“We Always Have to be the Nice Ones, be the Ladies”: A Postfeminist Analysis of how Sports Marketing Reflects Female Athletes’ Lived Experiences

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Abstract

Current debates about representations of female athletes in the media consist mainly of textual analyses research produced by scholars who observe the topic from different theoretical frameworks. To better comprehend the relation between women athletes and media’s representation of them, in particularly advertising, this thesis aims to converse with up-and-coming professional and collegiate sportswomen as a way to examine what kind of correlation, if any, there is between sports commercials’ portrayals of female athletes and their actual reality. As there has been a shift in sports marketing approaches towards women through ‘femvertising’ (which challenges traditional gender stereotypes), a common belief is that gender equality in sport has been achieved. Taken as my case study, I use Nike’s commercials I Feel Pretty (2006) and Dream Crazier (2019) as auxiliary ‘props’ to get the discussion about advertisements’ representations of female athletes off ground in my conversations with several women athletes. Nike stands as one of the most prominent sporting brands in the world, and since the early 90s, the brand has been leading in “female athlete empowerment” advertising. Thus, by conducting a focus group interview in addition to in-depth semi-structured interviews with women athletes from the United States and Europe, the analysis draws on a postfeminist critique as a way to better understand the relation between the representations of sportswomen in sport advertisements versus their real-life experiences. Ultimately, the results of this research work imply that even though sport brands make a good case for the visibility of sportswomen, it does not match the experiences of the female athletes without celebrity status. Finally, this thesis is a contribution to the field of media and communication studies as it privileges the voices of up-and-coming professional and collegiate female athletes. It serves in hope of inspiring other scholars to further investigate sport in relation to gender and media through the lived experiences of the sportswomen about which they theorize.

Keywords: media representations, sportswomen, gender, advertising, Nike, postfeminist critique
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**Figure 1:** Nike’s TV advertisement “I Feel Pretty” (YouTube, 2006)

**Figure 2:** Nike’s advertisement video “Dream Crazier” (YouTube, 2019)
1. Introduction

The first time that women were entered for athletic competitions at the Olympic Games was in 1928, in other words, 32 years after the international sports competition was established (Pfister, 2010). That year, the female athletes constituted of nearly 10 percent of all contestants, and in 2004, the proportion of sportswomen had increased to nearly 41 percent of all competitors (ibid). Although the participation of sportswomen in Western culture has emerged, Pfister (2010) notes that women’s sport is rarely recognized in the media (p.240). In the United States, female athletes comprise closely to 40 percent of all sports competitors, however they receive less than 2 percent of the overall sport media coverage on television (Kane, 2013, p.233). When represented, sportswomen are frequently portrayed in stereotypical lights which question their “femininity”, as well as they are further marginalized by factors such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion and socioeconomic status (Pfister, 2010, pp.234-237).

Compared to sport journalist coverage, many sport advertising companies have shifted their marketing approaches to represent female athletes in a more authorizing light. As the conversation about feminism and gender equality has grown bigger in Western culture, sporting brands such as Nike have utilized the notion of ‘femvertising’ as a way to empower female athletes and women’s sports in their advertisements. Contrary to traditional media’s representations of gender discrimination towards women athletes, many companies’ marketing approaches have shifted as ‘femvertising’’s’ aim is to challenge gender stereotypes and marginalized portrayals of women. According to Abitol and Sternadori (2018), a reason for overall positive reactions to Nike’s ‘femvertising’ messages is that girls and women can relate them to their own experiences, “which helps construct and affirm a positive self-view in a more immediate way,” and thereby they are likely to experience persuasive effects (pp.15-16). As for my contribution to the field, I aim to examine how accurate sporting brands’ representations of female athletes are, in comparison to sportswomen’s actual lived lives. As I am specifically utilizing Nike’s advertisements as a starting point for discussions, the following research question will help guide the research study’s objective:

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1 As Blokland (1997) notes, Western society considers the joint culture established in countries including North America as well as Western European countries, which pertains to my study as my interviewees are from the United States and European countries.
• To what extent do Nike’s marketing campaigns reflect the lived experiences of professional and collegiate female athletes?

Drawing on a postfeminist critique inspired by scholar Angela McRobbie, I conduct a postfeminist analysis of the qualitative data obtained from a focus group as well as in-depth semi structured interviews with female athletes. I have chosen to particularly examine Nike and its commercials *I Feel Pretty* (2006) and *Dream Crazier* (2019) as the brand has utilized female athletes in its marketing campaigns since the early 90s, and still stands as one of the most well-known sporting brands in the world that portray sportswomen in its advertisements. The disposition of my thesis is as follows: section two aims to put the topic into context as well as provide a historical overview of it. It introduces the idea of the ‘sports media commercial complex’ which is an important theme throughout the thesis. Section three discusses relevant literature review that has previously examined Nike’s advertisements through a postfeminist analysis. It also outlines brands’ marketing approaches through ‘femvertising’, and how it affects Nike’s consumers. Thereafter, in section four, I present my theoretical framework consisting of a postfeminist theory. I also further explain how I will utilize such theory as a postfeminist critique in my analysis. In section five, I offer insight into my chosen methods and my research strategy of data collection, in addition to the sampling process and some limitation of my research work. After I outline my ethical considerations in chapter six, I devote chapter seven and eight to my analysis, findings, discussion and conclusions. In these last two chapters, I argue that even though sport brands including Nike contribute to the visibility of sportswomen through their advertisements, the overall experiences of up-and-coming professional and collegiate female athletes against the backdrop of these commercials, are not equivalent.

2. Background

2.1 Gender in the contexts of Western society, media and sports

The interrelation between the foundations of society, media and sport is important to acknowledge while examining the idea of ‘gender’ in the context of female athletes’
representations and experiences. Martin et al. (2016) describe mass media and sport as “two of the most prominent societal institutions that [help] to preserve social dominance” in form of male power and control (p.15). Fink (2015) suggests that even though there has been revolutionary progress for female athletes in regard to participation, – the 2012 Summer Olympic Games, also indicated as “Year of the Woman,” consisted of nearly 45 percent of sportswomen – there is one establishment where female athletes have not yet made significant advancement, the so called ‘sports media commercial complex’ (p.331). Kane et al. (2013) explain the “all-pervasive institution” as follows:

“On a micro-level, how female athletes are portrayed has significant social and economic outcomes in that media narratives as both written and visual texts influence their acceptance— and thus marketability—in ways that reinforce traditional gender stereotypes (Kim, Walkosz, & Iverson, 2006). At the broader macro level, numerous scholars have identified how the sports media complex is a particularly powerful and effective tool for preserving hegemonic masculinity and thus male power and privilege” (Connell, 2005; Kim, Sagas, & Walker, 2010, as cited in Kane, 2013, p.270).

Fink (2015) summarizes the idea of this complex notion as the public’s perception of reality being directly influenced by media’s way of framing problems (p.332). Such influence, including the ‘sport media commercial complex,’ produces social, economic and political limitations for sportswomen and strengthens the “patriarchal power structure” rooted in the Western culture (p.332).

As an effect of media’s influence on the public in Western society, the practice of hegemonic masculinity legitimizes the perception of masculinity as “the defining characteristic,” while women are marginalized in many areas, “one of the most obvious” ones being sport (p.486). In the United States, Hardin and Greer (2009) found that college students continuously strongly “sex-types sports,” meaning women and men in higher education still distinguish between masculine sports including rugby and basketball, and feminine sports such as gymnastics and volleyball. Koivula (2001) further recognized masculine sports as dangerous, speedy, strong, cooperative and promotable, while feminine sports require advanced skills, cognition and aesthetics (p.361).
2.1.1 Women and sports in Western Society

Historically, women were not allowed to watch the Olympic Games that consisted of an all-male athlete lineup (Scheidler and Wagstaff, 2018, p.1). Sport and the male species have long been closely linked, as Whisenant et al. (2002) note, “For centuries, sport has been so associated with men and boys that it almost goes without saying that athletics and masculinity have become synonymous” (Kane & Disch, 1993, as cited in Whisenant et al., 2002, p.486). In Europe and the United States, women’s participation in sporting activities started at the end of the nineteenth century, and in 1928, women were allowed to enter, in selected sports only, the Olympic Games for the first time (Pfister, 2010, p.236). In 1972, the US Congress passed the law Title IX as an attempt to prohibit discrimination based on sex for student-athletes, stating:

“No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (NCAA, n.d.).

