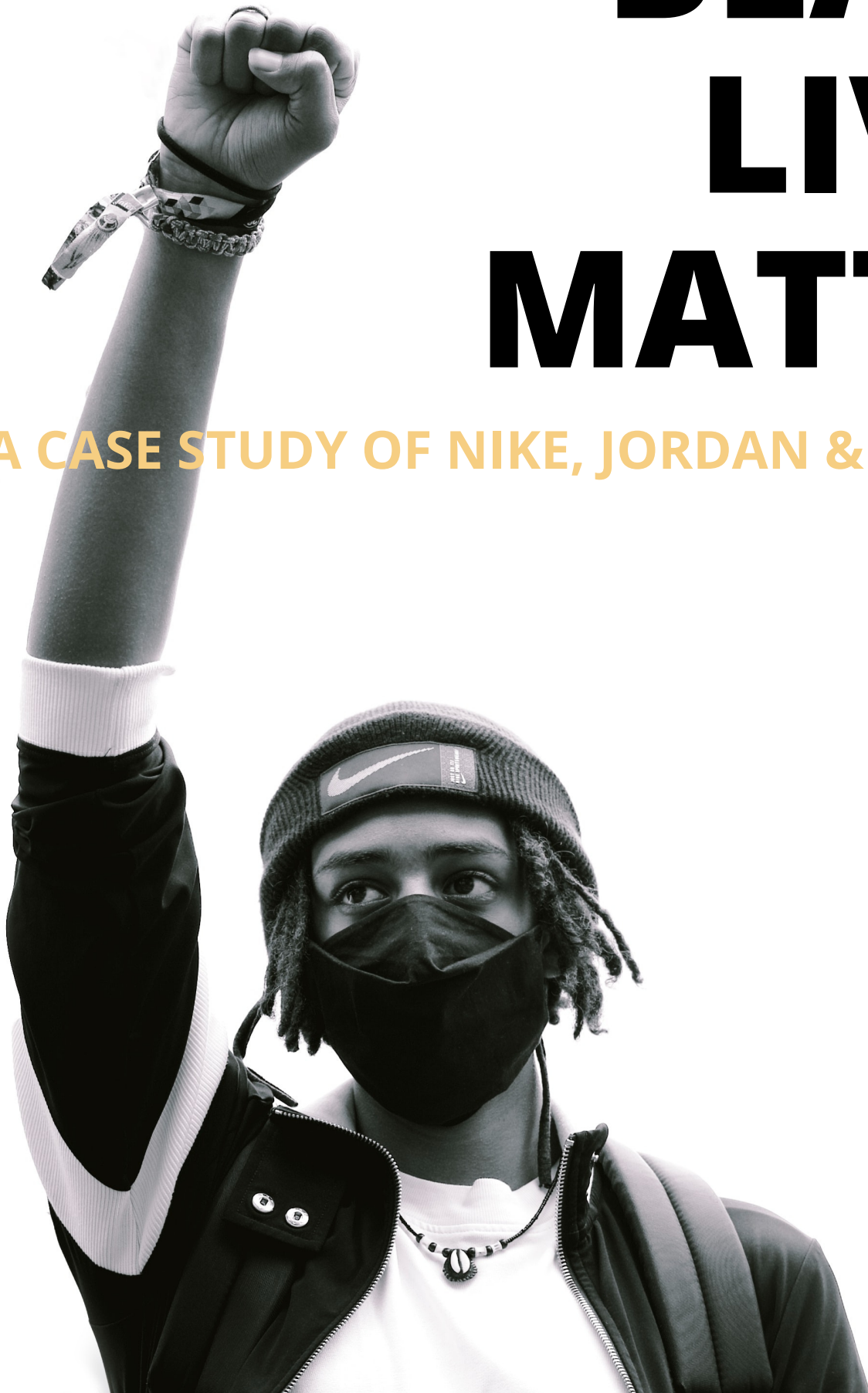


# ADVERTISING BLACK LIVES MATTER

A CASE STUDY OF NIKE, JORDAN & CONVERSE



**Advertising Black Lives Matter:  
A Case Study of NIKE, Jordan and Converse**

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## Abstract

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, a Black male, was killed in Minneapolis, Minnesota in the United States by a White police officer. The incident reverberated around the world and triggered support for racial justice and equality and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement on a global scale. A significant wave of activism became prominent in the American sport industry following Floyd's death, where professional sports leagues, athletes and corporations used their far-reaching platforms to support BLM. Adding to this, sports-related corporations played an important role in the social movement, as a great number of corporations positioned themselves as being woke and created advertisements that promote racial justice and equality. However, as some corporations have been heavily criticized for capitalizing on woke advertising to increase profits, consumers are increasingly aware of the perceived sincerity of corporations' advertising engagements within the sociopolitical landscape. For this reason, the purpose of this thesis is to investigate how American sports brands portray BLM in their advertisements in the wake of Floyd's death. More specifically, the focus is on what kind of messages the advertisements convey through verbal and visual modes of communication, what kind of understandings of BLM the advertisements shape along with how the advertisements align with the brands' values.

With a qualitative research approach, this thesis seeks to gain a rich understanding of the portrayal of BLM through a comparative case study of three advertisements from the American sports brands NIKE, Jordan and Converse respectively. To analyze the advertisements, this thesis employs the theoretical framework of Multimodal Discourse Analysis by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, which enables a thorough examination of meaning making and underlying discourses through both verbal and visual modes of communication.

Relating to the portrayal of BLM, the key analytical findings reveal that the three advertisements emphasize racial injustice and inequality as a problem that Black people are facing in society and that this problem can be defeated through individual participation and collective action. In the advertisements, verbal communication is employed to convey messages of commitment and ways in which the brands and recipients can promote racial justice and equality. In addition, visual communication is used to convey cues related to BLM, appeal to the recipients' emotions and

promote the brands. Even though the sociopolitical issue in focus aligns with the brands' values, which according to the literature reflects woke advertisements, a principal finding reveals that some advertisements can still be perceived as woke capitalistic due to a visual salience of product offerings. This is evident in the advertisements by Jordan and Converse. However, the advertisements by NIKE and Jordan indicate a genuine commitment to the issue in question due to an explicit nature of the brands' verbal and visual communication of BLM. In contrast, the advertisement by Converse indicates a more superficial commitment due to a subtle and abstract communication, which, along with the salience of product offerings, makes the objective of increasing profits more prevalent in the advertisement. In this way, this thesis reveals that the brands have different focal points with regard to woke advertisements and that the interrelation of verbal and visual modes of communication influences the way in which woke messages of BLM can be perceived.



