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# The Gender of Branding: Antenarrative Resistance in Early Nike Women's Advertising

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## The Gender of Branding: Early Nike Women's Advertising a Feminist Antenarrative

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Nike is one of the most visible brands in the world, with advertising that has drawn both acclaim and condemnation. Nike's partnership with its advertising agency Wieden + Kennedy (W+K) is legendary. Considering the visibility of the Nike brand, its close relationship with W+K and Nike's historically patriarchal positioning (Fog, Budtz, & Yakaboylu, 2005; Katz, 1994; Strasser & Becklund, 1993), Nike women's advertising provides an ideal case study for exploring how gender influences branding and the narrative process. If we consider gender within the narrative process (Clair, 1993; Clair, 2006; Mumby, 1987; Rhode, 2003), the lack of women in advertising agency creative departments (Broyles & Grow, 2008; Creamer, 2005; Farris, 2005; Mallia, 2006; Weisberg & Robbs, 1997), and Nike's masculine brand image (Fog et al., 2005; Katz, 1994; Strasser & Becklund, 1993), then the advertising that launched and sustained the women's sub-brand represents an exceptionally rich case study of gender, branding, and narrative process.

The evolution of the women's brands is an intensely layered story, "a complicated network of economic, cultural, and psychic relations" (Cole & Hribar, 1995, p. 349). From a communicative perspective, the ads for the women's sub-brand function as antenarratives. From a branding perspective the ads function as living stories reflecting female experiences and providing its audience with "emotional promises" (Aaker, 1997; Gobé, 2001; Travis, 2000) of empowerment and community that offer a sense of "reality" (Mumby, 1987).

Few studies use the creative process as a point of reference from which to explore the impact of gender on advertising. Fewer still explore advertising from the point of view of the creative team, much less a female creative team. This study does exactly that. For nearly eight years, from 1990-1997, the almost exclusively female creative team from W+K created ads for the Nike women's sub-brand that often challenged the social constructions of gender and sports. In the early 1990s, a female point of view was rarely reflected in advertising. While the creative team and Nike executives had the same objective of increasing market share among women, each had strongly differing views about how to achieve

this. In the end, women's advertising ultimately increased Nike's market share among women (Cole & Hribar, 1995; Lucas, 2000). Yet, the ads were a continual source of tension between the creative team and Nike executives.

This case study represents the merging of theoretical perspectives on branding, narrative process, and gender. It is framed by two overarching research questions. First, how did gender influence the communication between the creative team and the Nike executives? Second, how did their communication influence the creative process that shaped the branded messages within early Nike women's advertising, if at all? To that end, this study explores the development of the Nike women's sub-brand as a narrative process. Ultimately, early Nike women's advertising came to exemplify the intersection where "social and sport ideals clash" (Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar & Kauer, 2004, p. 318). As such, women's advertising became a lightning rod for intense debates over gender representations within the Nike women's sub-brand (Blair, 1994; Cole & Hribar, 1995; Goldman & Papson, 1998; Grow & Wolburg, 2006; Lucas, 2000; Scott, 1993). At its heart, this is the story of how gender, sports, and power collide at the intersection of the Nike brand.

## The Gender of Branding in the Literature

### *Nike's Prominence in Advertising*

Both Nike and its advertising agency, W+K, are highly esteemed in the world of professional branding, as exemplified by the awards each received from *Advertising Age*, one of the industry's most prestigious trade publications. In 1990 when the women's sub-brand was launched, Nike was a brand positioned as the patriarch of all sports, with the "Just do it" tagline defining that identity (Fog et al., 2005; Katz, 1994; Strasser & Becklund, 1993). Nike also had a long established relationship with its ad agency W+K, though it had only just launched the women's sub-brand. Then in 1991, W+K was named *Advertising Age's* advertising "Agency of the Year" (Horton, 1992). At the time of the launch of the women's sub-brand, women's professional sports were virtually non-existent. Title IX, legislation passed in 1976 granting equal access to both genders in collegiate sports, was still poorly implemented. By the mid-1990s Nike's global labor issues were prominent. Launching and sustaining the women's sub-brand against this backdrop posed numerous risks to the parent

brand. Yet, it also opened the door to the huge and largely untapped female market. At the same time that the sub-brand was being developed, the Nike parent brand's prestige was growing. In 1996, at the end of the period this case study covers, Nike was named "Marketer of the Year" by *Advertising Age* (Jensen, 1996). And, most recently, in 2006 Nike was named "Digital Marketer of the Year" (O'Malley, 2006). The branding power amassed by the pairing of Nike and W+K is unmistakable and this study offers a valuable contribution to our understanding of how gender influences branding and narrative process.

### *Branding and Sub-Branding*

Successful branding begins with a parent brand, from which sub-brands and line extensions can be developed. In the case of Nike the parent brand is the men's brand with line extensions for each sport, while the women's brand represents a single sub-brand. A parent brand defines the sub-brands, acting as endorser (Aaker, 1997). In 1990 the sacred Nike parent brand was defined by its masculine emotion and promise (Fog et al., 2005; Katz, 1994; Strasser & Becklund, 1993). Campaigns for the parent brand are replete with masculine signifiers from sweating, muscle-bound male athletes, to body copy predicted on vigorous competition, with the "Just do it" tagline as the ultimate signifier of this masculine promise. From this perspective the women's sub-brand, with its female-centric storytelling, was inevitably a source of tension.

Traditionally, a brand has been defined as a recognized and trusted badge of origin, with a promise of performance that differentiates it from its competitors (Feldwick, 1991; Ind, 2004; Murphy, 1990). However, in the postmodern era brands are conceptually framed by three branding hallmarks. Brands are: (a) living things (Aaker, 1997; Fog et al., 2005; Ind, 2004), (b) sacred entities (Fog et al., 2005; Ind, 2004; Vincent, 2002), and (c) emotional promises (Aaker, 1997; Gobé, 2001; Travis, 2000). In short, brands are the sum of all impressions, including their emotional promises and consumers' experiences of them as sacred entities and living things. Together, these three branding hallmarks create potent advertising messages.

Brands are sacred and alive, just like the cultures in which they thrive. "A brand is made in your mind . . . like a badge that lends you a certain identity" (Travis, 2000, p. 15). At the same time, the interface of the brand is framed by communicative boundaries that both connect and separate (Rodowick, 1995). The "Just do it" tagline is a powerful example of

connection between the parent brand and the women's sub-brand. At the same time the articulation of "Just do it" in the women's ads was framed by a culturally bound, gendered separateness, with images and copy that did not articulate the same masculine paradigm. Thus, the tag itself both commented and separated the sub-brand from the sacred parent brand. The sacredness of any brand is bound up in its value and its value is the measure of its equity or the "totality of the brand's perceptions" (Knapp, 2000, p. 3). Marketing is the organizational interface that binds the sacred brand into a cohesive dynamic unit, with storytelling as a management tool (Fog et al., 2005). For Nike the voice of the brand is articulated as "Just do it" stories.