As a result of Title IX, female athletes obtained more participation and competition opportunities in college athletics in the United States (Scheidler and Wagstaff, 2018, p.2). Furthermore, because of the enforcement of the federal law, I was able to attend college in the U.S. as a female student athlete myself, and that was also when my involvement with this subject, gender inequality in sports, flourished. Out of an auto ethnographical perspective on my experience as a student female athlete, as well as a sportswoman in different sports clubs across Europe, I have noticed several disparities between female and male athletes, the biggest ones being inequalities in salaries and media’s treatment. As confirmed by the Women’s Sports Foundation, male student athletes in the United States receive $179 million more than female athletes in athletic scholarships every year, and only 24% of colleges’ athletic budgets are spent on women’s sports (Casselbury, 2018). In regard to media’s treatment of sportswomen in Western society; Pfister (2010) notes that “nothing, or very little” has changed since the 1980s for female athletes in regard to the underrepresentation and stereotypical portrayals in sport media coverage (p.240).
2.1.2 Representations of female athletes in the media

In sport media coverage, according to Fink (2015), sportswomen and women’s sports are underrepresented on every media platform as well as the focus rarely lays on only their athletic abilities, but rather on their femininity, physical appearance and/or heterosexuality (p.331). In recent years, as in the 1980s, 5-15% of mass media sports coverage is dedicated to sportswomen in Western society (Pfister, 2010, p.240). As for female athletes’ appearances, Jonas and Greer (2004) note that because sportswomen have masculine builds, wear athletic wardrobes, play aggressively, and often sweat, they do not align with society’s expectations of what it means to be a woman (Jonas and Greer, 2011, p.360). As I observed in my previous work, “Exploring representations of female athletes in Nike’s advertisement Dream Crazier: A content analysis and reflection of research design,” for a Research Methodology course, such statement by Jonas and Greer explains how stereotypes of female athletes are created: Because they are unusual from the “standard” in the Western society, and they contest “the boundaries of femininity” (Halbert, 1997, p.11).

Stereotypes of sportswomen also exist in a context concerning intersectionality in the media, which stresses gender representations’ interrelationship with other parts of women’s selves, including race, sexuality, class, nationality, and/or citizenship; as well as it can impact the way media texts are interpreted or read (Molina-Quzmán and Cacho, 2013, p.75). Intersectional stereotypes occur in narratives about athletic women who appear ‘man-like’ or masculine, as a concern in the United States lays in the presumption that her athleticism is connected to lesbianism (Halbert, 1997, p.11). With that, the idea of a female athlete appearing “manlike” is closely intersected with African American and Black female athletes in the Western society, as they possess so called “Black Excellence” with their “Black” natural athletic ability (Zenquis and Mwaniki, 2019, pp.28-31). Additional racial stereotypes of African American and Black athletes present them as obnoxious, loud and aggressive (Withycombe, 2011, p.490). Bruce (2016) notes that sportswomen of color who in any way deviate from the “normative embodiment” which resembles “white heterosexual femininity,” tend to be portrayed in a manner of their “non-normative identity” (p.363).
2.2 Sporting brands’ use of female athletes in advertisements

In this study, the representation of female athletes in sport advertising is of particular interest as it correlates with sporting brands’ marketing approaches for female consumers (Cuneen and Claussen, 1999, p.40). As discussed in section 2.1.1, female participation in sports, both as athletes and spectators, commenced to increase around the mid-1990s, and in line with the increase of women’s role as consumers; brands started attracting women through their marketing approaches by including sportswomen in their advertisement campaigns (Grau et al., 2007, p.63). To appeal to and maintain the female market, sport product manufacturers such as New Balance, Reebok and Nike began to create advertisements aimed at women, which portrayed females (not necessarily athletes) as athletic and strong (Cuneen and Claussen, 1999, p.40).

However, though the trend of portraying women as central figures in active advertisements became more common in the late 20th century, it was hard for companies to sell to women exclusively in the sports industry as it was still dominated by men (ibid). Relating to this, according to Grau et al. (2007), sportswomen’s visibility is not nearly as evident as male athletes’ in sport magazine advertising. In addition, female athletes’ visibility reflects on their endorsements as there is a significant gap between sportswomen’s contracts and their male counterparts (p.63).

Prior research show that advertisements for sport products or themes, portray gender in an extremely stereotypic way (Cuneen and Claussen, 1999, p.40). Researchers have noted that advertisements rather highlight sportswomen’s sexuality than their skill and with that; nearly 45% of times, models are used to represent sportswomen in advertisements instead of female athletes themselves (Grau et al., 2007, p.63). Thus, one explanation for this, according to Grau et al. (2007), is advertisers fear of female athletes looking overly masculine and thereby receiving negative reactions to the advertisement by women consumers (p.63). Furthermore, other studies on sport-related advertising conclude that males are depicted more frequently, as well as in prominent roles compared to females (Cuneen and Sidwell, 1998, p. 45) Cuneen and Sidwell (1998) additionally note that advertisers regularly portray women in sport advertisements as “nonparticipants” or as contestants in “aesthetically oriented” individual sports including ice-skating and gymnastics, compared to males who are depicted in “strength sports” such as football (p. 47). In evaluation, Lynn et al. (2004),
examined if the same stereotypes from 1998 would be carried forward six years later, in 2004, in sport advertisements aimed at female consumers; and they found that the ratio of men in the advertisements was continuously high (around one quarter of the advertising characters), and that the women (models rather than athletes) were unceasingly depicted in a “more passive than active” light (p.344).

2.2.1 Nike’s story and development of advertisements

In this thesis, I aim to specifically utilize Nike’s commercials *I Feel Pretty* (2006) and *Dream Crazier* (2019) as props to start conversations with sportswomen about the representations of female athletes in sport advertising. I have chosen to explicitly examine Nike as its arguably one of the most well-known sporting brands in the Western world, and also a pioneer of women athletes’ representation. Moreover, the reason for specifically selecting *I Feel Pretty* and *Dream Crazier* is because of the fact that the commercials portray considerable different views of female athletes. Thus, even though Nike is known for having included women in its advertising for decades, the representation of female athletes has considerably shifted.

As early as 1987, Nike began to approach female consumers by producing a narrative of female bodies being powerful and desirable. However, the brand’s attempt to “[play] on women’s vulnerabilities” received heavy backlash as the advertisement’s punch line “It wouldn’t hurt if you stopped eating like a pig” was not received well by the female market (Lafrance, 1998, p.117). In 1990, Nike hired women to its marketing team as a way to represent a more authentic view of women’s experience in sport, and these females helped revolutionize Nike’s marketing and advertisement strategy (Helstein, 2003, p.279). In 1998, Nike developed new female representational images for its women consumers, emphasizing brilliance for serious sportswomen and women’s athletics (ibid). The campaign title “Engineered for Women Athletics” along with images portraying female athletes engaged in their sports, came with a text stating:

“…Nike is committed to helping all athletes bring out the best in themselves. Our commitment to women’s athletic needs: products engineered specifically for women athletes” (Nike, 1998, as cited in Helstein, 2003, p.279).
In 2006, only a week prior to the U.S. Open, Nike released the advertisement *I Feel Pretty*, spotlighting the No. 4 ranked tennis player in the world: Maria Sharapova (Nike News, 2006). In the campaign, Sharapova debuted her Nike performance tennis dress for the U.S. Open in New York, and Nike’s Director of Advertising Adam Roth explained the aim of the advertisement as follows:

> “Nike has a long history of celebrating the ‘beauty’ of sport in many different ways […] This campaign has some well-intentioned fun with the idea that it’s a big mistake to underestimate Maria, or any other talented, hard-working female athlete” (Nike News, 2016).

The *I Feel Pretty* campaign advertisement (see figure 1) features, along with Maria Sharapova, appearances by brothers John McEnroe (tennis Hall of Fame inductee) and Patrick McEnroe (2004 Men’s Olympic tennis team) as well as Mary Joe Fernandez, “two-time tennis Olympic gold medalist” (Nike News, 2006). In this montage style commercial, Sharapova walks through her hotel and travels to the stadium where her tennis match will be held, all while hotel staff and passersby’s sing “I Feel Pretty”. The music gets more intense as she approaches the stadium, and when she arrives, the entire stadium starts singing. The stadium is loud and crowded with people, including the McEnroe brothers and Mary Fernandez. However, the noise and singing are cut off sharply as Sharapova hits the tennis ball with a roar. Tennis Hall of Fame inductee John McEnroe acts as the game’s commentator and says “Wow” as Sharapova’s opponent is not able to catch the ball. After a moment of silence, the spectators start clapping, and the advertisement ends with Sharapova getting in position for another serve.