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# 1. Introduction

The year of 2020 has been characterized by significant world events. Aside from the novel and unprecedented global COVID-19 pandemic that has affected, and still affects, the lives of billions of people on a worldwide scale, the event that took place on May 25, 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota in the United States has left a noteworthy mark in history (Lindsay 2020). On this date, George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black male, was arrested in Minneapolis due to allegations that he had attempted to pass a counterfeit \$20 bill in a local store (ibid.). During the arrest, a White Minneapolis police officer at the scene pinned George Floyd to the ground and kept his knee on Floyd's neck for more than eight minutes, which left Floyd with a lack of oxygen that made him lose his consciousness and, ultimately, pass away (Barrie 2020, p. 1; Deliso 2021). According to Altman (2020), more than one Black person is killed by American police officers every other day in the United States, which is why Floyd's death followed those of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and many more in 2020. Disturbing video footage that captured the killing of George Floyd, in which Floyd repeatedly cries out "I can't breathe" and "I'm about to die" while the police officer keeps kneeling on Floyd's neck, was shared on the social media platform Facebook and, subsequently, spread quickly and widely on both social media and broadcast media (Simba 2020). The video footage reverberated around the world (The Economist 2020) and sparked anger, outrage and indignation on a global scale (Simba 2020).

Almost immediately after Floyd's death, Americans took to the streets to protest and address police brutality in support with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement (Weine et al. 2020, p. 1; Barrie 2020, p. 1), which is a social movement that strives to eradicate police brutality and racial injustice of Black people (ibid., p. 1). Around 26 million citizens of the United States participated in the protests, making BLM the biggest social movement in the history of the United States (Buchanan, Bui & Patel 2020). Additionally, social media platforms were extensively employed as a tool to showcase support to the movement, where the slogan and hashtag #BlackLivesMatter trended globally across social media platforms (Daragahi 2020) and was used approximately 3.7 million times daily in the weeks after Floyd's death (Anderson et al. 2020). Social media, thereby,

composed as catalysts for a global support of the BLM movement that went beyond the borders of the United States (Gawthrop & Illingworth 2020; Weine et al. 2020, p. 1). Floyd's death triggered protests in more than 60 countries on every continent of the world despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (Simba 2020), where solidarity marches took place all the way "...from Sydney to Beirut to Istanbul to London to Berlin" (Daragahi 2020).

Among the millions of people who supported the BLM movement in the aftermath of Floyd's death are numerous world renown American celebrities, who used their large, world-embracing social media platforms with millions of followers to advocate for BLM by making donations and "...posting petitions, educating those around them, and attending multiple protests." (Nuha 2020). From singers Madonna, Beyonce and Billie Eilish, to models Bella and Gigi Hadid, to actors Ryan Reynolds and Cole Sprouse to television host Trevor Noah (Harper's BAZAAR 2020), the celebrity support of and engagement with the social movement reached wide. In a similar fashion, large world renown American corporations such as Google, Netflix, Disney and Ben & Jerry's showcased their support to the BLM movement following Floyd's death (Durate 2020) and incorporated advertisements, bold statements and hashtags into their marketing efforts in order to spread awareness of racial injustice and inequality (Ahmed & Rehman 2020).

The death of George Floyd also triggered a significant wave of activism within the sport industry. American professional sports leagues and organizations such as the National Basketball Association (NBA), Major League Basketball (MLB), the National Hockey League (NHL) and the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR) "...conducted at least a one-day pause in their play to honor the memory of George Floyd" (Simba 2020) and their players participated in protests across the United States (ibid.). Additionally, the NBA and the National Football League (NFL), which are considered "...two of the most watched sports leagues in America" (Huish 2020), used their platforms to address social injustice and racism and bring the fight for racial equality into sporting arenas in 2020 (Reuters 2020). The NBA placed the message Black Lives Matter on its famous basketball court in the playoff arena in Orlando, Florida, where it was visible to thousands of viewers during games, both in person and on television (Huish 2020). The NBA also allowed its basketball players to incorporate social justice messages on their basketball

jerseys instead of their last names (ibid.), including “Freedom”, “Equality”, “Justice” and “Black Lives Matter” along with the same messages in different native languages for its European players (Simba 2020). Similarly, the NFL included visible social justice messages on its football fields and promoted BLM with advertisements on American television (Huish 2020).

Sports are generally considered to play an integral role in American society and have an extensive societal influence in the United States (Arkansas State University 2020). According to Kenneth J. Macri (2012), an American scholar within the field of sports and society, sports are essential in American society, because “sport coincides with community values and political agencies, as it attempts to define the morals and ethics attributed to not only athletes, but the totality of society as a whole.” (p. 1). In this regard, there is a strong history of activism within American sports (Sobande 2019, p. 2729), in which both sports organizations and athletes have used their far-reaching platforms to address social injustice issues for centuries (Wulf 2019). In addition, the Super Bowl is one of the most important yearly sporting events in the United States that attracts millions of viewers on a worldwide scale (Dean 2019). The event is highly desirable by advertisers due to its major outreach, which is why several advertisements addressing issues of social injustice have been displayed during the Super Bowl throughout the years (Montez de Oca, Mason & Ahn 2020, p. 16).

As the sports industry has played a profound role in the support of the BLM movement and the fight for racial justice and equality of Black people, we find it highly relevant and interesting to shed light upon how sports-related advertising has portrayed BLM in the wake of George Floyd’s death.

