

“It’s not About the Shoes”: How Nike’s Advertising Crosses Borders and Transcends Nationality

By: Melanie Brown

Abstract

In the practice of international marketing, the debate between standardization and customization of advertising has been long-running. The merits of each have been discussed, argued, and rehashed over and over again. What this paper sets out to discover is how a balance can be achieved between the two. Using advertisements and strategies of one of the most successful global corporations, Nike, Inc., I have conducted a study of international marketing and advertising practices around the world, and found that Nike’s advertising rises above the country in which the ads run.

International marketing has been a concern of global companies for decades. The numerous consumer markets of the world have been calling for products from all cultures and countries for years, and international marketing and advertising has been the extending arm of multinational companies throughout this demand. Many companies have taken the route of product diversification through acquisition of foreign companies in order to gain market share abroad. Diversification into products popular in other markets across the world is one thing, whereas getting a single product out to a multitude of markets is entirely another.

Over the past couple of decades, the world has gotten smaller. Although the developments in technology and physical products have been steady and relatively predictable, the rate at which the world’s product and service demand has been converging came as

something of a surprise to marketers throughout the world. Companies are, now, in a position to market the same products to the same kinds of people in all areas of the world. Nike, Inc., the worldwide maker of athletic shoes and apparel, is one of the most outstanding examples of successful international advertising and marketing. Through Nike's multicountry print and television campaigns, the company has become the global leader in sales of athletic apparel and footwear (Nike, Inc., 2011).

The development of multimarket campaigns for singular products was once entirely about adaptation. If a company wanted to sell their product in the United States and also in Poland, they would use two completely different sets of advertisements to target their customer base in each country. The concept of standardization, first discussed by Erik Elinder in his 1961 paper titled *International Advertisers Must Devise Universal Ads, Dump Separate National Ones*, Swedish Adman Avers, gave way to the ability of companies to keep their same basic marketing concept in all markets they were trying to penetrate. According to Chandra, Griffith, and Ryans, standardization revolves around the marketing elements which can be standardized, and the factors that influence those elements.

Determining a product or service's potential for standardization in advertising, marketers must take into consideration the four major elements of international marketing. Those are: market similarity, process standardization, environmental similarity, and mode of entry (Griffith, Chandra, & Ryans Jr., 2003). What largely makes standardization of marketing messages possible is the existence of homogenous markets and homogenous consumers across the world.

“The world has become an increasingly interwoven place, and, today, whether you are a company or a country, your threats and opportunities increasingly derive from who you are connected to. This globalization system is also characterized by a single word: the *Web*” (Friedman, 2000).

The consistently evolving and ever-expanding nature of technology is what drives globalization and the subsequent convergence of markets. Theodore Levitt’s 1983 article *The Globalization of Markets*, is credited with popularizing of the term ‘globalization,’ and discusses how technology is furthering the normalization of market tastes. “The world’s needs and desires have been irrevocably homogenized,” Levitt writes. “[Technology] has pushed markets toward global commonality. Corporations sell standardized products in the same way everywhere” (Levitt, 1983). Centrally developed promotional campaigns are a way of providing leverage to international businesses. If they are known for a particular type of ad campaign, as Nike is for its promotional messages of hard work, inspiration, and success in whatever you do, a company gains a following and a customer base around the world.

The key to standardization in advertising, as argued by Greg Harris in his paper *International Advertising Standardization: What Do the Multinationals Actually Standardize?*, is the balance between whole standardization and piece by piece standardization. Taking into consideration Nike, as one of the largest multinational corporations, it can be seen that the corporation makes extensive use of what Harris dubs the “pattern standardization,” and particularly in its television spots.

Pattern standardization, according to Harris, is where the same basic creative theme applies to all advertising and promotions, while elements that are executional in nature and easily adapted according to culture and nationality (Harris, 1994). Nike's famously effective slogan, "Just Do It," while infinitely recognizable regardless of nationality, isn't used extensively outside of the United States—instead, the company opts for the wordless and equally recognizable Swoosh. The pattern of Nike advertisements isn't really about the products. Inspiration is the real pattern that infiltrates every Nike advertisement everywhere.

