



Semiotic Analysis and Gender Representation in Nike's Advertisement "What If You Can"

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Abstract. *This study examines Nike's advertisement "What If You Can?" through a semiotic and sociocultural approach, focusing primarily on gender representation and women's empowerment in the context of sport, particularly in the Middle East. This advertisement is interesting because it presents a narrative of Muslim women actively participating in sports, a discourse that often faces cultural and social challenges in the region. Using Roland Barthes's semiotic theory, this study analyzes the visual and textual signs contained in the advertisement to interpret their denotative and connotative meanings. This approach reveals how these signs shape the social construction of gender roles, as well as convey implicit and explicit motivational and empowering messages. Within the framework of a constructivist paradigm, this study emphasizes the importance of subjective interpretation of the existing signs, in order to uncover the deeper meanings hidden behind the visual representation. Furthermore, a critical approach is also used to assess the extent to which this Nike advertisement challenges established gender stereotypes, or even subconsciously reinforces them. This research focuses not only on the content of the advertisement, but also on the social and cultural context in which the advertisement is disseminated, particularly public perceptions of women's involvement in sports in the Middle East. A qualitative analysis was conducted on key elements in the advertisement, such as symbols, colors, narratives, and gestures, to identify how gendered meanings are constructed and conveyed. This research is expected to contribute to academic discourse on gender representation in the media, as well as its social implications for public attitudes toward women's equality and empowerment. Thus, this study demonstrates how Nike's visual communication strategy can play a role in shaping public perceptions regarding the role of women in modern sport.*

Keywords: Advertisement, Gender Representation, Roland Barthes, Semiotics, Sports.

Abstrak. Penelitian ini mengulas iklan Nike berjudul "What If You Can?" melalui pendekatan semiotika dan sosiokultural, dengan fokus utama pada representasi gender dan pemberdayaan perempuan dalam konteks olahraga, khususnya di wilayah Timur Tengah. Iklan ini menjadi menarik karena menampilkan narasi perempuan Muslim yang aktif berpartisipasi dalam dunia olahraga, sebuah wacana yang sering kali menghadapi tantangan budaya dan sosial di kawasan tersebut. Dengan menggunakan teori semiotika Roland Barthes, penelitian ini menganalisis tanda-tanda visual dan tekstual yang terdapat dalam iklan untuk menafsirkan makna denotatif dan konotatif yang terkandung di dalamnya. Pendekatan ini memungkinkan pengungkapan bagaimana tanda-tanda tersebut membentuk konstruksi sosial mengenai peran gender, serta menyampaikan pesan motivasional dan pemberdayaan secara tersirat maupun eksplisit. Dalam kerangka paradigma konstruktivis, penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya interpretasi subjektif terhadap tanda-tanda yang ada, guna mengungkap makna yang lebih dalam yang tersembunyi di balik representasi visual. Selain itu, pendekatan kritis juga digunakan untuk menilai sejauh mana iklan Nike ini mampu menantang stereotip gender yang sudah mapan, atau bahkan secara tidak sadar memperkuatnya. Penelitian ini tidak hanya berfokus pada isi iklan, tetapi juga pada konteks sosial dan budaya di mana iklan tersebut disebarluaskan, khususnya persepsi masyarakat terhadap keterlibatan perempuan dalam olahraga di Timur Tengah. Analisis kualitatif dilakukan terhadap elemen-elemen kunci dalam iklan, seperti simbol, warna, narasi, dan gestur, untuk mengidentifikasi bagaimana makna-makna gender dibangun dan disampaikan. Penelitian ini diharapkan dapat memberikan kontribusi terhadap wacana akademik mengenai representasi gender di media, serta implikasi sosialnya terhadap sikap masyarakat terhadap kesetaraan dan pemberdayaan perempuan. Dengan demikian, studi ini menunjukkan bagaimana strategi komunikasi visual Nike dapat berperan dalam membentuk persepsi publik terkait peran perempuan dalam dunia olahraga modern.

Kata Kunci: Iklan, Olahraga, Representasi Gender, Roland Barthes, Semiotika.

1. INTRODUCTION

Women's participation in sports has long been a topic of debate and struggle, reflecting wide-ranging issues of gender inequality. Globally, women have faced many barriers to sports participation. The barriers faced mostly come from the things that are close to them including cultural expectations, lack of opportunities, and limited representation of women's participation in sports, especially that are exposed in media. According to report in Women In Sport (2023), only 30% of parents believe that playing sports is very important for their daughters, compared to 41% who feel the same for their sons. Additionally, only 49% of girls aged 5 to 11 participate in team sports, compared to 70% of boys in the same age group. The result depicts that women's involvement in sports remains lower than men's.