## **2. Literature Review**

To support our research focus, this section reviews existing literature on social movements with regard to racial injustice movements in the United States, social media and the increasing role that social movements play in corporations' advertising efforts. Furthermore, the section reviews existing literature on multimodality in order to comprehend its role in advertising in today's digital era.

### **2.1 Social Movements**

Sociologists della Porta and Diani (2006), who have written an explanatory book regarding social movements, argue that social movements became prominent in the 1960s and have since become an integral part of today's democracies in the Western world (p. 1). Similarly, organizational studies scholars de Bakker et al. (2013), who have investigated the relationship between social movements, civil society and corporations, likewise argue that social movements play an important role in the Western economy (p. 576). It can, therefore, be suggested that social movements are a prominent phenomenon in the Western world. However, when reviewing existing academic literature on social movements, it is rather difficult to encounter one consistent definition of what the phenomenon encompasses. To elaborate, Diani (2006) stresses that recent interest and increasement of scholarship on social movements has led to various definitions and conceptualizations of the phenomenon (pp. 129-130). Thus, these definitions will now be presented in an attempt to grasp what social movements encompass.

Sunio, Peckson and Ugay (2020), who have conducted research on urban social movements, argue that social movements are powerful tools that promote sociopolitical changes (p. 1). While de Bakker et al. (2013) suggest that social movements can be defined as the engagement of organizations and corporations in the sociopolitical landscape (p. 576), sociologists Mc Carthy and Zald (1973) suggest that social movements are entities that are formed due to collectively shared perceptions and ideas, which people support to promote changes within the sociopolitical landscape (p. 2). Mc Carthy and Zald (1973) place great emphasis on the term participation to

describe social movements, since they argue that such movements consist of larger groups of people, who collectively participate in changing the world around them (p. 2). Similarly, Krinsky (2019), who is a scholar within social movement studies, suggests that it is inevitable to deal with conflicts in today's society, and that conflicts pave the way for creative social movements in which people, either individually or collectively, attempt to promote changes in society (p. 1). Adding to this, Valocchi (2009), who is the author of the book *Social Movements and Activism in the USA*, suggests that people who take part in social movements can be perceived as activists that strive to acquire peace and justice both within and outside of their communities, especially with regard to sociopolitical matters such as racism, violence, labor, feminism and LGBTQ+ (p. 5). In this way, the literature emphasizes that the main features of social movements are efforts to promote social and political changes in society, a participation of individuals, larger groups of people and corporations along with a focus on conflicts in society - especially relating to matters such as racism, violence, labor, feminism and LGBTQ+.

As it was emphasized in the introduction (Section 1), a large number of people and corporations have engaged with the BLM movement in 2020 following George Floyd's death, which is why we adhere to a more broad definition of social movements, which combines the aforementioned definitions from the literature. To elaborate, we understand social movements as entities that promote sociopolitical changes in society (Sunio, Peckson and Ugay 2020) as a response to occurring conflicts (Krinsky 2019), which can relate to matters such as racism, violence, labor, feminism, LGBTQ+ and the like (Valocchi 2009). In the case of this thesis, the BLM movement is rooted in the conflicts between Black people and law enforcement in the United States that lead to injustice and inequality within the Black community (McCoy 2020, p. 467; Clare 2016, p. 123). Furthermore, we understand social movements to be constituted through collectively shared perceptions of what can be improved in society (McCarthy & Zald 1973). We acknowledge that these improvements in society rest upon participation, in which actions conducted by individuals, by larger groups of people (ibid.) and/or by corporations (de Bakker et al. 2013) can contribute to promote sociopolitical changes. For this reason, we consider any involvement with a social movement to indicate a participation in said movement. As stated in the introduction (Section

1), the sports industry has played a profound role in the support of the BLM movement and promoting changes in society. Since the messages in sports-related advertising are communicated by corporations to their consumers and, thereby, individual people, the broad definition of social movements is more compatible with our research focus.

### **2.1.1 Racial Injustice Movements in the United States**

Since the police killing of George Floyd and the subsequent protests mentioned in the introduction of this thesis originally emanate from the United States (Section 1), we find it relevant to narrow down our focus and review existing literature on social movements in the United States specifically.

When reviewing existing literature on social movements in the United States, a recurring theme is racial injustice and inequality. According to Jones-Everyly et al. (2017), Black people have been denied the same opportunities as White people and other racial minorities in the United States for centuries (p. 2). This has, ultimately, led Black people to join forces and constitute what the scholars refer to as Black social movements (ibid., p. 2). A prominent social movement in this regard is the Civil Rights Movement (CRM) of the 1950s and 1960s, whose focal point was to fight against racial segregation and discrimination in order for Black people to gain equal rights and justice in society (Carson n.d.). Sociologist Morris (1999) underlines that the CRM gained great legal achievements in the United States (p. 528), including legislation that aimed to end discrimination of race, color, religion and nationality along with legislation that secured Black people the right to vote (Carson n.d.). For this reason, Morris (1999) suggests that the CRM is a catalyst that has inspired many Americans to form and join social movements to promote sociopolitical changes in society (p. 528). To elaborate, movements such as the Black Power Movement and the Black Panther Party gained national prominence following the CRM, which both sought to combat white supremacy in the United States (Joseph 2009, p. 753; Hilliard & West, 2008, p. ix).



## **Black Lives Matter**

The most recent social movement relating to racial injustice and inequality in the United States is the BLM movement. According to Clayton (2018), who has engaged with scholarship on both social movement studies and Black studies, the BLM movement can be comprehended as a modern version of the CRM (p. 449). However, while the CRM mostly focused on justice and equality, one of the focal points of the BLM movement is to address police brutality inflicted on Black people (ibid., p. 449).