Television commercials before the 2008 Olympics in Beijing aired in multiple countries. Those that ran in the United States featured the U.S. Olympic basketball team in practice—each member from a different team, but all coming together as one country in an ad titled "United We Rise" and set to Marvin Gaye's national anthem performance from the 1983 NBA All-Star Game (Nike, Inc., 2008). A commercial along the same vein ran in China before the Olympics as well. The spot showcases a video montage of Chinese athletes, from those training for an Olympic race to children playing soccer on a playground, with the David Bowie song "Heroes" playing in the background (Nike, Inc., 2008).

In each television spot, the message of inspiration is abundantly obvious. In both cases, a nation's pride is being summoned, and its culture referenced—the perfect example of pattern standardization. The adaptations made are minor, but effective. The Chinese are a culture known for their work ethic and drive to be the best; the Nike commercial run in China takes advantage of this by emphasizing the fact that success is driven by the right attitude, no matter what level you compete at. Liu Xiang, Chinese Olympic gold medalist in the 110 meter hurdles and national

athletic icon, closes the commercial by saying “It’s just a game; you decide how to play” (Nike, Inc., 2008).

The commercial running in the same time period in the U.S. is an exemplary depiction of the American sense of nationalism, especially when it comes to sports. Sports are a huge component of American culture, and here, the professional athlete is more than iconic—he is immortal. Each athlete is simultaneously so revered by his fans and so despised by his rivals’ fans that seeing each one come together under the red, white, and blue of Team U.S.A. against the backdrop of amazing athletic feats and our country’s national anthem inspires those in the love camp, the hatred camp, and the indifferent camp to put their feelings aside and realize that we are all of one nation.

Each of these ads is playing to its culture’s specific tendencies. Had the two spots been switched, neither would likely have been as effective. According to Theodore Levitt, “Many companies have tried to standardize world practice by exporting domestic products and processes without accommodation or change—and have failed miserably” (Levitt, 1983). Undeniably crucial to the success of a multinational corporation is its willingness to adapt to the environments in which it is trying to become successful. The base is important, but the minor details are the things that drive success. Anyone can make a sneaker, but it takes innovation, genius, and attention to detail to sell a sneaker. Things are, after all, “driven by what happens at the margin, not at the core” (Levitt, 1983).

William Lazer makes the argument that the reality of global business is that many multinational companies have not put a plan in place for global marketing or advertising (Lazer,

1993). Multinational companies require multinational business strategies. The implications of a world whose tastes are quickly meeting up with each other are many. Marketers and managers of multinational companies must factor certain elements into their business strategies. Theodore Levitt makes the distinction between the global company and the multinational company through the metaphor of “the hedgehog and the fox” originally written by Sir Isaiah Berlin. The difference between the two being that the fox knows a lot about many things, while the hedgehog knows everything about one thing.

Levitt argues that “the multinational corporation knows a lot about a great many countries and congenially adapts to supposed differences...The multinational corporation’s accommodating mode to visible national differences is medieval” (Levitt, 1983). On one level, Nike can be seen as the fox. Nike’s adaptation to the cultures and desires of all the many nations it has advertising and products in can absolutely be classified as multinational. However, upon continuation of the metaphor, we see that Nike’s aim is more towards the globalization of its customers. Levitt continues to say that

“the global corporation knows everything about one great thing. It knows about the absolute need to be competitive on a worldwide basis as well as nationally...It treats the world as composed of a few standardized markets rather than many customized markets...It actively seeks and vigorously works toward global convergence” (Levitt, 1983)

Nike, to be sure, knows everything about selling their lifestyle and their product to people across the world. From the multitude of both print and television ads, it is clear that the company

does research on their markets—studies women, studies athletes, studies, children—in order to develop the exact promotions that will attract them. (See appendix of Nike print advertisements). This study of markets and of consumer desires across cultures has contributed to the massive success of Nike advertisements.