The dynamism of branding is rooted in storytelling and "Nike is an organization that lives on stories" (Ind, 2004, p. 171). Emotional relationships, rooted in the sacred brand promise, are at the core of a brand's value. These relationships are built and maintained by branded storytelling, which have an inherent gendered quality. At Nike it is a highly masculine quality (Goldman & Papsion, 1998; Grow & Wolburg, 2006; Katz, 1994; Strasser & Becklund, 1993). Tending to these emotional relationships—the brand's story—builds a brand's value and sustains its equity (Fog et al., 2005). To maintain its equity, "Nike uses storytelling both internally and externally, as a tool to support its key message. And this kind of constant interplay between the company's core story and the individual's 'hands-on' stories, lie at the heart of creating a strong brand" (Fog et al., 2005, p. 54). Scott Bedbury (personal communication, 2006) Nike's director of advertising, supports Fog's conception of branded storytelling stating, "A great brand is a compelling, never-ending story that recognizes there are fundamental human truths and needs that it can uniquely serve. Great advertising campaigns . . . bring the brand to life." Storytelling, both internally and externally, supported by advertising, has become decisive in "how brands of the future will be shaped" (Fog et al., 2005, p. 15). For Nike, the parent brand is fundamentally shaped by masculine branded storytelling. Tracing the structure of branding through branding theory—from brands as living things, to sacred entities, to emotional promises—it is clear that the Nike parent brand is framed by masculine storytelling. Consistent with branding theory, this framing sets up an inherent conflict between the parent brand and the women's sub-brand, which leads the women's sub-brand to be perceived as a threat to the parent brand, even as it increases Nike's bottom-line.

### *Gender Constraints*

Storytelling always has a gender component, emerging from existing social constraints (Kolb, Fletcher, Meyerson, Merrill-Sands, & Ely, 2003). Thus, both the sacredness of the brand and gender constraints define the organization, which are fundamentally gender-neutral structures. However, in reality, organizations are "contaminated" by gendered social constructions (Acker, 2003). In other words, "gender relations are reproduced in organizations" (Acker, 2003, p. 58). In the patriarchal world of athletics and sports, which fundamentally shape Nike as an organization, there is a social order that further constrains women by privileging femininity over athleticism (Choi, 2000; Clasen, 2001; Hanke, 1990; Krane et al., 2004; Shea, 2001).

Male and female athletes live in two culturally different milieus. One is an inherently male cultural world where masculinity frames athleticism. The other is a female cultural world where femininity is most often defined by patriarchy, which privileges femininity over athleticism. Because of these discursive environments transgressions often have severe consequences (Choi 2000; Clasen 2001; Krane et al., 2004; Shea 2001). Females must thus negotiate two competing cultures where "social and sport ideals clash" (Krane et al., 2004, p. 318).

Negotiating these two cultures can be challenging. In the world of athletics and sports, this social order constrains females by privileging femininity over athleticism (Choi 2000; Clasen 2001; Hanke 1990; Krane et al., 2004; Shea 2001). One only had to watch the 2008 Super Bowl commercial for godaddy.com to see this play out. Danica Patrick one of today's most competitive NASCAR drivers, named rookie of the year and finishing fourth in the Indianapolis 500 in 2005 (indycar.com), privileges femininity over her athleticism in a commercial encouraging viewers to go the Go Daddy Web site to watch her strip. Anna Kournikova, outranked by numerous other tennis players, provides another example of how this process works with her multiple product endorsements. In her role as product and cultural endorser Kournikova prominently displays her highly sexualized femininity over her less competitive athletic abilities, allowing her to reap enormous financial benefits (Isidore, 2002). Needless to say, both Patrick and Kournikova's physical appearances conform to patriarchal definitions of beauty and femininity. These high profile examples express the power of patriarchal dominance within the world of sports (Higgs, Weiller, & Martin 2003; Messner, Duncan, & Cooky 2003).

### *Antenarrative as Communicative Process*

The communicative process of storytelling as a traditional narrative tends to be more linear and historical, framed by a plot (Boje, 2001; Fisher, 1984; Ricoeur, 1980; White, 1980). As a narrative form, storytelling is both a public or communal and private act (Fisher, 1984; Ricoeur, 1980). Yet, the narrative that emerges from storytelling is essentially a communal act of repetition about time and place (Ricoeur, 1980). Thus, storytelling as a narrative process helps define history and in defining history the narrative provides closure (White, 1980).

Antenarrative, on the other hand, is "living storytelling that is fragmented, polyphonic (many voiced) and collectively produced" (Boje, p. 1). The antenarrative, expressed visually and/or verbally, is a fluid collective response to lived experiences. Brands and the advertising that support them are also fluid. Like the antenarrative, ads are about creating and sustaining fluid openings. I find the use of antenarrative a compelling theoretical reference for this case study because of its living and intertextual qualities. According to Boje (2001) the antenarrative has five dimensions: (a) it comes before whatever frame is imposed upon it, (b) it is speculative and often ambiguous, always questioning what is happening, (c) it directs our attention to the flow, asking us to make sense of lived experience beyond the narrative, (d) it relates best to audience fragments, and (e) the antenarrative reflects a consensual narrative as a collective memory. From this point of view, antenarrative forms a strong communicative counterpoint to branding.

The living quality of brands suggests an ambiguous questioning, rooted in lived experiences as part of collective memory. Brands as sacred entities often have a presence larger than what is imposed upon them, and their sacredness is sustained by a collective response. Yet, brands are shared privately, as part of communicative processes, often protected within fragmented audiences. Finally, the emotional promises inherent within brands are reflected in collective memory, but they flow out of lived experiences and tend toward ambiguity.

Much like Nike women's advertising, any antenarrative analysis encompasses "multi-voice ways of telling stories" (Boje, 2001, p. 9). Ads are essentially intertextual narratives, antenarrative if you will. Boje suggests intertextuality is essentially a conversation "among writers and readers of texts" (2001, p. 10). Advertising bespeaks a rich intertextuality (Barthes, 1977; Foucault, 1972; Kristeva, 1980) that has no single author (Barthes,

1977). Essentially, ads function as conversations. The creative process from which ads emerge is fluid, as are the signifiers within the advertising texts. Creatives (copywriters, art directors, and creative directors) engage in storytelling, framing their copy as part of lived experiences, which reflect the past and are directed toward fragmented audiences in an effort to create collective memory. Advertising texts are comprised of interwoven signifiers and interlacing utterances, which link previous texts with anticipated texts (Foucault, 1972; Kristeva, 1980). Thus they function much like Boje's (2001) antenarratives. Antenarratives like ads are conversations. And, ads function like antenarratives in that they are productive and redistributive in that they reconstitute time and space (Kristeva, 1980). In this intertextual process authors and readers become merged (Barthes, 1977; Kristeva, 1980). In the end the antenarrative suggests a "storied soup" (Boje, 2001, p. 78), reflecting the shared lived experiences and emotional promises that also bind brands into a cohesive whole. Stories are at the heart of building brands, and stories are at the heart of building community (Clair, 2006; Fisher, 1984; Mumby, 1987; White, 1980). In the end, the stories that advertising tells significantly define our communities.

Unfortunately, communal storytelling systems tend toward the ideological and hegemonic (Boje, 2001; Clair, 1993). Yet, stories within the hegemonic experience can—and do—act as forms of resistance to hegemonic power structures (Clair, 1993). Hegemony functions to suppress marginalized individuals within a society through a process by which the dominant class both dominates and leads others to accept subordination (Gramsci, 1971; Hall, 1985). This subordination is "maintained through coercion" (Clair, 1993, p. 114). However, there are communicative fractures that offer openings for resistance, and these fractures often fall along class and gender lines. In terms of branding, class and gendered fractures are often explored within advertising messages. In the case of Nike the fractured opening is gendered and dominated by patriarchy, "an ideology that promotes hierarchy, class division and oppression usually at the expense of women" (Clair, 1993, p. 114). The stories within the women's ads express a patriarchal fracture. Yet, counter-hegemonic resistance also suggests a unified point of struggle, pitting the parent brand against the subordinate women's sub-brand.

