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Representation and muslim women athletes: A textual analysis of a Nike commercial

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Abstract. Women representation in the media remains a critical issue in the debate on gender equality. Due to religion and culture, Muslim women have been sidelined. This explains the low involvement of Muslim women in sports. This paper analyzes a 2017 ad by Nike, which highlights the issue of women's representation and position in society, especially by focusing on the activities presumed to be a preserve of the male gender. Specifically, the paper focuses on Muslim women athletes, given that they still face significant challenges based on masculine tendencies in the Muslim community. The denotative analysis reveals the role of culture and religion in suppressing women, especially by preventing women from participating in sports. The Nike video pre-empts the new developments in the Muslim community where women are now participating in sports, implying the impact of the feminist movement. A connotative analysis further revealed the role of religion and race in shaping women's welfare in society. Further analysis reveals that Muslim women suffering from gender oppressive tendencies despite the push for gender equality and equity through the fourth wave of feminism. Specifically, Muslim countries have laws that still impede women from achieving similar goals as men.

Keywords. Feminism, religion, racism, culture, oppression, social, gender equality, Muslim women, athletes, rights, freedom, media

Introduction

In the current society, cultural norms and religious practices remain oppressive to most women, despite progress made in the past. Positions of influence, power, and strength have always been a preserve of men. The male gender has monopolized critical positions in different sectors such as the military, government, and corporate organizations. These circumstances beg the question; is there an empirically verifiable reason for innate biological barriers that prevent women from getting such equal power? Or is there anything special for males that make them more natural to dominate women than for the females to control the men? Male supremacy has been and remains almost universal. A 2017 TV commercial by Nike demonstrated how a woman is criticized for engaging in activities deemed masculine. The short film depicts an old woman looking at a young Muslim girl with disbelief for jogging. In the culture portrayed in the video, women are not expected to engage in certain sports, such as boxing, because they are regarded as masculine. Society also does not expect exemplary performance for females in some specific activities, and in case that happens, such women are treated with great heroism. Male

supremacy and dominance is the characteristic of such a culture. The purpose of this assignment was to analyze the commercial by Nike, which challenges the beliefs in a given male-dominated culture. In the community portrayed certain activities are reserved for the men under the pretext that women competently perform them, thereby giving rise to feminism.

Theoretical framework

The feminist movement dates back to 570 BCE, when the foremothers of feminism began their campaigns. These women include Hildegard of Bingen, Olympe's de Gouge, and Christine de Pisan. The individuals advocated for intelligence, dignity, and fundamental human rights for ladies. Notably, the fights for the freedom and dignity of women continued tirelessly for an extended period until the nineteenth century. During this time, the efforts of women coalesced together into a self-conscious and identifiable movement that ultimately began to bear fruit (Rampton, 2015). Some of the first feminist movements took shape in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The crusades emerged from a planned environment for liberal and socialist politics. The central focus of the movement was to highlight women's issues, especially suffrage. The Seneca Falls Convention convened in 1848 was a platform for both women and men to advocate for equal rights for all (Weiner, 2010). Despite having an impact, the movements could not guarantee complete freedom for women.

Moreover, the undertaking was challenging because the feminist movement was associated with abolitionist and temperance movements. During this era, all women were supposed to be tamed like animals. According to Victoria America wonders, the women were behaving in what she refers to as "un-ladylike manner" (Rampton, 2015). She had witnessed women speaking in public, in demonstrations, and doing jail terms. In the course of these developments, the deliberations on women's involvement in the election process in politics featured prominently in these campaigns.

Thereafter, another movement was initiated in the 1960s but did not take root until the early 1990s (Konner, 2012). Around the same time, more movements were sprouting due to growing self-consciousness among minority groups globally. The voice and demands of the second wave of feminism became radical. One of the significant factors that necessitated activism is sexuality and reproductive rights. The efforts of the activist groups resulted in the passing of the Equal Rights Amendment, which assured social equality regardless of one's gender (Dunton, 2016). This crusade did not relent in the fight against women's oppression.

