

THE EVOLUTION OF NIKE'S ADVERTISING TO WOMEN
IN VOGUE MAGAZINE: 1988-2005

by

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A THESIS

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Title: The Evolution of Nike's Advertising to Women in Vogue Magazine: 1988-2005

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This paper examines the evolution of Nike's advertisements to women from 1988-2005. Specifically, the print advertisements used were run in Vogue magazine during this period, totaling over 120 placements from several unique ad campaigns. The main objective of this study is to track the changes, both textually and visually, of these advertisements and examine the deeper meaning behind the messages. Nike is one of the biggest fitness and exercise brands in the United States and worldwide, thus, their advertisements have a wide reach and audience. Advertising to women is not always empowering or positive—many brands instead choose to use sexualized or objectifying messages to sell products. But, Nike successfully spoke to women in a personal and empathetic way in several of their campaigns, especially during the 1990s.

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Introduction

The history of women in athletics is fraught with obstacles and sexism, but is also a story that has undergone enormous and vital change in recent decades. The starting point of recent developments was the enactment of Title IX in 1972, which is widely credited with sweeping changes for women's rights, and securing the rights of girls and women across the country equal access to sports programs and teams. While women still face discrimination in this area, they have gained traction in the male-dominated sports field:

Historically, female athletes have been subject to scrutiny for crossing gender lines and entering the "man's world" of sport.... As a place where traditionally masculine ideologies such as competition, performance, strength, power, dominance, and winning are heralded, sport is not the "automatic" option for girls and women that it is for boys and men in our culture. That is, the traditional, communally scripted female path does not include athleticism as one of the gender-normative options. (Richman, Shaffer 1).

Women have come quite far in this this field recent years, considering that the notion that women should not--or were not even physically able to compete in athletics--is one that has only recently been proven wrong. Sport is one tangible way of breaking through restrictive gender norms, both literally and figuratively. The notion that women can be seen as serious competitors directly challenges our culture's construction of femininity and the idea that women should be passive and very conscious of appearance alone, and not strength or athletic ability.

While boys are traditionally encouraged to express their competitive and assertive behaviors, girls are often shown that these tendencies are not feminine or acceptable. The dramatic increase in female involvement in organized sports in recent

decades points to the erosion of this restrictive thinking. Athletics have provided a means for women to escape the sometimes stifling gender norms and expectations that society imposes. Studies have proven that girls' involvement in athletics has tangible benefits beyond fitness. According to one study, "greater precollege sports participation predicted a more favorable body image, greater perceived physical competence, more flexible gender role attributes (i.e., greater masculinity), greater enjoyment of sports, and (marginally) higher levels of self-esteem." (Shaffer, Wittes 5). In addition to the numerous physical benefits of exercise, sports and team participation also fosters maturity and the development of important mental and emotional skills. Studies have shown that girls who participate in team sports and athletics possess higher self-esteem and positive body image (Cohan 3).

Title IX is widely attributed with ushering in a new era of greater respect for women in sport and institutionalizing equality in athletics as a whole. While granting women greater access to sports programs certainly ensures benefits such as fitness and team participation, it also points to greater trends in society in regards to women's rights. Ensuring more opportunities to participate in team sports for young women reflects more meaningful changes in society:

Over time, men's intercollegiate sports flourished in the public eye... Women's sports, on the other hand, governed by physical educators, evolved and changed from emphasizing only the joy of participation to a greater appreciation for the challenges of competition. This evolution in women's sports occurred mostly in obscurity until the appearance of Title IX, which forced an intersection with men's sports and a "new paradigm for civil rights" emerging from the 1950s and 1960s (Estler 2).

Title IX secured female participation in sports for schools as well as garnering greater attention for the issue in society. These developments have positive impacts not only on physical well-being and fitness, but also mental and emotional health too.

Women's representation in advertising and media is another relationship that has long been plagued with issues of sexism and objectification. In today's cluttered media landscape, modern consumers are bombarded with more advertising messages than ever before. Americans are bombarded with hundreds of messages daily. While advertising may not often be respected as a significant portion of regular media, it is a form of communication that has the power to shape opinion and social norms.

In his research examining ethical advertising to women, John Alan Cohen discusses how "advertising has the power to change a set of values held by the collective majority. It can influence people to switch their attitude regarding things which they might ordinarily think of as morally wrong - to an attitude that it's morally right or acceptable" (Cohan 4). This power can become troubling when considering the prevalence of advertising that uses sexually-charged messages to persuade consumers. The use of these kinds of messages most commonly objectify women and this objectification has numerous consequences. Cohen points to several major areas of concern in depictions of women in advertising. Ad messages that focus on a "sex sells" mentality are damaging to women because they often rely on depicting women as helpless and weak, and thus propagate the idea that the ideal woman is vulnerable and weak. These ads also focus on women having perfect bodies, which is often unattainable thanks to digital airbrushing, and portray women as sex objects—which can lead to more permissible behaviors of violence towards women. (Cohan 6). So,

while these kinds of advertising may often be seen as a frivolous and sexy way to sell products, they have real and lasting consequences for women and societal standards.

In general, advertising fitness and sport to women throughout the second half of the twentieth century, many advertising messages are centered on appearance, specifically weight-loss and the idea that women should use exercise as a means of becoming more attractive. While both genders use exercise as an appearance-centered activity and a means of weight loss and maintaining an attractive body, women are most often targeted by these messages. The media tends to approach men as serious athletes, while marketing sport to women as a means to lose weight and look good—a sexist notion that trivializes women. In contrast, treating women as serious, dedicated athletes looking to develop determination, mental discipline and work ethic, and experience sportsmanship represents respect for women's physical abilities.

Advertising messages are a function of a company's brand and are among the most direct means of communicating brand philosophy to consumers. From an outsider's perspective, the concept of branding and brand development may seem to only cover superficial details about a company's dealings—their logos, target consumers and most popular products, for example. But branding delves much deeper into the essence and purpose of a business. A company sells a service or physical good, but a brand communicates the essence and personality surrounding the ways in which business is conducted, as well as how a company interacts with audiences and consumers. On a basic level, branding involves attaching traits, messages and values to a company, thus transforming a business into an entity with a unique personality. Despite what skeptics may believe, this is not merely the superfluous and superficial

attachment of feel-good traits to enhance a company's public popularity. Rather, a strong brand roots all aspects of its business in a strong foundation of principles. Thus, everything the company does, from the way its employees go about doing business to the ways in which it handles and treats customers, is influenced and should function as an extension of this brand persona. Former Creative Director at Nike, Stanley Hainsworth, describes a brand as “an entity that engenders an emotional connection with a consumer. Consumers emotionally connect with brands when the brands repeatedly provide something that the consumer wants, desires, or needs” (Millman 130). For example, there are many companies that sell athletic shoes and apparel, but Nike differentiates its brand in a number of ways. The process used to design or research shoes, the ways clothing is sold, or the marketing messages used, are all facets of a larger, encompassing brand strategy. Ideally, a successful brand works from this brand perspective to shape all the ways in which business is conducted.

Nike is one of the best examples of a modern company with a strong and well-developed brand. Nike began as small operation selling Japanese-made running shoes out of car trunks to runners at track meets, and has flourished into an international, billion-dollar company in a matter of a few decades. The Nike “Swoosh” logo has become ubiquitous and the slogan “Just Do It” eloquently captures so much about the spirit of Nike in just three words. This “Just Do It” slogan “speaks to the restraint and inhibition in everyday life that keep people from the experience of transcendence. Nike provides a language of self-empowerment—no matter who you are, no matter what your physical, economic or social limitations.” (Goldman, Papson 19-20). The Nike brand, which is predominantly and most directly spoken and felt through the advertising

messages—but also through a variety of more indirect channels—is one that encourages self-determination and improvement, competition and passion. Thus, staying within this brand identity means that consumers should never see a Nike campaign telling women how to lose weight or featuring messages that place appearance over performance or competitive ability. Nike has carefully created a company and brand that glorifies these values and injects them into popular culture in a way that transcends just the selling of shoes or clothes.