In countries with Islamic law, such as Middle East countries, women's participation in sports has been shaped by cultural views on religion and women's bodies, as well as legal restrictions on physical activity and female visibility (Rahbari & Mahmudabadi, 2022). Women have faced significant resistance from men and societal pressure to conform to traditional expectations of female behavior and appearance. (Harkness, 2012) These cultural restrictions limit women's opportunities to participate in sports and other physically demanding activities. Gender stereotypes portray women as less capable of excelling in sports, unpromising them from pursuing athletic ambitions.

In Qatar, particular barrier to women participating in sports is the belief that they shouldn't do intense physical activity in front of men. Some think men might view these actions as sexual and struggle to control their desires. (Harkness, 2012) Such stereotypes are deeply deep-rooted in many societies and spread by media portrayals that focus more on men's physical ability and achievements.

Cultural standards often prioritize domestic responsibilities over personal pursuits, limiting women's opportunities for self-expression and physical activity. Additionally, the lack of female role models in sports further discourages young girls from pursuing athletic ambitions. These traditional gender roles continue to influence women's participation in sports and other activities.

Despite these challenges, the last few decades have witnessed a gradual shift. Increased awareness of gender equality, the influence of international sports organizations and inspiring campaigns have encouraged women to break free from social restrictions.

Efforts to increase women's participation in sports in Islamic countries have gained momentum in recent years, driven by both grassroots activism and institutional reforms. Governments in countries like Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia have begun

investing in female sports programs, facilities, and education, signaling a gradual shift in official attitudes toward women's athletics (Al-Tamimi & Al-Kuwari, 2021). For example, Qatar's National Sports Day and initiatives supporting female athletes in schools and universities aim to normalize women's engagement in physical activity within culturally acceptable frameworks. Moreover, international events such as the FIFA World Cup 2022 hosted by Qatar have spotlighted the importance of inclusivity and gender equality in sports, encouraging local discourse on women's roles in athletics (Khalifa & Al-Malki, 2023).

Media representation is also evolving, with more coverage of female athletes who challenge stereotypes and serve as role models, such as Qatari sprinter Noora Salem Jasim. However, despite these positive developments, challenges remain, including persistent social stigma, limited media visibility compared to male athletes, and infrastructural constraints that restrict access to sports for many women (Rahbari & Mahmudabadi, 2022). Addressing these barriers requires a multifaceted approach that combines policy reform, community engagement, and culturally sensitive awareness campaigns to dismantle stereotypes and create sustainable opportunities for women's sports participation in the region.

Advertising can be an influential medium that influences shared attitudes and behaviors among a culture or society. By presenting the ideal images and narratives, advertisements can shape perceptions of identity, success, and belonging. In the context of gender representation, advertisements have the potential to encounter stereotypes and promote inclusivity. When individuals see themselves represented in positive and empowering ways, they are more likely to believe in their abilities and pursue their goals. For women, seeing strong, capable athletes in advertisements can challenge the concept that sports are a male domain and inspire them to explore their athletic potential.

Nike's "What If You Can?" campaign represents how advertising can be a platform for social change. By highlighting women's athletic achievements and addressing the barriers they face, the campaign contributes to the broader movement for gender equality. It also aligns with Nike's brand identity as a champion of empowerment and innovation. Through its advertisements, Nike does not only market its products but also inspires individuals to pursue their passions and challenge societal standards. Their commitment to representation is evident in its "What If You Can?" campaign, which features Middle Eastern's women from diverse athletic disciplines. By showcasing a variety of experiences and achievements, the advertisement highlights the universality of women's potential and the importance of breaking down the barriers. This inclusive approach not only resonates with local audience but also supports the idea that empowerment is for everyone. Advertisements like Nike's "What If You

Can?" contribute to this progress by challenging stereotypes and providing representation for women as strong and capable athletes.

Furthermore, Nike's "What If You Can?" campaign bridges the gap between marketing and advocacy by promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. The campaign aligns with Nike's broader corporate social responsibility initiatives, which include supporting popular sports programs and advocating for diversity and inclusion.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The semiotic analysis of Nike's "What If You Can?" advertisement reveals the power of media to challenge stereotypes and inspire change. By employing visual and linguistic strategies, the campaign communicates a message of empowerment that resonates with women worldwide. The advertisement addresses the barriers women face in sports, particularly in regions like the Middle East, and encourages them to believe in their potential.