While its transnational success has been one of the greater stories of the current age, this is not to say that a company like Nike has not had its share of advertising blunders in the past. The aforementioned implications of globalization include a required sensitivity to diverging customs, values, and philosophies (Lazer, 1993), that inevitably accompany the globalization of markets. While technological advancement and the increasing abilities of the world's nations to procure the rest of the world's products and services garner a huge population of followers, there are those who hold back. Thomas Friedman describes this phenomenon as *The Lexus and The Olive Tree*.

“Half the world seemed to be emerging from the Cold War intent on building a better Lexus, dedicated to modernizing, streamlining, and privatizing their economies in order to thrive in the system of globalization. And half of the world—sometimes half the same country, sometimes half the same person—was still caught up in the fight over who owns which olive tree” (Friedman, 2000).

Those people who hold the olive tree sacred and fight to protect it are those who require the most sensitivity in advertising. In 2004, Nike made the mistake of airing a commercial in China that poked fun at the olive tree. The ad, featuring the “Chosen One,” LeBron James, battling his fears and challengers in a kung-fu martial arts style.

In an article by the Washington Post in December of 2004, the Chinese state administration for radio, film, and television stated that the commercial “violates regulations that mandate that all advertisements in China should uphold national dignity and interest and respect the motherland’s culture” (Sandoval, 2004). Subsequently, the ad was pulled from Chinese television channels and banned. According to Li and Shooshtari’s case study on this particular incident of Nike’s,

“The competencies of speaker (here, the voices of the multinational corporations and their ad agencies) and listener (here, the Chinese public in general and consumers in particular) are conveyed and evaluated in a dyadic relationship...the ads' contents have provoked the Chinese consumers' feelings of ‘us’ against ‘them’” (Li & Shooshtari, 2007)

This advertising blunder is an example of promotional customization gone too far in the wrong direction. In fact, the “dyadic relationship” that Li and Shooshtari refer to is the one between LeBron James and his adversaries, who are nearly all depicted as strongly traditional Chinese figures (Nike, Inc., 2004). In the toss-up between customization and standardization, this particular advertisement would have been better off presented in a more standardized way.

Customization versus standardization has long been a debated topic among academics and theorists in the world of international marketing and advertising. “Underlying the standardization debate is the issue of effectively balancing the economic benefits gained through standardized strategies and tactics with the performance gains achieved when adapting to local market conditions” (Griffith, Chandra, & Ryans Jr., 2003). However, according to Hill and Shao, the controversy was in whether or not multimarket campaigns could even be standardized at all.

Standardization has proven to be useful in lowering costs due to the presence of economies of scale, but arguments have consistently been made that profit maximization occurs when advertising and promotions are adapted to each individual market. The resolution, in some cases, has been the implementation of “regiocentric” marketing campaigns (Hill & Shao, 1994) that targeted sections of the world instead of separate nations. These “market clusters” allowed for greater adaptation to specific cultures within one larger regional culture (Hill & Shao, 1994).

Most of the United States’ companies engage in this “regiocentric” type of marketing campaign. As many as two-thirds of U.S. companies participate in multi-country campaigns, and adapt their ads according to regions of the world. Nike has engaged in “regiocentric” advertisements for years. Nike’s European advertisements are largely centered on soccer, whereas in the U.S., soccer takes a backseat to more popular sports like basketball, football, and baseball.

An ad campaign titled “Write The Future” that aired throughout Europe during the European Club Final in 2010 showcases soccer stars like Wayne Rooney, Cristiano Ronaldo, and Fabio Cannavaro—among others—in a three-minute advertising film. There are no real words to the spot; it flashes in and out of several soccer games as the players imagine their respective futures, as determined by the outcome of a single moment (Nike, Inc., 2010). The same advertisement was run across the globe, in mass market standardization manner.

“‘This epic campaign really captures the scale, emotion and impact that one single moment in a football game can have on a player, fan or nation,’ said Davide Grasso, NIKE, Vice President of Global Football Marketing. ‘This is just the beginning of the

journey. The next stage allows everyone who loves football to engage and interact in an incredible way” (Nike, Inc., 2010)

The advertisement reaches fans of European football across the world, and each one, no matter his or her nationality, understands the message and understands that swoosh that appears numerous times throughout, as well as at the end of the spot.