Nike has worked with some of the most successful professional athletes to build its brand. The most iconic of these athletes is Michael Jordan, who has an entire Nike line bearing his name. Nike has long straddled an interesting line in their use of top athletes—like LeBron James, Tiger Woods, Serena Williams and Jackie Joyner-Kersey—to represent the brand while also extolling the belief that anyone with a body can be an athlete. Nike is able to find kinship in both the champion and the underdog, especially through the help of their advertising messages. The use of the best professional athletes is a way of associating their brand with champions. Nike uses these athletes' likenesses as a way of showing that their brand strives for greatness and is associated with these athletic achievements. Nike's general audience is much broader than just professional athletes. Their brand is built off the values of uncompromising determination, competitiveness and striving for improvement—universal values that are shared by both professionals and the underdog, or anyone who is willing to work for it. Thus, being a champion of female athletes, and celebrating and encouraging women in a field in which they have been classically marginalized and under-respected was in many ways a natural progression for their brand. Half of this country's population was

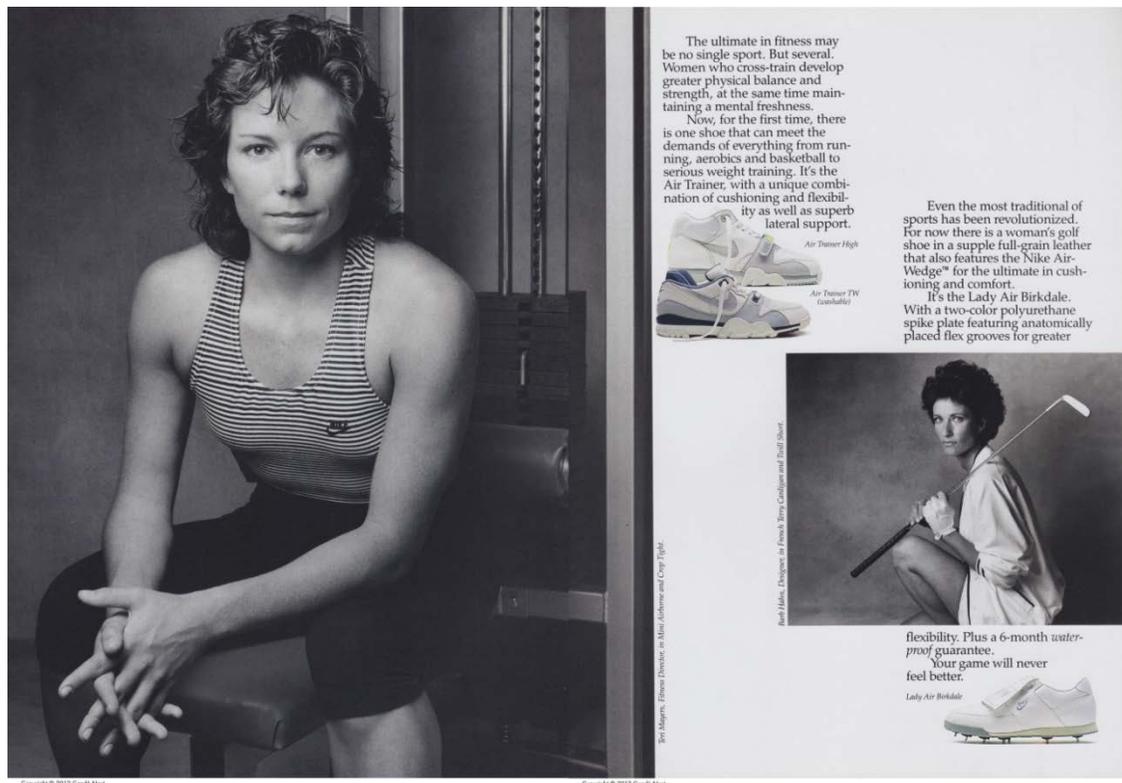
not regularly included or respected in the field of sports until the US government had to make a law granting them equal privileges. Nike has unparalleled opportunities to challenge the social issues that relate to the focus of their company.

For the purposes of narrowing the scope of this paper, I choose to analyze Nike advertisements run in *Vogue* magazine from 1988-2005. The use of *Vogue* provided both a practical means of deciding which campaigns to include, as well as a way of looking at how consumers came in contact with Nike's messages on a more day-to-day basis. *Vogue* is one of the most popular fashion magazines in the United States and has an average circulation of over 1.2 million. The magazine describes itself as: "thought-provoking, relevant and always influential, *Vogue* defines the culture of fashion" (Conde Nast).

Part One, The Late 1980s:

Nike first begins to advertise directly to women in *Vogue* magazine in the late 1980s. For the purposes of this project, I will examine advertisements run beginning on March 1, 1988, when Nike placed an eight-page spread in *Vogue* directly targeting female athletes. Though this ad was not the very first women's ad that Nike ran in *Vogue*, it is the first major placement in Nike's efforts to reach women. The few ads run before this were simple, text-free and showed only models wearing Nike shoes and clothing. This ad run in March, 1988, is the first significant piece for Nike in this medium because of its length and the emphasis provided by the text that accompanies the photos.

The first page begins with “A revolution in motion,” and the pages that follow feature Nike shoes meant for women in golf, tennis, cross training, aerobics, running and walking. Nike outlines all the ways in which their shoes provide the best-possible workout experience for a wide range of activities women prefer. The text for each shoe boasts superior cushioning, balance and light-weight design—all specifically tailored for each specific sport: “This is a fitness revolution. And the more serious a woman’s commitment, the more important it is that she get into equally serious footwear. Nike-Air is something of a revolution as well. Repeated scientific studies over the last seven years prove Nike-Air provides far and away the best cushioning available” (Nike. *Vogue* 1 March 1988: 243-250. Print.). While ads from this period mainly focus on the superior qualities of the shoe, it is important to note that the ads are talking to women as serious and determined athletes. Nike also offers many different types of shoes, both within a specific activity—there are several types of running shoes based on the athletes specific foot type—as well as shoes for many different sports and activities. Running shoes began as Nike’s primary product, but the expansion into other sports shows their acknowledgment and commitment to taking the needs of female athletes seriously and recognizes women as a viable demographic for top-of-the-line exercise equipment. Whether the women being targeted use the shoes for intense cross-training or just their weekly aerobics classes, Nike emphasizes the fact that their brand understands the unique needs of female athletes.



(Nike. *Vogue* 1 March 1988: 243-250. Print.)