Through its inclusive representation and inspiring narrative, Nike's campaign exemplifies how advertising can serve as a platform for social progress. By challenging traditional gender roles and promoting women's participation in sports, the "What If You Can?" advertisement contributes to the broader movement for gender equality and empowerment. As more brands embrace this approach, the media landscape has the potential to become a powerful force for positive change, breaking down barriers and inspiring individuals to reach their full potential.

By using its platform to address social issues, Nike places itself as a brand that values purpose alongside profit. This approach does not only enhance the brand's reputation but also raises a sense of loyalty among consumers who share its values. The success of campaigns like "What If You Can?" demonstrates the potential of advertising to drive meaningful change while achieving business objectives.

This research uses Semiotics theory introduced by Roland Barthes. Roland Barthes is a well-known figure in the field of semiotics. He is also known as the developer of theory of semiology by Ferdinand De Saussure (Putri et al., 2022) since his approach are mostly influenced by De Saussure. He developed a framework for understanding how meaning is constructed through signs into three; denotation, connotation, and myth. His theoretical approach provides a powerful instrument to analyze advertisements, uncovering not only explicit messages but also the basic cultural and social narratives they carry.

In Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, denotation and connotation are key concepts for considering how signs function to create meaning. In a research context related to semiotics, examining both denotation and connotation allows researcher to explore both the immediate meaning of signs and the broader cultural and ideological messages embedded within them. This approach is valuable for investigating how advertisements, media, or texts convey multiple layers of meaning to their audiences.

Denotation is the level of meaning that shows the connection between a sign and the real-world object or idea it represents, resulting in a clear, direct, and specific meaning. (Siregar, 2022) It is literal and natural, simply becomes a conclusion of meaning itself (Qalyubi & Misrita, 2023). On the other hand, connotation refers to the connection between a sign and the emotions or cultural values of the people interpreting it (Barthes, 1968). At this second level of meaning, connotation focuses on the personal and cultural interpretations that a sign carries (Bouzida, 2015).

Additionally, In Roland Barthes' semiotic concept, myth is stated as culture or understanding (Barthes, 1972). It is beyond an idea, it is a way to give meaning through a communication system known as message (Malau, 2022). It represents the deeper cultural meaning of a sign that spreads beyond its denotative and connotative levels. Myths are not just traditional stories but are constructed meanings that reflect and reinforce the ideologies and values of an exact society.

Barthes explains that myths often serve to support dominant cultural norms or ideologies by disguising them as common sense or reality. Nevertheless, the message cannot be confirmed true (Malau, 2022). Through myth, signs become tools for communicating ideologies in subtle ways, influencing how people view the world. In this research, the concept of myth is applied to analyze how Nike's "What If You Can?" advertisement uses signs and symbols to support or challenge traditional ideas about women in sports and promote empowerment narratives.

The study also focuses on the concept of gender representation and focuses on how gender roles, identities, and stereotypes are portrayed in media and cultural products. Previous studies have highlighted the significance of analyzing these representations to understand how societal norms and ideologies about gender are constructed and reinforced. For example, Purba and Tambunan (2021) used Barthes' semiotic theory to analyze an Indonesian beauty advertisement, revealing how signs and symbols address societal insecurities and contribute to empowering narratives. Similarly, Amalia and Kalaloi (2022) explored gender equality in Downy's advertisement, showcasing how stereotypes are challenged through visual and verbal elements that break traditional gender norms.

These studies emphasize the role of media in shaping public perceptions of gender by presenting visual and symbolic representations of women and men. Barthes' semiotic framework, which focuses on denotation and connotation, is frequently applied to analyze how media messages convey both literal meanings and deeper cultural associations. Through this lens, advertisements like Nike's "What If You Can?" are examined not only for their explicit portrayal of women in sports but also for the primary messages and myths they create about gender roles and empowerment. This framework provides a foundation for understanding how media influences gender perceptions and contributes to broader social discourses on equality and representation.

Purba and Tambunan (2021) explored the meaning of an Indonesian beauty advertisement "I Am the Face of Indonesia" for Wardah using Barthes' semiotic sign map to analyze the denotative and connotative meanings. By using a qualitative approach, the research provides a detailed description of the advertisement's content and its impact on the audience. The findings reveal that the advertisement reports issues faced by many Indonesian women, particularly feelings of insecurity, while offering motivation and solutions to boost their confidence. By carefully selecting signs to represent relevant social phenomena, the advertisement creates a narrative that resonates with its audience and contributes to the formation of discourse on women's empowerment in Indonesia.

