

The Contingency of Corporate Political Advocacy

Nike's 'Dream Crazy' Campaign with Colin Kaepernick

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The Contingency of Corporate Political Advocacy.

Nike's 'Dream Crazy' Campaign with Colin Kaepernick

Abstract: An emerging field of research views Corporate Political Advocacy (CPA) as a communication strategy that responds to the challenges of public relations in divided societies. CPA takes a political position in public and, by doing so, appears to deliberately alienate some of its stakeholders. This study challenges the assumption that CPA discards a unifying epideictic rhetoric in favour of agonistic politics. The investigated case is Nike's *Dream Crazy* campaign starring American football player Colin Kaepernick, whose protest against race discrimination in the US sparked a heated public debate. Though the critical analysis of the campaign and responses on Twitter reveal deep political cleavages, Nike is concurrently engaged in unchallenged communication praising the hyper-individualism of a market ideology. The epideictic contingency of Nike's CPA undermines the social cause ostensibly at the heart of the campaign: the fight against racial discrimination.

Keywords: Agonistics, Colin Kaepernick, Corporate Political Advocacy, Culture Industry, Epideictic Rhetoric, Nike, Racial Discrimination

Epideictic rhetoric is a genre that was introduced by Aristotle (2006) more than 2,000 years ago. He describes it as praise (or blame) used to win favour with a homogeneous audience by reclaiming its unquestioned values. Epideictic rhetoric is ceremonial communication that affirms the respectability or shamefulness of current behaviour. Coombs and Holladay (2018: 80) recently took up the term and argued that traditional corporate discourses are guided by an "epideictic advocacy". An organization engages in a ritualistic laudatio to itself by adapting to the expectations of stakeholders. It is a fight-shy rhetoric or, as Aristotle (2016: 1367b) put it

by referring to Socrates: “it is not difficult to praise Athenians in Athens”. Epideictic rhetoric has also intruded into mainstream public relations research. The postulation of symmetry and dialogue as the cornerstones of functionalist equilibrium models is “privileging consensual communication” (Ciszek and Logan, 2018: 117). Professional associations and their affiliated researchers promote a harmonistic ideology: the possibility of aligning with all of the stakeholders all of the time and the belief in win-win-solutions for any social conflict (author, anonymized).

The times, however, are changing. The rise of populist leaders such as Donald Trump in the US or Boris Johnson in the UK, as well as the emergence of right-wing parties in a number of Western countries are indicative of a society that is not harmonious, but deeply divided. More recent theoretical perspectives on PR are responding to these challenges. Davidson (2016) conceptualizes dissent instead of consensus and conflict instead of harmony as driving forces for social change. He applies Chantal Mouffée’s concept of agonistic pluralism to PR, which is also a promising theoretical framework for the PR practice that is at the centre of this study: Corporate Political Advocacy (Ciszek and Logan, 2018; Wettstein and Baur 2016). CPA is supposed to take a political stance in heated public debates. It is not crowd-pleasing and, as a consequence, it can please only some publics, while alienating others. CPA goes beyond lobbying, since it is public communication and not linked directly to specific business-related political goals of the company. An alternative term that has been proposed is Corporate Social Advocacy (Dodd and Supa, 2014; Miller Gaither et al., 2018). This study sticks with the term CPA and builds on the premise that conflictual public communication on societal issues ought to be both corporate and political communication.

The case investigated is Nike’s 2018 *Dream Crazy* campaign featuring the controversial football player Colin Kaepernick, who protested against race discrimination by kneeling during the National Anthem played before NFL games. The case looks like a prime example of a dissensus-oriented approach to Corporate Political Advocacy. This study, however, aims

to find out whether a consensual epideictic rhetoric that supports a hegemonic ideology still matters with respect to CPA communication, despite the controversial nature of the issue addressed.

Corporate Political Advocacy

The term Corporate Political Advocacy does not describe a new phenomenon (see e.g., Waltzer, 1988), but is garnering greater attention and developing as a distinct field of research as a result of societal changes. Managerial approaches, for example, ask how CPA can contribute to the bottom line, even though it automatically alienates a part of its potential customer base. Dodd and Supa (2014: 1) found that “greater agreement with a corporate stance results in greater intentions to purchase”. However, they cannot answer the question whether this might be outweighed by the number of alienated customers and, more importantly, why a company would choose such a risky strategy at all. Other scholars focus on public communication processes and analyse the social media discourses induced by CSA activities. Ciszek and Logan (2018: 123) took the case of ice cream company Ben & Jerry’s supporting the *Black Lives Matter* movement and concluded: “Users did not appear to listen, learn, or adjust their knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs; instead, they simply stated their position and moved on.” The deliberative quality of responses to CPA communication seems to be limited. However, what the authors do not call into question is the credible self-positioning of a company within an agonistic public debate.