Taking into account the carnivalesque (Kristeva, 1980) and the counter-hegemonic resistance that flows out of feminist critiques (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Clair, 1993; Clair, 1998; Frazer, 1998; MacKinnon, 1989),



we can see the appeal of antenarratives that engage in the discursive practices rooted in the consumption and production of "everyday life practices" (de Certeau, 1984). Let us consider Nike women's ads as antenarratives situated within an intertextual world of counter-hegemonic carnival. From this point of view the appeal of female-centric signifiers is salient. Thus the systematic "poaching" (de Certeau, 1984) from women's everyday life experiences becomes a compelling form of resistance and personal expression as the creative team focused on "organized dissonance" (Ashcraft, 2006, p. 58). From this perspective the actions of the creative team were undoubtedly "presumed hostile" (Ashcraft, 2006, p. 58). Within a patriarchal hegemonic system, the presumption of hostility leads to marginalizing or sequestering. Like women's stories that are often "sequestered" (Clair, 1993), the ads containing women's stories are often also sequestered in women's magazines. Despite this, the team's "organized dissonance merges contradictory forms to accomplish conflicted goals" (Ashcraft, 2006, p. 58) allows them to reach the mutually agreed upon objective of increasing sales for the women's sub-brand.

Practicing counter-hegemonic dissonance to the end, within the frame of an antenarrative, the creative team fully expresses the essence of the branding process by articulating the women's brand as a living thing and a sacred entity, imbuing it with emotional promises. The unifying power of this branded storytelling, as illustrated within these ads, also expose organizational conflicts. This case study suggests that counter-hegemonic dissonance often leads to hostility. Together, dissonance and hostility create organizational conflicts, which in this case are expressed within the communicative process of advertising.

### Constructing the Case

The conceptualization of most case studies evolves from a complex universal whole by focusing on finite connections and causes (Hamel, 1993; Feagin, Orum, & Sjoberg, 1991; Ragin & Becker, 1992). In this way a case study can operate as a window into a highly specified area of study, yet is framed within the context of the "texture of social life" (Walton, 1992, p. 124). As such, case studies are ideal for exploring the ways communication influences advertising because cultural, social, and economic life, that is to say everyday life, are intrinsically bound in the production of advertising. Significantly, "most criticism of advertising is written in ignorance of what actually happens inside these agencies"

(Schudson, 1984, p. 45). Even less is written about the "the mysterious creative process" (Schudson, 1984, p. 42). The chosen methodology helps illuminate connections and causes specifically related to gender that emerge through the advertising creative process.

### *Interview Guide*

This case study explores two questions: (a) how does gender influence the communication between the creative team and the Nike executives, and (b) how does that communication influence the creative process that shaped the branded messages within early Nike women's advertising. Depth interviews ground this study and are guided by theoretical constructs from branding, the antenarrative, and gender studies. Branding, with its focus on brands as living things, sacred entities, and emotional promises, finds its strength in storytelling, as a communicative form. We also know that gendered social constructions contaminate corporate organizations (Acker, 2003), and that the stories that emerge from within corporations are inherently constrained by gender (Kolb, et al., 2003). Additionally, the patriarchal construct of sports privileges femininity over athleticism (Choi, 2000; Clasen, 2001; Hanke, 1990, Krane et al., 2004). Thus, this case study of branded storytelling must be guided by an understanding of the role of gender in the interview process (Golombisky, 2006). Finally, storytelling is central to Boje's (2001) theoretical constructs of the antenarrative, which dovetails with theoretical frames of branding and gender. In that sense the notion that the ads are intertextual conversations also guide these interviews. Thus, exploring the process of the ads creation provides a rich source of information.

Considering the theoretical framing, three primary interview questions guided this process: (a) How did the creative process unfold? (b) What did you see as the big idea (central theme)? (c) How did the interactions between the ad agency and Nike impact the creative process, if at all? Considering the power of storytelling and its intertextual nature, these questions were designed to elicit personal stories from the participants. And they did.

These stories reveal deeply intertwined relationships between human communication and branding. Storytelling is the communicative form that binds human communication, as reflected in personal and collective antenarratives, with the branded voice of advertising, as a mediated antenarrative. The key participants were extraordinarily forthcoming and often launched into extended descriptions of the creative process and the central

campaign themes. Their candor expressed the living, fragmented, and collective nature of the antenarrative as a communicative process. Their verbose discussions about the interactions between agency and client also reinforced storytelling as a communicative form. However, their discussions also demonstrated the mediated quality of the antenarrative as both a communicative process and the branded voice of advertising. This voice questions what came before and helps make sense of lived experiences related to fragmented audiences and predicated on collective memory. Thus, this case study demonstrates how human communication and experiences influence advertising. And that influence, as reflected within the ads, is consistent with branding theory, which suggests that brands are essentially living things, scared entities, and emotional promises.

It is insightful to understand how this case study came to be. In 1997, while at major research institution in the Midwest, I found that my professional experience in advertising merged with my research interest in Nike's labor issues. I became curious about how Nike's labor issues were impacting its advertising, and I decided to talk to people at Nike. It seemed reasonable to begin with the director of labor communications. As it turned out, we shared an alma mater. His fondness for our alma mater and my professional background in advertising helped form an immediate bond of trust. From there, he connected me to the former director of women's advertising, who granted an extended interview along with access to all creative briefs (strategy documents) and copies of the print ads. At the same time I contacted W+K, leveraging my advertising industry experience and my recent connections at Nike to gain access to the account and creative staff. Janet Champ, the copywriter for all but 1 campaign, was no longer at the agency, but was freelancing locally. After some cajoling, my contacts at W+K agreed to contact Janet and ask if they could share her contact information with me. She agreed. Janet then connected me to the two art directors, Charlotte Moore and Rachel Nelson Manganiello. This was the beginning of a long research trajectory, of which this study is but one part.

### *Participants and Hierarchy*

For this case study 12 individuals were interviewed: 6 from W+K and 6 from Nike. Janet Champ, Charlotte Moore, and Rachel Nelson Manganiello were the primary participants. Copywriter Champ, who worked on all but 1 of the campaigns, covered all 7 years. She was interviewed in 3 face-to-face interviews and she returned 11 follow-up e-mail queries.

Champ was also responsible for presenting the ads to the Nike executives, which usually included the director and manager of women's advertising, who directly supervised their work. However, the presentation meetings also included multiple higher-level executives including Phil Knight, then president. When referring to Nike executives, the team almost always referred to the highest level executives rather than to their direct supervisors. Champ was consistently characterized as the team leader by all her fellow team members. Art director and later associate creative director, Moore, worked on the first seven campaigns covering 4 years and was interviewed via e-mail, returning 13 e-mails. Art director Manganiello worked on the last 4 campaigns over a period of 2 years and was interviewed by phone twice, returning 2 follow-up e-mails. Also interviewed by phone was Monica (pseudonym), the only copywriter other than Champ to work on the account, and 2 art directors Doug (pseudonym) and Ben (pseudonym), who created one campaign each. Doug and Ben were the only males to work on the account for a period of time totaling 1 year.