Permatasari (2022) believed that advertising serves as a medium which could reach audience broadly to deliver messages to various audiences. The study is about PT. Chevron, an oil and gas company which shows its potential through advertisement. In 2016, they used television ads to promote its "We Agree" campaign. This study analyzes the ad using Roland Barthes' semiotic approach to uncover its denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings. The ad portrays social progress through the image of towering buildings, while also implying at the ecological dilemma of balancing development with sustainability. Despite this, Chevron is depicted as a company that contributes to economic growth and human empowerment in Indonesia.

Shabrina et al. (2022) observe how health messages are conveyed in Bear Brand's "New Normal Series" advertisements during the COVID-19 pandemic. Applying qualitative methods, the research analyzes ads from the brand's official YouTube channel, applying Roland Barthes' semiotic theory to explore their meanings and Stuart Hall's representation theory to study verbal and nonverbal signals. The findings highlight how the advertisements represent health messages through both denotative and connotative elements, reflecting broader myths and themes related to the pandemic.

Moreover, Siregar (2021) conducts a study which shows how Acehese local wisdom is portrayed in an advertisement and reflects social changes within the community. By using qualitative research and exploring Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, the study examines the meanings of denotation, connotation, and myths in the TV commercial *The Light of Aceh*. The ad features symbols of local culture, such as the traditional Rumoh Aceh house, customs of hospitality, and the Pacu Kude horse racing tradition. These cultural elements are presented as both community identity and constructed messages. The myths in the advertisement highlight shifts in Acehese society, offering insights into how traditions adapt over time. On the other hand, similar study is conducted by Baldan & Septiyani (2023), yet it focuses on a cigarette advertisement for Wismilak Diplomat "Switch to Success". Using Roland Barthes' semiotic analysis, the study uncovers its meanings and underlying myths. Through qualitative analysis of video content, documentation, and related sources, the study identifies denotations, connotations, and myths within the ad, showcasing how it aligns with modern advertising trends and adapts to cultural changes.

Additionally, Amalia and Kalaloi (2022) discusses the semiotic analysis on the depiction of gender equality in Downy's advertisement. The qualitative research is supported with constructivist paradigm approach and focusing on a particular ad known as "Together with Downy, Harumkan Namamu for Free Expression". According to the findings, the ad shows many stereotypes of exclusion and limitations in the society against women. Furthermore, the study clarifies that the stereotypes aren't always right. It confirms that gender equality is important through its convincing campaign showing that women are proficient to do what they want. It breaks the restriction in any kinds of aspects.

In Ullah et al. (2023), semiotic elements are analyzed according to Zeera Plus biscuit's advertisement. The study focuses on the meanings conveyed through words, images, and colors using Roland Barthes' theory of denotation and connotation. By examining both verbal and non-verbal signs, the research highlights how the advertisement communicates messages and connects with consumers within a broader socio-cultural context. It finds that verbal signs slightly outweigh non-verbal ones in importance. The study provides insights into visual communication, product design, and consumer culture, offering practical value for marketers and designers.

In conclusion, these studies highlight the practicality of Roland Barthes' semiotic theory in analyzing advertisements across various contexts and themes. From gender equality to cultural identity, and from corporate branding to health messages, the denotative, connotative, and mythical elements of advertisements expose deeper narratives that resonate with their

audiences. By using qualitative methods, researchers uncover how signs construct meaning and reflect broader social and cultural phenomena.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research methodology to explore how Nike's "What If You Can?" advertisement uses semiotics to convey meanings related to gender and women's roles in sports, to be specific within the context of Middle Eastern societies. The qualitative approach is chosen because it allows a deep exploration of visual media and the interpretation of signs, symbols, and cultural meanings in the ad.

The research methodology will be framed within a constructivist paradigm which emphasizes understanding the multiple meanings that individuals and communities' portrayal in the media are shaped by their cultural and social contexts. By adopting this approach, the research aims to uncover how Nike's advertisement is interpreted differently by audiences, particularly how it may influence perceptions of gender roles in sports within the Middle Eastern context. This paradigm will help in understanding the advertisement's impact on challenging or supporting social norms, as it acknowledges the nature of meaning-making processes and the diversity of cultural perspectives. By following this methodology, the study purposes to gain a complete understanding of how Nike's advertisement uses semiotics to represent gender and influence social perceptions of women in sports.