The BLM movement was founded in 2013 after neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmerman killed the 17-year-old Black male Trayvon Martin and was found not-guilty of committing the murder (McCoy 2020, p. 467; Clare 2016, p. 123). As a result of the verdict, "...the words "Black Lives Matter (BLM)" first appeared on Facebook, one of the world's largest online social networks. Since then, BLM has become an ubiquitous presence in American culture." (Ince, Rojas & Davis 2017, p. 1814). Thus, the movement gained prominence on social media and was founded to emphasize that police officers who kill Black people must be held accountable for their actions. In this regard, the purpose of BLM is to "...eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes" (Black Lives Matter n.d. a). Additionally, the BLM movement seeks to promote reflection within areas such as racial injustice, inequality and police brutality (Ince, Rojas & Davis 2017, p. 1815). Adding to this, members of the movement especially demand justice and accountability by the government to ensure that police brutality on Black citizens is not overlooked (Rickford 2015, p. 36).

The movement has organized various protests and marches to promote its purposes, and the efforts have proven useful, as several police officers have been held accountable and convicted for their unjustified killings of Black people (ibid., p. 36). As mentioned in the introduction (Section 1), around 26 million citizens of the United States participated in the protests following George Floyd's death, making the BLM movement the largest social movement in the history of the United States (Buchanan, Bui & Patel 2020). In this regard, a prominence of people from

generation Z (born between 1996-2015) and generation Y (born between 1980-1995) (Davis 2020; Morano-Williams 2020) across racial and ethnic groups (Parker, Horowitz & Anderson 2020) participated in the protests.

As a result of the movement's great achievements and abilities to spread the messages of racial injustice and inequality on a global scale, the movement has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize of 2021 (Belam 2021). The Nobel Peace Prize is an international prize established by Swedish Alfred Nobel, who was largely engaged with social issues, and awarded to those who genuinely fight to acquire peace (The Nobel Prize n.d.). Thus, the fact that the BLM movement has been nominated for the award emphasizes both the importance and prominent size of the movement.

Since the BLM movement gained prominence through a hashtag and employs social media platforms to amplify its agenda (Ince, Rojas & Davis 2017, p. 1814; Clayton 2018, p. 454), the following section will review existing scholarship on social media and social movements in order to understand the interplay between the two phenomena.

### **2.1.2 Social Movements on Social Media**

Researchers increasingly examine the relationship between social movements and social media, particularly concerning how social media can contribute to promote and inform the agenda of social movements (Mundt, Ross & Burnett 2018, p. 1; Rohlinger & Earl 2017, p. 4). According to Rohlinger and Earl (2017), the growing interest and scholarship in this field is owing to the prominence and development of social media in today's society (pp. 2-3). Hwang and Kim (2015), who have researched the relationship between social media and social movements, suggest that social media provides consumers with the ability to interact with other consumers online and express and share their opinions (p. 478). As social media enables the public to voice their opinions and exchange perceptions, the scholars stress that "...discourses in a society can be generated and spread through these new media, which promotes sharing common interests and provides the public space to debate the issues within communities" (ibid., p. 478). In a similar fashion, sociologist Nikita Carney (2016) argues that due to technological developments, consumers can easily access and contribute to discourses on social media platforms and, thereby,

get involved with issues that are prominent in society (p. 184). Similarly, Ince, Rojas and Davis (2017) suggest that social media can assist social movements in showcasing and spreading both the movements' focal points and the solutions to the issues in question throughout the usage of hashtags (p. 1818). It can, therefore, be argued that the use of social media can have positive impacts on social movements, as the right social media strategy can potentially spread awareness and attract more people to participate in a given movement.

According to Bennett and Segerberg (2012), social media platforms also contribute with personal resonance to social movements, as personal stories can be disseminated online through consumer-generated content, especially with the use of hashtags that relate to the social movements (p. 742). Furthermore, social media can contribute to amplifying social movements, as social movements can go viral and scale up quickly due to the global outreach of social media platforms (Hwang & Kim 2015, p. 480; Penney & Dadas 2013, p. 77). In addition, social media can make it significantly easier for social movements to gather necessary resources, as constantly evolving technology makes it more accessible to donate money or collect signatures directly from phones or computers. Thus, people can engage actively and easily with a movement through social media (Van Laer & Van Aelst 2010, p. 1152).

The BLM movement is a recent example of a social movement that has been strengthened by social media (Clayton 2018, p. 449). The hashtag #BlackLivesMatter took off on social media in 2014, when the Black male Michael Brown was killed by White law enforcement in the United States (Carney 2016, p. 181; Anderson 2016). According to the BLM movement's official webpage, the hashtag was created as "...an online community to help combat anti-Black racism across the globe. We firmly believed our movement ... needed to be a contributing voice for Black folks and our allies to support changing the material conditions for Black people." (Black Lives Matter n.d. b). The hashtag became widely known both nationally and internationally (Clayton 2018, p. 449), and it appeared on social media no less than 58.747 times daily for almost three weeks after the killing of Michael Brown (Anderson 2016). Adding to this, when George Floyd was killed in 2020, the hashtag was used approximately 3.7 million times daily in the following weeks after his death.

From 2013 until the end of 2020, the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag has been used almost 50 million times in total and has, thereby, become an integrated part of the national discourse within the United States (Anderson et al. 2020; Ince, Rojas and Davis 2017, p. 1819). Not only has the hashtag been prominent on social media, it has also been manifested on apparel, mugs and other types of merchandise. Adding to this, the hashtag's phrase has also been broadcasted in American tv-shows such as *Empire* and *Law and Order* (Clayton 2018, p. 454). Besides the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag, supporters of the movement also use social media platforms to share videos, pictures and stories of numerous Black people, who have been victims of racial injustice and inequality. In this way, the use of social media platforms has, ultimately, assisted BLM to grow into the global movement it is today (Freelon, McIlwain and Clark 2016, p. 7).

While social media has been regarded as beneficial to social movements in the literature, researchers have also identified certain disadvantages associated with the use of social media that are worth highlighting. For instance, Hwang and Kim (2015) suggest that in today's digital era, people are more willing to participate and show their support to a social movement online, rather than committing to larger activities that require physical attendance (p. 480). To elaborate, people can join or support a movement on social media without being fully committed to it, as it can be less binding and less time consuming to post a picture or upload a video to social media (ibid., p. 480). The scholars refer to this sort of participation as "clicktivism", which encompasses individuals who only participate in social movements by posting superficial content on social media without a larger commitment and/or desire to engage in further and more demanding activities associated with the movement (ibid., p. 480).