Six individuals from Nike were interviewed and each is referred to by the title they held at the time the advertising was actually produced. Meredith (pseudonym), women's advertising manager, was interviewed in two face-to-face interviews and returned 3 follow-up e-mails. Scott Bedbury, director of women's advertising, was interviewed once by phone and returned 2 follow-up e-mails. Four other brief face-to-face interviews took place with the vice-president of global marketing, global director of advertising, director of advertising, and director of women's marketing.

### *Procedures*

Interviews were arranged by telephone and e-mail solicitations. Face-to-face interviews were conducted over two five-day periods in June 1998 and May 2000, on site at Nike in Beaverton, Oregon or at W+K in Portland, Oregon. Interview sessions lasted from 30 minutes to four hours, with Champ's and Meredith's interviews providing the most extensive face-to-face contact. Phone and e-mail interviews followed upon my return from Oregon. A seemingly informal solicitation and interview process was designed to reflect the culture within advertising agencies as well as at the corporate headquarters of Nike, both of which are known for their informal environments. Each participant received a handwritten thank you note and at least one follow-up e-mail.

Each interview began with a brief explanation of the project, followed by an explanation of the protocol. Protocol was approved by the Internal Review Board of a Midwest university with a reputation as a major research institution. The interviewees' rights during and after the interview were then explained. Oral or written permission from each participant was then obtained. Each subject was then offered a pseudonym. Those who chose pseudonyms were assigned arbitrary first names. Though anonymity was offered to all subjects, Champ, Moore, Manganiello, and Bedbury allowed me to use their names.

All face-to-face or telephone interviews were recorded. An outside transcription service transcribed all face-to-face and long telephone interviews. The author transcribed short telephone interviews. In all, there were 132 pages of verbatim transcriptions. Interview time for the individuals at W+K totaled nine hours with 26 e-mails. One central participant, Moore, was interviewed exclusively via e-mail because she lived in Europe. Transcripts from W+K totaled 90 pages. Interview time from Nike totaled nine hours with 5 e-mails. Transcripts from Nike totaled 42 pages. Thus, each citation from the various participants comes from personal communication.

### *Data Analysis*

Analysis of the data was conducted within the framework of case study methodology, which suggests that interviews must be analyzed within the context of the universal whole (Hamel, 1993; Feagin et al., 1991; Ragin & Becker, 1992). Understanding the advertising industry is imperative to deeper interpretation, as well as the ability to probe more effectually during initial data collection. Unstructured interview techniques deepen case research (Fontana & Fry, 1998) and frame this study. This process allows for a fluid informational exchange and deeper data collection (McCracken, 1998). This fluidity is particularly apparent in e-mail quotes, where the participants used the medium to accentuate their opinions and ideas with exclamation points and capital letters for example. Conducting face-to-face interviews within the natural environment where participants work or play encourages deeper reflections on the part of participants, further grounding the analysis process of case study research (Feagin et al., 1991). Finally, interpretation and analysis is further guided by analytic comparison across this body of interview data (Althedide & Johnson, 1998; Lofland & Lofland, 1995, Ragin & Becker, 1992).

The analytic process was conducted across five stages. The initial analysis involved a single reading of all verbatim transcripts, where themes began to emerge and a primary set of thematic codes was produced (Althedide & Johnson, 1998; Lofland & Lofland, 1995). With the focus on the W+K creative team and the advertising creative process, the second stage involved rereading the transcripts from the creative team to verify and deepen the analysis (Fontana & Fry, 1998; Ragin & Becker, 1992). Here I used the five dimensions of the antenarrative to thematically restructure the codes from stage one. The third stage focused on tracing themes as they moved across the campaigns (Fontana & Fry, 1998; Ragin & Becker, 1992). The fourth stage involved rereading transcripts from individuals at Nike and verifying themes from the creative team (Althedide & Johnson, 1998; Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Here again I referred back to the five dimensions of the antenarrative. The final stage of analysis was a comparative analysis between the W+K transcripts (stages two and three) and themes from the Nike transcripts (stage four). In the final stage, consistent with case study analytic procedure (Ragin & Becker, 1992), I compared the creative team's themes with those of the individuals at Nike, within the context of the antenarrative and branding theory. Finally, as part of the last stage of analysis statements were added or deleted to clarify thematic consistency across time and within both branding and antenarrative theory. This five stage analytic process allowed for thematic verification across the all campaigns.

### *Campaigns Overview*

The findings are presented in a manner that emphasizes the lived experiences of the individuals interviewed, which best demonstrates the impersonal dynamics as well as the resulting creative responses as ultimately expressed within the ads. Each campaign has a story to tell—one linking to the next. Thus, my findings are expressed in a historical timeline, by campaign name and season. I begin with a brief explanation of the historical structure of the campaigns from 1990 to 1997 when W+K was the agency of record for Nike women's advertising.

During this time two community focused thematic periods emerged, which I name an *Empowered Community* and a *Community of Athletes*. The *Empowered Community* began with the launch of the women's brand in spring 1990 and ran through fall 1994. The *Community of Athletes* followed in fall 1994 and ran through spring 1997 (Grow, 2006). There were 13 image ad campaigns in all, each named by the agency. Image ads

focus on brand promises rather than on tangible brand attributes, and Nike strongly tends toward image advertising. Ten campaigns were exclusively print, 2 were print with some color television spots, and one consisted of 3 black-and-white television spots. This case study focuses only on the print ads, as they make up the majority of the media buys for the women's sub-brand. Finally, throughout the paper titles of all thematic periods, campaigns and ads are noted in italics.

### The Gender of Branded Antenarrative Storytelling

Looking back over the discourse that emerged around and within the ads of the *Empowered Community* and the *Community of Athletes*, the parallels between branding and the antenarrative become clear. The findings that follow make evident that gender significantly influenced the communication between the creative team and the Nike executives, which addresses the first research question. Further, reflecting research question two, there is strong evidence that the communication between the creative team and the Nike executives greatly influenced the branded messages within the ads themselves. These ads, crafted by women practicing counter-hegemonic resistance, express a deeply intertextual conversation with readers. The findings demonstrate tightly branded series of campaigns, with ads evoking great intertextuality much like with the antenarrative. In fact, Boje's (2001) five antenarrative dimensions flow back and forth as this case unfolds. The stories told within the ads are framed by prior experience, always questioning, steeped in lived experiences. While speaking to audience fragments, they reflect females' collective memory. From a branding perspective, the ads emerge as branded living stories that share a sense of the sacred while making and keeping emotional promises—creating a resistant and powerful sub-brand. Unfortunately, as will be demonstrated, Nike executives respond as if the organization itself is becoming contaminated.<sup>1</sup>

#### *List—Spring & Fall 1990*

Behind closed doors the creative team began by critiquing women's magazines, looking for the "connective tissue between the women's magazine and our instincts" (Moore, personal communication, 2000). In the spirit of the antenarrative, personal experience and not market research fed their creativity. "There was tons of market research done. But the only time I ever looked at it was after the ads were done and bought internally,

so we knew how to sell them to the clients. That's it" (Champ, personal communication, 2000). As they brainstormed, they found women's magazines "insipid" (Champ, personal communication, 1998). For them, the messages in magazines did not represent women's lives and had little relevance. "We found the magazines so disgusting and so we made a list of what made us sick" (Champ, personal communication, 1998). In the end, "It was like we do exercise because it makes you feel good, not because it makes you beautiful" (Champ, personal communication, 1998).

