

# Sportswomen and Digital Media: Case Study of “Dream Crazier” Campaign

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**Abstract.** The article focuses on popular feminist movements about sportswomen with the example of Nike’s movement “Dream Crazier”. It firstly considers the features of popular feminism, the media’s role as a carrier, and the increased visibility of feminist movements in the digital era. In addition, given the context of the Nike sportswomen campaign, the essay proposes to analyse the engagement of digital media forms, especially posters on sportswomen, with a broader and more effective circulation of feminist claims. The essay contends that by illustrating sportswomen in videos and posters and presenting the discourse of renowned sportswomen like Serena Williams, the campaign conveys feminist appeals on sexual sporting equality, presents female power, and also works with intersectionality that protects equal rights for black sportswomen. This reflects the characteristics of popular feminism in the contemporary period. The essay concludes with further consideration of popular feminism when it refers to the relationship between celebrity figures and commercialized companies.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The tradition of Nike campaigns on sports can be traced back to 30 years ago, when the brand's iconic “Just Do It” was released. In 2018 - the 30th anniversary of this movement, Nike continues with the campaign “Dream Crazy”. Nike’s selection of the spokesperson Colin Kaepernick showed its devotion to individual potential and equal sporting opportunity: “So don’t ask if your dreams are crazy. Ask if they’re crazy enough (McPhillips, 2019)<sup>[1]</sup>.”

One year later, Nike cast its attention on women and launched the new campaign “Dream Crazier”. The spot narrated by Serena Williams is a compilation of female athletes who are dedicated to fighting against barriers of sportswomen. It also stars Olympic gymnast Simone Biles, fencer Ibtihaj Muhammad, snowboarder Chloe Kim and members of the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team (Sweeney, 2019)<sup>[2]</sup>, to redefine “what it means to call a female athlete crazy” (Monllos, 2019)<sup>[3]</sup>.

The campaign aimed to highlight women athletes' power to break barriers, show their energy, and inspire generations of sportswomen to pursue their dreams. The campaign was soon spread out and triggered the hashtag #DreamCrazier on Twitter, with a number of female athletes and sports fans responding and resonating. The campaign also reached a high level of attention and clicks on YouTube.

The quintessential brand campaign is an indication of how feminist ideas can be embodied and disseminated through online popular media forms. After theorizing popular feminism with digital media, the representative

videos and posters in this movement will be presented and analysed on their feminist connotations.

## 2. POPULAR FEMINISM AND THE DIGITAL ERA

With the technological progress of new media, feminists are more likely to bring traditional feminism’s commitment to popularity. As Banet-Weiser (2019)<sup>[4]</sup> indicates, popular feminism refers to feminism “practices and conditions that are accessible to a broad public, from organising marches to hashtag activism to commodities” (p.9). Unlike the past forms, popular feminism redefines the new relationship between media and feminism, the spreading of feminist politics in a “post-girl power” context (Keller, 2015)<sup>[5]</sup>. The digital media performs an effective method for self-branding or “girl entrepreneur”, and also creates a discursive space for feminist politics. Hence, girls are able to challenge the hegemonic postfeminist femininity that defines girls as apolitical.

*Online spaces have been significant to this process, providing anonymous space to “experiment” (Keller 2013, 2012) with feminist identities, and affording girls a chance to connect with other feminist girls and women. (Keller, 2015, p.278)*

Popular feminism enhances the visibility of feminist critiques and allows them to be disseminated more broadly. As social media becomes the critical platform for circulating feminist movements, the rise of “hashtag feminism” (Banet-Weiser, 2018)<sup>[6]</sup> has come into sight. The hashtag campaigns, along with other movements on digital media, are trying to reveal gendered inequality,

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emphasize female power, and create an opportunity for women to show their own voices to the broader public. By presenting young women's tendency to express their political views and communicating with different others online, Harris (2010)<sup>[7]</sup> also effectively clarified the role of social media as a "safer place" (p.480) for women speaking out.