### **2.1.3 Corporations in the Sociopolitical Sphere**

As this literature review has already emphasized, both the public and corporations engage with sociopolitical matters in society, and corporations, thereby, play a noteworthy role in social movements today (de Bakker et al. 2013, p. 577). According to Fan (2019), governments traditionally had the role of attending to and solving societal, political and environmental issues, whereas corporations prioritized attending to economic issues (p. 443) and increasing profits (p.

452). However, this is no longer the case, as corporations now also engage with sociopolitical matters in society through their business operations.

Due to the rising public interest in social, political and environmental matters, consumer expectations have increased in recent years. According to Feldmann (2016), consumers now consider corporations to have greater responsibilities besides profit making and, therefore, demand corporations to take a stand on sociopolitical matters (Feldmann 2016, p. 81). In this regard, it is especially consumers from generation Y and Z, who have increased their expectations to corporations (Fan 2019, p. 453; Sarkar & Kotler 2018, chp. 3). To elaborate, Sarkar and Kotler (2018) suggest that the younger generations demand corporations to aim their attention beyond profits to improve the world, as these generations in particular are very conscious of constant issues such as crime, violence and air pollution (chp. 3).

Similarly, research by Cone Communications (2017) shows that 70 percent of consumers in the United States “...believe companies have an obligation to take actions to improve issues that may not be relevant to everyday business operations”, 78 percent of consumers in the United States expect corporations to “...[stand] up for important social justice issues” and 87 percent of consumers in the United States will “... purchase a product because that company advocated for an issue they cared about”. One of the reasons why corporations engage with sociopolitical matters is, thereby, to meet consumer demands and preferences.

According to Montez de Oca, Mason and Ahn (2020), when a crisis occurs in a community, some corporations respond to it by acknowledging, addressing and creating awareness of the crisis and, simultaneously, taking advantage of the crisis as a marketing opportunity (p. 2). This entails a form of socially conscious marketing, where corporations fuse brand values with sociopolitical matters in order to commodify the said matters (ibid., pp. 3-4). To elaborate the phenomenon of brand values, Styliadis et al. (2020) suggest that brand values reflect a corporation’s core beliefs and character (p. 45). In a similar fashion, Urde (2009) suggests that brand values are constituted of ideas, norms and actions which reflect and define the core essence of a brand (p. 620). For this reason, the scholar underlines that brand values have a large influence on the perceptions that consumers have of a brand (ibid., p. 621).

An example of a form of socially conscious marketing is when Coca-Cola aired an advertisement in 1971, in which the brand fused its world-renowned soft drink with the 1960s attempt to obtain world peace (Montez de Oca, Mason & Ahn 2020, p. 3). The brand, thereby, commodified universal happiness, hope, love and harmony into their brand values, to which consumers could essentially support world peace by purchasing and enjoying a Coca-Cola soft drink. Although some consumers favour sociopolitical initiatives made by corporations, others do not. When corporations adopt a sociopolitical stance into their marketing strategy, it is likely that it will contradict with the perceptions of some of its consumer segments. To elaborate, consumers have destroyed products, disliked marketing campaigns on social media and even boycotted businesses to showcase their dissatisfaction with corporations that have taken a stand on sociopolitical matters (Vredenburg et al. 2020, p. 444). Thus, when corporations decide to fuse brand values with sociopolitical matters in marketing efforts, it can be suggested that they do it to attract specific consumer segments, even though it can be at the expense of disappointing and/or losing other consumer segments.

According to Sarkar and Kotler (2018), besides acknowledging, addressing and creating awareness of a crisis or issue, some corporations also want to make a genuine change and impact in society (chp. 3). This entails a form of brand activism where corporations not only articulate sociopolitical issues but do something actively to improve the said issues. To exemplify, Mattel, who is known for its world-renowned Barbie dolls, expanded its Barbie doll collection in 2016 with a collection of dolls that embrace the diversity of all body types and skin colors. Mattel created the collection as a response to a body positivity movement, which occurred as a reaction to unhealthy and unrealistic body ideals that were apparent in both the real and online world (Sarkar & Kotler 2018, chp. 12; Cohen, Newton-John & Slater 2020, p. 2). The brand, thereby, fused brand values with sociopolitical matters relating to diversity and commodified body positivity as a part of its values, but also contributed with an active change in their own business operations with the new collection.

In the field of marketing, Montez de Oca, Mason and Ahn (2020) highlight that many scholars agree that consumers find corporations' advertising engagements in sociopolitical issues most authentic if:

1) brands take clear stands without fear of alienating some consumers; 2) they align corporate values with their actions so that the politics do not appear opportunistic or superficial [...], 3) commercials' narratives should mobilize emotions since emotions convey truth; and 4) they should have closure so that consumers get emotional relief and feel the problem has a solution [...] (p. 7).

Thus, even though consumers increasingly demand corporations to engage with sociopolitical issues, it is essential that the corporations' advertising efforts are perceived by consumers as authentic through clear standpoints, an alignment between brand values and actions, an appeal to emotions along with solutions to the issues in question.

## **Woke**

When placing corporate engagement with sociopolitical matters into the context of social movements and racial injustice, an increasing number of corporations position themselves as being "woke" today. The concept of woke has been around since the 1940s (Sobande 2019, p. 2728), however, it has gained great popularity in recent years and is now widely used in relation to the BLM movement (Lima & Øksnevad 2020, p. 3). The concept encompasses being conscious of and recognizing the social injustice and inequality that takes place in society, and today, being woke is particularly associated with racial injustice and inequality of Black people in the United States (Ashlee, Zamora & Karikari 2017, p. 90; Sobande 2019, p. 2724).

In this way, corporations especially position themselves as being woke by creating woke advertisements (Selmani 2020, p. 9). Woke advertisements refer to advertisements that convey messages relating to the aforementioned matters of social injustice to consumer segments, and these advertisements are mostly published on social media (Herbert 2020, p. 55). Adding to this,

Lima and Øksnevad (2020) stress that multinational and global enterprises and corporations increasingly incorporate woke advertising into their business operations today (p. 3).