The team questioned the "quick fixes that women's magazines constantly suggested" (Champ, personal communication, 1998). Ads and editorials within the magazines "had little to do with anything even remotely sweaty or time-consuming or difficult" (Moore, personal communication, 2000). So the team created a print campaign with copy listing what women should reject. The first campaign, *List*, was sequestered; it lived in a "female world, in the female media. It was a first step that the men at Nike could agree on" (Moore, personal communication, 2000). Once it ran, the creatives were ecstatic about the responses they got from women. "Their response was powerful. Their heads had been turned. They were hanging 'lists' on their refrigerators. They were showing it to their daughters. They were buying Nikes and swearing off other brands" (Moore, personal communication, 2000).

Sales went up and the team saw this as their "personal victory" (Moore, personal communication, 2000). For them, their work was about "talking to women as human beings" (Moore, personal communication, 2000). As such, the ads reflected antenarrative dimensions (Boje, 2001). The copy framed by prior experience questioned social constructs. The stories within the copy empowered consumers to act because the team tapped into consumers' collective memory, reflecting the last of Boje's (2001) antenarrative dimensions. This also reflects the living quality of the newly launched women's brand. However, because of the sacred parent brand, the ads were tucked away in "female media" (Moore, personal communication, 2000). They were "sequestered" (Clair, 1993).

### *Empathy—Spring 1991*

The team was frustrated by the lack of acknowledgment from Nike, despite the fact that "futures went up and sales increased" (Moore, personal communication, 2000). They were, "tired of being hemmed into two or four pages [of ad space]. It pissed us off that men got big budgets and we didn't. We said if we're going to be stuck with print let's do the



longest fucking ad we can" (Champ, personal communication, 1998). And they did. Champ wrote a 16-page ad, though it got cut back to 8 pages. The ad, called *Empathy*, illustrated the evolution from childhood to adulthood through portrayals that elicited independence within a female community. Their vision was further constrained because "We were working with men and the models had to be pretty" (Champ, personal communication, 1998). Despite these constraints they continued to rely on their prior experiences and continued questioning, reflecting the essence of antenarratives. "The thing [ad] came to life . . . We had found our home and our voice, and we'd found the most fertile ground for the brand" (Moore, personal communication, 2000).

*Empathy*, although tempered by the male parent brand, still expressed resistance despite small budgets and pretty models. In writing the "longest fucking ad" (Champ, personal communication, 1998), antenarrative storytelling became a way of empowering individual women to become "significant to yourself" (ad copy). This again reflects Boje's (2001) antenarrative dimensions of relying on lived experiences and shaping a collective memory. Despite the limitations and sequestering, the creatives found the brand's voice in sacred communal storytelling that promised empowerment.

### *Dialogue I & II—Fall 1991 & Spring 1992*

In the *Dialogue* campaigns, the creatives continued their sacred communal storytelling. As in the previous campaigns, the ads tell stories of women within community and family and thus express the living quality of branding. They used old family photographs and images of their personal heroes to express the brand's promise of empowerment. The highly personal nature of their work is framed by prior experience, influenced by lived experiences and expressed as collective memory, always questioning, much like the antenarrative. "We were trying to get into other peoples lives. [We] talked to friends and relatives . . . and got down deep, to the kinds of tiny itty bitty truths that created our generation" (Champ, personal communication, 1998). In one ad, *Janet's Mom*, they used one of Champ's old family photographs to tell their story. In another, *Marilyn*, they used Marilyn Monroe, Champ's personal hero.

*Janet's Mom* illustrates the process of antenarrative storytelling in advertising. To create the ad Champ and Moore again cloistered themselves in their offices and debated the issues of their time. For weeks they talked about the things that drove them crazy: from media representations

of women, to inequities on the job, to love and dating, to gender dynamics within their families, to inequities the team suffered working on the women's sub-brand. They brainstormed ideas and made lists of images and words that reflected their frustrations. They gathered photographs and illustrations, and scribbled drawings that reflected how they felt. Champ brought in the photograph used in this ad—a photograph of her mother and sister. Seeing the photo rekindled in her memories of the many frustrations she experienced growing up female in her family. She sat down and wrote the story of what it felt like to be her—to grow up with narrow expectations defined by gender and heredity. Then she spun her story into poignant copy. In telling her own story Champ frames the ad based on prior experiences and uses the ad copy to question social norms, while engaging readers across audience fragments. Steeped in lived experience, Champ collectively asks the audience to decide for themselves who they want to be—much like she had decided for herself. In that sense Champ's creative process reflects all five of Boje's (2001) antenarrative dimensions.

Moore borrowed Champ's copy line when she reflected on the process of creating the *Dialogue* campaigns. She said, "It's never too late to have a life, and [it's] never too late to change one" (Moore, personal communication, 2000). In doing so, the team exemplified the antenarrative by using stories of themselves and other women to challenge social constraints the current portrayals of femininity. The team lived counter-hegemonic resistance while the audience demonstrated the powerful intertextual nature of the ads by engaging with the ads and responding to them. "People would call, track us down, and send us pictures. A 12-year-old girl wrote in. 'I always wanted to be a boy. Now I'm on a softball team.' We got lots of letters" (Champ, personal communication, 1998). However, despite the success of the *Dialogue* campaigns and increased sales, the campaigns fed internal tension. While the ads were sequestered in women's magazines, their presence still threatened the parent brand. "We were told by Phil Knight that we were 'pinkifying the brand'" (Champ, personal communication, 1998).

### *Emotional—Fall 1993*

The creative process for *Emotional* reflected a growing intertextual quality. The ads "came about as a way to involve women in the evolution of their own self-esteem" (Moore, personal communication, 2000). The team used the ads to express women's self-esteem as part of the emotional journey from youth to adulthood. As Champ (personal communication,

1998) explained it, it was not “about being beautiful or buff or having the perfect stomach. It’s about that rush you get, that joy of having your body do things you never thought it was capable of.” The ads empowered women to think differently about themselves and to take care of themselves on their own terms. “It was about your body being able to do great things. Small things. Strong things. You just need to find a sport—a routine—that can express it” (Champ, personal communication, 1998). Their insights were steeped in lived experiences and collective memory, always questioning, expressing the hallmarks of the antenarrative.

Yet, in spite of the creatives’ intentions of expressing the promise of empowering self-esteem through an emotional and physical journey, Nike “had no intention of portraying hard bodies and women as true competitors. So we had to focus on women that were . . . real, but not too real. We [Nike and the creatives] had long fights over that” (Champ, personal communication, 1998). Even more frustrating, “There was very, very, very, very little money for women’s [advertising] back then” (Champ, personal communication, 1998). Paradoxically, Nike could not completely discount their resistance or the intertextual responses of consumers.