The visual style is emblematic of several of the ads that Nike ran in their first attempts to advertise to women. The models in this spread are all athletic-looking and fit, not very thin like models normally featured in fashion magazines like *Vogue*. The models are also very natural-looking and wearing relatively little make-up. Nevertheless, despite being dressed in workout clothing, many of these models are still shown in passive positions, crouched or sitting instead of reflecting the sport for which they are modeling. The photos are set against backdrops, clearly indicating that these are models and not in life-like or actual workout environment—adding a feeling of separation from reality. The black and white photography does not reflect any sense of movement; instead, the photos feel like portraits, as the women stare straight into the

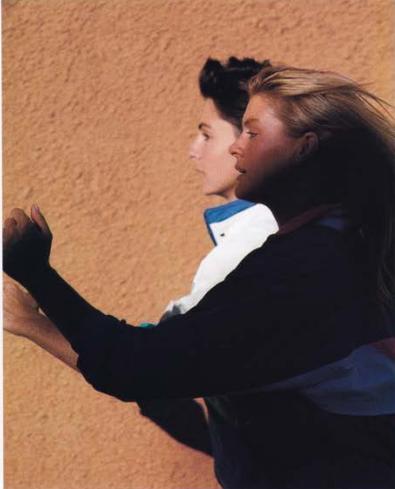
camera, their bodies posed in more artful positions. While the text simply focuses on describing these Nike shoes, the photography provides a more intimate and personal feel to the ads. Having the models look directly into the camera offers a sense of directness from these women. Female models are often depicted in poses and expressions that convey submissiveness, but these Nike models are not shying away from the camera, and while they are in mostly inactive positions, their gaze is forward, unflinching and engaging directly with the consumer.

These early ads during the late 1980s can be characterized by the features in this first spread: the passivity of the models and the strong focus on the technical features of the shoes themselves. Nike chose to run portions of this ad in subsequent months, as well as several other more minor ads. The latter short, one-to-two page spreads featured little-to-no text and were just visual ads meant to sell apparel. However, the style of the ads began to show models in much more dynamic poses—lifting weights, running, stretching. Nike also moved away from the black-and-white, portrait-style and started using colorful, eye-catching photos of these women exercising. In general, while Nike executives had acknowledged the need to begin advertising and marketing to female athletes at this time, this first eight-page spread was the most significant piece run during these first years. On a brand level, Nike had not yet found a cohesive message in targeting women beyond just accentuating the details of the shoes and clothing.

Part Two: The 1990s

A marked change in can be seen in February, 1990, when Nike shifts to include more emotion-based messages in their advertising to women. This ad launched a bigger

and more cohesive period of Nike's most well-known advertisements to women during the 1990s. The February ad is a three-page placement, with a color picture of two women, briskly power-walking in Nike shoes and apparel, reading "Stress management from Nike." The text on the following page then starts with "You can only do so much for so many. So this time, do something for yourself. And walk away from it all...And tell the rest of the world to take a number" (Nike. *Vogue* 1 Feb. 1990: 232-234. Print.). Like previous ads, the text then goes into the details of the shoe specifically, but these first few sentences exhibit an important shift in thinking from Nike. Incorporating the idea of exercise as stress-management—as women in the late twentieth century continued to take on more roles in the workforce—creates an emotional connection between Nike and the women they were hoping to reach. This ad shows a more conscious effort to broaden their brand position by speaking to women about bigger life issues, and to go beyond just trying to sell the specific attributes of Nike shoes or products. This ad shows one of the first real attempts by Nike to engage with women in a deeper and more personal way, in trying to show their empathy for women beyond just the realm of athletics.

You can only do so much for so many. So this time, do something for yourself. And walk away from it all. Just put on apparel and shoes designed precisely for the sport of walking. Shoes that are cushioned, from heel to toe, to relieve the stress and impact of each step. And flexible, so your foot will move naturally, easily. Just put on the Nike Air Healthwalker Plus or Air Healthwalker Max, fully cushioned walking shoes that are also machine washable. Or the Nike Air Street, a soft and supple performance shoe available in full-grain leather. Go ahead, take a walk. And tell the rest of the world to take a number.



Air Healthwalker Max, Air Healthwalker Plus, Air Street

For more information, call 1-800-344-NIKE. Monday-Friday, 7am-5pm, Pacific Time.

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(Nike. *Vogue* 1 Feb. 1990: 232-234. Print.)

The next ad in March, 1990, continues the idea of physical therapy introduced the month prior. The ad begins by listing all the different kinds of therapy and self-help methods people attempt to use, then posits Nike as the simple and effective alternative to all these. The model in the ad is a fit and healthy-looking young woman, running in the sun with a determined look on her face. These images of her capture the tone of confidence and energy of the message of the text. Much like the ad about stress-management, Nike mixes in an element of idealism before talking about the actual

product: “Therapy is where you find it. So start changing your life one step at a time. And run. Run, because of how it moves you. Run, because of how it becomes you” (Nike. *Vogue* 1 March 1990: 355-358. Print.). Using the concept of therapy is an interesting choice for Nike. It positions exercise as a natural means of mental development—a way use one’s body and physicality to work through emotional issues. Nike again attempts to show a greater connection of their brand with women’s deeper needs. They are not simply a running shoe company, but a brand that understands and serves a greater emotional role in consumers’ lives.

After the therapy ads, Nike then moves on to talking about another personal issue almost every woman struggles with in her life: diets. The first page of the spread lists all the different types of motivations for the various diets that many women attempt at some point: the New Year’s Resolution diet, the wedding day diet, the “I-wish-I-was-her” diet. (Nike. *Vogue* 1 Nov. 1990: 245-247. Print.). Nike offers a seemingly-simple solution to the pressure to be skinny and all these painstaking attempts at weight-loss: cross-training. Nike’s discussion of diets is a natural progression in their attempts to talk to women on a meaningful and personal level, and has a natural connection to exercise and fitness. But dieting is also a tricky subject for the Nike to tackle, as their brand extols the virtues of sport for the sake of competition, not weight-loss or image. Nike positions their brand as an answer to the restrictions and pressures that diets—and the image-consciousness that motivate these diets—and as a healthy way to forgo this stress. However, the stress behind all these diets comes from a greater outside pressure for women to be thin. The first page creatively shows how women are bombarded with the reminder that they must be thin during so many different stages in their life. Nike

tries to acknowledge through this ad, and the ones like it, that it is a brand that understands the problems and pressures that women face, and seeks to be seen as a means of escape. In that sense, this ad corresponds with previous brand messages, but only offers a different means to the same end: while exercise is a healthier way of staying fit, it is still used as a way to stay thin. Thus, in a deeper sense Nike does not provide a genuine escape from this endless pressure to conform and only one that is physically healthier and perhaps simpler. The ad matches the theme of the ads during that precede and follow it during those months—the way in which they identify greater personal struggles that women face and attempt to empathize and empower female athletes.

The ads that follow the initial ‘therapy’ and ‘diets’ ads from 1990 mark a greater move into this phase of more meaningful message in Nike advertising to women. During the 1990s, Nike centered their brand messages around these kinds of messages and made a name for themselves from these style of ads. In her research on these first years of Nike’s advertising to women, Jean Grow argues that “early Nike women's advertising, which debuted in 1990, systematically constructed women's athletic experiences within a series of mediated communities.” Grow explains that the power of these Nike ads comes from their attempts to create a sense of community for women by making “advertising a vehicle for women's self-empowerment through communal associations bounded by shared understandings of female culture. The poetic copy challenges women to reexamine gendered myths and to recast these stories with their own stories of empowerment. In essence the ads beckon women to participate in this newly formed mediated community.” (Grow 10). Grow focuses strongly on the

community-creation aspect of these ads. The personal understanding of women's emotional challenges and stresses provides a stronger bond and feeling of understanding for female consumers, which is pivotal in this sense of community-building. On the most basic level, Nike begins to form their brand messages around identifying these more personal issues to create an intimate bond of understanding with female consumers. By identifying common issues and problems with which many women struggle—the pressure to be thin and the diets this begets, stress fear and the therapy needed to handle those emotions—Nike looks to show female consumers that they understand where they are coming from. In a sense, Nike looks to call out these problems and share the emotional burden with women, offering a means of handling these problems through exercise.

