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ABSTRACT

Nike's 2018 decision to affiliate with Colin Kaepernick and his activist message in protest of racial inequality, police brutality, and in support of the Black Lives Matter movement is complex. While there is a benefit to giving Kaepernick's message a renewed and global platform there are widespread implications when a corporation, like Nike, appropriates an activist message for commercial gain. Nike's campaign, by aligning with Kaepernick's cause, equates consumerism with social action and the betterment of society (Nickel, Eikenberry 2009: 974). By making Kaepernick the face of the brand, Nike reinforces the false ideology that people can buy redemption from simply being consumer, as they are not just buying Nike apparel but in doing so are actually fighting for human rights (Zizek 2010). This marketization of philanthropy creates false associations between the act of consumption and participation in activism. This is problematic, as equating meaningful activism with mindless consumption disappears the transformative potential of activism altogether (Nickel, Eikenberry 2009: 974).

This paper examines the commercialization of activism and marketized philanthropy, questioning whether Nike's campaign is true activism or just capitalism. The question is explored as to whether or not a neoliberal capitalist society can allow for real activism that challenges the system in a meaningful way. This paper assesses what is lost when an activist message is brought into the mainstream. Ultimately, this analysis of Nike's Kaepernick 'Just Do It' campaign shows that marketized philanthropy – "philanthropy that is compelled to submit to the 'laws' of the market" – serves to co-opt activist messages, thus disallowing meaningful activism to exist in a neoliberal society (Nickel, Eikenberry 2009: 975). This essay critically examines slactivism and Nike's hypocritical positioning as a champion for human rights in America while it simultaneously perpetuates social inequality through sweatshop labour in the Global South. At a moment in history when corporate support of the Black Lives Matter movement is at an all-time high, this essay reveals how marketized philanthropy leads to the stabilization of capitalism not systemic change.

Nike, Colin Kaepernick, and the Commercialization of Activism

In 2018, Nike sparked controversy with its bold choice to cast Colin Kaepernick as the ambassador for their 'Just Do It' campaign's 30th anniversary. Kaepernick, notorious for being the first National Football League (NFL) player to kneel during the national anthem in protest of racial inequality and police brutality in the United States, is the face of the campaign, accompanied by the slogan, "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything." The slogan is inarguably in reference to Kaepernick's inability to get re-signed by any NFL team since his activism began in 2016, for which he is suing the NFL for collusion that ended his career (Green 2018).

Nike's decision to affiliate with Kaepernick and his activist message in protest of racial inequality, police brutality, and in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, is a complex affiliation with a myriad of positive and negative outcomes that is worthy of analysis. While there is a benefit to giving Kaepernick's activist message a renewed and global platform there are widespread implications when a corporation, like Nike, appropriates an activist message for commercial gain.

This paper will examine the commercialization of activism and marketized philanthropy, questioning whether Nike's campaign is true activism or just capitalism. The question will be explored as to whether or not a neoliberal capitalist society can allow for real activism that challenges the system in a meaningful way. Further, this paper will assess what is lost when an activist message is brought into the mainstream. Through an analysis of Nike's Kaepernick 'Just Do It' campaign it will be shown that marketized philanthropy, that is "philanthropy that is compelled to submit to the 'laws' of

the market,” serves to co-opt activist messages, thus disallowing meaningful activism to exist in a neoliberal society.

Colin Kaepernick was drafted into the NFL in 2011 by the San Francisco 49ers and played five seasons for the team before becoming a free agent. In 2016, his last year with the 49ers, Kaepernick became nationally known when he chose to kneel on one knee rather than stand during the American national anthem at the beginning of each NFL football game. In an official NFL interview after the first time Kaepernick knelt, he explained, “I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of colour. To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder” (Wyche 2016). Kaepernick’s activism inspired athletes from every team across the NFL to join the protest and kneel in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter cause.

President Trump was quick to publicly condemn the kneeling as unpatriotic and disrespectful of American troops (Kenny 2017). It ignited such fury in the volatile president that over the span of just 30 days 12% of Trump’s 311 tweets were NFL and national anthem related (Belden 2017). Trump’s tweets went as far as to call for the firing of players who chose to exercise their right to peaceful protest. “Stand proudly for your National Anthem or be suspended without pay,” Trump tweeted (Samuels 2018). Trump, at the time, attempted to shift the public narrative and perception of the protest and continues to actively do so today.

When after the 2016 season Kaepernick did not get resigned by any NFL team, despite being a top-ranked quarterback, he sued the NFL accusing them of colluding to keep him out of the league as a result of his activism (Belson 2018).

While Kaepernick was denied an NFL contract due to his activism, arguably, he scored a Nike contract because of his activism. On Aug 27, 2018, Nike published a black and white photograph of the quarterback's face with the slogan, "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything." In tandem with the photo advertisement, Nike released a commercial featuring a host of celebrity athletes including Serena Williams, LeBron James, Odell Beckham Jr., and Shaquem Griffin, a rookie linebacker for the Seattle Seahawks who only has one hand. Interspersed with these sports celebrities are images of other inspiring non-famous athletes such as a woman boxing in a hijab, a legless child wrestling, and a 16-year-old refugee soccer star. Kaepernick himself delivers the final take-away message within the commercial, "Don't ask if your dreams are crazy. Ask if they're crazy enough" (Nike 2018).