Overall, there is not yet much empirical research on CPA. The discourse is still at an early stage. Conceptual papers dominate - they aim to define and map the field. One contribution in particular is worth highlighting: Wettstein and Baur (2016) provide an invaluable terminological foundation which helps to clarify the concept. They point out that at its core CPA is promotional public communication and define it as “voicing or showing explicit and

public support for certain individuals, groups, or ideals and values with the aim of convincing and persuading others to do the same.” (p. 200)

This study takes Wettstein and Baur’s concept as a starting point, but challenges some of its key assumptions. First, the commitment to a tension-centred perspective when looking at societal debates does not prevent the authors from sticking with a harmonistic and positivistic *Walk the Talk* approach at the organizational level. They borrow the approach from functionalist CSR research and argue that CPA becomes convincing and credible once there is a “consistency between stated and lived values” (Wettstein and Baur, 2016: 206). While polyphony is acknowledged for the public sphere, the organisation itself seems to remain untouched: One singular identity enables the organization to speak with one clear voice in political debates. The theoretical underpinnings of such an understanding are the *container model* for the organization and the *transmission model* for communication. Constitutive, formative and paradox approaches reject both models and, consequently, normative *Walk the Talk* expectations too (Christensen et al., 2011; Schoeneborn et al., 2019; author, anonymized). Ambiguities of CPA resulting from contingent messages are not perceived as an organizational weakness, but a strategic resource that may extend corporate room to manoeuvre (Eisenberg, 1984).

Secondly, Wettstein and Baur reserve for themselves the right to decide which positions are appropriate for CPA engagement. The positions ought to represent values which are in line with “our liberal democratic order” (2016: 210). According to such a logic, it is fine to analyse and praise a corporate campaign for same-sex-marriage as an adorable CPA initiative, because it is within “our” order. Meanwhile, opposing voices are disqualified through *Othering* (Spivak, 1985). It would not be CPA, for example, if the CEO of Italian pasta company Barilla were to state that his company would never run an advertisement with a gay couple because it would not represent the brand’s family values. At best, such a case could be used for a crisis communication analysis (e.g., Pace et al., 2014). While one might have

personal sympathy for Wettstein and Baur's stance on the issue, their practice of *Othering* runs the risk of jeopardising the innovative potential of this very promising new discourse on CPA and getting caught up in a political correctness trap.

Wettstein and Baur's positioning illustrates a broader bias within the emerging CPA discourse. Cases brought forward by researchers relate to issues such as same-sex-marriage, transgender bathroom use, gun legislation, immigration reform, health care reform, emergency contraception, climate change and so forth (Dodd, 2018; Wilcox, 2019). What all these debates have in common is that there is always a kind of liberal, progressive and 'caring' political camp on the one hand being confronted with a conservative or even populist and reactionary camp on the other. Of course, all of the companies investigated choose the liberal camp. If they were to choose the other camp, it would no longer be CPA.

This contribution will challenge the observed bias of CPA research from a decisively critical perspective. We believe that the discussed contributions are too quick to grant corporations the ambitious status of political activist (e.g., Miller Gaither et al., 2018; for a thorough theoretical discussion: Holtzhausen, 2012). In particular, we contest the fundamental argument that CPA represents and promotes a "decrease in cultural homogeneity" (Dodd, 2018: 228). We believe that CPA still includes a lot of epideictic rhetoric aimed at pleasing everybody instead of pleasing some and alienating others. Our research questions are: What are homogenizing tendencies inherent to CPA messages and the social media discourses induced by them? Before we present our empirical case, we will embed CPA into a critical theory framework, namely Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's seminal reflexions on the culture industry and Chantal Mouffee's more recent agonistic approach to the political sphere.

The totality of the culture industry and the pluralism of agonistic politics

Horkheimer and Adorno (2006) look at the homogenizing and harmonizing effects of an epideictic rhetoric from a cultural macro-perspective. A coherent culture industry is producing a manipulative and standardized mass culture which is transforming citizens into uncritical consumers. It is a process of domestication, not empowerment. The power of the culture industry is grounded in the totality of both the production and consumption processes in late capitalism. Suppression in the workplace is followed by brainwashing through trivial entertainment at home. Culture is reduced to its exchange value; there seems to be no choice and no way of escaping from capitalist “success” ideology: “(...) the defrauded masses today cling to the myth of success still more ardently than the successful. They, too, have their aspirations. They insist unwaveringly on the ideology by which they are enslaved.” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2006: 50)

Corporate Political Advocacy appears to be the opposite: Both the corporation and the consumer seem to have a choice and can raise their voice for opposing political positions. Not surprisingly, Horkheimer and Adorno are often brushed aside when it comes to post-modern diagnoses of society (most notably: Collins, 1989; for a thorough theoretical discussion: Slater and Tomkiss, 2001). The term ‘mass culture’ has been replaced by popular cultures reflecting a post-Fordist economy. Post-Fordism is conceptualized as a knowledge economy in diversified markets with socially differentiated consumers. Material and natural resources matter less than the specific skills and engagement of the workforce. Not totality, but flexibilisation and individualisation are observed both on the level of production and consumption. Consequently, it has become much more difficult to manipulate a mass audience. The post-modern consumer society thus enables free spaces for “a rebellious reappropriation of commercial products”. (Slater and Tomkiss, 2001: 168)

One of these post-modern concepts in the field of political theory was provided by Chantal Mouffe (2013). Her concept of agonistic politics builds on Laclau and Mouffe’s (2014)

seminal work (first published in 1985) on political hegemony and radical democracy. It is a strong statement against homogenizing structures that aim to conceal hegemonies instead of making them contestable. Davidson (2016) showed the potential of the agonistic perspective for public relations theory building in general, while Ciszek and Logan (2018) applied it to CPA. Mouffee's ambition is to revitalize a pluralistic understanding of the political from a decisively leftist perspective. She argues that social conflicts are inevitable and that every social order is per se hegemonic. She further states that it is neither possible to overcome dissensus with deliberation nor to destroy hegemony with communism. Her solution is an agonistic pluralism understood as a realm of competing hegemonies.