Over the years, feminism has presented itself in different forms and shapes. The mid-90s feminism campaign was informed by post-modern and post-colonial thinking. Numerous societal paradigms were demolished; for instance, the concept and belief in universal womanhood, masculinity, heterosexuality, and sexuality were restructured to view women differently. Progressively, women became emboldened, empowered, and strong to challenge the oppressive culture in society. This was due to women empowerment crusades that were gaining momentum in the western countries (Konner, 2012). However, irrespective of these efforts, the male-subjugated environment remained. Most women were still referred to as "slut" and "bitch" for challenging the sexist culture that was aimed at dispossessing them of their basic rights (Rampton, 2015). These circumstances marked a struggle for the women in a defiant society of men. They had to work hard and do the impossible to prove their worth.

One of the main advocates of the second wave of feminism is Kate Millet (Langer, 2007). She gave the liberation of women its intellectual strength and cornerstone, especially in "Sexual Politics." Her efforts were later thwarted when she was accused on several occasions of associating with gays and lesbians. The second-wave activists also included the effort of

Betty Friedan. Her ideology went beyond the right to vote and included issues on equal pay, the right to inheritance, and sexual reproductive health (Langer, 2017). In her book *Sexual Politics*, she contends that every single power and authority in the society is entirely in the hands of the male gender, and the leaders are willing to continue wielding the influence even if it means the use and application of coercive force from the police (Langer, 2017). Men have taken over all aspects of politics in which they ensure that everything they touch feels their impact.

Chapter two of *Sexual Politics* addresses the theme of feminism and the perceived correlation of the sexes in a political perspective. However, while many people wondered how the regard is possible, Millet established that it depends on the meaning that one gives to politics. According to her, politics encompasses power-structured relationships in which a single group of individuals governs the others. The scenario creates the concepts of dominance and subordination (Millett, 2016). Besides, the main reason why the oppression of the members of coherent and defined groups such as castes, sexes, races, and classes; is continuous and so entire is that such populations are not represented in any way in the formal political structures (Millett, 2016). In this regard, *Sexual Politics* refers to the current association between sexes as “Herrschaft,” in which one group has the birthright control over the others (Millett, 2016). Primarily, women are not only ruled by men, but they have also held minority status throughout history. Their condition persisted even after the attainment of minimal rights of suffrage and citizenship earlier this century (Millett, 2016). Therefore, the idea that females have greater representation now that they can vote is a misconception. Therefore they cannot still address the issue of gender oppression.

Many concerns regarding sexism have been raised over time without anyone attempting to address them. For instance, little has been done to challenge male dominance in society. The topic is rarely discussed or acknowledged. In most situations, men control industries, finances, universities, and political offices regardless of where have larger stakes or not (Millett, 2016). However, many arguments can explain the massive evasion of the various facts that explain the situation of women in modern society. Notably, the masculine culture has established several defenses against any criticism, exposure, or infringement relating to its dominance (Millett, 2016). The main shield involves a reaction in mockery and the antique mechanism of denial and ridicule. For instance, the culture associates women with sex, which it regards as dirty and fun. On the contrary, men are considered superior humans since they are not sexual beings. Unlike females, males are regarded as real people; therefore, women are excluded from all discussions that target the realities of sexual life (Millett, 2016). Overall, women in oppressed cultures are not permitted to engage in any adult conversation, and those that do so are bullied back into their niche.

Moreover, the suffering of women is not just economic, but entire total subjugation of their self-worth. Females experience psychological oppression, which deters their ability to compete against their male counterparts. Primarily, women are taught to be less competitive in certain areas from birth. Since they cannot succeed in any essential human activity, females are urged to convert themselves into a thing – a sex object (Leary & Baumeister, 2017). Therefore, a woman must present herself as beautiful and mild-mannered to be considered suitable for marriage. In this regard, women live to be judged, weighed, and measured through their looks. For instance, men strive to find beautiful women to marry. Thereafter, females get pregnant, give birth, and look after children, while men control every aspect of society (Millett, 2016). The masculine culture has limited and reduced the potentialities and expectations of women (Millett, 2016). It appears that the life of a girl child is predefined even before she is born.

Furthermore, the book *Politics of Cruelty* documents the atrocities committed against women in various places across the globe, including Nazi Europe, South Africa, Ireland, and the Soviet Union. She regards her manuscript as vital in highlighting the abuses that have been committed against women (Langer, 2017). The piece focuses mainly on revealing the violence that females encountered from their male counterparts, which people are less inclined to discuss. The book makes it clear that most of the challenges that women face in society are enabled by silence and ignorance. Ideally, no one wants to come out and address the issues of gender oppression. Millet hoped for a better society; thus, she used her talent to inform, enlighten and even criticize the ill acts of some male-dominated cultures. Overall, *Politics of Cruelty* persuades and prevails with the greatest impact. It demonstrates the reality of feminism in a male-dominated community, which mobilizes many people to rethink their actions and behaviors against women.