*Figure 1: Nike’s TV advertisement “I Feel Pretty” (YouTube, 2006)*
Over a decade later, in 2019, Nike released the commercial video *Dream Crazier* at the Academy Awards, as a start of a celebration of sportswomen ahead of 2019 FIFA Women’s World Cup (Nike News, 2020). Narrated by Serena Williams, the advertisement video highlights female athletes’ abilities to break barriers, especially stereotypes about sportswomen. According to Nike, *Dream Crazier*:

“[…] shines a spotlight on female athletes who have broken barriers, brought people together through their performance and inspired generations of athletes to chase after their dreams” (Nike News, 2020)

The campaign video (see figure 2) showcases several athletes who rank amongst the greatest in the world, and especially female athletes from the United States, such as Serena Williams, Chloe Kim, Simone Biles, Ibtihaj Muhammad, in addition to the US women’s national soccer team (Nike News, 2020). In this 90-second commercial, Williams brings up points about different stereotypes associated with female athletes in Western society. In the first part, sportswomen such as Megan Rapinoe, Caster Semenya and Diana Taurasi are shown displaying such stereotypes while William says:

“If we show emotion, we’re called dramatic. If we want to play against men, we’re nuts. And if we dream of equal opportunity, we’re delusional. When we stand for something, we’re unhinged. When we’re too good, there’s something wrong with us. And if we get angry, we’re hysterical, irrational, or just being crazy” (YouTube, 2019).

But, as the music gets more dramatic, Williams approach to speaking of the female athletes including Lisa Leslie, Ibtihaj Muhammad, Becky Hammon and Simone Biles, changes as well:

“But a woman running a marathon was crazy. A woman boxing was crazy. A woman dunking, crazy. Coaching an NBA team, crazy. A woman competing in a hijab; changing her sport; landing a double-cork 1080; or winning 23 grand slams, having a baby, and then coming back for more, crazy, crazy, crazy, crazy and crazy. So if they want to call you crazy, fine. Show them what crazy can do” (YouTube, 2019).
The advertisement ends with Williams serving the tennis ball, and the screen background turns black with a white text centered: “It’s only crazy until you do it. Just do it” (YouTube, 2019).

**Figure 2:** Nike’s advertisement video “Dream Crazier” (YouTube, 2019)

### 3. Literature review

As female athletes’ participation in sports started to prosper around the 1950s, so did media and communication studies regarding the representations of sportswomen in the media. Later in the 20th century, postfeminist scholars also began to apply their work to how sport companies, including Nike, portrayed female athletes. Early studies that utilized postfeminist critiques of consumer culture and female athletes are the following specifically: Cole and Hribar (1995) as well as Lafrance (1998). The scholars view the theme from a historical perspective and are exemplary in the way they address the politics of the body and marketing, which was what a lot of the discourse was about at that time. These are fundamental texts that researchers draw off of and therefore they compose a significant part in the field of academic inquiry in my study.

#### 3.1 A critical approach to representations of women (athletes) in Nike’s advertisements: Postfeminist studies

The term ‘post-feminism’ describes the mutual relationship between the revolutions in feminisms and the changes in media culture, however scholars have yet to decide on an
universal meaning for the theory (Gill, 2007, p.147). In this thesis, I will refer to Gill’s (2007) definition of post-feminism as it accounts for “a sensibility” of mass media and includes advertisements as a significant component. Moreover, as will be discussed further in section 4: Theoretical framework, Gill’s comprehension of the theory involves the representational displays of women’s bodies as well as their sexualization in media culture, which can be interconnected with the stereotypes of female athletes’ portrayals considered in this thesis (Gill, 2007, pp.148-150). The early postfeminist scholars Cole and Hribar as well as Lafrance have particularly analyzed Nike’s approaches to female sports advertising in Western society, and mainly the United States.

Cole and Hribar (1995) analyzed Nike advertisements through different political, economic and social lenses, stating that even though Nike presents itself as a “pro-women” brand, it still has close association with normative forces controlling America in the 1980s” (p. 347). According to the scholars, Ronald Reagan’s powerful administration “established a national common sense that transposed structural and social problems into individual inadequacies,” suggesting being feminist and/or gay was threatening to the “American way of life” (p.354). Furthermore, Reagan’s entreaty to individualism and “the hard, masculine body” affected Hollywood productions, including the movie Rambo, which became popular in the media (p.354). The workout yuppie embodied “the normalizing lens” through which fitness, hard bodies and health, alongside success, discipline, effort and ambition was celebrated, as individual bodies in the US society was put in the center of debate (p.354). Cole and Hribar argue that the relationship between the idea of the body/anti-body dictating Reagan’s United States, and American society advertising, the “central to the governing logic of capitalism and one of several nodes that negotiates between production and consumption,” is important to acknowledge as “Nike became Nike” during this time through a complex linkage between cultural, economic and psychic relations (p. 355). As a result of such multipart relationship, the desirable body types in early Nike advertisements were white, middle-class women, whose identities were suitable with 1980’s America (p.362).

With inspiration from Cole and Hribar (1995), Lafrance (1998) continued to analyze Nike through a postfeminist critique in her article Colonizing the Feminine: Nike's Intersections of Postfeminism and Hyperconsumption. She points out three key ideas of
post-feminism critique including 1) the idea that women have attained full equality in society, 2) a cultural context in which there is an alleged notion of relationship between feminist activism and the deterioration of traditional moral values in Western society, and 3) the indication that a postfeminist experience replaces consciousness-raising and activism with resolutions only achievable through consumption (p.119). The scholar notes that Nike’s technique of postfeminist empowerment (“female empowerment”) as well as the creation of the “effervescent feelings of choice (through consumption)” is one reason for the brand’s massive popularism (p.121). Furthermore, Lafrance addresses Nike as seductive because the brand allows the consumers, through the purchase of new shoes, to “actively purge (their) guilt for (their) direct or indirect role in the systems of oppression” (p.121). She argues, by embracing a more open-minded attitude towards women’s sports, Nike’s consumers think they do not have to feel guilty for the oppression of sportswomen. The scholar moves on to address Nike’s advertisement “If you let me play” (1995), which consists of girls and women essentially imploring to play sports, saying the brand amounts to a misuse of gender, racial and class subordination; as well as a reshaping of women’s issues (p.128).

As Cole and Hribar (1995) as well as Lafrance (1998) view the theme from a historical perspective considering the timespan between the years of 1990-2000, not many postfeminist critique analyses have been done on Nike’s approaches of portraying female athletes in their advertisements after that. Therefore, that is what I aim to do in this thesis as I am considering Nike advertisements from 2006 and 2019.

3.2 Female empowerment in the context of brand marketing: ‘Femvertising’

In contemporary research concerning brand marketing and female empowerment, a subject noted by several scholars is ‘femvertising’. The term is short for female empowerment advertising and was first used in the lifestyle site SheKnows in 2014, as a label for marketing campaigns that challenge traditional gender stereotypes about women used in advertising (Åkestam et al., 2017). According to feminist scholar Åkestam, Rosengren and Dahlen (2017), ‘femvertising’ differs from traditional female empowerment advertising themes, which have existed since the 1960s, because ‘femvertising’s’ originality stems from the focus on women’s stereotypes being (at least
partially) produced by advertising (p.796). Former research shows that, historically, advertising has presented societal stereotypes and norms, but by currently challenging such norms through ‘femvertising’, brands’ approaches to marketing have shifted (ibid).

Furthermore, communication scholars Abitol and Sternadori (2018) argue that presently, “when political and social issues are at the forefront of every facet of our lives, including consumption,” brands are anticipated to weave ethical behavior and goodwill such as supporting social causes into their every day practices (p.1). In order to select the appropriate cause to support, companies need to be conscious of current trends as well as the impact and significance of ongoing social movements. One trend that has gained force in the 2010s, according to the authors, is the encouragement of female empowerment (p.2). One women’s movement that has been heavily discussed in contemporary media research, as well as on social media, is the #MeToo movement in 2017 which exposed sexual assault and harassment in the workplace towards women. Moreover, to investigate this cultural shift which ‘femvertising’ is a part of, the authors suggest that ‘femvertising’ is a communication strategy in the Western world that “reflects certain advances for Western women” including rising income, more visibility in the public sphere and an inclusive acceptance of anti-gender discrimination regulations (p.2). As most research done on ‘femvertising’ focuses on the consumer effects, Abitol and Sternadori have specifically examined well-known brands which utilize femvertising communication strategies, one of those being Nike.