The campaign generated swift and widespread controversy. While some applauded Nike for affiliating with Kaepernick in his support of the Black Lives Matter movement, others called for a Nike boycott. Videos flooded the Internet of angry consumers burning their Nike apparel and posting it online accompanied by the hashtags #BoycottNike and #BurnYourNikes (Chadwick, Zipp: 2018). Despite the backlash of consumers destroying their already purchased merchandise, the campaign proved commercially successful, as Nike saw a 31% increase in online sales and gained both earned media and free publicity valued at an estimated 43 million dollars (Sterling 2018). This raises the important question of whether Nike's campaign is true activism or just

simply capitalism, with Nike appropriating an activist message to appeal to consumers and increase profits.

Nike's campaign follows a cause-related marketing strategy, also known as consumerism philanthropy. Nike's campaign, by aligning with Kaepernick's activist cause, equates consumerism with social action and the betterment of society (Nickel, Eikenberry 2009: 974). By making Kaepernick the face of the brand, Nike reinforces the false ideology that people can buy redemption from simply being a consumer, as they are not just buying Nike apparel but in doing so are actually fighting for human rights (Zizek 2010). This marketization of philanthropy, or activism, creates false associations between the act of consumption and the participation in activism. This is problematic, as equating meaningful activism with mindless consumption disappears the transformative potential of activism altogether (Nickel, Eikenberry 2009: 974). By simply buying Nike products, consumers feel as if they have contributed to fighting racial inequality in the US, while in reality they have done nothing but support the capitalist system that is at the foundation of, and constantly working to maintain, this social inequality.

As Nickel and Eikenberry (2009) explain, "Philanthropy reflected in, distributed by, and used in the service of capitalism can only be the voice of capitalism and the complete destruction of imagination of alternatives" (986). Essentially, capitalism appropriates philanthropic and activist messages, thereby erasing the original transformative intention of the message and instead injects new meaning that links protest and social activism to the act of consumption. This link between activism and marketization serves to distract consumers from the realization that capitalism and the market are in fact at the root of the problem. Nike has created this link successfully, as

the company essentially packages and sells passive activism or 'slacktivism'. Slacktivism refers to low-cost and low-effort practices that people can engage in to boost their own egos, taking 'feel good' measures in support of a social cause or movement. In reality, such actions generally provide no substantial help or benefit to the cause, but rather falsely make the consumer feel like they have contributed (Christensen 2011).

Nike, by associating with Kaepernick, has completely commercialized the Black Lives Matter (BLM) message, turning Kaepernick and what he stands for into a commodity for consumers to purchase. By purchasing such products, consumers falsely feel as if they have significantly contributed to the BLM cause. This packaging and selling of passive activism demonstrates how Nike's campaign is driven by and in support of capitalism, not actual systemic change.

The campaign, arguably, has nothing to do with meaningful activism or genuine societal reform that would address the systemic oppression of black people. This is exemplified when one considers the non-existent relationship between social justice and equality and training shoes. As Chadwick and Zipp (2018) assert, "By exploiting injustice for commercial purposes, Nike may be undermining or demeaning the causes it declares to support" (6). There is no call for direct action and no commitment by Nike to raise or donate funds to BLM or any other activist organization. Rather, Nike neutered Kaepernick's initial call for societal reform of any and all politicizing aspects.

Recognizing that Nike's campaign is pure capitalism, with little to no true activism involved, begs the question is this an intentional choice by the company or an inherent reality of what mainstreamed activism looks like in the neoliberal capitalist society in which Nike operates. Neoliberalism emphasizes de-regulation of the market,

minimal government intervention, and stresses successes and failures as dependent on individual merit. Neoliberalism's focus on and perpetuation of free-market capitalism, to which everyone supposedly has 'equal access,' works to obscure the pitfalls of such a system which relies on social inequality to function. In a neoliberal society, marketized philanthropy, meaning "philanthropy that is compelled to submit to the 'laws' of the market", is encouraged as an acceptable and legitimate form of social activism (Nickel, Eikenberry 2009: 975). This type of activism is benevolent of the market, and further uses the market as a means to disseminate activist messages, as Nike does in its Kaepernick campaign. This benevolence to the market has severe consequences, as it counterproductively works to stabilize the very system that results in poverty and social and racial inequality, which are the very things these social movement affiliated campaigns claim to protest. As Nickel and Eikenberry (2009) explain, "[marketized philanthropy/activism] creates the appearance of giving back, disguising the fact that it is already based in taking away. Such an appearance creates the false impression that marketized philanthropy leads to systemic change rather than stabilization." (975)

This idea is exemplified by Nike's Kaepernick campaign, as there is no actual focus on challenging the system or calling people to action. Commodifying Kaepernick and his activist message to sell more merchandise does nothing to challenge neoliberalism, which is grounded in inequality, but simply works within the framework of neoliberalism to increase profits for Nike. Thus, the very system Nike is claiming to fight against it actually stabilizes by encouraging the continuation of free-market capitalism, consumption, and slacktivism that poses no real threat to the established social order (ibid, p. 976). Capitalism depends on the maintenance of the status quo and

the unquestioning of the current system in order to thrive. Because of this, neoliberal capitalist societies negate the possibility for meaningful activism to arise, as most social movements and messages are rooted in a fundamental critique of capitalism and class inequality, a critique that capitalism will not allow to surface (Banet-Weiser, Lapsansky 2008: 4).