While these ads do serve to foster a sort of community, there are also several manifestations of a theme of self-empowerment. The aspect of community is evident in the ways in which Nike chooses to address issues that so many women face, like dieting, stress and fears about the future. Nike is able to create a sense of greater inclusion through attempting to show that Nike understands the issues that women struggle with and tries to participate in female culture, thus providing a sort of theoretical community. Nike then inserts its brand into this conversation by suggesting that exercise and athletics can be used as a way of empowering yourself and overcoming these challenges. But the idea that exercise is a way to pull yourself out of these pitfalls and empower yourself to move beyond societal pressures is an inherently personal effort as well. This sense of community can provide support or comfort in acknowledging that you are not the only woman facing these problems, but the act of

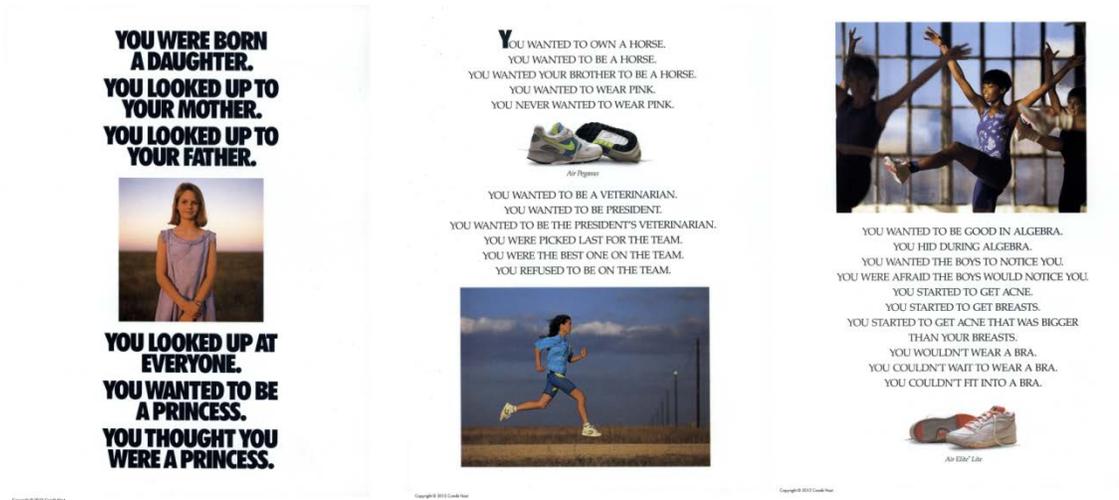
over-coming them can only be achieved individually. Nike has identified certain factors in women's lives that cause stress or doubt to show women they understand in order to create a personal connection. Exercise is then shown as a way of building physical and mental strength needed to overcome these problems. These acts of self-empowerment are only achievable through oneself however. Thus, Nike builds a sense of community with these messages, while also encouraging women to change their own lives individually.

The shift in advertising messages before and after 1990 was also visually apparent as well. While the first ads featured women in mostly passive, inactive poses, these models starkly contrasted this. Nike quickly shifts the focus of these visuals and the women are shown power-walking, biking and running, faces determined and muscles flexed. All of the models, from the initial ads in the late 1980s on, are fit, athletic and healthy-looking women. The images of women exercising together help to reinforce Grow's thoughts on community through exercise—the act of working out together is a literal manifestation of women coming together with the help of Nike. But these ads feature women working out solo just as much as they show them in groups, which also bring a sense of self-empowerment as well. The determination evident in these models' faces shows this sense of empowerment.

An eight-page spread run in the April, 1991 issue of *Vogue* marked yet another pivotal moment in the Nike brand standpoint. The ad is known as “Daughters” and the front page text—in bold, block letters—reads: “You were born a daughter. You looked up to your mother. You looked up to your father. You looked up at everyone. You wanted to be a princess. You thought you were a princess” (Nike. *Vogue* 1 April 1990:

225-232. Print.). Accompanying the text is a portrait of a young girl looking hopefully at the camera. The text on the following pages follows this style, as it goes through the stages of a woman's life, covering the highlights and heartbreaks of each. Interspersed with these powerful and broad statements, some of which talk about sports but many cover other themes, are pictures of women working out. A photo of a different Nike shoe is featured on each page, but those pictures and the Nike swoosh logo and "Just do it" on the last page are the only other evidence that this is a Nike ad. Unlike previous advertisements, there is no discussion or highlights of the shoes themselves. Instead, the ad allows the reader to infer the fusion of sport and personal growth. While the spread is still technically an advertisement with the purpose of selling Nike products, it also serves as a powerful brand statement. The personal connection that Nike was fostering in previous ads is even more obvious now. The second-to-last page reads "You became significant to yourself," along with a picture of a woman jumping rope. Nike again focuses on the theme of using sports and fitness as a means for female self-empowerment. This is also the first of several times that the Nike attaches its brand to stages of women's lives. Nike asserts that it is a brand that understands the struggles and hopes in women's lives as a way of creating a more personal connection with consumers and to build trust. Nike also strives to show that their brand understands and appreciates the diversity of these stages and the differences of among women. Women may not experience the details of these stages in the same way, but certain feelings and broader issues are universal and are used as a uniting force. The last page sums up these sentiments and features a picture of a woman dressed in a blouse and jeans—not even wearing exercise apparel. While these messages are consistent with the theme of earlier

ads, Nike has taken it a step further and placed even more focus on creating this personal connection through this shared understanding of the female condition.