3.2.1 Nike’s effect on consumers through ‘femvertising’

As I have conversed with the individuals who possess the bodies portrayed in Nike’s advertisements, and who are also sponsored or regular consumers of the brand, this section aims to display the effects of Nike’s ‘femvertising’ on female consumers studied in previous research. Scholars Abitol and Sternadori (2018) examined recent consumers’ attitudes towards Nike’s 2015 ‘femvertisement’ I Am My Resolution, which features female athletes practicing and conversing about their route to success. The authors found that the respondents believed that the ‘femvertising’ message was perceived to fit with Nike as a company (p.13). This indicates, according to corporate social responsibility research, that consumers believe Nike’s support of female athletes is authentic and legitimate (p.1). Furthermore, the scholars found “direct effects
between loyalty and purchase intention” for Nike, which indicates that the brand holds a solid loyal consumer base (p.13). These outcomes align with extant research (e.g., Forehand & Grier, 2003; Menon & Kahn, 2003) suggesting that “high perceptions of fit between company and cause lead to positive attitudes” (Abitol and Sternadori, 2018, p.15). Furthermore, as mentioned in the introduction section, Nike’s ‘femvertising’ messages receive positive feedback as their female consumers can relate such messages to their own experiences (pp.15-16). Connecting back to my research objective, this thesis aims to present the relation between Nike’s ‘femvertising’ commercials and female athletes lived experiences.

3.3 New media research on female athletes (social media)

As discussed in section 2, early research work on female athletes in the field of media and communication studies observed sportswomen as underrepresented and depicted through societal gender stereotypes in traditional media. In new media research on sports, communication scholar Creedon (2014) attests to digital media, in particular social media, being a key role player in creating controversy, generating attention and displaying changes in sport media coverage of women’s sports. According to the author, social media has utilized sports coverage as an international, intercultural and interpersonal public domain. However, as she argues, the representational values to construct and cover female athletes persist in news media (p.711). Considering how Creedon (2014) and other media and sport scholars (e.g., Wenner, 2013; Wensing and Bruce, 2003) understand the valuable concepts in measuring “victory or defeat in media coverage of women’s sports today,” it can be concluded that it rests on the shaping comprehensions of gender, consumer and fan roles (p.713).

With that, according to Creedon (2014), the 2012 Olympic Games outlined both the changes and unchanged habits of women’s sports reporting over the past two decades. In the 2012 London Olympics, the media made an attempt to emphasize and dramatize gender equity as, for example, NBC promoted the soccer final and broke its record for largest audience watching a women’s soccer championship game (p.714). However, the author notes, followed by these inclusive actions for sportswomen, there was a substantial portion of sport media coverage of women Olympians that still focused on “controversy rather than athleticism and beauty rather than brawn,” signifying the 2012
Olympics as “confusing, contradictory and controversial” (p.714). In sum, while the media made an effort to offer more awareness and space for female sports coverage during the 2012 Olympic Games (compared to previous Olympic Games), Creedon (2014) argues the underlying reasoning for continuous gender disparities in sport media coverage lays in the dominant belief that “sport reporting is still a male bastion” (ibid).

Furthermore, existing research on professional sportswomen’s utilization of social media in the Western world is likely to derive from a sports marketing approach (e.g., Geurin-Eagleman & Burch, 2016; Lebel & Danylchuk, 2012); and according to sport, media and feminism scholars Thorpe, Toffoletti and Bruce (2017), such investigations have struggled to sufficiently explain why professional female athletes emphasize their sexuality and personal lives on social media, yet give limited attention to “the contemporary gender arrangements and expectations” of female sports online (p.362). On the contrary, sport and feminism scholars have recently also begun to explore how girls and young women in sports construct athletic identities online; and studies found they show contradictory depictions from traditional stereotypical representations of sportswomen (p.362). As claimed by the authors, there is substantial scope to further research the ambivalences of young women as “they attempt to meet wider social imperatives to appear as both sporting and feminine” (p.362), including through a strand of postfeminist critique, which will be discussed in section 4: Theoretical Framework below.

Reflecting on the scholarship in relation to my research work; early postfeminist scholars Cole and Hribar (1995) and Lafrance (1998) analyze Nike’s way of portraying females in sports advertising during 1990-2000 through a postfeminist critique, which influences this thesis as I will utilize the same approach to Nike’s later advertisements depicting sportswomen (including ‘femvertisements’). Furthermore, female athletes who participate in my study will express their opinions on brands increased usage of ‘femvertising’ as well as how they utilize media in relation to their athletic careers. My ambition is then to complete a nuanced analysis which reflects back on the literature review.
4. Theoretical framework

As certain concepts and themes have been introduced throughout the discussion of this thesis, this section aspires to provide groundwork for approaching these ideas in the contexts of female athletes’ representations in Nike’s advertisements as well as sportswomen’s lived experiences.

4.1 Postfeminist theory

Apprehensions over representations of female athletes in media advertising, and in general, provide for a grounded basis for a postfeminist critique study. Within the conversation on postfeminist studies, Gill and Scharff (2013) suggest the notion can be utilized in four broad ways: First, as an analytical framework of an intersection of feminism with several other “anti-foundationalist movements” including post-colonialism, post-modernism and poststructuralism. Second, as a set of beliefs which are widely distributed in popular media and focuses on the “pastness” of feminism. Third, as an idea that it is a “backlash against feminism,” which may appear in numerous contradictory forms including attributing every females’ unhappiness to feminism, but also suggesting “all battles have been won” and that “political correctness” has become a new system of oppression in Western society. Fourth, as discussed in section 3.1, one approach to postfeminism is its elaboration of it “as a sensibility” that symbolizes large parts of contemporary culture (p.3-4). Alongside the fourth approach, McRobbie (2009) implies postfeminism can be used as “an object of critical analysis” as she argues women are offered certain types of freedom, choice and empowerment “in exchange for” feminist politics and transformation (ibid). This fourth approach explaining postfeminism as a critical term, is what I will utilize in this thesis.

As my research addresses the extent to which representations of sportswomen in the media, in particular Nike’s marketing campaigns employing ‘femvertising’, differ from female athletes’ lived experiences and how they perceive such depictions of themselves, a postfeminist critique constitutes a significant part of my analytical framework. Moreover, I am applying a postfeminist critique as a tool to deconstruct the stereotypical ideas of women athletes’ portrayals in the media, and I am doing so by conversing with, as well as using the stories of, the people who possess the bodies
represented in Nike’s commercials. While debating about implementing theoretical framework on audience studies, it is crucial to acknowledge that my choice of methods, including focus group and semi structured interviews with collegiate and professional sportswomen, do not only present the effects on the audience, but rather constitute a fruitful analysis of the individuals who live through the experience of what I am aiming to research. Therefore, a postfeminist critique helps better understand the disconnect between the depictions of sportswomen on the screen in sport commercials versus their real-life experiences.

Furthermore, postfeminist critique draws on the notions of femininity increasingly being reckoned as a bodily property; a change from objectification to subjectification in how (some) females are depicted; an emphasis on empowerment, individualism and choice; a focus on discipline and self-surveillance; a “resexualization” of females’ bodies; as well as an prominence upon consumerism and the “commodification of difference” (Gill and Scharff, 2013). These topics are structured by, as discussed in section 2.1.2., the context of intersectionality, which Gill (2007) notes relates to exclusions and inequalities based on gender, race, ethnicity, age, class, sexuality and disability, and is used in postfeminist critique analyses to examine media texts focused mainly on “white, middle-to-upper class North American or European women” (p.4).

These topics of critique are of essential importance to my research work, as Nike’s ‘femvertising’ commercials, specifically Dream Crazier, put vast emphasis on concepts such as empowerment, discipline, strong and powerful bodies, and as Gill (2003) argues, use today’s sexual subjectification that gives a (false) sense of being “knowing, active and desiring” while in actuality it more so marks a change from “an external male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze” in their advertisements (p.104). This demands to reflect on Åkestam’s (2017) view on ‘femvertising’, as discussed in section 3.1, which considers female’s stereotypes being shaped by advertising. From a postfeminist critique, this suggests that Nike’s commercials create new fixes on sportswomen, rather than acknowledge and equalize their employment as athletes. Furthermore, as one crucial point of criticism of postfeminist analysis comprises the concept of intersectionality, just as Cole and Hribar (1995) noted in their study on Nike’s early commercials, it allows to reveal if and how implemented such notion is in Nike’s advertisements. By selecting a diverse sample of female athletes to interview as
a methodological approach for this research project, it makes for a suitable method to investigate their interpretation on intersectional representations of female athletes in Nike’s commercials.