Although corporations increasingly use their platforms to create awareness of social injustice issues, scholars Austin, Gaither and Gaither (2019) stress that various corporations who have engaged with woke advertising have been called out for “woke washing” (p. 4). The concept of woke washing stems from green washing, which entails corporations who market their products to be environmentally friendly while they, in fact, are the opposite (Boyd 2018). Woke washing can, therefore, entail corporations who incorporate woke initiatives into their advertising efforts, but fail to ensure an alignment between the sociopolitical matter in focus and the brand’s values (Vredenburg et al. 2020, p. 445). Woke washing can also entail corporations who adopt activist values only to market their products or to derail or cover up public knowledge of inferior business conducts (Herbert 2020, p. 55). Being called out for woke washing can have negative consequences for a brand, as it can for example lead consumers to boycott a brand and its products to showcase their dissatisfaction (Vredenburg et al. 2020, p. 444; Vredenburg et al. 2018).

A similar concept that is also important in this regard is “woke capitalism”, which according to Selmani (2020) entails corporations who employ woke advertising to increase profits rather than spreading genuine awareness of social injustice issues (p. 11). To exemplify, Pepsi has been highly criticized and referred to as being woke capitalists due to its advertisement with Kendall Jenner in 2017, in which she offered a can of Pepsi to police officers in a protest. The intention with the advertisement was to create awareness of the BLM movement and its protests relating to police shootings (ibid., p. 10). However, the advertisement arguably undermined the importance of the BLM movement, because its message was interpreted by many consumers that Pepsi’s soft drink could solve the racial injustice issues in the United States. The advertisement, thereby, had a focus on increasing profits while positioning the brand as being woke. Being called out as woke capitalists can, thus, be damaging to a brand and its reputation - especially because it often causes much negative publicity (ibid., p. 11). This underlines that the way woke advertising is received depends on the perception of the recipients in question.



## **Conceptualization of Woke in Advertising**

Despite the fact that the concept of woke is widely used in connection with the BLM movement, limited scholarship can be found on the subject of woke advertisements relating to the movement. From a more general perspective, Lima and Øksnevad (2020) have conducted a consumer-oriented research, in which they examine what influences the success of woke advertising (p. 1). The research findings illustrate that in order to make successful woke advertisements in the eyes of the consumers, corporations must choose a sociopolitical issue or social movement that aligns with the corporations' brand values (ibid., p. 29).

However, Sobande (2019) has conducted a discursive research in which the scholar examines how 10 global brands convey woke messages relating to Black social justice through their advertisements (p. 2724). The research findings highlight that woke advertisements draw on verbal and visual elements directly associated with social movements, celebrities and their public images along with what the scholar refers to as "Black Excellence" and "Woke Change Agents" (ibid. P. 2730). "Black Excellence" encompasses experiences of Black people being inferior in society, Black people having determination despite facing adversity and messages of strength, empowerment and confidence that seek to uplift Black people and create encouragement (ibid., pp. 2732-2734). "Woke Change Agent" encompasses a call for change, in which brands emphasize their own commitment to assist in social change and consumers as having the capacity and ability to promote social change (ibid., p. 2736). On a noticeable facet of this, the scholar suggests that addressing issues relating to Black social injustice requires more than just representation in advertising and underlines the need for continued consideration of woke advertisements due to the rising criticism and discussion of woke washing in brands' marketing efforts (ibid., pp. 2740-2741).

In a similar fashion, Montez de Oca, Mason and Ahn (2020) have conducted a research, in which they, through the use of textual analysis, examine how corporations conceptualize woke messages of larger sociopolitical matters in 26 advertisements that have been shown during major sporting events in the United States (p. 4). The research findings highlight that woke

advertisements draw on pressing social issues and social movements, transformation and relief through actions, empowerment, optimism and hope, diversity and inclusion along with demonstrations of how brands' support the issues in question and how consumers can have a positive impact in society (ibid., pp. 6-15). On a noticeable facet of this, the scholars suggest that woke advertising is not a trend that will decrease over time, which is why the scholars underline that more scholarship should be conducted in this field, since corporations will increasingly make use of woke advertising efforts in the future (ibid., p. 13).

## **2.2 Multimodality**

We now live in a digital era, where people use the Internet and mediated technology more than ever, and this has led to a shift in communication practices. Özbölük and Kurtoğlu (2019) stress how communication has evolved from solely verbal to also encompass visual communication, as communication is becoming “a world of signs, symbols and icons” (p. 48) to a greater extent. The development of new technologies has increased the accessibility of visual communication, which has caused an abundance of highly visual content, especially on the Internet (Fahmy, Bock & Wanta 2014, p. 1). Likewise, visual communication is prevailing in the mediascape, as media is constantly evolving through technologies that allow a display of multiple modes of communication, including graphics, pictures and layout techniques (Lim, Nekmat & Nahar 2011, p. 170). For example, social media have become integral in the digital era, and social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter advantageously enable production and sharing of multimodal content (Bateman, Wildfeuer & Hiipala 2017, p. 355). According to Schroeder (2002), we now live in “a visual information culture” (p. 1) that exposes us to a large quantity of visual content on a daily basis, and the scholar, therefore, characterizes visual consumption as one of the most important features of the 21st century (ibid., pp. 1-3). Visual communication has, thus, become an inevitable part of our lives (Özbölük & Kurtoğlu 2019, p. 53), which is why the study of visual communication and multimodality has grown in importance (Fahmy, Bock & Wanta 2014).

According to Dutch linguist Theo van Leeuwen (2020), the fundamental concept of multimodality is that “it melds a variety of communicative modes into a coherent and unified whole” (p. 466). Multimodality relates to social semiotics - a theory of meaning and communication that focuses on how different semiotic resources are used by someone as tools for creating meaning in a given context (Wong 2019, p. 2). Semiotics is “the study of signs” (Cameron & Panović 2014, p. 98), and Theo van Leeuwen (2005) describes semiotic resources as “obvious modes of communication such as language, gesture, images and music, but also less obvious ones such as food, dress and everyday objects, all of which carry cultural value and significance” (p. i). Each of the chosen semiotic resources, thereby, contribute to the overall message that is being conveyed. Van Leeuwen’s definition of multimodality forms the basis for the following sections, in which academic literature about multimodality will be reviewed.