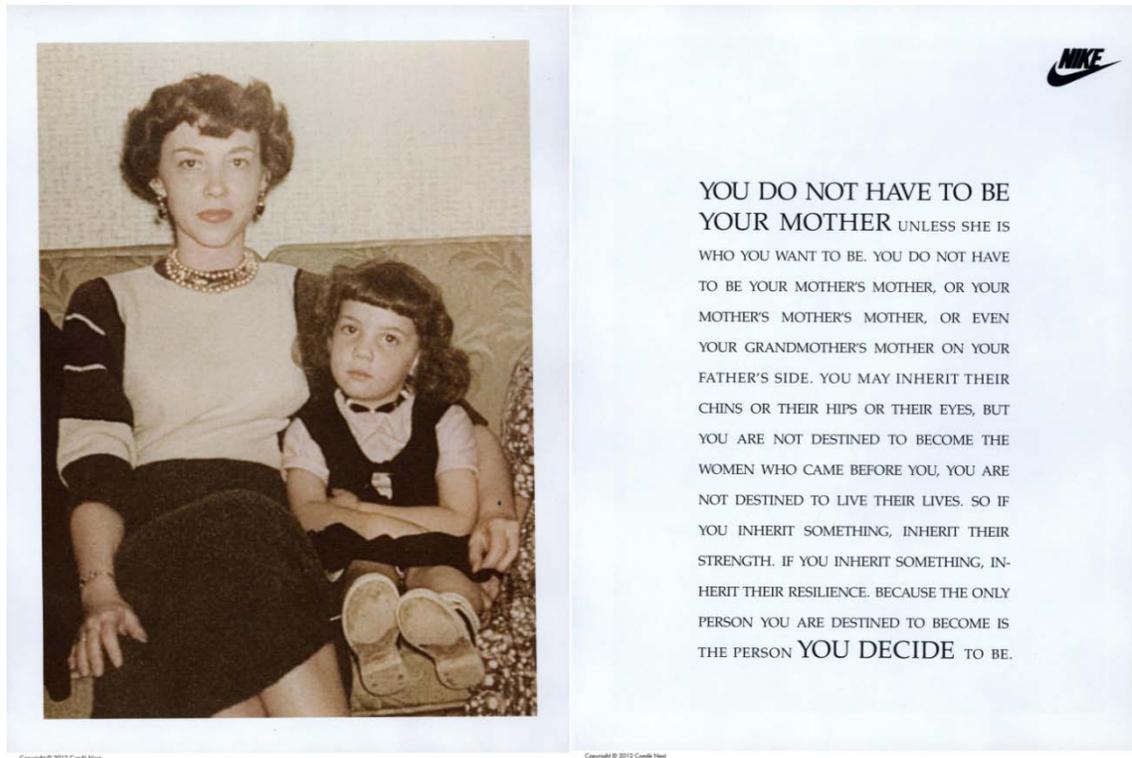


The Daughters ad, like those that follow, captures the basic essence of how Nike approached their advertising to women. These messages identify and acknowledge a universal issue or feeling of inadequacy that so many women feel and can identify with, and position sport as a means of liberating oneself through empowerment. As a brand, Nike thus positions their brand as the enabler of this liberation by offering the best way to experience exercise through their superior product. After running the 'Daughter' campaign several months in a row, Nike then followed up with another ad about being told "no": "All your life you are told the things you cannot do," reads the first sentence. "They will tell you no...you will tell them yes," are highlighted in big capital letters. Nike directly taps into fears of inadequacy and judgment that women often deal with: "Your life is a series of what everyone says about you, and what you say about yourself. So say yes" (Nike. *Vogue* 1 Sept. 1991: 402-405. Print.). They acknowledge that life is so often a struggle to handle all this rejection and projects a sense of empowerment

through taking control. A woman shown on the third page takes a long, powerful stride, face smiling into the sun as she runs outdoors. Nike suggests that this liberation can be found in pushing oneself in exercise and sport—and Nike’s superior shoes is the best way in which to have this experience. Nike moves to explicitly link their brand to messages of female strength and physical power as a means of overcoming bigger challenges women face in life.

In October, 1991, Nike ran another ad similar to the Daughters ad, this time featuring Mothers. The first page starts with big, bolded text reading, “You do not have to be your Mother,” opposite a retro picture of a mother and her young daughter (Nike. *Vogue* 1 Oct. 1990: 206-209. Print.). The ad uses a unique and very intimate relationship to address fear and feelings of lack of control, reminding readers that you do not have to physically become your mother—by inheriting her hips or chin—nor are you destined to lead the same life that she did. This fear is not necessarily founded in a dislike for one’s mother, but rather in the fear that genetics may have pre-destined one to follow someone else’s life without any control of their own. “If you inherit something, inherit their resilience,” the text continues, “because the only person you are destined to become is the person you decide to be.” The next page echoes this sentiment and ends with a reminder of how Nike shoes feature all the best technology for a better workout. The message again uses the female dynamic of a mother-daughter relationship to build a personal connection and trust with their audience. Much like previous ads, the body is shown to be a physical manifestation of this power—in this case, the power to decide one’s own fate and as a means of self-expression. So while Nike can only really help you to physically manifest this power through exercise, they are also trying to

inspire you to do so in much more metaphorical ways. Sport is used to as a way to exert this power literally.



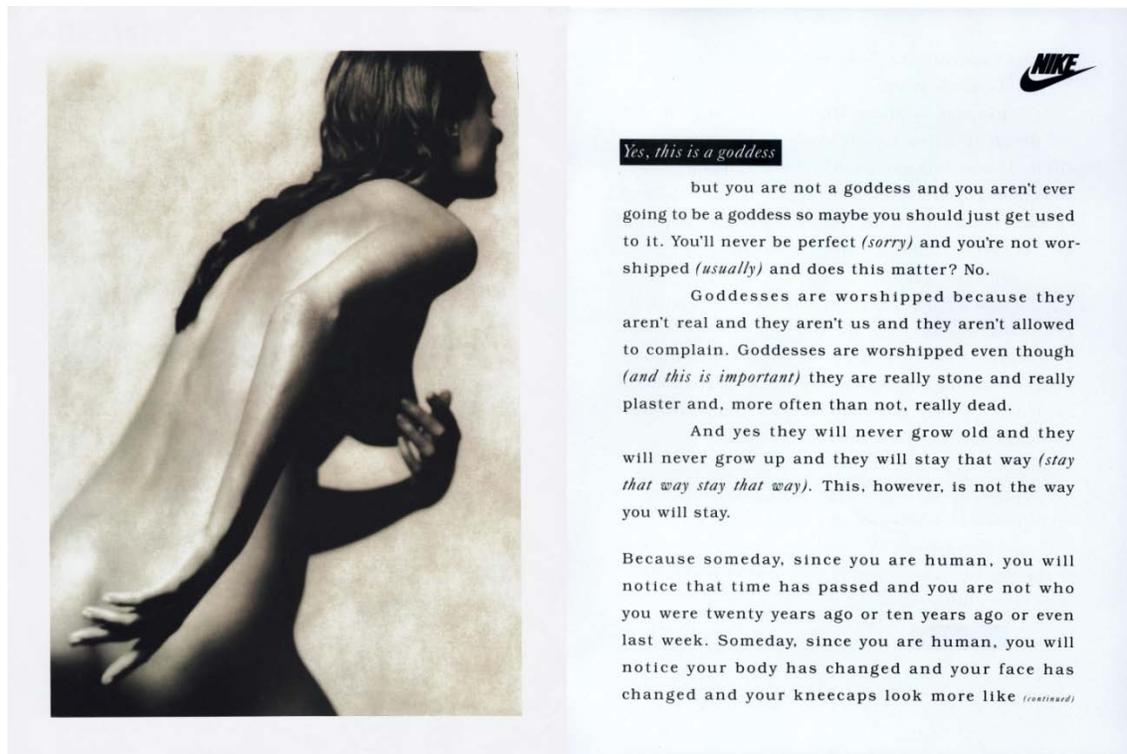
(Nike. *Vogue* 1 Oct. 1990: 206-209. Print.)

The next ad shown in the November issue confronts the idea of how statistics or measurements are used to judge women in ways they cannot control. Again, on a basic level, Nike is talking about a fear of inadequacy. This time, it is the inadequacy so many women feel when they are judged on their appearance and held to a standard they cannot control. These measurements, like chest and hip size or age, are so highly valued in society but do not capture the true essence and importance of a woman. Nor are these measurements, and the societal ideals that shape them, achievable or healthy for many women. Nike asserts that these measurements are not important and do not reflect the genuine worth of a person, a rejection that allows for freedom from the bonds of these

standards. While acknowledging that ‘statistics lie’ when it comes to women, the reader is reminded that statistics are actually pretty important when it comes to shoes in order to offer the best. The accompanying photo shows a woman gleefully high-kicking in an aerobics class, melding this concept of fitness and empowerment.