Mouffee's concept seems to be in direct opposition to Horkheimer and Adorno's verdict on the totality of culture industry. It looks like a timely answer that helps to make sense of the political advocacy of corporations in divided societies. However, what has at times been overlooked is her conceptualization of agonism as a *normative* ambition. The reality she describes looks different: A post-political rhetoric constitutes distinct contingent hegemonies as the only possible ones in the here and now. Dominant ideologies are preserved through immunisation. Thus, Mouffee's critical diagnosis of contemporary Western societies is not far from what Horkheimer and Adorno described as the function of the culture industry: destroying the distinction between the world as it is and a world as it could be. Though Mouffee does not use the term culture industry, she describes a

“‘consensus at the centre’ that had come to dominate politics in most liberal-democratic societies. This consensus which is the result of the unchallenged hegemony of neo-liberalism, deprives democratic citizens of an agonistic debate where they can make their voices heard and choose between real alternatives. Until recently, it was mainly through right-wing populist parties that people were able to vent their anger against such a post-political situation.” (Mouffee, 2013: 119)

Wettstein and Baur's (2016) communicative *Othering* is at the heart of such a post-political "consensus at the centre", when they claim for themselves the right to decide which positions are morally worthy of being voiced by CPA and which are not. Mouffee instead problematizes the moral condemnation of e.g. right-wing movements by liberal elites: "when the opponents are not defined in a political but in a moral way, they cannot be seen as adversaries, but only as enemies. With the evil ones, no agonistic debate is possible. They have to be eliminated." (Mouffee, 2013: 143)

Turning adversaries into enemies is constituting both: a broad consensus among the *Us* and a fundamental conflict with the *Other*. It is "our liberal democratic order" (Wettstein and Bauer 2016: 210) that needs to be defended against the enemies who seek to destroy it. Sense-making definitions of the *Us* must remain vague. Laclau (2015) has argued from a post-structural perspective that terms such as 'democracy' function as empty signifiers. Simply because identity-generating meanings are kept in a state of epideictic contingency a broad consensus can be imagined, while *Othering* practices demonize the dissenter.

In consequence, arguing with Mouffee and Laclau does not mean arguing against Horkheimer and Adorno. Even though post-structuralism rejects an essentialist perspective that seems to be inherent to a concept of "totality", we find stunning parallels between Mouffee's post-political "consensus at the centre" and the manipulation of the culture industry. Both approaches agree that there is a dominant hegemony creating the false impression of societal consensus that delegitimizes all those who aim to free themselves from the ideological embrace. Mouffee (2013: 139) argues that there can and ought to be nothing more than a "conflictual consensus" which would then allow contingent hegemonies to be contested through agonistic politics. This is her ideal and she is admittedly more optimistic than Horkheimer and Adorno. However, she leaves no doubt that, despite some glimmers of hope, we are far away from realizing that ideal.

The analytical distinction between the descriptive and normative level of both theories makes it possible to pose the empirical question of whether the rise of Corporate Political Advocacy is such a glimmer of hope for the realization of post-Fordist agonistic politics or whether it instead represents a post-political “consensus at the centre” defending the status quo of neoliberalism. Our case study on Nike’s *Dream Crazy* campaign will contribute to an answer.

Case and method

In September 2019, Corporate Political Advocacy arrived at the mainstream of the creative industries. The sportswear company Nike received an Emmy award for their “outstanding commercial” *Dream Crazy* (Television Academy, 2019). It was part of their 30th anniversary *Just Do It* campaign which had been launched one year before. The American football player Colin Kaepernick was the face of the campaign. Kaepernick is one of the most contested American athletes on account of his political activism before the NFL football games in the 2016 season, which left him without a contract. Kaepernick protested against social injustice and racial discrimination by not standing up for the national anthem. Instead, he kneeled; others followed, offending a great many Americans, including US President Donald Trump, and leading to calls for these players to be fired (Costello, 2019; Intravia et al., 2019).

Kaepernick’s protest took place against the backdrop of the heated debates surrounding police shootings of unarmed African Americans that gave rise to the *Black Lives Matter* movement. Explaining his social protest, Kaepernick said:

“I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. (...) 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).

It is not surprising that Nike took up the topic. The company has a history of using controversial issues such as ageism, sexism or gay rights for their marketing. However, Nike has also been constantly attacked for its labour practices, such as tolerating abusive sweatshop practices in the Global South (Costello, 2019). Most recently, the *Nike Oregon Project*, an elite athlete training camp, came under fire after its head coach received a 4-year ban for doping offences (U.S. Anti Doping Agency, 2019). In the meantime, it has been shut down. Ambiguities like these make Nike's campaign an interesting subject of research. However, the case was not selected to find out whether Nike does or does not *Walk the Talk*. We do not compare communication with "real" corporate practices. Instead, we look at communication alone and argue that an epideictic rhetoric continues to be an inevitable tool used by companies to harmonize social and political contradictions within the ideology of a dominant hegemony.

Nike's *Dream Crazy* campaign featuring Kaepernick began with a tweet of the football player on September 3rd, 2018 (Twitter, 2018a; see figure 1). The tweet includes a close-up photo of Kaepernick's face and the words: "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything". The hashtag "JustDoIt" is added to the text that is repeated above the photo. The slogan also features on the photo but can only be seen when one double-clicks the photo to see the full-size view. According to Twitter statistics, within one year the tweet received 45,000 comments, 353,000 retweets and 903,000 likes. Nike retweeted it the same day and two days later added its *Dream Crazy* video (Twitter, 2018b). Shorter versions of the commercial were aired on American television. Our critical analysis will include both the photo and the full-length video, which is 2.06 min long.

