

## Nike Pulls Away: An analysis of Nike's "The Jogger" Advertisement and Other Marketing Strategies

### **Introduction**

Growing up for as long as I can remember I aspired to be something that millions of people dream to be. I read books, watched movies, watched documentaries, and opened my ears to the countless myths of how a select few athletes outshined their counterparts in their quest to reach greatness. In a time where obesity is an increasingly large problem in the United States, sports companies have attempted to use high profile athletes to pass on the message of what "greatness" is to their perspective audiences. Almost all sports companies' commercials have used and taken advantage of the popularity of famous athletes to help brand their products. But when using high profile athletes, it is difficult for most people of an audience to relate to them because the majority of sports companies' audiences are everyday common people. One of these companies that steered away from the norm for a brief period of time was Nike. I want to examine Nike's intuitiveness, effectiveness, and how they created the exact opposite scenario in one of their most inspirational commercials called "The Jogger." Nike's marketing strategies have always attempted to piggy-back on the most current events in the United States and turn those events into an opportunity to market their product. This Nike commercial attempts to rely on the physical appearance of a boy, stoic voice of a narrator, and scenic setting to employ the message that greatness lies in all of us. Even though Nike ultimately succeeds in communicating the message that greatness is attainable by everyone, they fail to communicate the underlying messages of how important it is to be active and live a healthy lifestyle overall.

## **Dominance of Nike**

Nike's commercial "The Jogger" is worth studying because it epitomizes why and how Nike became the most dominant sports company in the world. Over the last century no other company has even come close to challenging their supremacy. Unlike a lot of sports brands that may only be known nationally, Nike is a worldwide company who's expansion continues to grow. Forbes magazine reveals, "With a value of \$10.7 billion, the Nike brand is the most valuable among sports businesses" (Schwartz, 2014, p. 1) and last year it was also noted by Forbes that "Nike made upwards of \$18 billion in company revenue last year" (Schwartz, 2014, p. 1). In order to grasp Nike's sheer dominance over the sport's world, the next company behind Nike is ESPN, which collected \$11.5 billion last year in revenue. Nike is no different than other companies in many respects. For example, companies like Nike have their own distinct logo, sponsors, and have athletes who star in their commercials, and yet no other company poses even the slightest threat to dethroning them as the most valuable sports company in the world. It is important to recognize and understand what strategies Nike has used to separate themselves from their competitors, even though it may appear at first glance that Nike doesn't do anything differently than its competitors. The commercial "The Jogger" helps us to understand Nike's advertising proficiency and why Nike has become the most dominant sports company in the world.

## **Rhetorical Methods Used to Analyze the Commercial**

The elements of a very brief minute long commercial come together and convey a very understandable message that is independent from the context

surrounding the commercial. By using small but important details and elements, the commercial is able to remain independent from outside texts and contexts. Thus, the Close Reading method is the best microscope to analyze Nike's commercial "The Jogger." Close reading is "an approach of rhetorical criticism aimed at privileging the rhetorical artifact and its content over any particular rhetorical concept" (Kolodziejcki, 2014). Methodologies such as ideological criticism and ideographic criticism often focus on the social constructs and ideas that are created in society, and are often too expensive and dependent on outside texts for a commercial that is only a minute in length. By using this method "the critic is then able to focus on a single text at a time, and by examining the details of the text, they uncover subtle and otherwise unrecognized rhetorical strategies" (Reidy, 2002, p. 308). Many times the methodologies, ideological and ideographic criticism, don't focus on the characteristics of a text that can cause critics to miss subtle nuances and elements of the text that wouldn't be missed when using the Close Reading method.

One of the unique characteristics of the Close Reading method is that it doesn't have a specific outline of how to perform a criticism of an artifact. This attribute best allows the critic to scour through the text and develop a hypothesis or research questions based on one's particular interests in the text. But the Close Reading method does have its shortfalls. The limitation with Close Reading is "the close textual critic can only say how an audience was invited to respond; the critic is unable to make any conclusions about the actual persuasive influence of the text" (Reidy, 2002, p. 308). Due to this limitation, it is important to combine the Close Reading method with the Study of Reception. This new approach to rhetorical

criticism is “a close textual-intertextual analysis” and “provides a more reliable connection between the internal form and external function” (Reidy, 2002, p. 309). When using this approach, the rhetorician first “conducts a close reading of the text in its context to offer hypotheses about how readers might have been invited to respond to the text’s appeal. The rhetorician then tests these hypotheses through a close reading of contemporary responses” (Reidy, 2002, p. 309). The combination of these methods is best suited for the “The Jogger” because it abstracts details from the commercial to support the notion that Nike’s commercial is inspirational and effective in communicating its message, by looking at the comments to determine how the commercial was received, as well as the emotional appeal oneself feels after watching the commercial.

