04)<sup>1</sup>



In a sarcastic but professional way, the advertisement also highlights that there is an extensive gap between female and male soccer in Germany. While the Men's Soccer

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<sup>1</sup> Translation made by the author. German Original:

Alexandra Popp: „Weißt du eigentlich wie ich heiße?“

Melanie Leupolz: „Und ich?“

Dzsenifer Marozsán: „Genau...“

Voiceover: „Wir spielen für eine Nation die unseren Namen nicht kennt.“



Team is predominant throughout the whole year, the attention for the Women's Team bears little comparison. The advertisement also makes fun of the existing pay gap between men and women. They mention that they received a tea set when they won the European Championship for the first time in 1989 (Ihr Spiel, Ihr Beat, Ihre Bank 2019: 0:16-0:19).

I think the Commerzbank campaign featuring the German Women National Team nicely sums up what we have learned about protest in sports. It is a great platform to raise your voice and address issues which are not always comfortable to talk about. Moreover, the performance of the female athletes in the mentioned advertisement is extremely inspiring because they keep playing soccer and fighting for their dreams despite all prejudices and difficulties.

### **2.3 Class 6, November 20: Nike: Capitalism and Activism**

"In America, taking *any* stand is good for business; this much is clear" (Petrarca 2018: n.p.). This quote immediately comes to my mind when I am thinking about Class six because we started this lesson by discussing the statement above. Our first task was to position ourselves in relation to the statement and most of us agreed with it. Even when a brand, a politician or an athlete takes a stand which backfires or which does not fit the debate or situation he or she still took a stand and that is, for most of the time, better for business than taking none at all (cf. Class Discussion Nov. 20. 2019).

In relation to our seminar and its title “Controversial Advertising“ even a controversy evolving around a brand, a corporation or a product is good for its business because what we have also learned in this session is that a controversy brings polarization. Polarization brings publicity and that is something vitally important for business (cf. Class Discussion Nov. 20. 2019). Taking Nike’s advertisement into consideration, we can see that the campaign had a huge influence on different levels. It led to a nationwide discussion about how protests in sports can affect other parts in society and inspired a lot of people to believe in their dreams. Moreover, the “NFL is facing a ‘racial divide‘ in its fan base“ ( Petrarca 2018: n.p.) and has to deal with the consequences the Dream Crazy campaign has created.

Another statement we dealt with in class was the following: “Where once they feared to speak up, now it can actually be a liability for [corporations] to remain silent.“ (Bain 2018: n.p.). In relation to this quote we discussed whether political silence is a liability or not. To my mind, it is very difficult to find a general answer to this and is more complex than I originally thought. On the one hand, it is rather negative for brands or corporations not to speak when it comes to publicly addressed topics because corporations have a huge influence and they should use it in order to target and address social injustices or difficulties. Their impact can reach people on another level and reminds their buyers what the brand stands for. It helps to shape a brand’s identity. But on the other hand, speaking up in a public debate is always linked to a certain risk. Corporations fear running their reputation because if they do not act in the right way, which can be quite difficult with certain topics, consumers might turn their backs on the brand and do not buy products any more.

To sum up, I have learned how closely capitalism and activism are linked. It takes a lot of risk for a brand to take a stance in public debates in terms of their reputation but it can also help to shape the future. Corporations focus on their business but to my mind they should never forget how much influence their voices entail.

## **2.4 Class 8, December 4: Racism in Advertising**

Our eighth session was about racism in advertising. We dealt with a lot of different examples. Finally, we dedicated a huge part of the lesson to think about what we can do to stop racism occurring in advertising. In retrospective, this session was one of the most important for my learning process. I gained a lot of new knowledge and was able to observe advertising from different perspectives.

We dived into our topic by analyzing a German advertisement. It has been released by the brewery “Brauhoof Saar“ and features a new beer which is called “Black Bitch“ (Brauhoof Saar 2019: n.p.). The description of the beer says that it is easy to drink and does not have any tabus, it is deep black (Brauhoof Saar 2019: n.p.). Not only is the ad extremely racist but also sexist and offensive. The sexualized term “Bitch“ in this case refers to black women, which are depicted as less inhibited as white women and easy to get (cf. Class Discussion Dec. 4. 2019.). Drinking the beer is like drinking a black woman. According to the ad, this is easy. Black women are depicted as objects and that they do not have any tabus (cf. Class Discussion Dec. 4. 2019). This advertisement is highly racist. In my opinion, it shows a very old-fashioned way of thinking as it is very imperialistic and makes use of stereotypes which are used from a white subjectivity.

