

“You Can’t Stop Us” Nike Campaign



Source: Nike

Launching on July 30th, 2020, Nike Released their “You Can’t Stop Us” Campaign. The campaign centered around a central theme of unity, that although we as a collective society may originate from different places be it race, religion, creed, etc. We are still stronger together rather than apart. The campaign featured Athletes from all different racial and religious backgrounds such as Black, White, Asian, and Muslim. The ad campaign also featured disabled and able-bodied athletes relaying the message that “we” can not be herald back, regardless of what the opposition might say. Although initially a commercial release, the campaign would move to print, stringing together split images with their messages integrated as one. The Print ad featured above consists of male and female athletes taking a knee during the national anthem. The most recognized and controversial figure here would be Colin Kaepernick, A Football quarterback and civil rights activist ostracized by the NFL and general public for his Peaceful protest. Although there are many, myself included, who support Kaepernick’s decision to peacefully protest, many did not. The NFL as well as multiple news outlets portrayed Kaepernick’s actions as “unpatriotic” and a disgrace to the US military and its veterans. However, As Kaepernick explains, his actions were that in protest of the brutality African Americans and people of color face daily, saying his body was that of a flag at half-mast (in reference to a soldier's death, when a flag is raised at half-mast to honor them). Kaepernick states in an interview, “I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color, --- To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way.

There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder." (Wyche). This is relevant not only to Kapernicks image but to the context of the advertisement as a whole. When we break apart an Ad It is relative to not only define the image, but the narrative, message, context, and language as well.

In Identifying the language of an Image, French Theorist and Philosopher Roland Barthes defines this as the *linguistic message*. The linguistic message can be simply understood as the literal presented text/ language. When looking at the advertisement, the title and subhead read as "You Can't Stop Sport Us." and "We may start from different places, but together we'll rise stronger." By itself, we identify the meaning of the presented language without the influence of the image. By essentially crossing out 'sport', we understand that 'sport' is irrelevant, with the phrase 'us' taking precedence over it. Objectively, 'us' is more important than 'sport' yet its importance is reliant on 'sport'. If the word 'sport' wasn't used it would hold no relation to the overall text, however, by including sport it becomes comparative, thereby meaning in the context of 'us' *versus* (comparative) 'sport', 'us' comes out on top. This is then supported by the following subtext, "We may start from different places, but together we'll rise stronger." We and Us are synonymous, meaning were then one. The use of 'we' not only supports but reinstates the use of 'us'. This continues with the further use of the word 'together' meaning in conjunction with 2 or more things. In all, the language is creating a hierarchy valuing 'togetherness' overall. However, it can be argued that all is reliant on the image as it works in tandem to generate the overall message using the context.

This leads us to the denotative and connotative aspects of the linguistic message. We have looked at the words as they are presented, the linguistic message, as well as the literal meaning, denotative, yet what can be derived from the connotative. Unlike denotation which stems from the literal meaning of a word, connotation goes deeper, identifying the feelings and emotions that are associated with a word. Although moist feelings are subjective cultural influences and time can help us better understand the circumstances surrounding the message. As previously stated, this is special attention focused on the word 'us' as it not only overtakes the word 'sport' but also physically stands out in size and color. 'Us' becomes the unifying factor of both the main text and subtext as feelings of "unity" are brought forth. The subtext starts by remarking on separation and isolation when stating, "We may start from different places,-". The word 'start' prompts the viewer to not only imagine a beginning but also an end, as the two are reliant on the other. Next, we move onto the notion of 'different places'; when paired with the beginning "start[ing] from different places" globalizes the statement, whereas just stating 'start' feels localized to the individual. "We may start-", localized to you, "-from different places,-" globalized to all as 'different places' is an undefined phrase. This feeling of a start with no end and an undisclosed beginning creates feelings of uncertainty, yet, as the text continues and touches on previously is that there will inevitably be some form of "unity" as the subtext begins with 'We'. As the subtext later reads, "-but together we'll rise stronger." The presence of the conjunction 'but' gives the reader comfort, telling them that *despite* the aforementioned, something in *opposition* of what's been previously stated, will follow. In this instance, it's both

the 'uncertainty' and 'isolation' that is opposed when stating "-but together we'll rise stronger." From there feelings of liberation, of strength, or collaboration are called forth; that in fellowship can strength be achieved. These emotions are then cosigned by the imagery used and the context of which surrounds it.

As previously mentioned, this particular print ad from the Nike "You Can't Stop Us" Campaign, features female and male athletes with the most notable figure among them being quarterback Colin Kaepernick. This leads us to Roland Barthes's definition of coded iconic vs. non-coded messages and how this affects the viewer's perception and interpretation of not only the image but the advertisement as a whole. When looking towards the literal image, a non-coded iconic message there is a singular idea being presented, and that is what's blatantly on the page. The Image is of athletes on a field, male and female, four of them taking a knee while one holds a hand over her heart. If left at that, the message presented by the image greatly suffers, being reduced to redundancy. It's when looking towards the *coded* iconic message that the overall meaning becomes clear. Culturally, and somewhat ostracized globally, the US is a country hailed for its overt patriotism. When looking over the photo, a crowd of people is seen with their hands over their hearts along with one of the players on the field. This symbol is commonly associated with the recitment of the national anthem and pledge of allegiance, as it's used to signify "allegiance" to the United States. As we dig deeper its connection to the overarching theme of the ad is more evident when considering the closing lines of the anthem which state, "liberty and justice for all". This then ties back into Kaepernick's decision to take a knee amongst others pictured in the ad, as they are in protest of a country that has shown relentlessly that there is a lack of justice. This contextualization of the image allows for a sort of *relay* between the text and the image, as they work in a complementary relationship, supporting one another in a common theme. However, this is not to be stated in opposition to the subtle use of *anchorage* as well.

As Roland Barthes states, an advertisement can be broken down into a series of clear distinctions, separating all elements into their individual state; that is the text and the image are further simplified. One such distinction is how the two coincide with one another and a question of if they coincide at all. Barthes defines this in either one of two processes, anchorage, and relay. As we've defined the text in isolation as well as the image, we are then left with the connection between the two: how do they interact? As mentioned, the image and text in the advertisement use relay, in which the text and image work in a parallel playing off of one another. The image supports the text and the text supports the image. Anchorage, however, insinuates a more one-sided relationship in which the *text* guides the viewer in their interpretation of the image. It can be argued that there is indeed a slight use of anchorage present when considering the text and *context* of the image. The text speaks of unity, of togetherness overall even in the competitive field of sports. The text helps to better reiterate the image as it not only touches on the difference between the two stitched together photographs but of the alliance as the photos line up despite being from two different teams.

Advertisement and media as a whole are not without context, meaning, or message. Be it a combination of text and image or the separation of the two, there is always subtext. As we dissect this media is important not only to the viewer but the creator to consider all elements when producing their work. When we analyze the “You Can’t Stop Us” Campaign. Using the techniques established by Roland Barthes, it becomes clear to recognize the thought process and feelings a viewer is meant / can conclude upon seeing this ad.

Work Cited

Wyche, Steve. "Colin Kaepernick Explains Why He Sat During the National Anthem."
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