### **Example of Nike Marketing/Description of Commercial**

Nike strategically defines what greatness really is through a relatively quaint and simple commercial for their company. Respectively, Nike commercials, along with the other sports companies like Reebok, Adidas, and Under Armor, often contain some of the most popular athletes in the entire world. Basketball stars Michael Jordan and LeBron James, who are also global icons, frequent Nike’s commercials in an attempt to convince their audiences to buy Nike’s product. Other athletes like Cristiano Ronaldo and Usain Bolt, who are non-American athletes, also make appearances in Nike commercials, demonstrating Nike’s popularity globally as well. Yet, in the summer of 2012 during the Olympic games, Nike decided to deviate from the norm in ways in which it tends to sell their product. Rather than using high profile athletes roaming the streets of a big city, Nike instead used an overweight

teenage boy, who is jogging at a slow pace, a narrator, and a Midwest background to show that greatness is within all of us.

The first element of the commercial that Nike shows is the background and layout of the scene at hand. There is utter silence for the first 10 seconds, except for the faint sound of a car passing by in the distance, and buzz of a summer bug. As the camera begins to pan out slowly, a long and straight asphalt road becomes the focal point of the commercial for a short period of time. Though the road that viewers see isn't winding, roads in literature have represented obstacles and challenges that lay ahead, but the straight and narrow road represents the path that one must take in order to reach their goals. Still within the first ten seconds of the commercial, the camera continues to pan out and other objects and other scenic pieces give way to where the audience may believe this commercial takes place. The combination of tattered mailboxes and the endless plain of overgrown grass lining the only road in sight suggests that the commercial takes place somewhere in the Midwest. Another important feature of the commercial that must be taken notice of is the color of the sky in the commercial. It is difficult to determine what time the commercial is taking place, but with the faint hint of light, viewers can suggest that it is during the wee hours of the morning or last fading hours of light of an evening, generally the hours of when people will go for runs or exercise. There is a slight hint of the sky where it appears that sunlight is breaking through the darkness. Michael Osborne, author of the "Archetypal Metaphor in Rhetoric The Light-Dark Family" explains that "Light-dark metaphor combinations carry still another important implication which students of rhetoric appear to have neglected, inevitability or determinism"

(Osborne, 2003, p. 118). The combination of the sky, the long asphalt road, tattered mailboxes, and overgrown grass stray away from the “usual” Nike commercial. Normally, viewers are swamped with the bright lights of a city or athletic sports field, yet there is a strong sense of determinism present in the setting of the first few seconds of the commercial. As this first section of the commercial completes, the audience is invited to believe that struggles lay ahead, but must be combatted through deterministic virtue. It also gives the audience a few seconds to drift into what struggles or obstacles they have in their lives before the next vital piece of the commercial begins.

After Nike sets the scene and mood of the commercial, they introduce the narrator at the ten-second mark. In a calm, soft, yet unwavering voice the narrator delivers his speech:

Greatness. It’s just something we made up. Somehow we’ve come to believe that greatness is a gift reserved for a chosen few. For prodigies. For superstars. And the rest of us can only stand by watching. You can forget that. Greatness is not some rare DNA strand. It’s not some precious thing.

Greatness is no more unique to us than breathing. We are all capable of it. All of us. (Nike, 2012)

The way the narrator delivers the speech has everything to do with the message that he and Nike are attempting to convey, that greatness exists in everyone. If the narrator had read through the text as if he were reading a book, the speech and commercial would not have had the same meaning. The pauses that are incorporated into the speech allow for the audience to reflect and react to difference

segments of the speech. After every period in the speech the narrator pauses because each sentence or phrase is meant to build off of the preceding one, and it is vital that the audience understands each point he makes about greatness. The narrator's aim is to simplify the concept of greatness and make it sound attainable to all people. Yet, words alone lack the power to inspire viewers to act, compared to if they were paired with an image to help inspire them. As the narrator speaks, the most important piece of the Nike commercial comes into full site at the end of his riveting speech about Greatness.