They kind of let us run wild because they’d received so many calls and letters about all the previous work. And we were on time, on budget . . . All the money was going to men’s [advertising] as so we kind of snuck in with a really cheap campaign and won dozens of awards and got everybody talking about the ads and had thousands and thousands of women and girls call in for reprints and Oprah was talking about the ad on TV. It was a huge deal. (Champ, personal communication, 1998)

By now the women’s sub-brand was expressing a fluid intertextuality that relied heavily on interactivity with consumers. The emotional brand promise of empowerment that was inherent in the ads had established a relevant brand for women. Yet, the expanding women’s sub-brand threatened the sacred parent brand. Tensions caused by conflicting brand messages between the Nike parent brand and women’s sub-brand increased—as did the bottom line.

### *Commitments and Accomplishments—Spring 1994*

This is the only campaign for which Champ did not write the copy. Themes of empowerment, in *Commitments and Accomplishments*, are

more conventional and, thus, express less resistance. Moore pushed for using non-models and having copy formatted like questionnaires as a means of expanding the storytelling mode and reflecting the collective memories of ordinary women, much like antenarrative. Yet, Nike constrained Moore's strategic idea. While the Nike ads portrayed ordinary women ranging from schoolteachers to stay-at-home moms, they also used actor Helen Hunt and athletes Gabby Reese and Sheryl Swoops—pretty and famous and not so ordinary women. Further, the images and copy that framed Hunt, Reese, and Swoops did not express athletic competition. They expressed self-confidence and personal growth, a clear continuation of branded promises from previous campaigns.

In some ways this campaign expresses a carnivalesque intertextuality by mixing non-models and celebrities with ordinary women. Yet, the brand kept its sacred emotional promise of empowerment. Avoiding any direct references to competitive sports and feminizing the introductions of Reese and Scoops largely removed counter-hegemonic resistance. Thus, the parent brand's masculine equity was maintained, and tension between Nike and the creatives was briefly reduced.

### *Falling in Love—Fall 1994*

Champ returned to the team with *Falling in Love*, along with a new art director, Rachel Manganiello. Their ads, as antenarrative storylines, maintained the focus on empowerment through personal growth, with only a hint at competitive sports. "For a long time it was difficult to even suggest women would do real sports instead of fitness" (Manganiello, personal communication, 2000). The team's frustration level rose as they were not allowed to use storylines involving serious competitive sports. They resisted, pushing back with a 12-page ad, *Falling in Love*. The suggestion of portraying female athletes competitively elicited intense debates between the creative team and Nike.

We suggested to Nike that perhaps it was time to bring in some "sports" instead of just fitness. They let us do what we wanted as long as we didn't "sully" the men's brand . . . . As long as the women's products kept flying off the shelves they were happy. And they were. So no harm. No foul. (Champ, personal communication, 1998)

In fact, "It was difficult to even suggest that women would do real sports. It's like we're a different species or something" (Manganiello, personal communication, 2000).

The insight that drove the long copy concept was the importance of falling in love with yourself, and the ad unfolds as a six-part play about self-love. The creative team focused on questioning, which was framed by prior experiences, again reflecting Boje's (2001) antenarrative dimensions. The team's resistance, even while using "pretty" models, kept them locked in a pitched battle with the Nike executives. Women's advertising remained separate and unequal—a different species—a sub-brand always separate from, and unequal to, the parent brand:

Somehow women do all of those things [sports], but for men they're separate categories. It's like they wouldn't apply women to those categories . . . Things like basketball and soccer and stuff, oh, I swear to God, you know, that it was—you know, it was too masculine. It was very strange . . . since it [Falling in Love] was very pathetically emotionally driven. It was acceptable to them because that was kind of the realm of women. (Manganiello, personal communication, 2000)

Concerns about pinkifying the brand remained and thus women's advertising was still sequestered in women's magazines, fueling the team's counter-hegemonic resistance. The creatives knew that Nike was still a man's world.

### *Just Do It Stories—Fall 1994*

The transition campaign between the *Empowered Community* and a *Community of Athletes* was the *Just Do It Stories*. Antenarrative storytelling focused on collective memory as the creatives steeped themselves in the lived experiences of female athletes. "I immersed myself in their sport, in their story" (Champ, 1998). Two of the three ads, *JJK* and *Hamm*, feature Jackie Joyner-Kersey and Mia Hamm and explore how they empowered themselves to become athletes. Like the previous ads featuring athletes, the imagery remained soft. Unbeknownst to Nike, a third ad, *Canoeists*, highlighted two lesbians, featuring copy that told of their personal journeys. Using lesbians was a stark act of counter-hegemonic resistance. But despite Champ's attempt to subvert patriarchal images of femininity:

The women paddlers hated their ad because it didn't sound at all like them. They were loud, boisterous, happy gals and I think I made paddling too serene. And there was no flak about them being lesbians because people are stupid and didn't catch on. (Champ, personal communication, 1998)

The softened, feminized imagery and use of lesbians was particularly ironic because for the first time the art director was a man. Regardless of one's sex, social constructions of gender pre-empted lived experiences, when creating ads for the Nike women's sub-brand. "He was very deferential. I think his ads could have been much much better. They're too feminine for me. They should have been strong . . . But, he was worried he had too much of a 'male' sensibility" (Champ, personal communication, 1998). While storytelling remained crucial to the brand, a carnivalesque intertextuality played out with a multigendered creative team, subversive uses of lesbians and overtly feminized images.

### *Hedonists—Spring 1995*

*Hedonists* represents the second and last time a male art director was part of the team. The ads featured high school aged girls with words and images that signify competition. However, the focus remains on the individual rather than a team. Debates between the creatives and Nike illustrate the patriarchal structure at Nike. There was "political stuff because Nike's position was in the big men's sports. And, you know, [women's was] just kind of siphoning off money" (Manganiello, personal communication, 2000). Aware that their ads were viewed as contaminating the parent brand, the creative team treaded lightly around team sports. Women were "not perceived as really aggressive or like they don't really like to win" (Ken, pseudonym, art director, personal communication, 2000). The team knew it was "bullshit. They [women] all go through the same pain—the same things as men" (Ken, personal communication, 2000). However, the only way Nike executives would acquiesce to sweaty competitive imagery was if the emphasis was on girls. Using girls kept the ads sequestered in an infantilized, female world without directly challenging men's sports or the parent brand. Finding resistance available in the margins, the team signified girls as hedonists and a "pack of wolves" (ad copy). When the copy treaded near team sports, it was spun as "taking vows" or being part of a "marriage," keeping gender constructions intact. And, of course, beauty remained central to selecting the girls they featured.

We had for years wanted to be ballsy and out there and finally we just did it. You should see the original stuff before they made us tone it down. It was fantastic. Very edgy, very sweaty, very much about competition and pain and pleasure and basically just saying—without saying it—that men and women do this for the same reason . . . . Nike has always liked “smiling women” . . . always happy, always smiling, never a grimace, as though working out or playing sports is just fun, fun, fun—nothing hard about it at all!! But of course it’s not like that. It’s fucking hard work. (Champ, original emphasis via e-mail, 2000)

For this and previous campaigns the addition of men to the creative team apparently made no difference to gendered social construction, as Nike’s powerful patriarchal presence dominated. For Nike it was about maintaining the sacredness of the parent brand and keeping the genders separated. The importance of protecting the sacredness of the parent brand was evident as the team was forced to tone down their work. Yet, using storytelling, the ads offered girls and young women representations of females finding pleasure in physical agility and strength, something uncommon in advertising in the mid-1990s. Thus, the brand established deeper and more fertile ground, predicated on inspirational intertextual antenarrative with young female consumers.