In addition, we will carry out a quantitative and qualitative analysis of a total of 360 comments equally divided between comments on the photo (P001-P180) and on the video (V001-V180). They were retrieved on March 22nd, 2019; double entries and a very small number of non-English comments were excluded due to the language barrier. The sequence of

the comments is not chronological. The lists are organized according to an algorithm which is not disclosed by Twitter. While this lack of transparency poses a methodological problem, it can be assumed that the comments analysed prompted the most traffic for the company. What matters as a selection criterion for this study is the public visibility of voices, and comments listed higher are more visible than the lower ones.

The data analysis builds on Stuart Hall's (1980) distinction between the encoding and decoding of messages. Encoding is the construction of a meaning from the perspective of Nike as the producer of campaign messages. Decoding is what the recipients do with it. They may accept the dominant position of the producer, which is grounded in a hegemonial ideological order, or they may take a negotiated position or reinterpret it in an oppositional way. Hall points out the importance of the context of the communication process, which is capable of reducing the contingency of messages. Accordingly, we will focus on how Nike either provides or refuses contexts for the key claims in the campaign: "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything." is the most salient in the photo message, while the slogans *Dream Crazy* in combination with *Just Do It* are the most salient in the video message.

The analysis is mainly qualitative but is supported by a quantitative part. We measured the frequencies of (a) the political positioning of the comments according to Hall's differentiation, including the number of *boycott* and *buycott* appeals, (b) the users' explication or exemplification of their own position, (c) references to the main aspects of the central messages which would be (c1) racial discrimination and social change, (c2) sacrifice, (c3) the *Dream Crazy* slogan in combination with *Just Do It*, and finally (d) references to a potential economic dimension of the campaign.

One may contest the appropriateness of Stuart Hall for this study, because Nike using CPA to make a statement against social injustice looks rather like resistance against a dominant hegemony, but not as the representation of one. However, as argued in the theoretical part,

encoded messages and political cleavages are not always so clear-cut. This transforms the high degree of abstraction in Hall's dichotomy into an advantage when engaging in a more inductive in-depth analysis.

Findings

Encoded messages: The photo and the video

On September 3rd, 2018 Kaepernick tweeted the text "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything." (Twitter, 2018a) He added the hashtag #JustDoIt. The text is followed by a photo of Kaepernick showing his face up close in black/white format. His facial expression is contemplative, serious, and grounded: He does not look like one of the most divisive personalities in American sport, but rather somebody who is at peace with himself. His statement reappears on the photo. An encoded message can be identified when taking the unique context into account:

- (a) "Believe in something..." Kaepernick took a stance against racial discrimination and related police brutality in America. His political activism developed in the context of the *Black Lives Matter* movement. Thus, the "something" he believes in is the need for social change, in particular with regard to police brutality against people of colour.
- (b) "...Even if it means sacrificing everything." Kaepernick did not secure a new contract in the National Football League. The message suggests that he had to give up his career as a professional football player due to his political activism and specifically his kneeling during the national anthem.

Figure 1: The first message in the “Dream Crazy” campaign



12:20 - 3. Sept. 2018
Kaepernick's Tweet, 3 September 2018 (Twitter, 2018a)

The ascribed contextualisation of the message would guide the reader to the conclusion that Nike and Kaepernick aim to make a distinct statement for social justice. However, this contextualisation is not self-evident. Nike is not explicitly embedding the sacrifice statement into a discourse on race and discrimination. In a strange way, the photo actually neutralizes the racial aspect. The contrast in the black and white image is set such that Kaepernick's skin colour is transformed into the bright part. The image also excludes his afro – a strong symbol when he was kneeling in the stadiums. Thus, Nike ostensibly supports the Black Lives Matter movement while at the same time removing signifiers which would invite discourse on racial discrimination. We conclude that Nike aims to turn Kaepernick into Laclau's empty signifier in order to enable contingent decodings of a mass audience. The company wants to have Kaepernick's cake - and eat it, too.

The commercial tweeted by Nike two days later (Twitter, 2018b) employs the same strategy while revealing more explicitly the encoded epideictic ideology behind the campaign. The video tells success stories of individual athletes who appear throughout the video – such as football player Odell Beckham Jr., basketball player LeBron James, tennis star Serena

Williams, wheelchair basketball player Megan Blunk and boxer Zeina Nassar wearing a Nike pro hijab in the boxing ring. These are just a few high-profile athletes who have all, in some way, managed to make their dream come true despite various obstacles and difficulties. The video is narrated by Kaepernick and his voiceover is directed towards an imagined audience. At 1:17, he is seen for the first time looking up at a huge Stars and Stripes flag projected on a city wall saying: “Believe in something.” He then turns to the camera and adds: “Even if it means sacrificing everything”. At the end of the video, we see Kaepernick walking outside in his ordinary clothes saying: “So don’t ask if your dreams are crazy, ask if they’re crazy enough”.