### **Analysis of Commercial**

The determination of an obese boy who isn't doing anything extraordinary besides jogging is what makes this commercial inspirational to its audience. It forces people to think that if this boy can do it, then they can. At the start of the commercial he is nearly invisible, but as the commercial progresses he makes his way closer and closer to the camera. The slow pitter-patter of his feet grows louder as the commercial progresses and eventually reveals that the boy isn't any sort of star athlete. To have him appear and grow in intensity both in how clearly we see him as well as hear him represents the recognition of greatness that the common person achieves every single day. Every day we are bombarded with how great high profile athletes are. We hear about the games they've won, the money they make, and the records they broke. The media plays such an important role in making these known that viewers don't even have to go out of their way to find out what happened. This isn't the case for a boy like the one in this commercial. You'll never hear about an obese boy running the mile one week, and running that mile a little

faster the next week. “The Jogger” represents the lack of recognition of greatness that occurs in so many regular people, but no one will ever hear about it unless it is right in front of their face. That’s why Nike has him eventually become the only figure in view in the commercial.

### **Significance and Representation of Obese Boy**

Unlike most sports company commercials he isn’t a person who has a perfect body, the perfect form, or even the latest running gear. In fact he doesn’t have anything compared to the stars that promote the Nike brand. It is obvious to the viewer that the boy is struggling; one can even hear the short breaths he takes as he struggles with every step. But none of that matters because he shares in the regularity of many people. Even the wardrobe alone conveys the message of greatness in normality. He isn’t wearing Nike gear, he doesn’t have an iPod playing music to motivate him, or a fancy watch that tracks a joggers heart rate. All that lies in front of him is a road and a goal to reach. Through him and the narrator, Nike is speaking to a broader audience showing that their aim is to reach out to everyone, and if this boy can combat obesity and be active, then anyone who views this commercial can too.

### **Obesity in US**

In order to give even more meaning to the commercial, it is important to recognize and analyze the rhetorical situation at hand. Commercials like “The Jogger” identify and combat the growing disease in this country that is leading to early diagnosis of diabetes and heart disease in many young children and teenagers, obesity. Due to the advancements in the video gaming industry, a child or teenager



is influenced to sit inside for six hours and play video games rather than go outside for an hour and play basketball or be active. On January 30<sup>th</sup> 2014, a group of doctors evaluated a study that was performed over the time period of 1998-2007 regarding childhood and early teenage obesity. Over this nine- year study 7,736 participants were studied and the results were disturbing. It was found that at the mean age of 5.6 years “12.4% were obese and another 14.9% were overweight” (Cunningham, Kramer, Narayan, 2014, p. 403). When the students entered 8<sup>th</sup> grade, of that same population “20.8 percent of the children were obese and 17.0% were overweight” (Cunningham, Kramer, Narayan, 2014, p. 405), but the doctors concluded that those who eventually became obese between the ages of five and fourteen “nearly half of them had been overweight and 75% had been above the 70<sup>th</sup> percentile for body-mass index at baseline” (Cunningham, Kramer, Narayan, 2014, p. 410). These statistics reveal that obesity and being overweight begin early in a child’s life. As the video game industry and other technological advancements continue to grow popular along with the habit of eating unhealthily, these numbers will only continue to grow. It isn’t a coincidence that Nike uses the image of an obese boy in their commercial “The Jogger” to reveal that being active and reaching greatness is something everyone can achieve. This commercial is a prime example of how Nike piggy-back on current events in the United States, and the World to make their messages more salient.