What is more, intersectionality with race is also an outstanding point of popular feminism. As Williams (2015)<sup>[8]</sup> suggests, social media hashtags have aroused people's attention to the situation of black women, when the mainstream media has been neglecting them for decades. According to Pew research on technology use, 96% of African American users aged 18-29 use at least one kind of social networking site; moreover, black women use Twitter the most, compared with any other demographic group (Smith, 2014)<sup>[9]</sup>. The black feminists are hence provided with an online community to voice their opinions and speak for equal rights and condense them into appealing hashtags to spread globally. Besides, social media's nature of real-time discussion will help to reduce mainstream media's problematic framing of race.

### 3. DREAM CRAZIER: EMPOWERMENT, EQUALITY AND INTERSECTIONALITY

With the slogan of pushing us for our dreams, the campaign released a series of inspiring advertisements with the narrator Serena Williams and the heroines of famous athletes from other sports fields. These ads are posted and disseminated through online websites, calling for women's empowerment, fair sporting rights, and also equality across gender and race.

#### 3.1. Empowerment

Nike's movement encourages female athletes to be proud of being called "crazy" (Binlot, 2019)<sup>[10]</sup>. In one of the video products from the campaign posted on YouTube, the outstanding accomplishments of women athletes of different ages and fields are highlighted. Williams's narration is also a central component in conveying the spirit of female power.

*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 Frontside Double Cork 1080, or winning 23 Grand Slams, having a baby, and coming back for more? Crazy. Crazy. Crazy. Crazy. And Crazy. (Williams, 2019)<sup>[11]</sup>*

In the 1:30 clip, Serena Williams talked about the scorn that women athletes often endure: athletes who have triumphed over their opponents and achieved great success, are labelled "madwomen". In the public eyes, women are usually "delicate" and meanwhile conform to rules and regulations; any woman who breaks this impression is regarded as madness. Krane (2001)'s argument<sup>[12]</sup> captured the contradiction between athleticism and femininity - women must show their sports ability and "the ability to be accepted by society" at the same time. In other words, many sportswomen are

forced to exhibit their feminine characteristics to avoid prejudice and discrimination.

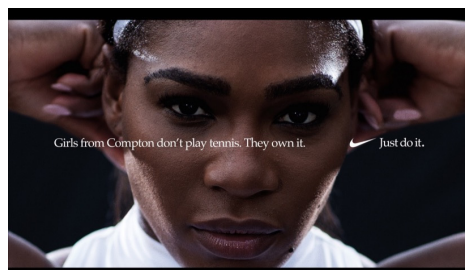


**Figure 1.** Poster with Williams about sportswoman empowerment. From Ella.Marketing. Retrieved from <http://ella.marketing/news/nike-y-serena-williams-redefinen-lo-que-significa-llamar-loc-a-una-mujer-atleta/>.

The poster is simple but influential, illustrating Serena's confidence and willingness of showing her strong and vigorous look. Gender discrimination against female athletes and their hegemonic representations in the mainstream media (Shugart, 2003)<sup>[13]</sup> are traditional ways of devaluing and marginalising women's sports. As Heineken's (2015)'s research<sup>[14]</sup> on women's jockographies (sports autobiographies), traditional media consolidates heterosexual femininity while ignoring the sporting inequalities in their reports on female athletes. By showing that women should not be discriminated against for participating in fierce competitive sports, the poster's circulation on social media effectively strikes back the stereotype of women of a "standard feminine role".

#### 3.2. Sporting Equality and Intersectionality

Serena Williams emphasized much on equal rights for women (and especially black sportswomen) as a black female athlete herself. As Carter-Francique and Flowers (2013)<sup>[15]</sup> argue, the sociohistorical construction of ethnic groups and women as "the others" has situated them out of the sports world. Except for three concentrated fields for coloured female athletes (Basketball, Track and Field), the disproportionate number of coloured women in sports participation at both collegiate and professional levels reveals evident opportunity inequality (Lapchick, 2012; Lapchick, Hoff, et al., 2010)<sup>[16][17]</sup>.



**Figure 2.** Posted on equal sporting opportunities. From Nike.com. Retrieved from [https://news.nike.com/featured\\_video/dream-crazier](https://news.nike.com/featured_video/dream-crazier).