Additionally, to collect data for the semiotic analysis of Nike's "What If You Can?" advertisement, researcher applies techniques according to Sugiyono (2009) by dividing the source of data into two, primary and secondary data. The primary data is collected by watching the video repeatedly. This helps the researcher familiarize themselves with the ad's visuals, audio, and overall narrative flow. Secondly, the researcher focuses on understanding the concept and messages the advertisement aims to convey. By analyzing the tone, visuals, and storyline, the researcher identifies the central theme about gender representation. This step supports uncovering the broader purpose of the ad on the audience. Next, taking screenshots of specific scenes to support a detailed analysis to capture important visuals, expressions, or narrative that hold semiotic relevance. These selected frames become the foundation for analyzing signs and symbols in the advertisement.

After that, identifying the signs shown in the ad by including both verbal and non-verbal elements, such as gestures and imagery, which interconnect messages about gender and sports. Finally, the researcher describes each identified sign based on Roland Barthes' concepts of denotation, connotation, and myth. This step discovers the primary messages about gender

representation embedded in the advertisement. After collecting the primary data, the secondary data will be composed by literature studies concentrating on women participation in sports, women stereotype in Middle East, gender representation, information related to Nike, as well as advertisement in general to support the research.

Moreover, After getting all related data, researcher analyzes the collected data, by applying the data analysis techniques adapted from Taylor & Bogdan (1984), specified in data analysis in qualitative research. Firstly, it is done by organizing the data by reviewing the data collected, including the video, screenshots, and notes. The researcher arranges this information into manageable sections, categorizing it by themes such as empowerment, gender representation, and sports culture. Secondly, identifying themes and patterns by carefully examining the data to identify frequent signs, symbols, and messages within the advertisement. Thirdly, inductive reasoning by allowing the themes and patterns to appear naturally from the data without striking defined notions. After that, linking signs to semiotic concepts by Roland Barthes containing denotative and connotative meanings as well as myths explored from the ad. Then, contextual analysis of the findings interpreted within the larger cultural and social context, including Nike's branding and historical role in promoting gender equality in sports. Lastly, synthesizing the findings into a solid narrative that explains how the ad represents gender and challenges or supports traditional ideas about women in sports.

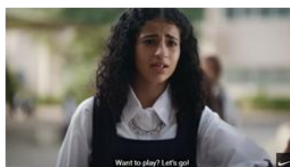
4. HASIL DAN PEMBAHASAN

The object of this research is Nike's advertisement entitled "What If You Can?" The advertisement is a part of Nike's broader attempts to promote inclusivity, empowerment, and gender equality in sports. The ad shows diverse female athletes across various sports, highlighting themes of resilience and determination to break traditional gender stereotypes. The video features a mix of powerful visuals, motivational slogans, and emotional storytelling, presenting women as strong, capable, and deserving of equal opportunities in sports. Through the use of dynamic scenes, empowering music, and impactful dialogue, the advertisement conveys its message of inspiring individuals, particularly women, to challenge societal expectations and strive for greatness.

The ad was selected as the research object due to its rich semiotic content and its alignment with the study's focus on gender representation. Its use of signs and symbols provides an excellent opportunity to analyze how Nike constructs narratives around women's roles in sports and how these narratives contribute to the discourse on gender equality and empowerment in the media.

Data 1

Signifiers:



Duration 0:01-0:09

Signified:

A girl is watching her friends playing football but refused to join when her friend asks her to.

Denotative:

A young girl sits in the hallway, watching the other girls playing football during school break. Her friends are actively playing, with one extending a direct invitation by saying "Want to play? Let's go!" But, the girl visibly refuses by shaking her head.

Connotative:

Her refusal to join, despite the friendly invitation, suggests an internal struggle often tied to feelings of self-doubt, insecurity, or fear of not belonging. This hesitation can symbolize the broader societal pressures and gender norms that discourage girls from participating in traditionally male-dominated sports like football.

Myth:

Girls are naturally less suited or less entitled to participate in competitive, physical, and public activities like football.

Data 2**Signifiers:**

Duration 0:10-0:17

Signified:

Suddenly being involved in a volleyball game.

Denotative:

The young girl who was previously hesitant is now actively participating in a volleyball game. She is seen moving onto the court with determination, engaging physically by preparing to receive or hit the ball. Other girls around her are also playing energetically, creating a lively and dynamic atmosphere, supported by the saying “well done!” said by her team mate who hugged her. The girl’s body language shows focus and confidence, contrasting with her earlier reluctance.