The next ad plays on the theme of goddesses. “You are not a goddess and you aren’t ever going to be a goddess, so maybe you should just get used to it,” begins the text. A goddess is used to stand for the ideal but inhuman woman. You are not a goddess, the reader is reminded, and so why not embrace the beauty of imperfection of being human: “And as you move, you will learn to rejoice in your body because it is yours and no one else’s. You will learn to rejoice in being imperfect because being perfect is such a complete and utter bore” (Nike. *Vogue* 1 Feb. 1992: 140-143. Print.). Goddess serves as the ideal woman and expectations of femininity, and thus the stifling standards of perfection—in this case, perfection is literally impossible as a goddess is not even completely human. Instead of lamenting the impossibility of this, they encourage women to embrace their human body for all that it can do—including exercise—and to understand that these imperfections come with this human body and should thus be celebrated. This idea again circles back to the idea of female-empowerment. Embracing imperfection as a way to escape insecurities and use one’s physicality to challenge the constricting and unrealistic expectations society holds for women. So while your kneecaps may begin to “resemble Winston Churchill more than ever,” one’s body and the imperfections that come with it should be embraced for all that they are capable. The visual accompanying the text featuring a nude model is an interesting choice for the ad. On the one hand, the use of nudity is eye-catching and

compliments the idea of physicality and celebrating the strength of one's body. But it is also distracting and the model's nudity makes her appear more vulnerable, exposed and sexualized and does not directly compliment the text or serve to bolster the overall message.



(Nike. *Vogue* 1 Feb. 1992: 140-43. Print.)

A series of ads following plays off the idea of how women are always labeled as “emotional” (Nike. *Vogue* 1 April. 1992: 230-233. Print.). The acknowledges that women are often called “emotional” as a way of dismissing their feelings and not taking women seriously. And yet, if a woman is to keep these feelings under wrap and remain calmer, she's then labeled as cool and heartless. This theme returns to a basic fear of being judged for things out of one's control—either way, you cannot win in this double standard. Nike positions their brand as one that understands, as the text on the

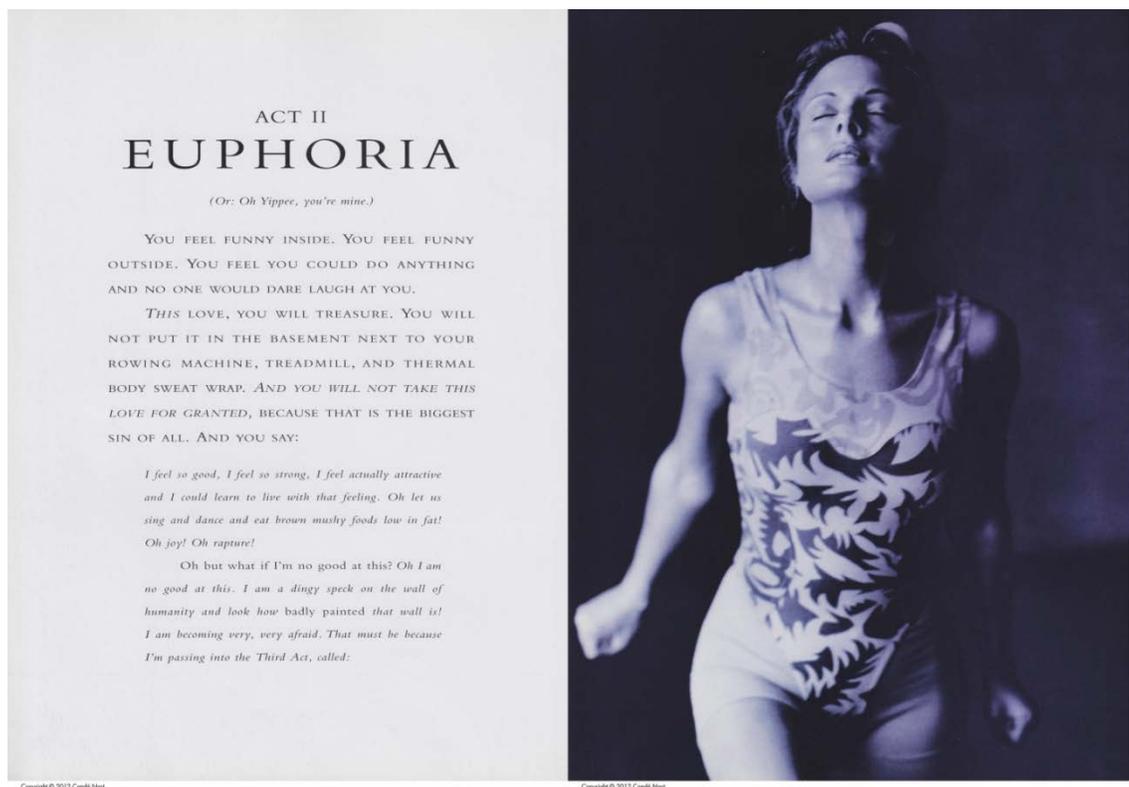
following page instead encourages women to ignore all this and push past it both literally and figuratively. You've shaped your body and can make it do amazing things, the reader is reminded, and thus you have the power to push beyond these standards. Nike also subtly acknowledges a greater issue of sexism, one that is especially pertinent to women in the workforce. The message acknowledges this aspect of sexism--and while there may not be a way for women to control these labels--the ad seems to encourage them to ignore them and push past them. By confronting a problem that is much bigger than sports, Nike made their brand relevant to their female audience's lives in a more significant way.

“Did you ever wish you were a boy?” asks an ad run later in August, 1992. The ad features a younger girl, sitting and holding a baseball glove while staring directly into the camera. The ad touches on the idea that sometimes there are moments that can cause girls to wonder if life would be easier had they been a boy. Would you have been taken more seriously when you wanted to play sports, for example? But in the end, the ad reminds the reader, no two boys, just like no two girls, are ever the same and so it does no good to wonder. “One day...” the reminds us, “you learn to stop beating yourself over the head for things that weren't.” And when you hear the words ‘you run like a girl,’ you'll finally be able to respond: “Yes. What did you think I was?” (Nike. *Vogue* 1 Aug. 1992: 50-52. Print.). While some may never have wished they had been born a boy, the ad does tap into a more universal sentiment that men may have it easier than women in some ways. Sports has traditionally been a male-dominated field, hence the sentiment that life may have been easier for boys in that way. For the Nike brand, this message is an opportunity to celebrate female empowerment. Nike again

acknowledges a common struggle among women—this time one that is especially pertinent to their audience of female athletes. They understand that especially in sports, boys have often not had to go through the same struggles as girls in asserting their own competitiveness and physicality. In a way, Nike is creating a sort of community of understanding for women: if you've ever secretly wondering this, you are not alone, they assure the reader. On a deeper level, they are also confronting sexism. While men and boys may not have to deal with the same issues of sexism, in sports or in other areas of life, but Nike celebrates female athletes and encourages them to move beyond these feelings and setbacks. It's a powerful brand message from Nike, as they are really trying to celebrate female athletes and encourage women, as well as acknowledging the challenges female athletes face.

“Falling in Love in Six Acts” is the next major campaign, featured in the October, 1993, issue. The twelve page spread is definitely the most metaphorical ad campaign by Nike thus far. The six stages in order are: Lust, Euphoria, Fear, Disgust, the Truth, the Finale. The ad examines love, a pivotal experience in the human condition, and examines the ways in which the experience is both uplifting and frustrating. The progression quickly takes a cynical stance, but in the end seems to argue that the process is worthy of the effort, and that is why we all continue to participate in the experience. Though the connection to sport is murky, the message seems to be that in love, whether it is of a person or activity, will excite, challenge and frustrate you. But the process is ultimately worthy, as “there is something to be gained from commitment. There are rewards for staying when you would rather leave” (Nike. *Vogue* 1 Oct. 1993: 107-118. Print.). The ad is incredibly metaphorical and poetic, and

would certainly not have been used in trying to reach a male audience. While these kinds of symbolic messages seemed to work for Nike in previous ad campaigns, this message seems to rely heavily on “feelings-based” ads to women to the point of excessive. The connection to sport or competition seems flimsy, insomuch as Nike almost believes that this kind of dramatic style will appeal to their female audience without having a clear connection to their company or brand ideals.