### *Vignettes I & II—Fall 1995 & Spring 1996*

The focus on individual athletes within a team continues with *Vignettes*. These ads had less emphasis on girls, yet clearly kept gender constructions in place. Nike “really wanted to capitalize on the differences between men’s [competition, you you you] and women’s sports [us, teamwork, we’re married to each other and our sport]” (Champ, parentheses original to e-mail, 2000). The theme was sports as a place to belong, which was very much in keeping with the branded emotional promise of community. By framing the ads’ storyline around prior experiences that reflected the collective memory of perseverance, the ads became “an inspirational thing for all women, not just for super athletes. They were about how they [female athletes] persevered through all the things they did” (Manganiello, personal communication, 2000). Listening to the athletes’ stories helped the creatives shape a collective memory, while questioning what female athletes had to “endure in order to even get to there—to their sport” (Manganiello, personal communication, 2000). The ads also sustained the

living quality of the brand and the scared promise of sports in community, thus preserving competitive sports for the male parent brand.

The divided nature of the parent and sub-brand continued to be evident in how the women's sub-brand was pathetically underfunded. Nike "didn't have any money [for women's advertising] . . . . We had to just cobble things together" (Manganiello, personal communication, 2000). While no longer verbalized, the idea of pinkifying the sacred parent brand was still a salient issue. "They didn't place a lot of value on it [women's advertising] . . . . They weren't putting a lot of money behind it" (Manganiello, personal communication, 2000). As much as the Nike executives enjoyed increased profits from the women's sub-brand, the masculine parent brand would not take any risks.

### *Participation—Holiday 1995-Fall 1996*

Sequestering ebbs but does not end with the *Participation* campaign. *Participation* dovetailed with the twentieth anniversary of Title IX. The campaign's storyline enhanced the new brand promise of entitlement through equity within a community of athletes. Nike saw this historical moment as a point of leverage. Thus, seven years into building the women's sub-brand, Nike approved a larger budget allowing the team to produce color television spots that ran in conjunction with the print campaign for the first time. As with their previous work, the creative team ignored the marketing research and instead amassed data on women and sports. "We were stunned . . . [about] the lack of parity between men and women and how they're treated" (Manganiello, personal communication, 2000).

It came down to the idea that sports can change your life . . . . We found out that still in 1995, 40 percent of all girls at home who wanted to join sports teams were not being allowed or were being discouraged. It was very sobering. (Champ, personal communication, 2000)

Motivated by these facts, the team moved boldly ahead using real girls along with professional models to tell the facts. The ads featured a montage of girls telling consumers startling facts about the effects of females' participation in sports. "We wanted to strip the bullshit away. Finally, I just went in and typed up literal facts" (Champ, personal communication, 2000). But facts were never enough to break though the



gendered social constructions under which Nike flourished. Any overt challenge to the masculine parent brand was quashed. "We had to fight for . . . almost every line [of copy], all the way to the top . . . It was very, very hard. We had an alternative cut, which of course I was going to destroy if need be" (Champ, personal communication, 2000). When the first ad ran the Nike executives "were SHOCKED at what a nerve it touched" (Champ, original emphasis via e-mail, 2000).

Expressing the five dimensions of Boje's (2001) antenarrative, the ads illustrate a brand promise that was both resonant and powerful, and was one that the Nike executives appeared to embrace—participation in sports as empowerment for girls. Storytelling, as in previous campaigns, was the lynchpin driving this campaign's success. In simply writing up the facts, a collective story was told. The brand articulated a living, human quality and touched a nerve, while speaking to multiple fragments audiences. By using girls the creatives were able to boldly represent the lived experiences of all females, articulating an intertextual antenarrative that created and sustained conversations about a female collective. The campaign exemplified a sacred promise that resonated from a female collective memory. *If You Let Me Play*, the central ad of the *Participation* campaign, won more awards and generated more positive publicity for Nike than any ad in its history (Meredith, pseudonym, women's advertising manager, personal communication, 2000). The creatives felt vindicated. Yet, the team would pay a high price for their bold independence and resistance. The next campaign would be the last for the W+K creative team.

### *Stories We Tell—Spring 1997*

The team moved decisively forward after *Participation*, using adult female athletes and firmly connecting them to the team experience of professional sports. To create the ads the team relied on the collective memories and lived experiences of the players of the Women National Basketball Association (WNBA). These ads depicted the players and their stories of perseverance as the WNBA was launched. With these ads the team meshed their own prior experiences, as women, with the lived experiences of the WNBA athletes, reaching for "something exterior, you know. Yet, you have to find something inside yourself that's going to make sense" (Manganiello, personal communication, 2000).

The stories within the ads reflected the antenarrative. They spoke boldly of sports, women and competitive teams. "We were always met with, 'well, it's not women's fitness'" (Manganiello, personal communi-

cation, 2000). Undeterred and emboldened, they pushed the fractured opening they had created with *Participation*. In expressing antenarrative dimensions and practicing counter-hegemonic resistance to the end, these ads became another personal victory for the creative team. "There was a truth there. There was a heart beating. Nothing fake, nothing phony, nothing made up. It was all real for whatever that's worth" (Champ, personal communication, 2000).

Yet, their bold and financially successful work simply proved too conflictual with the patriarchal parent brand. Thus, at the same time that these ads were being produced, the women's advertising budget was being slashed in half (Kurt, pseudonym, account executive, personal communication, 1998), and Nike withdrew the women's account from W+K. *Stories We Tell* was the final chapter for this creative team. Gender, sports and power had collided at the intersection of the powerful and patriarchal Nike brand.

### Gender and Branding: The Emergence of a Feminist Antenarrative

I begin the concluding discussion by returning to the two overarching research questions that frame this case study. First, how did gender influence the communication between the creative team and the Nike executives? Second, how did their communication influence the creative process that shaped the branded messages within early Nike women's advertising, if at all? The influence of gender is clearly articulated in the stories shared by the participants and demonstrated by the clashes over depictions of women within the ads. These communications, as well as the creatives own life experiences, significantly shaped the branded messages within the ads and fomented passionate resistance to Nike's patriarchal structure.

The three hallmarks of postmodern branding theory: (a) brands are living things, (b) sacred entities, and (c) emotional promises, form potent antenarratives, as revealed through passionate branded storytelling. The creative process, which emerged from the lived experiences of the team and the women they spoke with, sustains the fluidity of the living brand. Through the brand voice and articulated within this advertising, these branded promises shaped the women's sub-brand into a sacred entity with two emotional promises: empowerment and equity within a community of

athletes. The living quality of the sub-brand was further extended by the intertextual flow between the creative team and consumers as they responded to the ads. The sacredness of the women's sub-brand is thus bound up in its value as a unifying communal female story. In this sense the ads became living, mediated antenarratives.