As seen in the statistics above, fast food and video games are more prevalent today than they have ever been. Those two combined have caused the rates of child and teenage obesity to climb significantly over the last twenty years. Smaller

companies have spoken out to the importance of being active, but none have the influence that Nike does simply due to its sheer popularity. Even if companies do have that kind of influence, the standard commercial from sports companies use high profile athletes to convey messages that almost all of their viewers share nothing in common with. Media has attributed greatness to what these athletes accomplish in competition, but have never targeted or spoken of the greatness that lies dormant in an average person. That is the whole point of “The Jogger” commercial, to reveal that we all can achieve something, no matter how little or large. The average person cannot think there is no commonality between the famous athlete and myself; hence I will not be active. Without speaking, the obese boy shows everyone that if he, who is a part of small Midwest American town, who is wearing simple gear, can be proactive in combatting obesity then everyone else can too.

### **How Nike Differs**

The Nike commercial is completely contradictory to what is perceived to constitute greatness in today’s society. Up until this commercial aired in 2012, Nike and their competitors had never developed a commercial in this manner to brand and promote the purchase of their product. Commercials created by Nike and other sport’s companies had always sought out the greatest athletes to promote their company’s product, yet Nike took a risk and diverged from this norm to appeal to all people. Nike uses the obese teenage boy, who isn’t an athlete by any means, instead of a recognizable athlete because he appeals to the average person more than a Kobe Bryant or LeBron James does. Even though Nike breaks new ground by

steering away from the norm, it is still necessary to flash their logo at the end of the commercial. Instead of flashing their logo along with the company phrase “Just Do It” it is replaced appropriately with “Find Your Greatness.”

Similarly to company logos and phrases, all companies abide by a particular mission statement, and Nike is no different. Their mission statement is “to bring inspiration to every athlete\* in the world.” Due to the asterisks after the word “athlete” in their mission statement, Nike’s targeted audience expands from only athletes to anyone who is watching the commercial or wants to buy their product. The commercial “The Jogger” reinforces Nike’s mission statement and appeals to all people. Because Nike is the most well-known sports industry in the world, they do not have to go through the preciseness of targeting specific audiences and can promote their product worldwide. Companies, such as Adidas, continue to attempt to become significant rivals to Nike’s product by endorsing athletes like soccer star Lionel Messi. By hoping that “Messi is a big enough superstar to help make the breakthrough” (Sorenson, 2013, p. 1). Adidas will fall short because he appeals to a very small percentage of buyers. Sports industry analyst Matt Powell reveals that as Nike continues to endorse their product with high profile athletes along with commercials like “The Jogger” companies like Adidas will continue to have a long road ahead of them to catch up.

Another important factor that reinforces the commercial and how Nike strategically attempts to appeal to everyone is the date when the commercial was aired. Since the commercial was aired August 1<sup>st</sup> 2012, this timing means that the commercial was viewed world wide as people watched their country’s best athletes

participate in the Summer Olympics. When looking at sports teams in the United States, the city a particular team represents is the primary source of fandom for that team. There are obviously reasons why people root for other teams other than that of the city they live in such as, a friend used to live in another city, they went to school from another city, or perhaps a person still has family in another city. Generally speaking though, people from one city will support the team that represents that city. The culture of the Olympics is far different than that of a sports team who represent a single city. Athletes who represent their countries in the Olympics represent not just a city, but the people of an entire country. Millions of viewers tune into the Olympics to watch their athletes, but also to be a part of the nationalistic unity that occurs when rooting for your Nation to win against another. Why Nike airs the commercial during the Olympics then becomes much clearer. Rather than airing the commercial during the NFL season, airing it during the Olympics allows the commercial to be recognized by the world. Hundreds of millions of people are tuning in to support their country. Thus, anyone who viewed this commercial can be included in Nike's target audience. We can only speculate, but it seems that Nike strategically aired the commercial at this time knowing that many "non-athletes" would keep tabs on the sportsmen that represented their countries, yet the athletes that represent their countries in the Olympics are anything but average. But by airing "The Jogger" commercial containing elements that completely contradict aspects of the Olympics, Nike is able to speak to the greater audience. If Nike had chosen to use a known athlete instead of the boy, their

notion of “greatness in all of us” becomes contradictory because millions of viewers are already watching the greatest athletes in the world compete.