Detonative analysis

The Nike promotional video is set in the Middle East and aims to underscore the negative perception of women's progress in conservative societies. Markedly, the cultural norms of these communities curtail women's freedom in engaging in certain activities since they are exclusively reserved for men. The religious and cultural indoctrination makes the disapproval of some of these undertakings happen subconsciously and unpremeditatedly. At the beginning of the video, an elderly female watches a young girl with disapproval as she leaves home for a jog. The film also shows other men, one a young man and the other an aged man, staring at her incredulously.

In another scene, women play games and engage in activities that the Islamic society believes are meant for men alone. The writer portrays boxing as a demanding sport, which would make it challenging for women to participate. In another instance, a woman is not expected to act in a movie or demonstrate strong character. Despite women taking up such roles, the cultural stand that they do not have a strong voice to question the dominance of the males in the society remains.

Consequently, the Nike video demonstrates how some religions have perpetually oppressed women. Furthermore, the video shows women wearing hijabs to imply that they belong to the Islamic culture. Although they have refuted the claim, Muslim communities have been seen to oppress their women for many years. For instance, the tradition dictates that a woman's accusation against a man must be backed by a male witness; otherwise, it is considered a fabrication. Such cultures are male dominated, even in religious matters (Langer, 2017). As a Muslim, the girl is supposed to be domesticated. Naturally, she is expected to take care of the children and engage in homemaking activities. In addition, she is not expected to have the freedom to walk around town without a good reason. The Nike promotional video demonstrates girls oppressed by the community due to religious reasons and institutional and societal oppression that has existed for a long time and is still maintained.

Primarily, Nike used its promotional video to reveal the ignorance that prevails in the male-dominated society. Notably, regardless of lessons from history and daily experiences, people are still blinded by masculinity and feminist ideals. Nike intends to show how beliefs and biased perceptions have hampered the ability of women to enjoy the privileges that men do. Even though females have demonstrated their capabilities, particularly by playing crucial roles in the development of the global economy, society still fails to recognize their abilities and efforts. In this regard, women are criticized because of engaging in activities that are considered manly. Furthermore, Nike strives to demonstrate how women are failing because of lacking

faith in each other. The scene where an older female is surprised to see a young girl jogging denotes a lack of confidence among women in their ability to conquer the prejudice and discrimination they experience. Therefore, Nike rallies women to stand out and support each other first before seeking the aid of others. In so doing, they must show the world that they are ready to dominate their lives and pursue their passions. The promotional video also manifests the great potential of young women to transform their current situation. Although most elderly females are accustomed to believing in the masculine culture, upcoming ladies are eager to challenge it. Moreover, Nike shot the video in a region where male superiority is profoundly upheld. While some nations in the West and Africa are starting to accept women and their practices, the Middle East's efforts to address this issue have stalled. The region still upholds certain archaic Islam ideologies, which advocate for the subjugation of some of the women's basic rights. Therefore, Nike intended to highlight women's plight in different parts of the world and the actions required to eradicate it.

Connotative meaning

The video depicts women as objects of shame in society. They are treated with less dignity and as second-rate people after the men because of their gender. According to the Nike commercial, women are considered inferior people in society. In their quest to be accepted, known, cherished, and loved in the community, they have ended up in shameful demeaning activities.

Based on the social media response to the Nike advertisement, the undertones that came out were race and religion. The advertisement had both positive and negative social media reviews. Some of the negative reviews suggested that Nike was promoting the oppression of women by supporting the wearing of the hijab. However, most of the positive reviews were from Muslim girls who could relate to the story. Most of them felt encouraged to pursue their dreams regardless of the life hurdles they face. The social media responses also took a racial angle, with most whites being against the advertisement. Gender bias was also evident in the social media comments. Prominently, most negative reviews were from men, whereas most women gave positive reviews. The women felt that the Nike advertisement was a tool for empowerment and emancipation of women from all walks of life.