The poster focused on the situation of Compton girls and their life in sports. As the Childhood hometown of Serena Williams, Compton contains 40.31% of African Americans (according to the 2010 United States Census). The crime-ridden area fostered long-lasting hostility and

hatred towards black sportswomen. Serena, along with her sister, has been “the targets of racism, sexism, and body shaming - from getting booed by unabating crowds as teenagers, to being referred to as ‘brothers’ by the head of the Russian Tennis Federation” (Shackelford, 2015)<sup>[18]</sup>.

To ask for equal sporting right for black women, Serena Williams tried to challenge the so-called “noble sport for white elites”. In 2016, she wrote an open letter to “All Incredible Women”, where she addressed the unequal payment and sexism faced by sportswomen. She portrayed her life as a “question of resilience” (Williams, 2016)<sup>[19]</sup>: regarding what others think of as the shortcomings of an athlete - race and gender - as the driving force for her success.

After calling for sporting rights and equality on the poster, she also did a similar video on her Twitter for the “Dream Crazier” campaign, encouraging girls from her hometown to realize their sports dreams, which received more than 150,000 likes and 50,000 retweets. Female athletes and sports lovers were responding to the campaign, making the feminist idea more visible and influential.



**Figure 3.** Responses on social media. From Twitter. Retrieved from <https://twitter.com/serenawilliams/status/1034093664996343809>.

## 4. LIMITATIONS AND REFLECTION

The “Dream Crazier” campaign over females in the sports area has received great public attention. Especially, the Internet and social media are instrumental in the popularity and circulation of their assertions, making women’s rights for sports an increasingly valued topic. However, although the campaign was initiated by a group of prestigious female athletes headed by Serena Williams, which aimed at breaking the imbalanced power relation in the white-man-dominated competitive sports field; the Nike company is substantially the title quotient of this campaign. Therefore, the claims of authentic feminism assertions from celebrities could be a commodified “brand culture” (Genz, 2015)<sup>[20]</sup> in a neoliberal society.

Shortly after the campaign, Nike company was soon receiving critics of its policy of reducing an athlete’s sponsorship payments for any reason he/she didn’t meet a specific achievement threshold, including the reason

for pregnancies. Several people have been reversely criticizing Nike’s inconsistent behaviour, which also formed a trend on online media. Montañó spoke for the rights of those pregnant female athletes in The New York Times with the headline “Nike Told Me to Dream Crazy, Until I Wanted a Baby”, along with a large-scale public outcry on social media. Fortunately, on August 12th, Nike issued a new contract that guarantees maternity protections for their sponsored athletes.



**Figure 4.** Critics of Nike’s policy. From The New York Times. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/12/opinion/nike-maternity-leave.html>.

This contradiction with its claimed feminist movement indicates the ambiguity of the “Dream Crazier” campaign: nominated by a commercial company, is it an authentic feminist movement, or just like commercialized postfeminism with “commodity fetish” that spread across social media, while its political significance gets erased (Gill, 2006)<sup>[21]</sup>? Is Williams’ voice for sportswomen merely a commercial strategy to improve Nike’s sales performance and popularity? This point indicates that the motivation and efficacy of popular feminism could be ambiguous because so many of the described endeavours are wrapped up in commodified notions of the individuals or leading characters.

## 5. CONCLUSION

While sportswomen may not be the major force of contemporary feminist movements, social media plays a critical role in expanding the visibility and influence of their voices. The core value they convey in their online campaigns, such as empowerment as being a “strong” woman, equal opportunities to receive professional training and to stand on the competition stage, and anti-discrimination towards black sportswomen, is consistent with broader rights for women in various identity.

However, when linking the campaign with the Nike brand, the efficacy of the “Dream Crazier” movement is greatly reduced by Nike’s deeds that do not accord with the campaign’s assertion. The visibility brought by digital media technology fosters not only feminist support but also a branding or commodified story (Grow, 2008)<sup>[22]</sup>, which should be regarded as a further consideration.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Xiaotong Liu contributed to the conception of the study, selected the case, analysed the documents and wrote the paper.

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