(Nike. *Vogue* 1 Oct. 1993: 107-118. Print.).

The last major ad campaign in this era circles back to the idea of mothers and daughters. The ad essentially asks, what kind of world do you mothers wish to leave for your daughters? Nike mentions sport as a means of offering daughters a tool to move past the struggles our generation faces: “If she plays sports, if she’s healthy and strong and self-assured, they won’t. Being active can make a difference in your life, in

the lives of women and in the lives of generations to come.” Nike returns to these themes of exercise as a means of female-empowerment, this time talking to mothers and plays of the responsibility they feel for the well-being of the daughters as a motivation for exercising themselves, and for encouraging their daughters to participate in sports as well. The ad also ties together the themes of sexism, mother-daughter relationships and the benefits of fitness.

Later Stages of Ads: 2000 and On

After years of cultivating this female-empowerment theme through their advertisements, Nike’s messages dramatically shifted once more at the end of the decade. This time the shift was embodied by a set of futuristic ads beginning in September, 1999. These display both a drastic change in visual aesthetic from ads in previous months. The sleek, monochromatic image features two pictures of the same model wearing a Nike long-sleeve shirt, sitting on the ground with legs folded and also laying on her stomach looking up at the camera with intensity. There is no backdrop or other background scenery and everything besides the dark green of her shirt is a shade of black, grey and white. The only accompanying text is shown in very small font and rotated horizontally, reading: “Dry-fit base later. Wicks away sweat. Attracts stares” (Nike. *Vogue* 1 Sept. 1999: 360-361. Print.). The ad exhibits futuristic intensity, but none of the personal messages that had been so characteristic of Nike ads from the rest of the decade. The focus has been shifted to the products specifically. The shirt, not the woman wearing it, is what attracts stares and is the most important aspect in the ad. The futuristic style of the ads serves to emphasize the sleekness and cutting-edge style of the

products, rather than focusing on the message the Nike brand is trying to relay to the audience. The shift is pronounced both in the significant visual change from past campaigns, as well as the changes in how they are addressing the female consumers. Past messages relied heavily on themes of female empowerment to form a personal connection with the women they were trying to reach. Aesthetically, the model is shown in passive positions and neither picture mimics any sort of exercise or athletic movement—she is even covering her head in a defensive position in the second photo. The model's intense intimidating stare, as she sits alone against a plain backdrop, all give the photo an isolating and intimidating feel. The text is also isolating with the idea of inciting jealousy, which seems to move women against each other more than bring them together. These ads are a radical departure from past campaigns, which placed serious emphasis on creating a personal bond and emotional connection with women

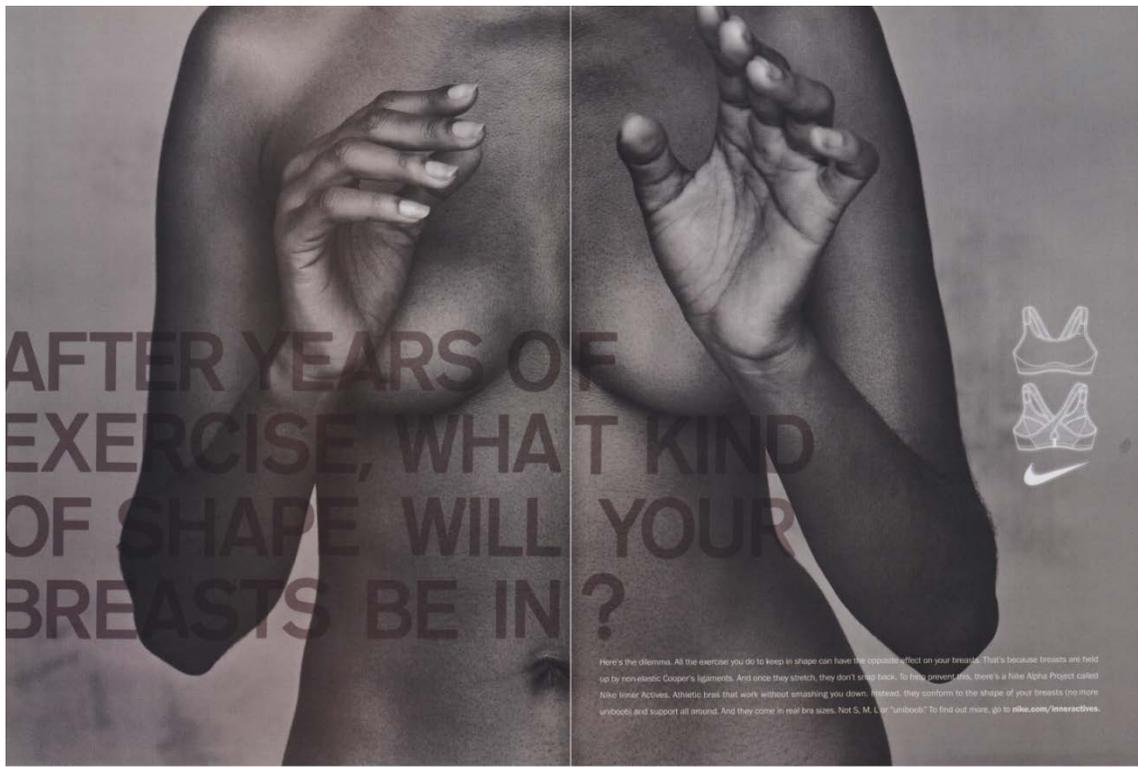
over the details of the specific products themselves.



(Nike. *Vogue* 1 Sept. 1999: 360-361. Print.)

According to Grow, the focus on advertising messages in the late 1990s dwindled due to a variety of economic and business-related factors: “From fall 1997 to spring 1999 consumers would see very little Nike women's advertising in print. By now, Nike was truly a divided community. Labor issues led to advertising budgets being slashed, by half, across all brands...When Nike returned to print for women, they focused on product, connoting less emotion” (Grow 19). The change is most remarkably evident first with those more futuristic ads, and the ads that follow those demonstrate a lack of brand cohesiveness. The campaigns following September, 1999 were visually very different from one another. The messages and themes of these ads also varied widely, and Nike’s ad placement in *Vogue* was sporadic.