5. Methodology

5.1 Choice of methods: focus group and interviews

To properly answer my research question, implementations of a focus group, as well as semi-structured individual interviews with collegiate and professional sportswomen from Europe and the United States were concluded. The reason for the application of such methods stems from the idea to give space to the voices that are represented in sporting brands’ ‘femvertising’ campaigns. Such voices are significant in this debate as they are sponsored by these brands, however they are left anonymous in this study as potential risks can arise from speaking critically about the brands. The brands I am referring to do not only include the obviously well-known international sporting brands, but also the brands of the collegiate schools in the United States and professional clubs in Europe.

As I apply this thesis to consider female athletes’ own perceptions of how they are represented in the media, explicitly Nike’s advertisements, the aim was first to “facilitate discussion, rather than to direct it” in a less structured focus group meeting (Liamputtong, 2011, p.3). With that, the women athletes were encouraged to discuss amongst each other on the topic of female athletes’ portrayals in different contexts, while my focus as the researcher rested on understanding their interpretations and meanings about the theme (ibid). As a result, the focus group participants helped lay out an overview of female athletes’ thoughts and experiences regarding the topic, which made it simpler to construct relevant in-depth interview questions and later conduct fruitful interviews.

To obtain more data, I found conducting interviews with collegiate and professional sportswomen as the next suitable method for my research focus. As Kvale (2007) notes, it is through conversations one gets to know individuals and truly understand an
appropriate representation of their experiences, which is ultimately the objective of my research work. Moreover, semi-structured interviews were conducted as they “[seek] to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee” through a sequence of topics to be addressed while also allowing a space of openness to take place. According to Kvale (2007), this approach of interviewing, in this case of young sportswomen’s experiences, relates to anthropological questioning as follows:

“I want to understand the world from your point of view. I want to know what you know in the way you know it. I want to understand the meaning of your experience, to walk in your shoes, to feel things as you feel them, to explain things as you explain them. Will you become my teacher and help me understand?” (Spradley, 1979, p. 34, as cited in Kvale, 2007, p.53).

Furthermore, focus group and interviews are qualitative studies that are associated with an inductive logic, which involves the researcher to establish patterns of collectivities of people’, groups’ or categories’ characteristics. To draw on such patterns, social science researchers must first choose a set of characteristics to distinguish, and then collect data through observations, before making conclusions (Blaikie and Priest, 2019, p.111). In this thesis, characteristics including “female athletes general experiences”; “female athletes’ identities”; “female athletes in the media” and “female athletes’ hope for the future” were established before obtaining data from observations of a focus group and interviews; and then later drawing generalizations which will be discussed in section 7.

5.2 Research paradigm

While having recognized the methods, it is equally as important to acknowledge the paradigm of which this thesis will be based on. According to Blaikie and Priest (2017), “all knowledge generated by social research is tentative because it is conducted from a particular point of view” (p.24). Considering my logic of inquiry, the paradigm most compatible with my methodological approach is an interpretivist paradigm. The purpose of an interpretivist approach is to define, comprehend and hopefully explain “any area of social life” by acquiring how the populations conceptualize and apprehend it, which is what I am aiming to accomplish with my research work (p.98). Furthermore, the interpretivist paradigm embodies values of subjective views as it understands the social world as continuously interpreted by humans and therefore cannot be studied in an external or objective way (ibid). Connecting back to my research focus, the extent of
accurate representations of female athletes’ in Nike’s advertisements, it is clear that the emphasis of my thesis lays in the desire to collect evidence that includes subjective views, opinions and emotions of sportswomen. Moreover, such paradigm requires interpretation from me, the researcher, about the sportswomen’s answers.

5.3 Sample

As the object of my research is to collect data on how Nike’s marketing approaches reflect female athletes’ lived experiences, a non-probability sampling approach was integrated. A non-probability sampling method, which is commonly used in case studies such as mine, allowed me to collect a sample based on shared characteristics of a population related to the objective of my thesis; which in this case constituted of female athletes from the Western world (Blaikie and Priest, 2019, pp.194-195). For my study, such sportswomen were contacted through social media and included basketball players from a diverse ethnographical background who I, through my own experience as a woman athlete, played with in college in the United States, or in a professional club in Europe.

While this thesis aims to collect in-depth data on an arguably unrepresentative sample in such regard (quantitively data about especially collegiate athletes in the United States are frequently conducted), a smaller sample was selected as such method is very resource-intensive (ibid). According to Liamputtong (2011), an appropriate number of participants for a focus group interview involves six to eight people (p.4). I approached eight female athletes who I consider outspoken and easy to converse with, and six of them agreed on participating in a focus group interview, while I considered the number of five in-depth interviews (out of the eight originally contacted) as a sufficient sample size for this research work. The respondents were recruited through Facebook as well as Instagram and are basketball players who I have played with in college in the United States or in clubs in Europe. Two of them are from the USA and are about to attend their senior years of college. Six of them are from Europe, more specifically Norway, Sweden, Latvia, Denmark and Belgium, and five of these European female athletes have or are currently attending college and playing basketball as upperclassmen in the United States. Overall, the sample constitutes of six female athletes who are currently attending college in the United States and two sportswomen who are playing
professionally in Europe. However, since six of them are from European countries, they have also experienced playing professionally for a European club before moving to USA. The criteria were that whether they were collegiate or professional athletes, they had to have been doing that for at least two years. So, I interviewed collegiate players who were juniors or seniors as well as professional athletes with at least two years’ experience. Collectively, the sample consisted of sportswomen aged between 21 and 26 years old and are part of sport organizations who are sponsored by Nike or other sporting brands.

5.4 Strategy of data collection and data analysis

The data composed for analysis encompasses answers from both the focus group interview and the individual in-depth semi-structured interviews, which interview guides are found in the appendices at the end of this thesis. As I gathered background information and collected literature review journals on the topic of my research work, as well as I regarded my own experience as a female athlete, I found it beneficial to simultaneously write my interview questions for the best outcome of fruitful interviews.

In the focus group meeting, the participants (as discussed in section 2.2.1) viewed and discussed Nike’s advertisements *I Feel Pretty* (2006) and *Dream Crazier* (2019), including what the messages of the commercials are, the representation of sportswomen as well as differences between the advertisements. The interview took place on Zoom and I shared my screen while we all simultaneously watched the advertisements. Additionally, the focus group’ interviewees read and conversed about the online article *Employee Activism Hits Nike as its Staff Demands More Support for Women*, which discusses how consumers and employees of Nike protested against the company’s discriminating culture against women (Bain, 2019). I sent the link of the article in the chat box on Zoom, and the reason for implementing such article involved multiple purposes: To perceive what the female athletes thought about the event; if they had had previously read a similar document about Nike or other sporting brands, and if the article would change anything for them (e.g., as consumers, their thoughts on the brands’ values, or how they spoke about it). Furthermore, as an outcome of the discussion formed during the focus group interview, I identified four relevant topics to
cover in the in-depth interviews and to later study more closely, including (as discussed in section 5.1) “female athletes’ general experiences”; “female athletes’ identities”; “female athletes in the media” and “female athletes’ hope for the future.”

Furthermore, for this research work, the strategy of data analysis is inspired by Green’s (2006) framework for a thematic analysis of qualitative data. To investigate how Nike’s marketing approaches, reflect female athletes’ experiences, according to Green (2006, pp.76-77) a multi-step analysis of the data should be considered in the following steps:

1) Representation of the complexity of one’s data
2) Representation of major findings and key themes (including typologies and classifications)
3) Identification of connections between experiences, attitudes and behaviors
4) Ideally, an emergence of new theories and ideas

While it will be acknowledged further in section 7, my analysis, inspired by this process, discovered several repeated themes in female athlete’s collegiate and young professional experiences from those who I interviewed. Furthermore, the analysis also draws on the theoretical considerations of postfeminist critique as a majority of the data aligns within such framework.