Prior to the airing of this commercial Nike was an athlete- dominated company. Even though the commercial did not create some paradigm shift in commercials, the commercial does reveal a sort of paradigm shift in the marketing of Nike. Commercials before this were more about the best gear, gloves, bats, shorts, shoes, that *athletes* could buy in order to perform better in their perspective sports. It can be argued that after the airing of this commercial Nike transitions into more of a clothing company rather than a sports gear/wear company because they already dominate the sports world, so now they can expand into more of a clothing line company. Like the boy, other non-athletes are finding ways into the business as well. Today, in Nike commercials we see musicians and other non-athletes. Most recently Nike just signed a deal with perhaps the biggest star in music right now the rapper, Drake. One of the advantages by bringing musicians into the company’s branding is that musicians are year round, where as athletes are seasonal. By incorporating other types of people and not just athletes, Nike has not only held onto their dominance in the athletic world but begun its expansion into more of a clothing line for all, rather than a sporting company that is just for athletes.

Before we can conclude that Nike’s commercial was ultimately a success, it is important to examine the responses it elicited from their audience. Something like this had never been done before in sports commercials, so it could have very easily backfired. After reviewing 500 comments, that spanned from June to August of 2012, in the Youtube comment section, it was determined that 147 of these

comments reflected some sort of positivity. The overwhelming majority of these comments were reflections of people's own personal stories of how they lost weight and overcame obesity. Many other comments cheered for the boy in the commercial Nathan, and encouraged him to continue his battle with his weight. As discussed earlier, one would assume that with the success of this commercial that there would be some sort of paradigm shift in branding in sports ads to incorporate "normal" people, but there wasn't. The failure of there to be a paradigm shift in the sports marketing industry, but success of this commercial is a testimony to how "Nike has always been clever in its advertising campaigns at blending themes of personal empowerment and transcendence with media irreverence" (Notaro, 2008, p. 64). Even if the background to what Nike is promoting isn't clear to the audience, the sense of empowerment in "The Jogger" is enough to elicit positive emotions from their audiences. Even though the majority of the comments were positive, there were some negative comments. To be exact, there were 33 comments that exuded negativity, and almost half of these comments were name-calling comments like fat ass, or fat boy. Other comments made jokes of how there were pizza or ice cream behind the camera, which is the only reason why he was running. The remaining comments were simply people arguing amongst each other about the meaning of the commercial, or they were just friends tagging other friends to watch the commercial. Although there was some negativity present, it is obvious that Nike's message resonated with their audience as evidenced by the overwhelming positive reaction it received.

One would expect that because the commercial received such high praise from its viewers that there would be a paradigm shift in the way sports companies conducted their commercials, yet this was not the case whatsoever. One of the reasons this may be the case is because Nike is the only sport's company that has this type of flexibility and capability. Due to the fact that they already dominate the sports industry, Nike is the only company that is able to take the risk of using an average person to brand their product while communicating a message. Other companies like Adidas and Reebok heavily rely on their prolific athletes to brand their product because they still compete amongst each other to acquire the customers that do not choose to buy Nike's product. Even though the commercial was well received, I want to examine if Nike truly does contribute to their underlying message, to combat obesity, or if this commercial was simply a tool to have more people than just athletes purchase their product.

Aside from the elements in the commercial such as the scene, speech, and boy we have covered various strategies that Nike has used in order to brand the product and influence people to buy it. Since the commercial "The Jogger" does not combat obesity alone, we have had to look at the other marketing strategies that Nike uses to help brand their product. It was noted earlier that Nike aired this commercial during the 2012 Olympics so that people all over the world would see it. After analyzing these broader themes, it is time to take a more centralized look into the specifics of the speech. From listening to the speech during the commercial you hear the word "greatness" over and over again which may lead to other details being overlooked. But the last two sentences reveal another way that Nike aims to market

their product, by using the words “we” and “us.” As insignificant and little these words might mean, Nike is showing its audience that you as a customer, even if you are a non-athlete, are important to us. As “Nike presents itself as a ‘family’ business” (Nataro, 2008, p. 68) consumers can easily create an atmosphere around themselves that with Nike and their product I can achieve whatever endeavors regarding weight loss that lay ahead. From first glance of the commercial, and the Youtube comments, it appears that Nike does execute the pursuit of trying to be the support system for their consumer just as if they were family members supporting an exerciser, which ultimately promotes people to buy their product.