### **2.2.1 Effects of Multimodality**

There seems to be a disagreement among scholars regarding the effects of multimodal messages. From a psychological standpoint, Singer (2014) underlines that audiovisual messages impede information processing (p. 31). The scholar suggests that audiovisual messages are complex and fast in nature, which limits our capacities for processing information thoroughly, since the messages include moving visuals, voice-overs and written text that pressures our attention span (ibid., pp. 37-38). The scholar, therefore, adds that the nature of static messages allows a more focused and effective information processing (ibid., p. 40). In a similar fashion, Graber (1990) shares concern for the processing of visual information in audiovisual messages, as “...information may be lost because its manner of presentation is difficult to absorb”(p. 134). By investigating the contribution of visual information to the meanings conveyed in over 300 televised American news stories from 1985 in an experiment with 48 news consumers, the scholar’s findings suggest that news consumers tend to concentrate more on written text and, thus, do not process the remaining visual information thoroughly (ibid., p. 148). However, more recent studies challenge these views, as the impact of visual communication has now been well-documented (Fahmy, Bock & Wanta 2014, p. 135). In complete contrast to the findings from Singer (2014) and Graber (1990), Arpan et al. (2006) have examined how visual information

influences the effect of news stories about protests on the audience, and these findings suggest that visual information contributes substantially to both the attention to and the perception of news stories (p. 2). The scholars, thus, underline that “visual information alone” (ibid., p. 16) can impact the audience’s processing of news stories (ibid., p. 16). Similarly, Fahmy and Wanta (2005, as cited in Fahmy, Bock & Wanta 2014) have examined how different media channels influence the persuasiveness of messages on individuals based on the concept of priming (p. 98). The scholars’ findings suggest that individuals have stronger attitude changes when exposed to information from moving images, and that it is, thus, more effective to communicate messages through media channels such as videos rather than media channels such as static print formats (ibid., p. 98). In the same manner, Smith (1991) has examined how verbal and visual advertising content influences consumers’ inferences about products, and the findings suggest that consumers’ inferences about products are “strongly visually depended” (p. 22), which is why the scholar argues that visual information largely influences the way consumers’ respond to advertising messages (ibid., p. 22).

On a noticeable facet of this, a large body of literature agrees that multimodality is beneficial for advertising. In modern media such as television, computers and mobile phones, advertisements “...can be found anywhere at any time” (Liu 2019, p. 1523) and are, thereby, penetrating our lives to a greater extent (ibid., p. 1523). According to Çoşkun (2015), visuals are very important for modern media, as they are used to express meaning beyond solely language (p. 42). Likewise, Özbölük and Kurtoğlu (2019) suggest that “...visual is the king in the digital era” (p. 57), which is why the scholars argue that using visual-based content in advertising is now vital for companies’ survival, as it can invoke emotions, engage consumers and reveal more about a company (pp. 57-59). Similarly, Yang (2019) suggests that advertisements are more powerful when they include resources from both verbal and visual communication (p. 30). The scholar argues that verbal and visual communication reinforce each other and are, thereby, important for conveying intended advertising messages and advantageous for better engaging the consumers (ibid., pp. 38-40). To this, Liu (2019) adds that the simultaneous use of resources such as language, image and sound in advertising can “...better convey the connotation and obtain the best advertising effect” (p.

1523). In the same way, Fahmy, Bock and Wanta (2014) add that “powerful visual imagery” (ibid., p. 135) in advertising can help to influence consumer behavior.

### **2.2.2 Analyzing Multimodality**

According to Bateman, Wildfeuer and Hiippala (2017), communication disciplines have traditionally focused on “segmenting and compartmentalizing” (p. 7) different modes of communication rather than analyzing how the modes function collectively (ibid., p. 7). The scholars argue that within multimodal communication, it is inadequate to aim attention to individual modes of communication as if the modes are only present on their own, because they always coexist with several other modes in any given multimodal context (ibid., p. 8). For this reason, the scholars stress the importance of engaging “...productively and critically with combinations of quite different forms of expression” (ibid, p. 14), as the synergies within multimodality cannot be ignored (ibid., p. 14). A large body of literature agrees that analysis of multimodality needs to address the multilayered relationships and meanings of the occurring modes of communication (Jewitt & Kress 2003, p. 73; Çoşkun 2015, p. 40; Smith & O’Halloran 2011, p. 156; Ly & Jung 2015, p. 55).

Australian semiotician Gunther Kress and Dutch linguist Theo van Leeuwen are renowned for their contributions to the field of multimodality. Their book *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* from 1996 is deemed a “groundbreaking publication” (Bateman, Wildfeuer & Hiippala 2017, p. 48) that provides one of the most influential structures for multimodal discourse research, as it addresses meaning making through both verbal and visual modes of communication (ibid., p. 48). It is regarded to be one of the most “widely recognized theoretical framework[s] for analyzing multimodality” (Ly & Jung 2015, p. 50), because it acknowledges the value of different semiotic resources and presents a framework for decoding the messages and discourses that the semiotic resources collectively construct (ibid., p. 50). Kress and van Leeuwen’s approach to multimodal discourse analysis has proven to be suitable for “a great variety of complex texts” (Maier 2011, p. 156) such as tv commercials and films, and scholars highlight that the theoretical framework provides a beneficial common language for analyzing