This type of standardization is dubbed prototype standardization (Harris, 1994). According to Harris, prototype standardization is the use of the same exact advertisement across multiple countries and multiple markets, but the copy and written elements are changed according to linguistic and cultural norms. It is argued, by some, that “a centrally developed international promotional campaign with minor modifications, such as translation of copy into the local language, is effective in a world in which consumer differences are diminishing” (Griffith, Chandra, & Ryans Jr., 2003).

The continually globalizing consumer market is providing more and more opportunity for prototype standardization to apply, and Nike is making excellent use of the global drive for competition, inspiration, and success at whatever one does. According to William Lazer,

“globalization means acceptance of borderless markets and greater sensitivity to other nations in the larger world community. It implies that international marketing need not be a zero-sum situation in which the gains of one nation are at the costs of another. Rather, all can benefit all” (Lazer, 1993).

Thinking on a global scale has certainly skyrocketed Nike to the top of the athletic apparel world, as well as to the top of the advertising world, but how does this globalization

affect the advertising and marketing practices of the notoriously culture-oriented Asian nations? What is so different about these cultures that the same advertising cannot be used in both the United States and Asia?

Jean-Marie Dru, the author of *Disruption*, seeks to uncover this discrepancy in the investigation of standardization in international advertising and marketing. The most glaring of differences comes in the differentiation between Asian advertising—particularly Japanese—and those done by the U.S. and by Western Europe. “The Japanese constantly combine relentless technological progress and the conservatism of a highly traditional society...behind their cool façade, the Japanese have a constant need for added cultural value” (Dru, 1997). Every product advertised in Japan must be linked to a kind of spiritual or cultural enhancement. American companies don’t find that they always need to associate their advertising with a higher calling—often advertising in the United States is considered insulting to people’s intelligence and more of a nuisance than anything else (Dru, 1997).

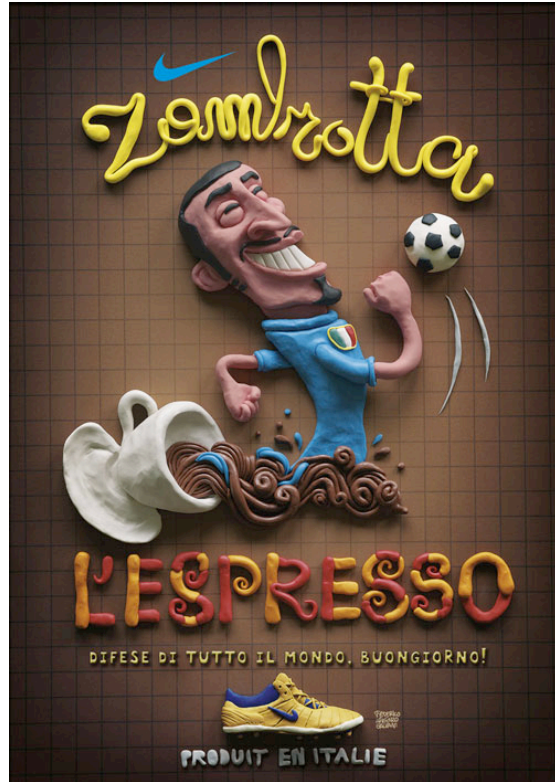
Much of Japanese marketing develops from a kind of bare-bones simple approach that emphasizes the entertainment of clients and customers (Johansson & Nonaka, 1996). Because the feelings of their target audience are so important to Japanese advertisers, the “soft” sell is a crucial part of the nation’s advertising. Creating a brand image associated with a particular feeling or lifestyle is necessary in Japan, since there is an undeniable cultural resistance to the “hard” sell approach taken by many American companies (Li & Shooshtari, 2007). If one looks at many Japanese advertisements, a somewhat nonsensical approach is taken to them. The mood of an advertisement is often more important than the content itself.