To combat such critiquing of the socio-economic order, conglomerates like Nike intervene and bring activist messages into the mainstream. In doing so, the original transformative potential of the message is stripped away, and replaced with a depoliticized and commodified message that is unthreatening to neoliberalism. Working within the system, as Nike's campaign demonstrates, threatens to disappear the original intention of activism and activist movements. Conglomerates like Nike encourage benevolence to the market presenting the market as a panacea to fighting social inequality, thereby stabilizing the very system (capitalism) that causes the suffering these companies claim to want to end (ibid, p. 5).

Further, and more insidiously, Nike's association with Kaepernick and his protest against racial inequality and police brutality serves to distract consumers from Nike's historic and ongoing violation of human rights regarding its sweatshop production practices in the Global South. Nike's human rights hypocrisy, whereby Nike condemns inequality in North America while actively perpetuating it in the Global South, reinforces one of the dangers of marketized philanthropy. Marketized philanthropy, as explained by Nickel and Eikenberry (2009), "depoliticizes the relationship between the market and the negative impacts it [the market] has on human well-being." (974) By associating with Kaepernick, Nike presents itself as a socially conscious company, which serves to

disappear Nike's deployment of sweatshop labour and thus active role in perpetuating social inequality (Nickel, Eikenberry 2009: 974).

By conflating activism and capitalism, Nike risks being exposed as a hypocritical company who publicly claims to support one social movement fighting for human rights, while simultaneously committing heinous human rights violations out of the public's view. Nike's appropriation of social justice movements and their equating of buying Nike products with fighting for human rights is a bold and risky campaign strategy.

"Capitalism and activism have always been uneasy bedfellows," Chadwick explains, "Nike, and other companies, risk exposing their own skeletons in the closet by taking these high and mighty stances" (Chadwick, Zipp 2018: 6). Nike has a lot of skeletons.

Since 1991, Nike has been criticized by the press for its treatment of sweatshop workers in its over 700 plants worldwide, particularly in the Global South. Nike's has plants in China, Thailand, South Korea, and Vietnam. Accusations of human rights violations including cases of abuse have been reported in more than one-quarter of Nike factories. In 2005, Nike released a 108-page document detailing their admissions of abuse in Nike factories including forced overtime and restriction of access to drinking water. It was disclosed that 25–50% of Nike factories in Asia restrict access to toilets and drinking water during the workday, with that same percentage of workers being denied one day of work off in seven. Further, in over half of Nike factories employees work more than 60 hours per week, with 25% of workers who refused to work overtime being punished (Teather 2005).

Not only does Nike exhibit hypocrisy in claiming allegiance to social activism in the US while partaking in human rights crimes abroad, but in partnering with Nike so too

does Colin Kaepernick. To criticize injustice against people of colour in America, while simultaneously agreeing to be the ambassador for a transnational corporation that actively engages in abusive labour practices in the developing world, is a clear contradiction. Kaepernick claims to be protesting inequality at home by becoming the face of a company that perpetuates inequality abroad in order to produce its goods (Stanley, Ratna 2018: 657). This is not to say Kaepernick's intentions were inherently bad, or purposely hypocritical, but it demonstrates the reality of activism in a neoliberal capitalist society, where people trying to engage in philanthropic or activist action find themselves, "limited to the very venue (the market) that creates the need for philanthropy in the first place" (Nickel, Eikenberry 2009: 980).

This further highlights the negative implications of marketized philanthropy and the bringing of activist messages into the mainstream. Commercializing social activism creates an ideological narrative that emphasizes the benevolence of consumption and perpetuates the false idea that, "one can celebrate a culture of global capitalism while sympathizing with its victims." (ibid 979) This is not possible, but this reality gets disappeared when corporations like Nike co-opt activist messages, eliminating their transformative potential and re-signifying these messages to promote consumerism. Marketized philanthropy demonstrates the consequences of activist messages being brought into the mainstream and commodified for the profit of transnational corporations.

Through the analysis of Nike's Colin Kaepernick campaign, it has been shown that marketized philanthropy has widespread negative implications. By perpetuating the practice of utilizing the market as an acceptable means through which activism can be expressed, neoliberal capitalist societies negate any space for meaningful activism to

exist. When an activist message such as Kaepernick's is brought into the mainstream, it is co-opted by transnational corporations like Nike, thus stripping the message of any transformative potential and disallowing any substantial societal change to occur.

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