At first sight, the video celebrates diversity in contexts such as race, gender, sexuality, religion and physical ability. As such, it can be seen as a consistent extension of the photo message addressing racial discrimination. Once again, however, these contexts are anything but explicit. The recipient needs to pay attention to the various discourses and their protagonists in order to make these connections. For example, the video shows a young skateboarder while Kaepernick is saying: “Don’t believe you have to be like anybody to be somebody.” No additional context is provided. We are not told that the skateboarder is Lacey Baker, a queer who lives a non-binary identity. Again, Nike wants to have its cake and eat it: while LGBT activists may praise the company for a courageous positioning, the mass consumer who is unaware of the relevant context information simply enjoys an easily digestible message.

Thus, it is not surprising that Kaepernick as the narrator takes a back seat in the video. We see him for only around 14 seconds. People who do not know Kaepernick are not able to find any cue in the video relating the encoded message to the *Black Lives Matter* movement. In the key sequence of the video, Kaepernick looks up to the US flag while making his “Believe in something” statement. A contextualized decoding would position Kaepernick as a political activist shining a light on America’s shortcomings and remind the nation to live up to the

ideals represented by the flag. Without that context, however we may simply see a narrator encouraging us to sacrifice everything for America. One is left wondering why Nike did not include the sequence that triggered the whole controversy - Kaepernick kneeling in the football stadium. Such a move would credibly reduce contingency. Instead, Nike demotes Kaepernick's activism into an empty signifier.

Producing empty signifiers is not in itself a rhetorical end. Epideictic communication sustains a contingent hegemony. It is at this juncture that the video goes beyond Kaepernick's initial attention-grabbing sacrifice statement. The commercial is encoding the ideology behind the campaign far more explicitly: Nike is retelling the American Dream (Samuel, 2012). They tell the audience that every individual can *Just Do It*. If you just work hard enough, your crazy dreams will come true. Kaepernick presents Serena Williams as a prime example: "If you're a girl from Compton, don't just become a tennis player, become the greatest athlete ever." Compton has been known as hot spot for crime and police brutality. However, it is not encoded as a societal problem that needs to be addressed through collective political action including Corporate Political Advocacy. In Nike's story, Compton is nothing more than a prop. Oppressive structures destroying equal opportunities are presented as if they ultimately do not matter. Everybody can overcome them - only the will to *Just Do It* makes a difference. The video promotes an ideology that radically individualizes social issues and the solutions to those issues.

It is ultimately a *neoliberal optimism* (Bourne, 2019) that drives the video. The analogy to sports connects the *American Dream* narrative with a market view on social life. Kaepernick promotes competition without limitations: "Don't try to be the fastest runner in your school. Or the fastest in the world. Be the fastest ever." Hyper-individualism links to a "success" ideology as described and criticized by Adorno and Horkheimer (2006). Greediness is transformed into a positive value. Insatiability in sports redefines the land of opportunity as a voracious consumer society. Everything is subsumed into an instrumental reasoning - even

sweatshop practices in business or doping in sport can then be accepted as necessary sacrifices for the one and only higher end: success.

The success of the campaign relies on the exchange value of the initial message on social media (Dean, 2014): creating first public attention through controversy and following two days later with the epideictic retelling of the traditional *American Dream* story. Horkheimer and Adorno (2006: 63) referred to this as “detoxifying tragedy”. The tragedy of racism is detoxified with a commodified reproduction of the *American Dream* starring a hero who is “getting into trouble and out again” (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2006: 62). Failure to attain the status of hero is attributed not to oppressive societal structures, but to personal shortcomings: these people simply aren’t dreaming “crazy enough”. At the beginning of the video, Kaepernick calls them “non-believers”. His *Othering* practice turns the campaign into a religious crusade whose mission is to defend the *American Dream* against all the non-believers. How inhumane such an ideology is can be seen when applied to Nike’s own examples. If the crazy dreamer is the guy who became an “ironman after beating a brain tumour”, then the *Other* will be all people who fail to beat the tumour and die from cancer. They weren’t dreaming crazy enough.

Nike utilizes what Jack Solomon (1988) has described as the paradox of the *American Dream*. The “mythic promise of equal opportunity” collides with “a ferocious competition for privilege and distinction” (p. 167). Nike’s hyper-individualism puts the focus on the latter. The commercial primarily presents solo sports and none of the ‘winners’ are seen getting help from anybody. Just as Serena Williams *beat* an opponent on the court, so too the future ironman *beat* cancer - not the medical staff treating him and certainly not a healthcare system providing equal access for everybody. For Nike, a crazy dream is neither a collective achievement nor can its realization be undermined by forces outside one’s own control: If you lose, it’s nobody’s fault but your own. Neither a tumour, nor Compton can be blamed.

The analysis of encoded messages shows that Horkheimer and Adorno's notion of the culture industry is anything but outdated. What first appears to be a credible and courageous Corporate Political Advocacy turns into the selling of a hyper-individualism driving boundless markets where everything is permitted to be sacrificed for the sake of one thing only: being the winner. However, stopping our analysis at this point would be problematic. There are reasons why the thinking of the Frankfurt School has been called elitist. Critical intellectuals are positioned with a superior access to social reality seemingly legitimising them to tell ordinary people why their everyday life is manipulated by the culture industry. It has been the merit of post-modern writers such as Mouffee to upvalue audiences and their subversive potential when engaging with promotional communication (see also De Certeau, 1984). Thus, our analysis of encoded messages needs to be complemented by decodings of an audience.