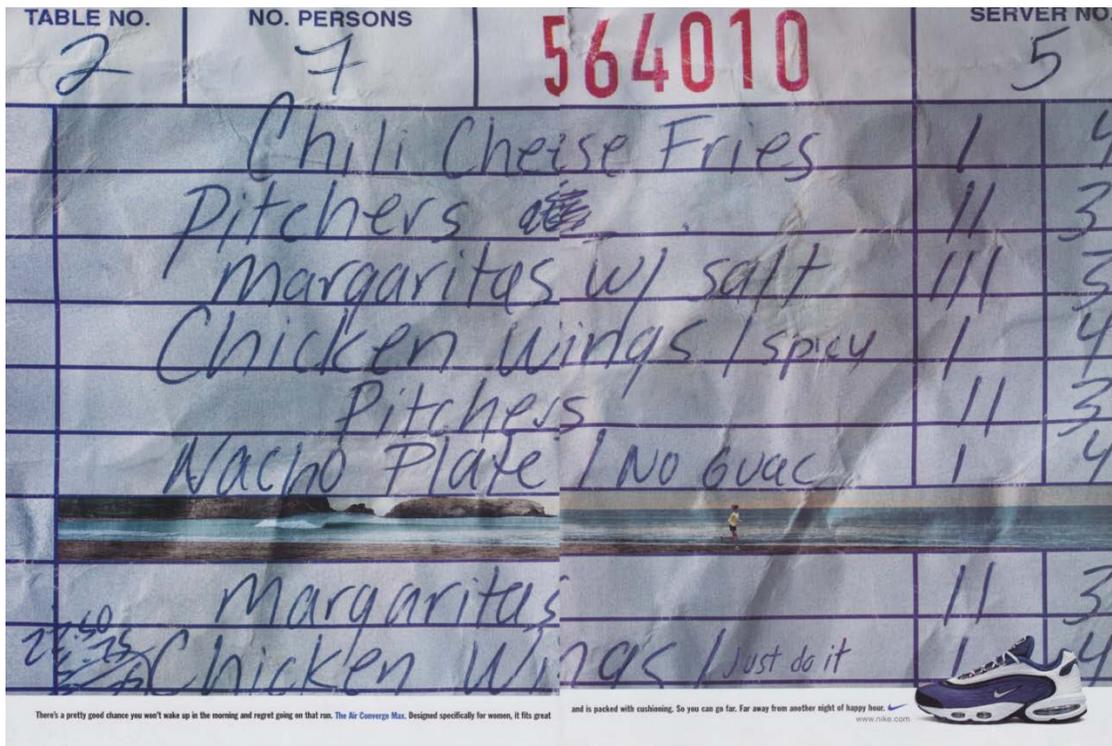
In October, 1999, Nike starts a series of ads for a new sports bra. These ads show a black and white picture of a woman's chest, her hands and arms positioned to cover her breasts. "After years of exercise, what kind of shape will your breasts be in?" asks the text (Nike. *Vogue* 1 Dec. 1999: 396-397. Print.). According to Grow, this campaign was done both 'Covered' and 'Uncovered,' featuring pictures that had women with and without their breasts covered (Grow 19). The ad covers a very personal and intimate topic in a straight-forward and open attitude. The almost-nude model and black-and-white style of the photo also impart this intimate feel as well. The next ad in this series asks, "Do your breasts make you feel uncomfortable?" While these ads do tackle a somewhat awkward subject, they also underhandedly seem to encourage a sense of self-consciousness in order to sell their product. They also lack the personal connection or themes of empowerment from previous ads.



(Nike. *Vogue* 1 Dec. 1999: 396-397. Print

Following that campaign, Nike also ran a series that moved even farther from the personal branding that they had cultivated during the 1990s. The ads show pictures of things like a restaurant happy hour receipt or TV schedule, and spliced with pictures of women running. The basic thrust behind the ads is that “you’ll never regret a workout.” At first glance, these ads are not obviously different from previous ads and seem to show running as a way to cope with other stresses and distractions, but this message actually strays hugely from past campaigns, which instead focused on the empowering nature of exercise for women. Instead of celebrating running as a means of relief and escape from outside pressures, Nike insinuates that women really use running to feel better about themselves after a long night of happy hour drinking and eating, or if they turn off the TV and go exercise. These messages greatly depart from the

previous brand standpoint and offer a patronizing message to women about exercise.



(Nike. Vogue 1 June 2000: 94-95. Print.)

The last major campaign Nike ran in *Vogue* attempted to return to the empowerment messages that Nike cultivated during the 1990s by tackling body image issues. There were three ads run in the series in *Vogue*, all centered around celebrating a certain body parts. The first ad begins with “thunder thighs.” The text looks to celebrate women’s muscular legs, which may not be skinny because they are muscular, but are powerful and strong. The campaign follows up with ads in the same vein with another about legs and having muscular shoulders. The idea looks to directly reject societal standards that pressure women to be thin—sometimes at the price of their health. Nike is directly trying to challenge these beauty standards by showing that women’s bodies are beautiful in their strength and self-sufficiency. The ad celebrates the rejection of

these pressures and embraces female empowerment—literally. While the message and intent of the ad is empowering, the visual aspect does not adequately compliment the thoughtfulness of the text. The picture only shows the model’s legs—or knees or shoulders in later ads in the campaign—without showing her face or the rest of her body. The visual focus on just specific body parts“endorses the idea that bodies and presumably the "people" inside of them, are fragmented, and there is no unified or coherent ‘self.’” Just showing the model’s legs creates a personal disconnect from the audience. While Nike attempted to reconnect on a more intimate level with women, the pictures hamper this. The focus on just one specific body part causes a lack of connection to the whole body and the person behind the message.



(Nike. *Vogue* 1 Sept. 2005: 428-429. Print.)

In Conclusion

In conclusion, the evolution of Nike's advertising messages in Vogue can generally be divided into three segments based on their content and visual style. Nike's strongest and most brand-centered ads came during the 1990s, in the middle of their ad placements in Vogue. In developing their brand for women, Nike comes into their own during this period as it becomes clear that women have a strong role in developing these messages. Many of these ads successfully spoke to women on a personal level in an empowering way. Even from the very beginning of their efforts to market to women and the ads they run in Vogue, Nike makes a point of talking to women as serious athletes and in a way that is personal, empathetic and empowering. Both the smaller details of the ads as well as the text and most obvious visual characteristics are important in reinforcing these messages as well. Specific details of the ads—such as the models' natural make-up and direct eye contact—as well as the use of models with athletic, realistic body types, dynamic poses and the very issues the ads discuss, all helped Nike further their efforts to connect with female consumers and strengthen their women's brand. The power of the messages comes from Nike's efforts to connect their brand to more significant events and stages of women's lives. These advertisements were a direct way of inserting Nike into the greater context of their consumers' lives in a more meaningful way. While Nike may have fumbled slightly in the cohesion of these ads and strayed from these empowerment messages, at least in their efforts in Vogue magazine, their better advertisements show that brands can successfully market to women without being preachy or making women feel inadequate in order to make money.

In the forty-two years since the passage of Title IX, women have seen remarkable improvements in equality in the field of sports and beyond. Sexism is arguably less overt, women continue to make up a larger percentage of the workforce and account for an even larger proportion of spending. But there are examples everywhere of ways in which more subtle forms of sexism creep into our everyday media, and advertising is certainly no exception to this. Nike's focus on empowering women through sports provides a strong example of how using positive messages for women can also benefit a brand and bolster sales as well. Women aren't just a demographic—they make up half the world's population and learning to speak to them intelligently and in a way that is empowering, not degrading, is increasingly important and ethical.

Nike is one of the biggest and most widely-recognized brand in the world, as well as the biggest sports apparel brand. Their advertisements throughout the years have been met with heavy attention, both positive and negative. Thus, their messages to women are widely seen. Critically examining Nike's messages to women allows for a deeper look at the ways in which major corporations interact with their female audiences. Cheryl Swanson, president of brand consultancy agency, Tonic, explains that “brands are totems. They tell us stories about our place in culture—about where we are and where we've been. They also help us figure out where we're going.” (Millman 143). These changes in the messages used to reach women and female athletes reflect greater advancements and changes our society has undergone during these years.

In examining areas for further future research, I believe that looking into the background and experiences of the creatives who developed these successful

campaigns would be a logical first step. Many of these advertisements have a strong female voice and it is obvious that women were behind certain campaigns and drew upon their own experiences to shape messages. Thus, it would be an interesting progression to talk with some of these creatives to gain better insight to the thinking and opinions that went into these ads. I also believe that this could help inform future campaigns for all women's brands, even beyond Nike, as how to better target and engage with female consumers. Widening the scope of the ads included, beyond Vogue magazine or even ads in other mediums, would also be another way of getting an even more comprehensive look at the progression of Nike's messages.

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