Racism

The United States has experienced several issues regarding the notion of racism. Nonetheless, the problem spans beyond the US to other western countries characterized by mixed-raced populations. Black people have been the main victims of the vice in white-dominated nations. Due to this reason, Madonna, in one of the interviews, stated that she wanted to adopt a black child, which was a good sign and a privilege for a white person to see the blackness in the black people (Hong, 2016). She further says that the white supremacists who do not see the black pain do not understand the agony and the wounds of the black people.

Black women have a strong expression against white supremacy, including people like Madonna. The hatred towards Madonna is not associated perhaps with the fact that she was successful, and so it was mere envy; no black woman declared their love for and desired to be like Madonna (Dunton, 2016). The institutionalized racism that has existed for a long time and the political reality underlies Madonna's and the general societal belief against the people of color. The perception that the blacks cannot have fun or succeed in any endeavor is a pure white supremacy view, and it is racist. The oppression of these black women by the white supremacists keeps them from growing and becoming bold to take up steps for their lives and

the future of their children (Lalnehzovi, 2007). The women should have woken from these chains since everyone is poised to succeed despite their skin color.

No single Madonna fan can deny that her beauty is not achieved through skillful artifice. She capitalized on her high energy, resource, and time to build her image. However, when the chips are down, the image of Madonna presented is that of a white girl. For her to maintain the image, she had to dissociate herself from the black community (Lalnehzovi, 2007). As an outsider, she could use the black people's experiences for her opportunistic ends as she does all she can to mask her racial aggression disguised in affirmation. The inferiority complex presented in the NIKE video highlighted the discrimination that a black child, especially a woman, would undergo in a white supremacist-dominated environment.

Another excellent and most recent example is the story of the fencing Olympian Ibtihaj Muhammed. In her book "Proud: My Fight for an Unlikely American Dream," she narrates her harrowing experience on the United States Olympic team. Ibtihaj received death threats, which she reported to the American fencing council, but the matter was not investigated. She also received cold treatment from her teammates and coach and always felt segregated from the national team. The motto for the United States team was "When one wins, we all win." Ironically, when preparing for Olympics the team made her swim through a minefield of micro-aggressions and mental torture that left her feeling choked by the exclusion. Team management deliberately failed to book lodgings for her during international tournaments, which communicated its displeasure with her inclusion. The national coach would most of the time point the finger at her for team failure and regularly categorize her as only physically strong (a case common for black competitors), as opposed to skilled for tactical fencing. Amid her high school fencing profession, she could foresee the gazes that would pursue her around fencing matches. Since it is such a specialty and predominantly a white sport, she regularly felt everyone's eyes stare at her when she strolled into an exercise center. Such situations expected especially where one is the only non-white individual in the competition and wears a hijab. More often than not, she could not wait for the fence, so she could put on her veil and blend in with fellow athletes.

The topic of how media affects racism has gained massive popularity over the years. Mainly, researchers explore media bias, but it is significant to examine how media facilitates the issue of racism in clear ways. For instance, it was difficult for black people to represent their identities, opinions, beliefs, and stories during the initial stages of establishing film and media (Kulaszewicz, 2015). The white people dominated everything in the entertainment sector; therefore, they chose what minorities, such as African Americans and Latinos, shared and portrayed. Moreover, the media influences the behavior and perception of people towards a particular group (Kulaszewicz, 2015). Individuals strive to access the available information through reading or viewing. Thereafter, the data affects their behaviors, emotions, and beliefs towards others. In modern society, racial stereotypes, differences, and racial perceptions, as well as micro-aggressions are driven by the media. For example, Makhareh, Alharethi, and Campbell (2022) describe how Cokes' 2013 super bowl commercial depicted Arabs as "backward and foolish Camel Jockeys (10)," a position that has been disputed by other scholars. The same way, the media has also depicted Muslim women in a different light as from what they actually are. Nevertheless, Muslim women are also utilizing the media to overcome their oppression. On many occasions, the individuals have been seen questioning and resisting male dominance. Currently, Muslim females are regarded as ambassadors of Islam. Besides, their self-representation should be perceived as a segment of politics of ownership (van Es, 2017). The main objective of Muslim women is to change the discussions held through various media

outlets to their advantage, mainly by mobilizing individuals to see and learn about the realities of feminism.