We talked about different kinds of racism which can appear in an advertisement. First, there is the “accidental racism“ (cf. Handout Class 8, Dec. 4. 2019) or “inadvertent racism“ (cf. Handout Class 8, Dec. 4. 2019). We speak about this kind of racism in ads when the released advertisements or campaigns are pulled back right away which shows that the producers and corporation does not mean to be racist within their advertisement (cf. Class Discussion Dec. 4. 2019). They did not want to be offensive and therefore offered an apology by taking the campaign down. The other kind of racism is “racial stereotyping“ (cf. Handout Class 8, Dec. 4. 2019). This kind of racism deals with the overrepresentation of Black people or people of Color doing sport or being shown in a sexualized representation and also refers to the “overrepresentation of Black men as criminal“ (cf. Class Discussion Dec. 4. 2019).



As an example, we talked about the Adidas “Predator“ advertisement featuring the Black footballer Paul Pogba. The campaign advertises a new football shoe from Adidas which is called “Predator“. A predator is someone who hunts others and by presenting the shoe with a young, Black man, the ad becomes highly racist. Not only does it support the overrepresentation of crime reports by black men but also a racist and imperialistic idea of black people being hunters (cf. Class Discussion Dec. 4. 2019).



At the end of the session we talked about what needs to be done in order to stop racism in advertising. To achieve the goal of non-racist advertising, we need to focus on the production of racist campaigns. If the only people who are producing the ad are white, heterosexual, christian and able-bodied men, more often the ad will be racist. If those standards do not change advertising will remain the way it is today (cf. Class Discussion Dec. 4. 2019). Therefore, I think that it is necessary to create diversity in campaign teams in order to have different perspectives on a topic. Moreover, it is vitally important to establish an awareness for racism and to stop color-blind-racism which explains that a majority of people believe that racism is not a problem anymore but it certainly is (cf. Class Discussion Dec. 4. 2019).

As an input for further thinking, we spoke about German advertising and Prof. Dr. Olson told us that racism in advertising in Germany is more common than it is in the U.S. It terrifies me and makes me feel uncomfortable bearing our history in mind. I looked up German advertisements in order to see if racism is still common in German advertising. I felt angry when I saw how many ads are racist and found an

advertisement produced by Ferrero in 2013. It deals with one of their products called “FERRERO KÜSSCHEN“ which are produced with dairy milk and are therefore brown but during the summer they are available in white chocolate. In order to advertise the white chocolate, Ferrero produced an ad where it says “Germany votes for white. White Ferrero Küsschen forever.“ (Ferrero 2013: n.p.).<sup>2</sup> It is extremely and highly racist. Moreover, it simplifies Germany in a way that white is the only right answer. The fact that it says “forever“ is crucial because it seems as if the producers did not take anything from the past and history of Germany because excluding others and glorifying one group is something which should never be happening.



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<sup>2</sup> Translation made by the author. The original says: „Deutschland wählt weiss. Weisse Ferrero Küsschen für immer.“

## **2.5 Class 12 , January 23: Gillette's We Believe: The Best Men Can Be (2019)**

“Boys will be boys“ is not only a phrase which is known and used for decades but also challenged and discussed in Gillette's “We Believe: The Best Men Can Be“ advert from 2019. It calls out sexual harassment, bullying and toxic masculinity (King 2019: n.p.). Further, it encourages men to “rethink what it means to be the best version of themselves“ (King 2019: n.p.) and tries to give an input for developing a new and modern picture of masculinity.

We introduced the new topic by watching Gillette's ad together and discussing our emotional and affective reactions afterwards. As we were all deeply engaged in the topic of Critical Media Analysis, which we learned throughout the seminar, we were now focussed on small details. I recognized that I noticed more details in Gillette's ad than for example in Nike's Dream Crazy ad in our first lesson. This made me realize that I had not only engaged with the methods but also unconsciously internalized them. My first reactions were very emotional to which the music within the ad contributed a lot. I thought that the advertisement was very well-done and that the producers also put much thought in it. As toxic masculinity was the main topic and it was shown what harm it does to women, I felt connected to the subjects addressed in the advertisement.



In order to dive into a deeper discussion the terms “toxic masculinity“ and “hegemonic masculinity“ were introduced. Toxic masculinity is a kind of masculinity

which is understood negatively and refers to non-preferable traits of men, for example sexual harassment, disrespecting woman, sexist behavior and bullying (cf. Class Discussion Jan. 22. 2019). Moreover, it includes hyper-masculinity, violent behavior and dominance (cf. Class Discussion Jan. 22. 2019).