5.5 Limitations

As I have conducted interviews as my main form of data collection, limitations of my research work must be addressed. While the methods of qualitative focus group and individual interviews’ objectives are to produce thick data by researching a narrow, in-depth population (which align well with my research aim), this thesis only considers young and “anonymous” female athletes. As covered in the background sections, Nike uses well-known profiles in its advertisements who have even greater endorsements than the group in my research, and so a suggestion for further research includes a more cross-sectional approach to the topic such as comparing different age groups or “level of fame” populations.
With that, as the number for the in-depth interviews seems quite small, it is important to acknowledge that one interviewee might represent a whole community of people from a certain background, which puts vast limitations on this thesis. Furthermore, although the aim was to include a diverse group, the majority of the participants were of Caucasian heritage, which puts a limitation on the study as the level of importance concerning intersectionality in postfeminist critique is considerably high, and therefore could not be thoroughly explored. However, reflecting on the scope of this thesis as well as the lack of female athletes’ own experiences and views on this topic in former research, I consider my contribution to the field of media as an accomplishment.

6. Ethical considerations

To consider ethical implications in my research work is crucial as I have been in direct contact with participants through a focus group meeting as well as interviews. As Kvale (2007) notes, the element of human interaction in interviews affects the participants, and therefore the “knowledge produced by an interview inquiry affects our understanding of the human condition” (p.24). The circumstances of the interviews should also be taken into account as they were all done online through zoom, and in some instances, technical issues occurred which caused an interruption of flow in the conversation. Furthermore, while executing the focus group interview through zoom, I felt that if we had physically been in the same room, a more comfortable atmosphere could have been created for the participants. Also, before every interview, informed consent was granted and because of a potential risk of speaking out about the brands that sponsor the female athletes (e.g., Nike, collegiate brands, club brands), the participants are anonymous. Moreover, to be sure the subjects agree on potential “release of identifiable information,” the interviews will be sent a copy of this thesis for approval of usage of data before it is published.

Additionally, while addressing ethical issues in this thesis, my personal stance as a researcher requires to be critically examined. As qualitative interview analysis puts the researcher as the “main instrument for obtaining” as well as interpreting data, factors such as knowledge, experience and background can affect the outcome of the study (p.31). Considering my own experience of being a female athlete and inevitably a body who sport brands depict in certain ways, there are potential possibilities that my own
biases about the topic affected the collection and explanation of data in this thesis. However, as I was aware about such factor potentially being an issue before starting this research work, I chose to take the stance of an ‘empathetic observer’, who’s goal is to remain objective while also putting oneself in the position of the social actors (Blaikie and Priest, 2019, p.59). In addition to obtaining data as an empathetic observer, an insider/outsider approach was considered before conducting the research as it seemed relevant considering my relation to those I studied. When a researcher arrives at the research site as an ‘insider’, that is someone whose profile (gender, class, race, sexual orientation and so on) suitably matches those of who she studies, then that gives the researcher access to producing a different study than the ‘outsider’ (Brewer et al., 1986). Furthermore, while acknowledging my background as a white, European female; it needs to be established that I am aware of potential shortcomings regarding an intersectional analysis because of my background. With such notion in mind, a study like this would profit from knowledge obtained and analyzed by researchers from different backgrounds than mine.

7. Analysis and findings

As I coded the focus group and interviews, recurring thematic patterns emerged from my observations and discussions with the collegiate and young professional female athletes, which were then subject to analysis informed by the theoretical perspectives of a postfeminist critique. By using a postfeminist critique inspired by postfeminist scholars Rosalind Gill and especially Angela McRobbie, the following themes will be addressed in the analysis: sportswomen’s pressures and anxieties, issues of gender inequality in sport organizations and the media, and representation of female athletes. As discussed in the methods section, the importance of protecting the participants of my interviews is itself evidence of how vulnerable these female athletes are. The names used in this analysis are therefore pseudonyms rather than their real names.

7.1 Sportswomen’s pressures and anxieties

To connect how female athletes’ representations in advertisements relate to the pressures and anxieties they endure throughout up-and-coming professional and
collegiate careers, the notion of the ‘sport media commercial complex’, as discussed in the background section, needs to be taken into account. The ‘sport media commercial complex’, addressed by several scholars such as Kane (2013) and Fink (2015), refers to the idea that women’s sport representations in the media produces social, economic and political limitations for female athletes. It reinforces traditional gender stereotypes in sport, and it is an effective tool for strengthening male power and privilege (Kane, 2013; Fink, 2015). The participants I have interviewed have noticed disparities, in particular the social aspects of being female athletes.

Bianca is a professional basketball player who recently finished up her second season in Europe. She has played for two clubs in two different European countries and has throughout those two seasons endured physically and psychologically strenuous situations. She recounts:

One time I messed up in a play and my coach called me a fat big cow and a selfish little whore for not helping my teammates, and he just yelled that out in front of everyone. That was during a game so there were people there watching us…and the girls on the other team were coming up to me and telling me to not listen to him and that ‘it’s okay’(…) And then there’s the time last year in Belgium when my coach almost hit me for getting a lot of fouls (…) In Czech Republic the club didn’t pay me, and I was playing and upholding my part of the contract. They thought they had been paying me.

Bianca’s story addresses the unacceptable treatment of a young woman, and also shows striking similarities to the treatment of the female body as it was presented in Nike’s first advertisement in 1987 (discussed in the background section), which utilized the woman’s body saying, “It wouldn’t hurt if you stopped eating like a pig” (Lafrance, 1998). Considering this from a postfeminist critical standpoint, Bianca’s story addresses the notion of femininity’s close correlation to bodily property evidently continues to coexist with ongoing inequalities of, in this case, gender (Gill, 2007). Moreover, McRobbie (2004) states there is scant scholarship analyzing the “enduring inequalities which still mark out the relations between men and women” (p.263). The importance of contributing to such research is the motive for this thesis.
Furthermore, another layer of female athletes’ pressures and anxieties can potentially emerge from, as discussed in the background section, “the boundaries of femininity” (Halbert, 1997). As I conversed with the sportswomen, I noticed that, despite the appearance of a diverse set of stereotypes portrayed in the media, in addition to several opinions of female athletes’ bodies in society as a whole, there is still an ongoing notion within athletics that stresses the importance of behaving and ‘acting’ as a woman. 

Bianca said:

We’re supposed to carry ourselves in a way where we’re female athletes before we’re athletes. It’s always like it’s “female” and “athletes” and not just being athletes. It feels like we have to uphold a certain view of what feminine is.

Moreover, collegiate athletes Ariana and Michelle, who are both about to attend their senior seasons of college basketball in the United States after the summer, also discussed the pressures of acting a certain way. Ariana said:

I think that’s always a thing, like (…) even though we are athletes, we are still women and we’re expected to behave in a certain way. You have to look a certain way; you have to behave a certain way (…) basically it’s most about looks. Like how many stereotypes are put on women? And then there are none on men.

Michelle continued:

Female athletes are expected to be like top prestige, like you get good grades, you don’t mess up at all, if you get caught at a party you get kicked off the team. Versus males it’s like, pass the classes and even then, if you don’t pass, we’ll find a way around it, we’ll schmooze the professor for you, we’ll do what we need to do to get you on the court. (…) I don’t think my coach would stand for us standing up for ourselves and doing what we want. He wants us to do what’s good for the majority, which is obviously not women being in power.
What the sportswomen describe here is an experience of being ‘gender aware’ (Budgeon, 2001, as cited in McRobbie, 2004). As McRobbie (2004) states, “the new female subject is, despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique in order to count as a modern sophisticated girl” (p.262). This notion of McRobbie’s (2004) idea of feminism being “undone,” is shown through the expectations of the sportswomen who have participated in my research work as they are expected to perform this idea of femininity which is a mix of modern femininity (‘freedom’ and ‘choice’) and traditional femininity (‘act like a lady’). If they resist it, it is viewed as a threat to the coaches and athletic departments in this case. Therefore, as the female athletes point out; they are told to behave in a certain way as well as it is evident, they have to uphold a certain image to be accepted in their athletic communities. Considering the fact that my research work confirms similar actions throughout sports organizations in the Western world, McRobbie’s (2004) critique of feminism being “undone” for the young women in the west seems very accurate.