Unlike any other group in the world, Muslim women have a high unemployment rate, and those who have gotten a job are paid lower salaries than men. The individuals rarely acquire higher education degrees; hence, most of them occupy only low-level job positions (Koopmans, 2016). There is also systematic prejudice with CVs demonstrating social markers of disparity. The names of Muslim women are enough to make them lose the best opportunities. For instance, unlike Emily, Aminah needs to submit multiple applications to various employers to increase her chances of getting a positive callback (Khattab & Johnston, 2013). Nevertheless, Muslim women from across the globe are utilizing the media, visual and publishing arts, and fashion as the main weapon against oppression.

Fourth wave feminism

The fourth wave of feminism is taking root, especially among the young females in the current generation. The women's liberation regime is moving from the academy right into the sphere of public discourse. The plight of the women then and the issues that affected them are now receiving the attention of the mainstream media and the politicians (Konner, 2012). The problems like violence against women, sexual abuse, rape, slut-shaming, and unequal pay are now matters of discourse on mainstream media stations. The Nike video connotes a gender disparity between men and women. Ideally, there are the things and activities that men are supposed to engage in, while the others are reserved for women.

However, there are changes in today's society. Unlike then when feminism implied a call to radicalism underpinned by the assumptions of exclusionary subtext for the class of women only, today, feminism has a broader meaning and implications. Currently, feminism is focused on gender equity and less on the struggles women face. Feminism has reincarnated in both its sense and impact in the fourth wave generation where women's suppression can only be comprehensible in the marginalization of the other gender groups (Weiner, 2010). For this reason, feminism is part and parcel of the larger consciousness of other forms of oppression alongside ageism, racism, classism, and sexual orientation, and ableism.

Religion

The Nike promotion video demonstrates the challenges of women and how they are less regarded and constrained in their practice and interaction in comparison to men. Religion has consistently been used as a tool of oppression for women. Furthermore, religion binds and often is not subject to questioning and interrogation, and women remain in a state of abuse and discrimination against them because faith dictates that way.

Nowadays, in some the places like Syria and Iran, where there are state religions; the most oppressed people are women. Other African countries such as Nigeria and Somalia, which have been affected by wars and terrorist groups associating themselves with religious extremists, have used women and children as soft targets. Besides, in some circumstances, women have been taken, abducted, raped, and killed (Hong, 2016). These are some of the extreme conditions that have come with religious extremism in the name of serving a supreme being. The actions have dehumanized the women and hampered their progress in life as men, contrariwise, prosper.

In addition, religion has taught women about domesticity. Religious conviction teaches women to remain at home and take care of children. Such experiences and belief systems advance male dominance and supremacy over women (Rampton, 2015). Most religious

organizations do not teach women to encourage their children to strive and observe equity in society. However, there is hope because of the ever-rising fourth wave of feminists that has given the girl child a platform to express women's issues. The activism through the mainstream media is also an added advantage as a forum for canvassing societal matters to the public for emancipation and education.

Various campaigns have been held globally to condemn the social injustices that females face daily. However, while the problem of race has been associated with labor inequality and segregation among the minority groups in society, the importance of religion is yet to be fully evaluated. Modern society has realized the influence of certain people, therefore awarding them with the responsibility to oversee the welfare of others. The global Muslim market has been expanding in significance as more Muslim females take lead in the creative industries ("It's not just about race and gender," 2018). The Vogue Magazine selected Dina Tokio among the seven women to appear in "The New Suffragettes." Primarily, the selection targeted the influence of each person towards empowering women in the fight against inequality ("It's not just about race and gender," 2018). While more women join the media industry, young, upward, and educated mobile British Muslim females are employing their creative platforms to counteract stereotypes and resolve the burdens of sexism and Islamophobia in workplaces and society.

Conclusion

This Nike commercial is titled "What Will They Say About You?" It is not an expression compensated for this specific Nike video. It is one of the numerous barriers alongside religion, race, class, and socioeconomic status outlines fundamentally different issues that Muslim ladies experience to survive and accomplish whatever they seek. The Nike commercial demonstrates the position society has placed on a woman. This circumstance has led to feminist movement groups that have fought for the rights of women and their dignity. These crusades have continued to be the order of the day in society as there are still other obstacles, including culture and religion, which still oppress the women and prevent them from achieving their full potential. The fourth wave of feminism is the most influential voice of women alongside the support of the media in canvassing matters of women in the hope for equity in the future society.

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