Decoded messages: Comments on Twitter

Our theoretical discussion has resulted in the empirical question of to what degree Corporate Political Advocacy converges with Mouffee's normative idea of agonistic pluralism. The decodings of Kaepernick's and Nike's messages do indeed indicate a divided America (see table 1). Most of the comments either strongly support or oppose the campaign with only 1.9% conveying a more balanced negotiated meaning. There is a majority of 51.7% voicing an oppositional meaning, compared with 34.7% affirmative voices (see table 1). The opposing voices include more often *boycott* appeals (27.4%) compared with *buycott* appeals among the supporters (14.4%).

Table 1: Decoding the *Dream Crazy* campaign on Twitter

	Photo	Video	All
Dominant: agreement	31.1%	38.3%	34.7%
Negotiated	1.7%	2.2%	1.9%
Opposing: disagreement	60.6%	42.8%	51.7%
Unrelated	6.7%	16.7%	11.7%
Total	100%	100%	100%
N	180	180	360

The sample includes the first 180 listed responses to Kaepernick's Tweet, 3 September 2018 (Twitter, 2018a) and the first 180 listed comments to Nike's Tweet, 5 September 2018 (Twitter, 2018b).

As expected, opposition to Kaepernick's photo message (60.6%) is stronger than the opposition to Nike's video (42.8%). The photo functions primarily as an attention-grabbing tool by stirring controversy. The video not only receives less opposition, there are also more irrelevant or nonsense responses which, from the very outset, do not contribute to the discussion in a meaningful way (16.7% versus only 6.7% for the photo). Similarly, the majority of 'meaningful' video comments (52.0%) do not elaborate on their opinion. Pro or con statements such as "Probably the most inspiring ad of all time" (V052) or simply "#FUCKNIKE" (V003) are not backed up with any arguments. Meanwhile, the majority of the comments (74.3%) on the photo justify and explain it. Thus, the photo not only caused controversy, but also triggered a fairly sophisticated political discussion while non-reflexive positionings dominate the comments on the video. Nonetheless, opinions on the video are still divided, so that there may have been a significant spill-over effect from the photo and/or related media coverage which ultimately thwarted Nike's unifying and mollifying American Dream storytelling.

The next step will analyse in detail the content of the comments by looking at the ways the users decode the main components of the messages:

- (a) “Believe in something”, encoded as the belief in the need for social change and protest against racial discrimination and related police brutality,
- (b) “Even if it means sacrificing everything”, encoded as a sacrifice made by Kaepernick who had to give up his football career due to his political activism,
- (c) “Dream Crazy” / “Just Do it”, encoded as the celebration of diversity, the individual ability to realize crazy dreams and become a winner.

We have argued that Nike is half-hearted in its offering of these contextualized encodings. Overall, the company aims to uphold contingency. Thus, it is not surprising that only 7.2% of all comments refer to the (a) “something” Kaepernick believes in. The social change and diversity theme that seems to be at the heart of Nike’s campaign is barely discussed on Twitter. The discourse instead revolves around (b) the sacrifice theme: 24.2% of all comments discuss the meaning of sacrifice - primarily as a response to the photo (38.9%) whereas only a small number of comments on the video refer to it (9.4%). Finally, (c) the *Dream Crazy* or *Just Do It* slogan is hardly taken up by users, slightly more often in comments to the video (12.8%) than to the photo (4.4%). Overall, it is the “sacrifice” topic that triggers the discussion with primarily oppositional decodings.

The most salient oppositional reading on Twitter argues that Kaepernick did not sacrifice anything and that all he did is dishonour the American flag and the national anthem. It is the American soldiers serving under the flag and risking their lives who are really prepared and willing to sacrifice everything. The prime example used is that of Pat Tillman, who was also an NFL player, but decided to join the US army. He died in service in Afghanistan in 2006. Other examples of “sacrifice” are directly embedded into the context of 9/11, such as the

firefighters who risked their lives in the twin towers or Todd Beamer who fought the terrorists on hijacked United Airlines Flight 93 that crashed in the fields of Pennsylvania.

The contingency of the sacrifice topic is utilized fully by Twitter users and its decoding changes with the chosen context. Nike applies it to Kaepernick in a way that allows a diversity and political activism context to be selected, while opponents apply it primarily to military heroes and prefer a 9/11 context. There are only a few posts challenging the sacrifice claim per se. @Jeffrey_D_Meyer argues: “Or believe in something and rationally fight for it without having to sacrifice everything.” (P159) Another example is @AtlantisWellne2 who reflects on the risks of the message’s contextual contingency: “Think about this: believe in something even if it means sacrificing everything _ what can that mean? Your life? A dream? This is not a good message to send. With all the shooting going on are they believing something and sacrificing life?” (P097).

The reference to school shootings exemplifies the perils of Nike’s contingent sacrifice message. It allows users to go far beyond the dichotomy represented by Colin Kaepernick and Pat Tillman. There is a much broader range of potential decodings: @jccod711 promotes Jesus Christ as the prime example (P064, see figure 2), whereas @CoolAutumnWind1 introduces Osama Bin Laden as the one who believed in something and sacrificed everything. (P136, see figure 3; the Twitter account concerned has been deleted in the meantime).

Figure 2: Jesus Christ sacrificing everything



Figure 3: Osama Bin Laden sacrificing everything



Two comments on Kaepernick's Tweet from 3 September 2018 (Twitter, 2018a)

Overall, a potential agonistic discussion of the “something” Kaepernick believes in is stifled by the presentation of a whole army of potential role models who have literally sacrificed “everything”. What at first glance looks like a clear, consistent Corporate Political Advocacy statement that pleases some while alienating others is transformed into an epideictic bear hug from which nobody can escape. The photo paradoxically does both: causing public attention through dissent while offering something for everybody. What is forgotten is the political issue at stake: racial discrimination.