7.2 Issues of gender inequality in sport organizations and the media

For collegiate and up-and-coming professional sportswomen, issues of gender inequality in sport organizations as well as the media is a persisting matter. As deliberated in the background section, less than a third of colleges’ budgets in the United States is spent on female athletes (Casselbury, 2018). As for the Western society as a whole, only 5-15 percent of media coverage is devoted to sportswomen (Pfister, 2010). According to Fink (2015), an effect of media’s frugal portrayals of sportswomen, is the impact it has on the public to marginalize women’s sport. A possible result of that could be the reason college students in the United States strongly “sex-types sports,” meaning students’ views align with the stereotypical perception of sport consisting of two different types: masculine and feminine sports (Hardin and Greer, 2009). From my observations and interviews, as well as my own experiences as a female athlete, I also have noticed a correlation between gender inequalities in sport organizations (both collegiate and professional organizations) and the media. Niria, a transfer college basketball player, said she switched schools as she was not treated well by the coaching staff at her first university, however, she stated similar issues occur at her new school as well. Though, as she is receiving full funding for her education through an athletic
scholarship, and because of her passion for basketball, she has decided to remain a student athlete and endure the disparities of being a sportswoman as “it’s the same thing everywhere.” Reflecting on the athletic media and marketing teams who produce media content for their schools’ sports teams, Niria said both universities she attended showed less interest in women’s sport.

We don’t have as much good quality media time to where it attracts a lot of people to our games and events like that. The men’s basketball team has postings every day and highlights of games that they won and buzzer beaters (…) and with us it’s like one video every other week. So, our media presence is not there as much as the men’s is. Men’s basketball and football are represented most in the media. Volleyball doesn’t get as much as they should, but they’ve done really well the past couple of years (…) But football (…) we don’t have such a winning season, but yet they still get more fans which is confusing to me.

The sportswomen who participated in my research work point out a disconnect between success and admiration in correlation to gender, both in the sport organizations and the treatment of media. Michelle said, “With male athletes they are going to interview them, no matter who they are, any time they get the chance (…) versus female athletes they only want the superstars to talk to, they don’t care about anybody else.” In addition, Ariana adds, “when it comes to media (…) just because we have been doing well, and since my school won the national championship, there are always expectations, and they always talk about us. But it’s always also based on the performance, you know.”

While exploring the notion of gender inequality in the context of a disconnect between success and admiration, McRobbie’s (2009) argument of new and ‘modern’ ideas about women and feminism as a way to reassure the continuation of certain hegemonic structures seems pertinent. McRobbie (2009) argues that elements of feminism have recently been integrated into political and institutional life, however more so to “ensure that a new women’s movement will not re-emerge” (p.1). Even though Title IX is employed, the fact that these female athletes are experiencing how difficult it is to resist hegemonic ideas, addresses the persistence of underlying beliefs of male dominance in sport institutions.
As covered in the background section, Title IX was established to provide equal opportunities for both male and female student athletes (Scheidler and Wagstaff, 2018). However, sportswomen’s reality in college does not always match such description. Michelle said:

Football is treated differently because they make the money for the university (…) and they get literally every breakfast and dinner made for them every single day at the stadium. Versus us, we get two meals a week when we (are) in season. The men’s basketball team gets post-practice meals delivered when they are done with practice (…) it then sits for two hours for us on heating tables (…) and we get their sloppy seconds.

Moreover, even though female athletes may experience inequalities in sports as a result of being women, they do also acknowledge that there has been a change in how sportswomen are treated, both within the organizations and in the media. Nora, a Swede currently playing college basketball in the United States, said:

I think it has gotten better (…) because I remember when I started playing basketball when I was younger, I wasn’t even able to watch women’s sports on television, like especially basketball (…) like they would never show a game on TV, but now they’ve been starting to show the Swedish leagues, the female ones.

Furthermore, Bianca said she felt the change more within herself rather than from outside influences such as the media, following “I feel like because of the way my coaches who support women’s sport have been speaking about it and presenting it, I have changed.” Moreover, in the focus group interview, the sportswomen collectively agreed that a big reason for the positive change in regard to how female basketball players are talked about on social media, is because prominent athletes such as Kobe Bryant, use their platforms as a way to promote women’s sports. Ariana said:
People want to follow well-known people because they like what they do and look up to them more. It will definitely take some men to support women’s sports for it to change (…) That was why Kobe was so big in that because he was so invested in women’s sports and a lot of other men wanted to support women’s sport because of that.

Selma added:

Yeah, I think that’s a big deal what people are tweeting about like (…) Koby used to do a lot obviously (…) and like Lebron and Steph and all of them are doing it more. Just them talking about it I feel like makes even just like Adam (her boyfriend) (…) talk about Sabrina Ionescu (…) and he went to her game and just like hyping it up just because other people are doing it.

Interestingly, prominent male basketball players’ support for female collegiate and professional basketball players has grown tremendously through social media over the recent years. As discussed with the participants of my research work, Kobe Bryant was probably the leading male athlete in doing so. Before the unfortunate event of his passing, Kobe wanted to help grow women’s basketball, so he started mentoring professional and collegiate sportswomen, which drew a lot of media attention. He also used his social media platforms to create awareness about big time female collegiate and WNBA games, which he attended front row with his daughter. This, as conversed amongst the sportswomen in my focus group interview, resulted in a buzz about women’s basketball. It will be interesting to see who, if any, professional male basketball players will take on his role as the leading voice for supporting and being outspoken about women’s sports.

7.3 Representation of female athletes

While this thesis aims to examine how sport marketing reflects up-and-coming female athletes’ experiences, this section will address the representations of sportswomen, both in the contexts of media representation, but also as an analysis of sportswomen’s meanings and how it is perceived by sport institutional subjects. As Stuart Hall (1997) suggests representation means “using language to say something meaningful about, or
to represent, the world meaningfully, to other people” (p.13). This way representation becomes a vital part of the process by which meaning is shaped and exchanged amid members of a culture (ibid).

7.3.1 Nike's advertisements

To properly answer my research question of how sport brands marketing approaches reflect collegiate and rather anonymous female athletes’ lived experiences, a focus group interview appeared as the most effective method for a thorough analysis. As stated in the background section, I chose to specifically examine Nike’s advertisements as the sports brand stands as a leading company for female athletes’ representation and empowerment. Furthermore, the commercials I FeelPretty (2006) and Dream Crazier (2019) were selected because they both present sportswomen in different ways. After collectively viewing I FeelPretty (2006), Nora said:

I feel like just because she is a female, they focus on her look instead of maybe her performance. If it would’ve been Lebron James they wouldn’t have been focusing on his look (...) or they wouldn’t even be singing “she’s so pretty.” It would’ve been more about how good he is on the basketball court.

Selma added:

No, I agree though. It’s like if you walk on campus (...) people ask if you’re an athlete and (it’s like) “oh that’s cool.” But if it’s a guy it’s like “OMG let me get your number!” While if you’re a girl, it’s just like a “oh yeah that’s cool.”

Here, McRobbie’s (2009) idea of feminism being “undone” is applicable as another aspect of the notion comes from a “re-drafting” of gender hierarchies which impacts issues of race, ethnicity and social class. For example, Nike’s advertisement I Feel Pretty (2006) portrays a white, blonde and skinny sportswoman whose appearance aligns with Western culture’s beliefs of what “beauty” looks like. As Bianca notes in the quote below, I Feel Pretty (2006) only focuses on “one white lady” who is “pretty,” while all other subjects in the advertisement admire her beauty. It reinforces the idea of
white dominance and “white beauty,” which makes McRobbie’s (2009) argument about feminism being “undone” crucial, since the advertisement lacks the incorporation of intersectionality.

Regarding *Dream Crazier* (2019), the interviewees said it focused more on performance, rather than what the athletes looked like. However, Bianca pointed out the advertisement was constructed in such way because it is currently “trending.” She said:

They have to keep up with the trends because eventually it is the people, the consumers, that are buying (...) that set the rules for what is approachable. I think it has changed with #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter because the diversity is wider in this ad (...) like they’re bringing up different ethnicities and religions, and stuff like that is wider in this one (...) in the other one there was just like one white lady.