I read two additional texts in order to get a better grasp of the term “hegemonic masculinity“. Hegemonic masculinity is described as “a form of masculinity that is accorded greater cultural and political legitimacy than others“ (Griffin 2018: 378-380) and “an ideal type of masculinity that imposes upon all other masculinities“ (Howson 2006: 1-8). Moreover, it also secures the dominance of men and subordination of women (Griffin 2018: 378-380) and underlines what we have learned in class: Women hold up the patriarchy and as long as they do not act against it, these power structures will remain and change will not be introduced (cf. Class Discussion Jan. 22. 2019).

The Gillette’s advertisement acts as a part of a larger campaign (King 2019: n.p.) and wants to encourage men to reflect on their behavior towards other men and women and if they can make changes in their behavior. It is an attempt to introduce a more respectful communication and respectful way of dealing with one another. As I thought about the ad tackling toxic masculinity and about the text I engaged with, I was wondering how the ideal of a hegemonic and toxic masculinity was portrayed in advertising in earlier times. When Gillette had the feeling of needing such an advert, there must have been various campaigns in the past which reflected the opposite and supported the idea of toxic masculinity.

While looking for advertisements or campaigns that represent toxic and hegemonic masculinity, I came across an advert of the fashion house of Dolce and Gabbana. They produced it in order to advertise their 2007 spring and summer collection (Gurrieri 2019: n.p.)<sup>3</sup>. The fashion label was criticized for its controversial campaign because it portrays and simulates a gang rape scene (Gurrieri 2019: n.p.). It does not only violate and harass women but also presents them as objects. This ad is an example of how toxic and hegemonic masculinity had been portrayed in

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<sup>3</sup> <https://theconversation.com/profiles/lauren-gurrieri-5402/articles>

advertising in recent years. Of course, not all advertisements featuring men are toxic or hegemonic but throughout my research I have found a lot of advertisements that are. Referring to the Dolce and Gabbana campaign, it supports hegemonic masculinity insofar as it subordinates women. It resembles the negative qualities in men which Gillette highlights in its “We Believe“ campaign and shows that it was indeed necessary to address the issue of toxic masculinity.



To sum it up nicely, the campaign “We Believe“ produced by Gillette was one of the advertisements I liked most because, despite its high quality, it did not occur to me to be somehow forced. While watching the ad I sometimes forgot that it is an actual advert, and this shows that the message behind the product is highlighted in such a way that it wants to address problematic topics and does not only work with the topic in order to sell a product.

### **3. Conclusion**

Coming to a conclusion at the end of this semester and after deeply engaging with the topic of controversial advertising once again, makes me realize how my attitude towards advertising and its meaning within our social community has changed. I now think about advertising campaigns not as something which pops up on my phone in between scrolling through social media or which accidentally confronts me while watching tv.

As I already mentioned in my introduction, I think that advertising can deeply influence your emotion if it is well-made. During this class, I found myself more than once overwhelmed after watching the various advertisements I have discussed in my reading journal. From choking up to nearly crying to happiness and anger, I felt a lot of emotions and I have never thought I would be so intensively affected by advertising. This has not only shown me that advertising campaigns have a great ability to carry depth and meaning within them, but that the producer behind those campaigns have a certain responsibility when it comes to finding a brand's voice and how they want to present their brand. I learned that it is no longer enough to be present in advertising as a brand but also to carry a message and engage with topics that might go beyond the brand's usual frameworks.

Referring to my individual engagement with advertising after this seminar, I am sure that I will react more sensitively and be mindful to advertisements. Especially the classes in which we discussed racism in advertising and where we talked about sports and protests influenced me a lot insofar that they showed me a very different perspective on advertising. Even if some consider advertising to be "just about ads", I do not want to accept the fact that some campaigns still revolve around racist stereotypes, imperialist attitudes or old-fashioned gender prejudices. In my opinion, it is also my responsibility not to support advertising that seems to uphold those outdated images because advertising is something that everyone is confronted with in their daily life and therefore everyone needs to pay attention to the deeper meaning within advertisements.

Nevertheless, the whole seminar was very interesting. It supported and deepened my knowledge and further engagement with this topic in which I became very interested. I hope to get the chance to attend more seminars about critical media studies. I can for sure say that this seminar not only extend my academic skills but also taught me a lot about myself and influenced me in my non-academic life as well. To my mind, this is a more than positive sign that a seminar has fulfilled its purpose: not only deepening a student's academic skills but also contributing to his or her personal life.



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