Contingency means that Nike and Kaepernick leave it to the audience to decide what that “something” one believes in might be and which “everything” one is willing to sacrifice. What is not left to the audience is the decision to link the “everything” with the “something” through an instrumental reasoning. The sacrifice is a means of reaching a higher goal. It is then up to the video to tell the audience what that goal ultimately is : You will be a winner once you *Dream Crazy*. The contingency of the message finds its limitation in an optimistic market ideology of free and ambitious individuals.

Only one recontextualisation could prove problematic for the company: a decoding applying the instrumental reasoning against Nike itself as an enterprise whose ultimate goal is to make a profit. However, only 12.8% of all responses discuss materialistic motives behind

the campaign. Critical voices question e.g. Kaepernick's credibility as a political activist. He is described as somebody who "sucked at football, now sells shoes" (P054). Or: "His career was in the toilet (...) & now he's making millions of dollars" (P173). Kaepernick appears in these comments as a money-grabbing failed football player. Greediness is also assigned to Nike as a company: "I don't call a multimillionaire "Sacrificing Everything" true, I call it corporate propaganda used to manipulate customers to spend 150 bucks on a shoe that costs @nike 25 to make." (V046) Other comments question the credibility of Nike by referring to its sweatshop labour practices in overseas factories: "Way to point out inequality in the United States, through products made with slave labor" (P003). One comment encapsulates the instrumental reasoning fundamental to the market logic by turning it directly against Kaepernick: "Dont be a tool" (sic, V161). In contrast, there are also voices who do not criticize the campaign's economic rationale but want the company to stick with their identity as a commercial enterprise instead of choosing "politics over shoes" (P125). @Tabnotic has "purchased Nike for athletic purposes" (P114) and now see themselves being forced into representing a specific political position.

Overall, the critiques are twofold when it comes to the discussion of whether Nike, as a business organization, ought to be promoting political positions. Some agree that it should but question the credibility of the campaign by highlighting Nike's profit-orientation and Kaepernick's material interests. Others disagree that Nike and Kaepernick should stay in the seemingly neutral worlds of business and sports. Once more, contingency is constituted - here regarding the boundaries of the political. @imatider, for example, attacks Nike for its "venture into politics" (V139) while at the same time using the American flag as profile photo on Twitter. Bryant (2018) recently argued that the predominantly white middle-class audience of NFL games tends to disregard the political and militarized character of patriotic symbolism that has increased significantly in American football in the wake of 9/11. Playing the national anthem and flying the flag is not perceived to be political, while kneeling during the

ceremony is. *Othering* practices turn the *political* into a dirty word. This is exactly what Mouffee (2013) describes as the post-political turn in public discourses that prevents the development of an agonistic pluralism. The same can be observed with regard to the *American Dream* narrative. There are no Twitter discussions of its political dimension as a neoliberal market ideology. It is so deeply culturally embedded that an agonistic contest becomes impossible. Inevitably, the *crazy dream* of the political activist degenerates into a trivial *Just Do It* consumerism:

- “My birthday is on the 19th of October and I wish for #Nike to give me a crazy birthday surprise in making my dream a reality.” (V038)
- “Just did it! My son’s new Nike. Also got Nike T-shirts and pants. Support all the way. Go Kaepernick.” (V018)

Conclusion

For many decades public relations research built on functionalistic and harmonistic equilibrium models. These have in the meantime been contested by critical research and deconstructed as a business ideology that hides inevitable conflicts and power inequalities in post-modern societies. Societal changes, such as the rise of populist politics in divided societies, make this critique more pressing than ever. The concept of Corporate Political Advocacy describes a possible corporate response to these challenges. Corporations deliberately take a stance in political issues and in so doing accept that they may alienate a significant portion of potential customers. From a critical perspective, it is difficult to understand why companies would make such a sacrifice, which is why this paper challenges the assumption by searching for homogenizing tendencies in a recent Corporate Political Advocacy campaign. In other words, we argue that CPA communication is built on a great deal of harmonistic and epideictic ideology.

Thus, classical critical theories such as Horkheimer and Adorno's (2006) verdict on the standardizing, totalizing and "detoxifying" culture industry on the one hand, and postmodern answers such as Mouffee's (2013) normative concept of agonistic politics on the other do not necessarily pose a contradiction. Both deconstruct the harmonious post-political society as a liberal ideology that concurrently sustains and conceals persistent hegemonies. An agonistic pluralism would instead bring unavoidable conflicts to the foreground and facilitate true public debate among adversaries. Thus, the empirical question that arises is whether Corporate Political Advocacy lives up to such an ideal of agonistic politics and leaves the totality of the culture industry behind.

We chose Nike's *Dream Crazy* campaign featuring controversial US football player Colin Kaepernick, who protested against racial discrimination by kneeling during the National Anthem before football games. We analysed a photo posted by Kaepernick on Twitter on September 3rd including the text: "Believe in Something. Even if it means Sacrificing Everything.", as well as the *Dream Crazy* commercial launched by Nike two days later together with a total of 360 Twitter comments on both products. What at first appears to be a consistent and credible Corporate Political Advocacy message turns into a traditional retelling of the *American Dream* narrative. Nike celebrates the value of hyper-individualism and competition on boundless markets, where the ultimate winners will be those willing to sacrifice everything.