Connotative:

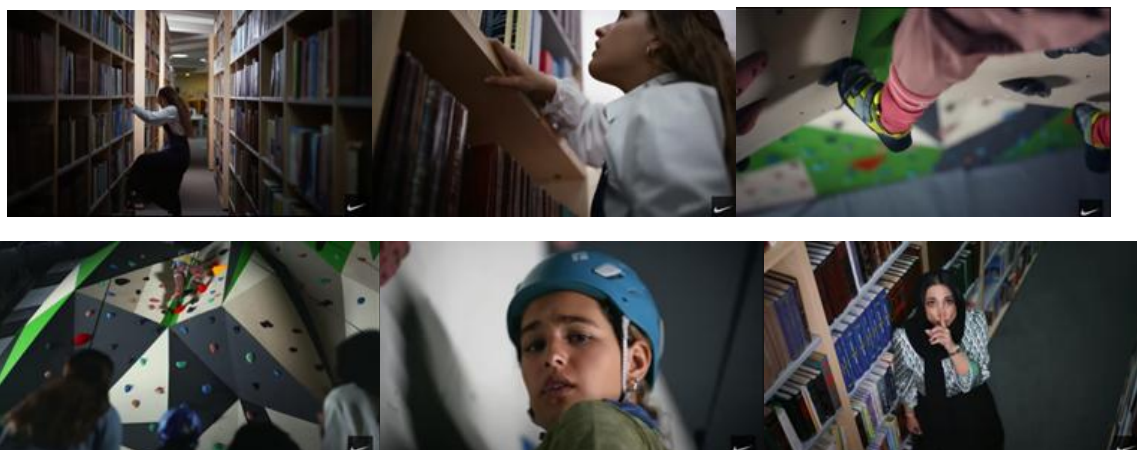
The girl’s sudden involvement in the volleyball game connotes a powerful shift from hesitation to empowerment. Her active participation symbolizes overcoming internal doubts and societal expectations that previously held her back.

Myth:

Limitations are socially constructed and can be overcome through courage, determination, and opportunity.

Data 3

Signifiers:



Duration 0:21-0:27

Signified:

Climbing the library shelves.

Denotative:

This moment captures her imaginative and physical exploration of movement within a familiar, non-sport environment. She is physically climbing on the library shelves, which are depicted as a climbing wall. She uses the racks as footholds and handholds, moving upward with focus and determination.

Connotative:

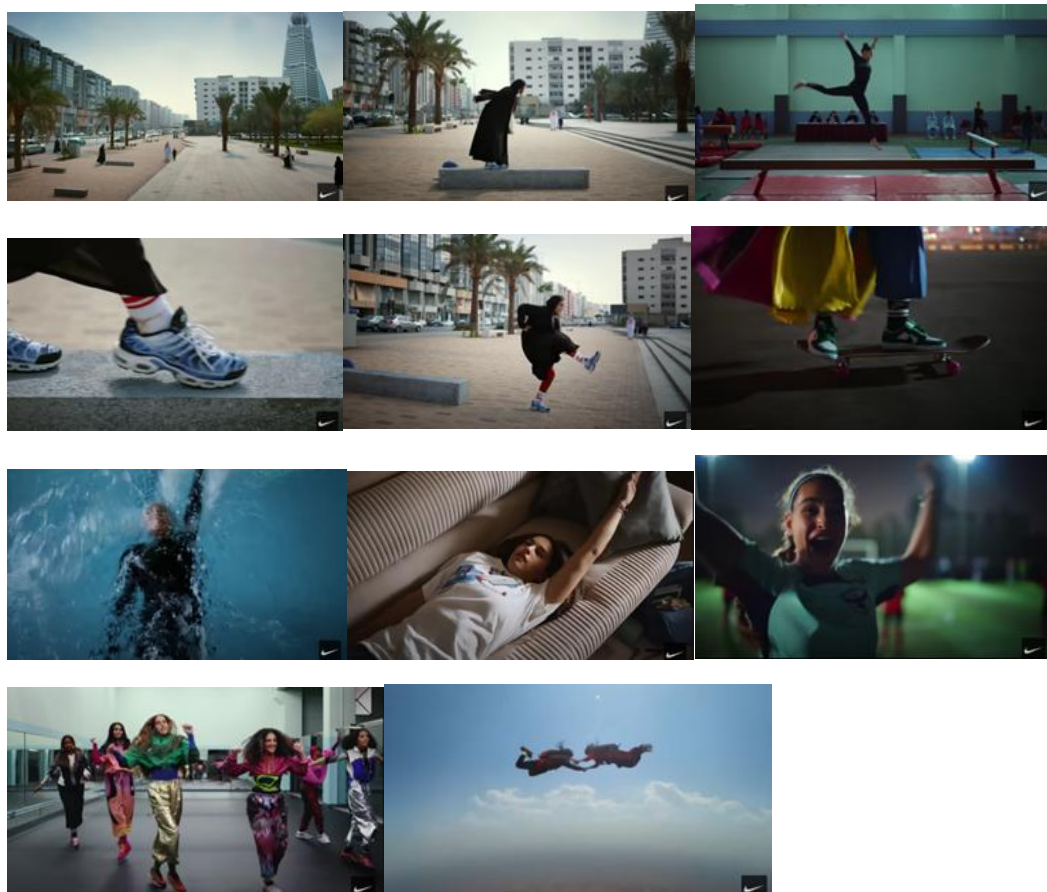
By transforming the library shelves into a climbing wall, the girl challenges the rigid expectations of how spaces and behaviors are gendered or limited. This action symbolizes creativity, resourcefulness, and a refusal to be confined by societal norms. It connotes the idea that athleticism and empowerment can emerge anywhere, even in places not designed for sports.