In this quote, Bianca points out an interesting fact as discussed in the literature review, which relates to ‘femvertising’. The term refers to female empowerment advertising which challenges traditional gender stereotypes and relates to Nike as it is well-known for its employment of depictions of empowering and strong sportswomen in their marketing approaches (Åkestam et al., 2017). However, to analyze this from a postfeminist critique, McRobbie (2009) points out the re-workings of feminist predecessors, currently transplanted into the popular sphere of female ‘empowerment’ as a notion to promote ‘change’ and ‘freedom’ for Western women, is offered as a “new form of sexual contract” (p.2). McRobbie (2009) notes that this contract offered by the government, popular culture, and the media, is given in exchange for feminism. So, as consumers assume the idea of feminism being ‘done’ and fully reached, through for example Nike’s ‘femvertisments’, McRobbie (2009) argues they are only promised economic ‘freedom’ and ‘choice’ as a way to obscure the mechanisms of power.

### 7.3.2 Intersectionality

As noted in the background section, in addition to gender disparities and stereotypes within sports media, there are also issues concerning intersectionality in the media as
well as in the institutions of sport. As Halbert (1997) notes, a concern about female athletes in the United States is that their athleticism is linked to their lesbianism (p.11) This assumption was noted by the sportswomen I conversed with, as Ariana mentioned only the women’s basketball team, out of all teams at her college, received Adidas clothes including slippers, shirts and shorts with the LGBTQ+ pride colors on them. She said, “I knew Adidas supported the LGBTQ+ community, but I never thought we would get it (clothing from Adidas) as a team.” In addition, another part of the notion of intersectionality is race, and Ariana points out an interesting point about her white coach:

My whole college team is African American, and first of all my coach thinks that only African American people can play basketball. He hasn’t said that out loud (…) but the way that he behaves, it’s clear.

She continues:

Honestly, if we wouldn’t have athletes it would be hard to find people of color on our campus.

This aligns with the stereotypical idea produced in media (as discussed in the background section), that African American female athletes are expected to have a so-called “Black” natural athletic ability and “Black Excellence” (Zenquis and Mwaniki, 2019, pp.28-31). Much as the notion of McRobbie’s (2009) ‘feminism undone’ discussed in the section above, these situations clearly demonstrate the many pressures put on African American and Black female athletes as they endure burden from not only the issue of gender, but also from the issue of race. It puts them in this one-dimensionality box where they must obtain the burden of representing superior athletic abilities. These situations demonstrate why an intersectional feminist analysis is crucial for understanding female athletes’ lived experiences.

Furthermore, as my research study has found that there is a disparity in representation between sport brands’ advertisements and female athletes’ lived lives, my interviewees also identified that there is a difference in representation between well-known athletes
and up-and-coming collegiate and professional sportswomen. Michelle said this while discussing well-known female athletes:

I don’t think it’s happening at my school, but I think women are starting to become more empowered, like the US national soccer team and their fight to equal pay. You see a lot more of women athletes having every right to feel empowered.

However, for her, being a senior in college, she implies there’s more of an entertainment aspect of how her university’s media and marketing team portrays her. For example, before every sport’s season, the teams have a so-called media day when the lineups have their group and individual pictures taken. Players are also expected to answer funny questions or ‘guess the songs’ on video, as well as some record even longer sit-down sequences. Michelle said:

During media day you’re literally treated like a puppet, they don’t care (about) what they have you doing, they don’t care if they make you sound like an idiot. I can still find videos where I look like an idiot (…) it’s just to entertain our fans during a time out.

In summary, as my study shows, representations of female athletes is rather complex. There is a discrepancy between male and female athletes, between white athletes and athletes of color, and finally, another layer of disparity was discovered in the representation and lived experiences between well-known female athletes and up-and-coming professional and collegiate sportswomen.

8. Discussion and conclusions

To conclude, this thesis aims to comprehend to what extent Nike’s marketing campaigns reflect the lived experiences of professional and collegiate female athletes through qualitative data from a focus group as well as in-depth semi structured interviews. By drawing on a postfeminist critique, the analysis helped illuminate the continuous disparity between representation and lived experiences for female athletes.
without prominent status. I started out aiming to exclusively discuss Nike’s advertisements *I Feel Pretty* (2006) and *Dream Crazier* (2019), but the research study transformed into an in-depth analysis of novel themes related to up-and-coming professional and collegiate sportswomen. Therefore, my contribution to the field of media and communication studies constitutes of giving space to the voices of these female athletes, in the hope of inspiring other scholars to further investigate sport in relation to gender and media through the lived experiences of the female athletes about which they theorize.

Essentially, the analysis found that although sport brands such as Nike make a good case for the visibility of female athletes through their marketing approaches, the representation of sportswomen in their advertisements does not match the overall experiences of female athletes without celebrity status. The findings point out that the notion of conversing about sportswomen’s bodies persist, especially in a degrading way. It is also evident that the collegiate and professional female athletes without celebrity status are expected to be ‘gender aware’ as it is anticipated that they behave and act in a hegemonic, heteronormatively feminine way. Furthermore, issues of gender inequality in sport media as well as sport organizations endure as collegiate athletic marketing teams decide to focus on men’s sports and teams in college sports. Also, a disconnect considering success and admiration between the genders is found as collegiate male sports and athletes are more likely to be portrayed in the media regardless of their performance, while female athletes’ representation in the media is heavily affected by their athletic presentations. However, it could also be argued that despite persistent disparities for sportswomen without prominent status, some improvement of representations of female athletes overall has been accomplished. But again, these improvements might also be linked to the male-dominated sports world. For instance, a possible reason for more awareness in the media for women basketball players is the involvement and support through social media from well-known male NBA players such as Kobe Bryant and Lebron James.

Reflecting on these findings, I consider it vital to continue researching on the complexity of female athletes’ lived experiences in relation to sport marketing approaches. As I have already established the limitations with this thesis in section 5.5, I want to further address the potential meaningful implementations of this topic for
future research. While Nike uses well-known female athletes such as Serena Williams, Simone Biles and Megan Rapinoe in its advertisements, an even more stimulating study could be conducted to examine whether celebrity-status sportswomen’s lived experiences match the images portrayed in marketing campaigns. In such case, the women athletes would be exposed to even greater vulnerability as endorsements and sponsorships are likely to comprise much of their income. Furthermore, other recommendations for future research include to specifically focus on representation and performance on gender identity while addressing the socioeconomic aspect of free education through athletic scholarships. In addition, another interesting point of view could be to examine if there is solidarity between collegiate and professional female athletes.

In conclusion, the representations of sportswomen in sport brands’ marketing approaches affect female athletes’ lives and need to be challenged. As McRobbie (2009) suggests, feminism is “undone”, and it is still very much needed to obtain gender equality in Western society. Nike’s advertisements I Feel Pretty (2006) and Dream Crazier (2019) are seductive into making the public believe that feminism is “done” and that gender equality in sport has been achieved. Drawing on the findings of this research work, it is evident that issues of gender, race, sexuality and class persist in the representation and lived experiences of up-and-coming professional and collegiate female athletes. My thesis work therefore urges researchers to take this topic seriously, as it shows how necessary and needed further investigation concerning media research and intersectional feminism is.
9. References


10. Appendices

Focus group questionnaire


1) What do you think the ad’s message is? (How does it make you feel?)

2) In what way is this ad agreeing or disagreeing with the portrayal of female athletes in your mind?


3) How is this ad different from the first one?

4) Do you feel like something has changed in regard to what it means to be a female athlete? Why/why not?

5) How has your own experience been with the media?

6) How does the media represent female athletes and male athletes?


7) How do you feel about Nike as a brand after reading this article? (Does it change anything?)

8) What has been your experience with being sponsored by Nike or a similar sporting brand? What expectations are there on you as an athlete?

One on one interview questions

**Topic 1: Female athletes’ general experiences**

- Can you describe what it means to be an athlete to you?
- How are you’re treated by your school’s/club’s community?
- In your opinion, what team or sport is favored at your school/club and why?
- Can you tell me about a time within the last two years when you were empowered in sports?
- Can you tell me about a time within the last two years when you were mistreated in sports?
Topic 2: Female athletes’ identities
- How would you explain your identity as a female athlete?
- How are you expected to behave at your school or club as a female athlete?
- Would you say female athletes and male athletes are expected to behave in the same way or different ways?

Topic 3: Female athletes and the media
- How do you think female athletes are represented in the media?
- Could you tell me about a specific time within the last two years when you were involved with the media? How was that experience?
- How has your experience with the media been during your years of being a female athlete? In your opinion, has there been a change? If so, what?
- In your opinion, what team or sport at your school is presented most in the media? Why are you saying that?

Topic 4: Female athletes’ hope for the future
- Can you tell me about what you hope for female athletes in the future?
- Can you tell me about how you think we will get there?