Antenarratives storytelling become a compelling communicative form used by the creative team to express their resistant brand voice. Through Nike women's advertising, the voice of the sub-brand reflected women's experiences of inequities. The brand was the interface that framed the communicative boundaries that connected and separated (Rodowick, 1995) consumers and the brand. The brand was connected by the tagline and the brand name, but separated by gender. Yet, it is gender that creates the unified communal branding experience through shared antenarrative stories. And, stories are at the heart of building community (Clair, 2006; Fisher, 1984; Mumby, 1987; White 1980). For the creatives, just as for consumers, the sub-brand became a sacred entity, a sacred community. The passionate interactions between consumers and the creatives articulate Clair's (2006) hope for women's narratives, while also articulating Rodowick (1995) contention that brands inherently connect and separate. Clair is hopeful that one day, "Women's sequestered stories will be respected as well-grounded challenges" (Clair, 2006, p. 1259).

I posit that early Nike women's advertising became the "opening" to express the stories of women's lives, creating a "new dialogue." At the same time that dialogue achieved Nike's marketing objective by increasing market share among women.

This case study articulates how antenarrative storytelling meshes with branding, shaping the branded messages within early Nike women's advertising. Yet, it also takes antenarrative theory to another level, one that suggests a modified form of Boje's (2001) antenarrative. Initially, the creative team's passion for giving voice to females' experiences emerges as antenarratives and the brand voice is sustained by their commitment to the women's sub-brand. At the same time, if we think of the creative team as a separate internal organization, we can see how their commitment articulates Ashcraft's critiques on feminist organizations. These organizations are "conceived (of) as the pursuit of empowerment by way of a kind of collectivism" (Ashcraft, 2006, p. 61). Considered from this theoretical perspective, it can be argued that no matter how contradictory the messages from the Nike executives—wanting the women's ads to remain hegemonically feminine, yet accusing the team of pinkifying the Nike

parent brand—the creatives persevered as a collective unit, reflecting the actions of a feminist organization.

The creatives collective response to the Nike executives reflects a response to a bureaucracy that is “hostile to feminism, the institutional arm of male dominance” (Ashcraft, 2006, p. 61). Their experience working with Nike suggests the power of gender in organizations. “Gender is not an addition to ongoing processes, conceived as gender-neutral. Rather, it is an integral part of those processes” (Acker, 2003, p. 52). If we consider the creative team as an empowered collective working with a decidedly not gender-neutral organization, the rise of a resistant form of antenarrative makes perfect sense. Thus, we see antenarratives reflected in both their own stories of conflictual relations with Nike executives and within the ads themselves. These ads are often framed by what precedes them, an environment hostile to feminism. Yet, the ads articulate an independent brand voice, they question and are often ambiguous. Campaign after campaign the creative team used the ads to try to make sense of lived experiences, their own as well as that of female consumers. The team uses storytelling to reflect and shape a collective female memory. Their audience is fragmented, separated from the parent brand. In fact the ads are literally sequestered (Clair, 1993) in women’s media. The creatives’ work, emerging as antenarratives, reflects hegemonic counter-resistance and a form of “organized dissonance” (Ashcraft, 2006, p. 58). As such, early Nike women’s advertising represents a feminist antenarrative.

Feminist antenarrative is best articulated by considering the intersection of three feminist theoretical constructs: organized dissonance (Ashcraft, 2006), organizations as structures that reproduce gender relations (Acker, 2003; Kolb, et al., 2003), and the sequestering of women’s stories (Clair, 1993). Layering these constructs with postmodern branding theory, with antenarrative as a foundation, it is evident that early Nike women’s advertising created a profound discord with the masculine parent organization and its parent brand. The only way to negotiate this dissonance was for the Nike parent brand to assertively maintain its patriarchal role within a hegemonic framework of “the institutional arm of male dominance” (Ashcraft, 2006, p. 61). Thus, Nike adapted the role of hegemonic supporter. Nike supported women in their quest for equity as if it were a gender-neutral organization, as long as women and the ads that were directed toward them conformed to hegemonic ideals. Early Nike women’s advertising was a “storied soup” (Boje, 2001, p. 78) of antenarratives that resisted hegemonic masculine notions of femininity by representing

too much female human truth. In the end, the sacred living women's brand sustained by its emotional promises of empowerment and equity ultimately were seen as pinkifying the masculine Nike parent brand.

Reflecting on this body of advertising in terms of Boje's (2001) antenarrative, I suggest that the antenarrative as reflected in early Nike women's advertising is a modified version of the first of Boje's dimensions. That is, rather than exclusively coming before frames imposed upon it, this advertising becomes the frame, a voice unto itself. Ironically, its individual, resistant voice emerges out of the "pursuit of empowerment by way of a kind of collectivism" (Clair, 2006, p. 61). In this sense this case study demonstrates a modified antenarrative, a feminist antenarrative that is predicated upon collective resistance.

### *The Evolution of Nike Women's Advertising*

The ten years since the account was withdrawn from W+K have been largely uneventful for the women's sub-brand. From late 1997 to early 2000 the women's account floundered at Goodby Silverstein & Partners, a San Francisco based advertising agency. Then in late 2000, the Nike women's account was returned to W+K. I suggest that Nike returned the account for three reasons. First, the historical bond between Nike and W+K offers enhanced brand knowledge. Second, three years allowed time for the sting of a pinkified branding message to recede. Third, market share for the women's brand had sunk in the intervening years. Nike executives hoped that renewed advertising initiatives by W+K would return high profits. Yet, the team that had produced the early women's work was no longer at W+K and it was their voice and talents that had built the women's sub-brand.

Today, the women's sub-brand remains at W+K. It has been somewhat absorbed into the Nike parent brand under line extensions for various sports, not unlike men's branding. There are still some women's sub-brand campaigns. The *Body Parts* campaign in 2005, which focused on the celebration of women's muscular body parts, is one example. However, it is safe to say, that during the past ten years the women's sub-brand has had a significantly quieter and substantially less gendered voice. Ten years later, the voice of women's advertising has been brought more in line with the patriarchal parent brand, articulating the power of hegemony.

### *Past Influences and Future Research*

Given the historical perspective of this case I suggest that early Nike women's advertising opened the door for other campaigns, few as they are, to speak female truths. One such campaign may be Dove's *Campaign for Real Beauty*. One future research question might be: How did early Nike women's advertising influence Dove's *Campaign for Real Beauty*, if at all? Further, if we consider the multiple conflicting brand stories under individual corporate umbrellas, a second research question might be: How do brands such as Dove and the Nike women's sub-brand expose or conceal corporate hypocrisy? This is particularly interesting if you consider the sometimes conflictual messages between the Nike parent brand and its women's sub-brand, as well as conflictual messages between brands such as Dove and Axe under the Unilever umbrella.

Historical advertising case studies are imperative if we are to make sense of the role of gender in ever-shifting cultural paradigms. This study, exemplifying the power of branding as a form of feminist antenarrative, helps articulate shifts in branding and culture over time. I conclude by calling for renewed scholarly focus on the gendered voice of advertising. With advertising's pervasiveness and the significant lack of women in creative departments (Broyles & Grow, 2008; Weisberg & Robbs, 1997), scholars are called upon more than ever to engage in a deeper exploration of advertising and gender. For as Schudson reminds us, "Most criticism of advertising is written in ignorance of what actually happens inside these agencies" (1984, p. 45). It is time to shine a light on that ignorance. It is time to honor the storyteller's story.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The tone set by each participant was that of telling their own experiences as stories. Rarely did they mention specific individuals by name. Rather, the creative in particular, used the interview process as a forum for expressing frustration with the process by which the advertising was developed and pitched to the client and how that process was colored by gender.

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