Myth:

Potential and empowerment are boundless and can be realized in any context.

Data 4

Signifiers:



Duration 0:30-1:22

Signified:

A series of dynamic moments.

Denotative:

The young girl is actively participating in a variety of sports and physical activities. She is shown running energetically through urban streets. The settings vary from outdoor cityscapes to indoor gym-like environments. Other girls are also visible, engaging in similar athletic activities, creating a sense of community and shared effort. The girl's facial expressions and body language convey focus, determination, and confidence. The scenes are fast-paced, with dynamic camera movements that emphasize motion and strength.

Connotative:

The girl's active engagement in diverse sports shows empowerment, resilience, and freedom. Her confident movements and the urban, sometimes unconventional settings suggest breaking free from traditional gender roles and spatial limitations. The presence of other girls participating alongside her signifies solidarity and collective empowerment, emphasizing that the involvement of female in sports is not isolated but communal and supported. The dynamic, fast-paced visuals evoke energy, aspiration, and enjoying physical exercises.

Myth:

Limitations are obstacles that can be transcended by individual will and effort. It promotes the belief that athletic success and empowerment are accessible to all who dare to try, regardless of background or gender.

Data 5

Signifiers:



Duration: 1:23-1:32

Signified:

A girl is watching her friends playing football but shows her grin when her friend asks her to join.

Denotative:

A young girl sits in the hallway, watching the other girls playing football during school break. Her friends are actively playing, with one extending a direct invitation by saying "Want to play? Let's go!" and finally the girl visibly agreed by smirking.

Connotative:

When the girl finally agrees and smirks, this gesture connotes a shift in mindset: from doubt to confidence, from outsider to participant. The smirk itself suggests a playful defiance and readiness to challenge expectations. This moment captures the emotional transition from self-doubt to empowerment, highlighting the importance of support and social connection in overcoming internal barriers. It also connotes the breaking down of gendered limitations, as

the girl embraces participation in a sport traditionally dominated by boys or seen as physically demanding.

Myth:

Overcoming personal and societal barriers through encouragement and self-belief.
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Nike's "What If You Can" advertisement powerfully addresses gender representation by challenging traditional stereotypes that limit girls' participation in sports, particularly those that were commonly done by boys in the past, such as football and skating. The advertisement is started with a young girl who seems hesitant to join her friends playing football (Data 1). The scene symbolizes the general societal myth that standardized girls are less suited or entitled to be involved in competitive, physical activities (Messner, 2002). This early refusal reflects an incorporated self-doubt and the impact of gender norms that cast down girls from embracing athleticism openly.

However, the narrative quickly changes as the girl transitions from hesitation to active participation in a volleyball game (Data 2), showing an intense empowerment moment. This change includes the idea that social limitations are constructed and can be overcome through courage and opportunity. The girl's confident engagement and the supportive environment from her teammates strengthen a note of collective encouragement and resilience which emphasizes empowerment in both individual and communal.

Moreover, the advertisement creatively expands the concept of sports participation beyond traditional spaces. It is seen when the girl climbs the library shelves as if they were a climbing wall (Data 3). This imaginative act symbolizes breaking free from the set gender expectations and spatial limits. It suggests that potential and empowerment are not limited to conventional settings but can be developed anywhere. It highlights Nike's broader message that strength and creativity cut across societal boundaries.