### **Does the Commercial Contribute to Obesity?**

As inspiring as the commercial was perceived, it is not apparent that Nike initially contributes to obesity just through the commercial. Some viewers may assume that Nike is trying to promote healthy living and exercise, and ultimately fight obesity, but other viewers can just as easily perceive it a different way. The point is that in order to truly communicate the importance of combatting obesity viewers cannot assume that Nike is actually making an attempt to combat obesity through this commercial, it must be definite. Viewers do not directly know why the obese boy has decided to run. Perhaps he was bullied at school or maybe the boy simply wants to become fit. If in fact the commercial was an attempt to help combat obesity and encourage people to become more fit, then Nike should have put some sort of blurb at the end demonstrating how they are attempting to fight obesity around the world. Because the story behind why the boy is running isn’t clear, this commercial simply becomes an ad to promote Nike’s product. It would have been



very easy to show some sort of image at the end of the commercial promoting one of the various obesity programs that Nike funds. For example, they most recently “committed 50 million dollars to the Make Kids Active program” (Anaya, 2013, p. 1). Many people don’t know this fact, and not only would it help the cause of fighting childhood and teenage obesity, but it would also clear up the underlying message to viewers. Although it may have not been Nike’s intention, it can be perceived that Nike used the struggles of an obese kid to their own financial gain, rather than supporting a very serious problem amongst children today.

Even though the commercial received high praise and perhaps did have good intentions, there are always other perspectives to consider. The most controversial image of the commercial is the boy, not only because he is obese and clearly struggling with the run, but because Nike adopted a completely different approach by choosing him to star in their commercial. We already know about Nike’s message of how *there is a greatness that lies within all of us*, but the combatting of obesity message is not well executed. The issue with the commercial is that it creates the idea that obesity is a barrier to greatness, when it isn’t at all. Being obese is perhaps a major barrier to having athletic prowess, but in no way is an obese person’s potential for greatness less than someone who is fit. The commercial makes it seem as if the only avenue to finding your greatness is by being fit, when in fact there are innumerable avenues to achieving greatness. Dr. David Katz, editor-in-chief of the journal *Childhood Obesity*, feels that “the ad could have shown a boy we were inclined to judge based on his appearance sitting down at a piano bench, and stunning us with his virtuosity, and without muddling the message, that obesity

and greatness can travel the same road” (Katz, 2012, p. 2). By using the obese boy Nike created a parallel that obesity and greatness cannot be intertwined with one another, which isn’t true. If Nike wants to promote physical activity, then that is fine, but needs to be mindful of how its message may inadvertently stigmatize those who are overweight. As the dominant athletic company in the world, Nike must remember that although obesity does impede running down a road, and often, achieving greatness in athletics, it is not a barrier to greatness.

### **Does Nike Still Need to Brand Their Product?**

Even though Nike may have failed to communicate the importance of combatting obesity effectively in the commercial, it still reveals effective marketing techniques that were well received and show why Nike is the most popular sports company in the world. The argument that Nike is well known throughout the world cannot be denied; they sponsor a great number of athletes. People who even live in third world countries are familiar with the word Nike because of the sheer dominance and popularity the company has all over the world. Out of 196 countries, Nike sponsors teams or athletes from 60 of them. So does Nike still need to brand their product? They sponsor a number of teams and athletes in almost a third of the countries that make up the world. The answer is still yes. Even though there is no real threat from other sports companies to take their spot on the throne, Nike, like most companies, boils down to one thing, money, and no matter how much money companies make, they will always want more.

## **Conclusion**

The uniqueness of Nike's marketing strategies and their willingness to go out on a limb are what separate them from their competitors. Every sports company has their sponsors and famous athletes that represent their company, but Nike's ability to recognize current world events and take risks in advertising is why their dominance of the sports gear and clothing industry continues to grow. Although the commercial failed to truly promote combatting childhood and teenage obesity by being active, it didn't hurt them because their overarching message that greatness is within all of us is true. The commercial "The Jogger" represents Nike's risk taking and ability to brand their product to the entire world during the perfect time. Up until this commercial, no other sports company had ever attempted to brand their product with a "normal" person. Sports companies were always represented by famous athletes who people aspired to be because that is what greatness was perceived to be. Yet, "The Jogger" commercial revealed to everyone that you don't have to be a famous athlete in order to be great, and that there is greatness in all of us.

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