“The seemingly irrelevant usage situations, the preference for cartoon characters, and the popularity of persistently upbeat musical soundtracks all add up to a fantasy-filled, mood-creating, “unserious” audience experience in Japanese TV advertising” (Johansson & Nonaka, 1996).

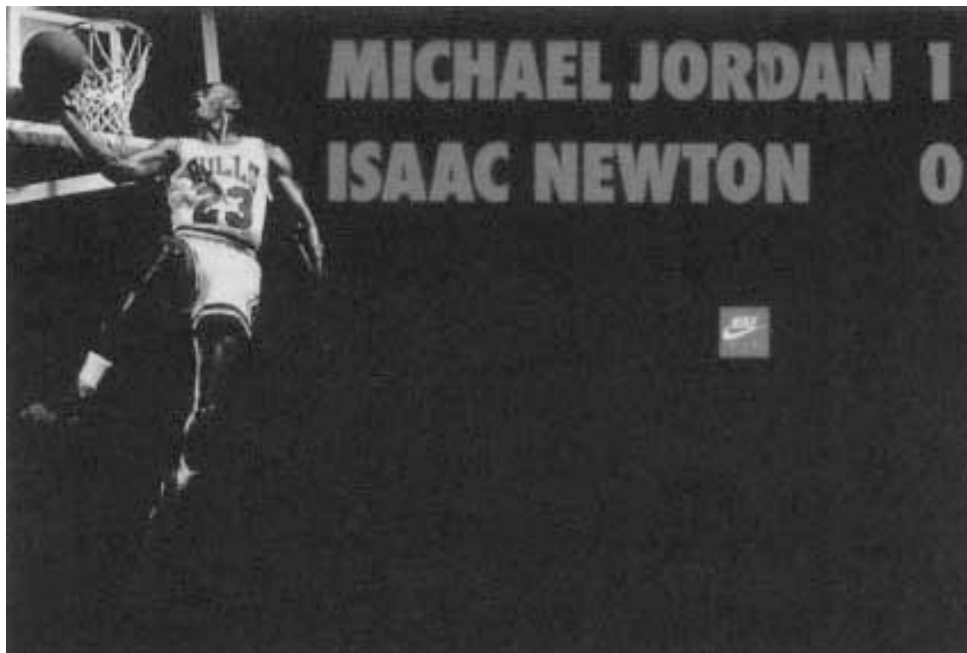
In its Japanese advertisements, Nike has taken this into consideration. One ad, for Nike soccer, showcases European players, young Japanese children, an evil opposing team, and a kind of “monster ball” filled with green goo (Nike, Inc.). The ad makes little sense in the western culture, but is perfectly aligned with Japanese advertising culture. “Japanese advertising is not simply emotional. It taps into the richness of the imagination (Dru, 1997). What seems like a far-flung and absurd television spot to the western eye is, in fact, a study in the imaginative nature of Japanese marketers and evidence to Nike’s marketing versatility and prowess.

Nike takes standardization and adaptation in marketing to new levels. The company has set a precedence for all global companies that many strive to imitate and equal. The fact that a global corporation like Nike can use its advertising to go beyond the borders of nations, cultures, and other multinational companies in order to create a following the size of its current one speaks to the global power of international marketing. Nike advertisements are not just for their products; they showcase the work, the sweat, and the pain that goes into becoming great. Nike’s world transcends our world, unites the globe through advertising, through spirit, and through feeling. In creating images and campaigns that appeal to the human in each one of us, Nike’s marketing has created its own culture that is about more than athletic apparel. In the words of Michael Jordan, “It’s not about the shoes;” what it *is* about, undeniably, is the furthering of the world’s collective spirit.

Appendix



Italy



U.S.A.



U.S.A.



U.K.