The ad continues to capture the girl energetically participating in diverse sports across urban and indoor environments (Data 4). It highlights freedom, determination, and solidarity among girls. The dynamic visuals and collective involvement reinforce the myth that limitations are obstacles to be transcended by determination and effort, which promotes the belief that athletic success and empowerment are accessible to all, regardless of gender.

Finally, the ad closes with the exact same scene with different ending compared to the beginning. The girl's confidently accept to join the football game she initially declined (Data 5). Her smirk signifies a transformation from doubt to playful boldness, embracing

participation and challenging gender norms. This moment summarizes the constructive message of overcoming personal and societal barriers through encouragement, self-belief, and social support.

In conclusion, Nike's "What If You Can" advertisement uses compelling visual storytelling to confront and deconstruct gender stereotypes in sports. It conveys a constructive message that empowerment is achievable through determination, community, and the courage to hold out against limiting myths, to encourage girls everywhere to redefine their potential and embrace athleticism confidently.

5. CONCLUSION

In summary, this study analyzes Nike's advertisement "What If You Can?" through a semiotic and sociocultural approach, with a specific focus on gender representation and women's empowerment in sports, particularly within Middle Eastern societies. Using Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, the study dissects how signs in the advertisement (visuals, gestures, language, and context) convey denotative, connotative, and mythical meanings that challenge traditional gender norms and encourage female participation in sports.

The study adopts a constructivist qualitative methodology, interpreting the advertisement's signs through repeated viewing, screenshot analysis, and contextual cultural understanding. Primary data are derived from the ad itself, while secondary data are gathered from literature on gender stereotypes and sports in Islamic cultures.

The ad's narrative focuses on a young girl who transitions from hesitance to active participation in various sports, symbolizing personal growth, social encouragement, and empowerment. Scenes such as her climbing library shelves or running through urban streets metaphorically represent breaking free from societal constraints. These elements are interpreted as myths under Barthes' theory widely held beliefs or cultural narratives, which in this case are being challenged rather than reinforced.

Furthermore, the advertisement's efficacy in subverting patriarchal norms must be contextualized within broader discourses of corporate activism, Islamic feminism, and transnational media reception. While the ad's narrative of individual empowerment aligns with neoliberal feminist frameworks emphasizing personal agency (Rottenberg, 2014), its deployment within conservative Middle Eastern societies introduces complex negotiations of cultural authenticity.

Scholars like Al-Mohammad (2020) argue that such campaigns succeed when they engage endogenous feminist discourses rooted in Islamic tradition such as reinterpretations of religious texts supporting women's physical activity rather than imposing Western liberation models. The protagonist's modest athletic wear and communal settings subtly reference this dynamic, positioning sports participation as compatible with cultural/religious identity rather than antagonistic to it.

This resonates with Mir-Hosseini's (2006) concept of "gender jihad", where Muslim women reclaim religious hermeneutics to challenge patriarchal interpretations. Semiotically, the ad's climax where the girl's solitary run evolves into a group of diverse women athletes operates as a syntagmatic chain (Barthes, 1977) signifying collective solidarity. This visual syntax counters Orientalist tropes of Muslim women's isolation, instead echoing ethnographic findings by Hargreaves (2007) on women's sports groups in Morocco creating "counter-public spheres" against gender segregation.

However, the campaign's impact is mediated by material realities: Deeb and Winegar (2012) caution that media representations alone cannot dismantle structural barriers like unequal sports funding or legal restrictions in some Middle Eastern countries. Nike's parallel initiatives like their Pro Hijab line co-designed with Muslim athletes demonstrate corporate recognition that symbolic representation requires tangible product innovation to enable participation (Toffoletti, 2017).

Critically, the ad's avoidance of overt religious iconography (e.g., mosques, prayer gestures) reflects a deliberate de-politicization strategy observed by Sakr (2008) in transnational Arab media, allowing messages to bypass state censors while still resonating locally. Audience studies in Saudi Arabia (Alhumaidan & Loos, 2021) reveal that such ads gain traction when framed as promoting national progress rather than Western values, leveraging state-supported "sportswashing" initiatives like Saudi Vision 2030.

Ultimately, the advertisement functions as a cultural palimpsest: overlaying global feminist ideals onto local contexts through carefully curated signifiers (the library symbolizing knowledge reclamation, urban spaces as contested territories), thus creating what Moors (2009) terms "modest modernity" a synthesis of empowerment and cultural continuity that redefines female athleticism in Muslim-majority societies.

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