Not surprisingly, only a small minority of the Twitter comments discuss the social cause at the heart of the campaign: racial discrimination. Instead, controversies constitute contingent meanings of 'real' sacrifice. Oppositional decodings claim that it is not Kaepernick who has sacrificed everything, but the American soldiers dying for their country. Thus, the comments on Twitter stay within the discursive framework set by Nike. None of the comments deconstruct *Dream Crazy* and *Just Do It* as a political ideology of the market society. Instead, the multifold discussion on the meaning of sacrifice shows that the company is by no means

taking a clear and consistent partisan position on a distinct conflictual topic. Instead, Nike turns Kaepernick into an *empty signifier*. It is garnished with an epideictic rhetoric that any political camp can identify with.

What we have presented in this paper is a singular case study. We are aware of its limitations and refrain from generalizing the findings. Accordingly, future empirical studies could identify different ways of decoding CPA communication depending on the social background of the audience. We would expect praise of Nike's political encoding among activist communities, while the epideictic *American Dream* rhetoric might be most appealing to more indifferent post-political audiences. Conservative critiques, in turn, might be very harsh towards Nike, but we hypothesize that they will not question the market ideology behind the campaign.

Overall, what can be learned from the results is that a change of perspective can be instructive: not taking for granted that CPA is replacing an epideictic rhetoric but looking to what degree harmonistic ideologies still survive in divided societies. The key finding that Nike's CPA does not support but rather impedes communicative processes towards agonistic pluralism could inspire discourses in other research fields. These could, in turn, offer theoretical frameworks for future studies on Corporate Political Advocacy. For example:

- The sacrifice topic could be interpreted as a *boundary object* (Star and Griesemer, 1989). The corresponding sociological concept postulates the possibility of communicative boundary crossings once individuals or institutions are able to apply very different meanings to the same objects. Nonetheless, these largely contingent objects still need to represent a common ground which, in our case, would be the celebration of outstanding individual performances in a neoliberal land of opportunity. Accordingly, we would follow Huvila (2011) and argue that, despite their contingency, boundary objects such as the sacrifice topic are never neutral. They may still promote a dominant ideological order.

- CPA-induced communication processes on social media could also be interpreted as *culture jamming* (Lasn, 1999). Relevant research investigates how parody and irony are used as creative and disruptive tools in order to articulate social protest against established communication orders. *Culture jamming* may be agonistic when creating “productive dissensus” (Madden et al. 2018: 183), but appropriation as its key strategy also has a downside (Heath and Potter, 2006). This study showed how the provocative social protest against Nike’s campaign ultimately turned into an affirmative replication of Nike’s own communicative framework. The contingency of the campaign offers room for such a corporate re-appropriation: Anybody may sacrifice everything for something.

The contingency of Nike’s CPA in connection with the optimistic reaffirmation of a hegemonic neoliberal order may ultimately pervert the social cause which seemed to be at the core of the campaign: “Slavery was a choice.” (V004) - This is one of the top listed Twitter responses to Nike’s *Dream Crazy* commercial and another extreme decoding which exemplifies that Nike’s strategic contingency ultimately knows no limitations. The text – together with the adidas logo – is arranged on a photo of the rapper Kanye West, who had argued that 400 years of slavery “sounds like a choice” (Merrett 2018). Kanye West was the subject of widespread criticism for the statement and later issued a tearful apology. He attributed his behaviour to mental health issues and claimed to be a different person now. Kanye West applies a remarkable rhetoric of *Othering* himself through *Absencing* (author, anonymized). The *other* Kanye West no longer exists; he has been pushed into the past. Reversely, the Twitter user who reused the statement in response to *Dream Crazy* insists to be one of *Us* by radically exploiting the unlimited contingency of the *American Dream*. The recontextualization exemplifies how Nike’s approach to Corporate Political Advocacy – embedding the quest for social justice into a market ideology – is opening Pandora’s box. It is only a small step from the hyper-individualism of *Dream Crazy* and *Just Do It* to the interpretation of slavery as the free choice of the losers in a competitive land of opportunity.

Thus, Nike's epideictic market rhetoric does indeed offer something for everybody – racists included.

Ultimately, Nike's Dream Crazy campaign constitutes a contingent consensus by stimulating affirmative dissent. While this kind of epideictic communication might result in more sales, it does not contribute to an agonistic debate. So what could be the alternative? An endless agonism inspired by post-structural relativism will not solve any social conflicts, either. However, an agonistic approach to Corporate Political Advocacy is not concerned with overcoming conflicts, but with the possibility and appreciation of their existence. Contesting contingent hegemonies alone makes social change possible. Accordingly, it is not a sign of weakness when critical researchers refuse to propose harmonizing solutions at the end of their papers. Instead, we prefer a self-understanding that is rooted in Theodor W. Adorno's reflexions on the societal role of intellectuals. Our final quote from Adorno can also be read as a normative plea for Mouffee's agonistic politics and a critique of objectified hegemonic realities that fall short of that ideal. Nike's Corporate Political Advocacy represents one such reality. *Dream Crazy* is not agonistic. Instead, it promotes the idea

“that contradictions which reach into the very heart of our society can be healed and resolved through human-to-human relations, since everything is dependent on man alone to heal and solve. I believe that one must counter with the utmost severity even the slightest tendencies towards this harmonization of the world. It is precisely the intellectuals - decried as subversive, when they uncover that swindle - who render service to humanity.”

(Adorno, 2013: 59; own translation)

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