COME ALL CHALLENGERS
FROM ALL FOUR CORNERS
THOSE WHO COVET OUR CROWN
THOSE WHO HAVE
WRITTEN US OFF WILL
FEEL OUR WRATH
IN EVERY BONE-CRUNCHING

TACKLE

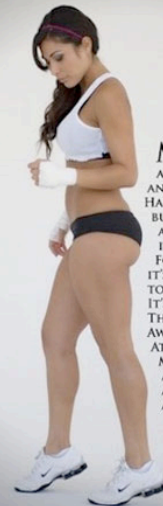
WITH EVERY DEFT PASS AND
HARRYING RUN
WITH EVERY KICK

SCRUM

AND LINE-OUT
A CONSTANT THORN IN YOUR SIDE

FOR IF YOU WANT
WHAT IS OURS
BE WARNED

NOT WITHOUT A FIGHT



MY BUTT IS BIG
AND ROUND LIKE THE LETTER C
AND TEN THOUSAND LUNGES
HAS MADE IT ROUNDER
BUT NOT SMALLER
AND THAT'S JUST FINE.
IT'S A SPACE HEATER
FOR MY SIDE OF THE BED
IT'S MY EMBASSADOR
TO THOSE WHO WALK BEHIND ME
IT'S A BORDER COLLIE
THAT HERDS SKINNY WOMEN
AWAY FROM THE BEST DEALS
AT CLOTHING SALES.
MY BUTT IS BIG
AND THAT'S JUST FINE
AND THOSE WHO MIGHT SCORN IT
ARE INVITED TO KISS IT.
JUST DO IT.



NIKEWOMEN.COM



U.K., U.S., France



France



U.K.

Works Cited

- Designyourway.net. (2010, November). *35 Nike Print Advertisements That Boosted The Company's Income*. Retrieved May 2, 2011, from Design Your Way: <http://www.designyourway.net/blog/inspiration/35-nike-print-advertisements-that-boosted-the-companys-income/>
- Dru, J.-M. (1997). *Disruption*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Friedman, T. (2000). *The Lexus and The Olive Tree*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Griffith, D., Chandra, A., & Ryans Jr., J. (2003). Examining the Intricacies of Promotion Standardization: Factors Influencing Advertising Message and Packaging. *Journal of International Marketing* , 11 (3), 30-47.
- Harris, G. (1994, December 1). International Advertising Standardization: What Do the Multinationals Actually Standardize? *Journal of International Marketing* .
- Hill, J. S., & Shao, A. T. (1994). Agency Participants in Multicountry Advertising: A Preliminary Examination of Affiliate Characteristics and Environment. *Journal of International Marketing* .

Johansson, J. K., & Nonaka, I. (1996). *Relentless: The Japanese Way of Marketing*. New York: HarperBusiness.

Lazer, W. (1993). Executive Insights: Changing Dimensions of International Marketing Management--The New Realities. *Journal of International Marketing* .

Levitt, T. (1983). The Globalization of Markets. *Harvard Business Review* .

Li, F., & Shooshtari, N. H. (2007). Multinational Corporations' Controversial Ad Campaigns in China—Lessons From Nike and Toyota. *Advertising & Society Review* . Advertising Educational Foundation.

Nike, Inc. . (2008). Heroes. *Nike Media* . China.

Nike, Inc. (2004). Chamber of Fear. China.

Nike, Inc. (2008). It's Not About the Shoes. United States.

Nike, Inc. (n.d.). Monster's Ball. Japan.

Nike, Inc. (2010, May 20). *Nike “Write the Future” Campaign Celebrates Football’s Pivotal Moments and Allows Fans Around the World to Connect with Their Heroes*. Retrieved May 3, 2011, from Nikebiz.com: http://www.nikebiz.com/media/pr/2010/05/20_WriteTheFuture.html

Nike, Inc. (2011, May 5). *Stock: Nike (NKE)*. Retrieved May 5, 2011, from wikinvest.com: [http://www.wikinvest.com/stock/Nike_\(NKE\)](http://www.wikinvest.com/stock/Nike_(NKE))

Nike, Inc. (2008). United We Rise. *Nike Media* . United States.

Nike, Inc. (2010). Write the Future. Europe.

Sandoval, G. (2004, December 7). *China Bans LeBron James Nike Ad*. Retrieved April 29, 2011, from The Washington Post : <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A41825-2004Dec6.html>