both verbal and visual resources that are used for meaning making (ibid., p. 156). Maier (2011) has applied Kress and van Leeuwen's framework to analyze the multimodal discursive strategies that are used in a marketing video to position the American corporation General Electric as environmentally friendly (p. 154). By analyzing the meaning that is conveyed through different modes of communication in the video, the findings showcase how General Electric presents itself as a reliable corporation (ibid., p. 166). In a similar fashion, Bateman, Wildfeuer & Hiippala (2017) have applied the framework to analyze the opening scene of the 1995 Hollywood film *Die Hard*, which the scholars consider to be "a highly-crafted multimodal composition" (p. 332). The scholars stress the relevance and necessity of multimodal analysis of any kind of film, as a variety of different resources are always used to create different communicative effects in films (ibid., pp. 328-329). The opening scene of the film showcases how resources such as "cutting, camera movement, sound track, natural sounds, framing of characters and camera distance" (ibid., 332) combine to create a unified discourse. More recently, Liu (2019) has applied the framework to analyze how verbal and visual messages interrelate to convey meaning and persuade the public about beneficial social behavior in three public service advertisements about wildlife protection, parenting and health respectively (p. 1526). While the study explores the synergies between verbal and visual messages in static advertisements, the scholar underlines that "in this era of information technology, dynamic multimodal analysis shall be taken into consideration, studying how sound, action and other semiotic resources work together to construct interactive meaning" (Liu 2019, p. 1523).

### **2.3 Research Question**

The body of academic scholarship presented in this literature review underlines the prominence of social movements and how they are regarded as a direct response to conflicts in society (Krinsky 2019) and a powerful tool to promote sociopolitical changes (Sunio, Peckson & Ugay 2020). The literature emphasizes how corporations play an important role in social movements. With the increase of consumer demands towards corporations that go beyond solely profit making and the increasingly belief driven nature of consumption, in which a majority of consumers will purchase a product if a brand advocates for sociopolitical issues the consumers

care about themselves, corporations have started to employ marketing strategies that spread awareness of sociopolitical issues. A great number of corporations position themselves as woke today and create advertisements that convey messages of racial injustice and inequality of Black people in the United States and the BLM movement in general. As stated in the introduction (Section 1), this has especially been the case following the death of George Floyd, where large, world-renown American corporations have used their far-reaching platforms to engage with BLM.

However, as the literature stresses, some corporations have also been heavily criticized for capitalizing on woke advertising to increase profits, as the advertised sociopolitical issues do not align with the corporations' values (Vredenburg et al. 2020) and the advertisements are clearly focused on marketing products (Herbert 2020). This has, ultimately, led consumers to question corporations' sincerity when engaging with sociopolitical matters, as the question arises if the engagements are opportunistic with a maintained focus on profit making. Therefore, in light of the global prominence of the BLM movement in 2020, it is relevant to investigate the advertising messages corporations convey about racial injustice and inequality of Black people and how these messages align with the corporations' values - especially to uncover if the corporations engagements appear to be sincere or opportunistic.

As we now live in a digital era where mediated technology and the Internet have become integral parts of our lives, the literature also emphasizes how social media are considered important platforms for social movements, as they enable both the public and corporations to easily voice their opinions and debate conflicts within society (Hwang & Kim 2015). It is, thereby, underlined how discourses in a society can be generated and heavily spread through social media platforms. The BLM movement presents a recent example of how a social movement has been strengthened due to the global outreach of social media (Clayton 2018), especially through the use of multimodal content such as the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, images and video footage that shed a light on racial injustice and inequality. As new technologies in the mediascape enable the production and sharing of multimodal content (Bateman, Wildfeuer & Hiippala 2017), the substantial advantages of using multimodality in advertising have been well-documented in the

literature. It is highlighted how visual communication is vital for corporations' survival in the digital era, as it can strongly evoke emotions, influence consumer behavior and reveal more about a company (Özbölük & Kurtoğlu 2019), and, thereby, make advertising messages more powerful (Yang 2019). Due to the importance of visual communication in advertising, it is relevant to investigate how corporations use multimodality to construct and convey messages about racial injustice and inequality of Black people on social media to influence consumers.

Within literature about woke advertisements, little is currently known from a multimodal perspective, even though it is a field of growing importance. Lima and Øksnevad (2020) focus on what influences the success of woke advertisements from the perspective of consumers, Sobande (2019) focuses on discourse analysis of how woke messages relating to social justice are conveyed and Montez de Oca, Mason and Ahn (2020) focus on textual analysis of how corporations conceptualize woke messages in advertisements during major sporting events in the United States. In this regard, scholars have expressed the need for further investigating woke advertisements due to the rising criticism and discussion of woke washing (Sobande 2019) and the fact that woke advertisements are predicted to be an advertising trend that will keep increasing over time (Montez de Oca, Mason & Ahn 2020).

As the literature stresses the importance of addressing multilayered relationships of communication, engaging with all occurring forms of communication in a given context and highly taking multimodal analysis into consideration in the digital era (Bateman, Wilfeuer & Hiippala 2017; Liu 2019), it creates an important opportunity to advance the understanding of how corporations use different modes of communication to convey messages about racial injustice and inequality of Black people in the United States. A research with such perspective can provide detailed insights into the specific multimodal strategies that are used to communicate woke corporate standpoints of racial injustice and inequality to influence consumers. This thesis, thereby, seeks to investigate how corporations construct and convey multimodal advertising messages on social media regarding the BLM movement with the following research question:



***How do American sports brands portray Black Lives Matter in their advertisements?***

- *What kind of messages do the advertisements convey through verbal and visual modes of communication?*
- *What kind of understandings of Black Lives Matter do the advertisements shape?*
- *How do the advertisements align with the brands' values?*

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

In this section, the theoretical framework of Multimodal Discourse Analysis will be presented along with the specific approach to multimodality that is chosen for this thesis by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen.

#### **3.1 Multimodal Discourse Analysis**

According to British multimodality researcher Carey Jewitt (2014), multimodality “proceeds on the assumption that representation and communication always draw on a multiplicity of modes, all of which have the potential to contribute equally to meaning” (p. 13). Modes are means of communicating, and Multimodal Discourse Analysis, therefore, seeks to uncover how different modes of communication, like verbal and visual communication, and their semiotic resources are used simultaneously to convey unified meaning and persuade recipients in a given context (Machin & Mayr 2012, p. 1). Dutch linguist Theo van Leeuwen (2005) describes semiotic resources as follows:

Semiotic resources are the actions, materials and artifacts we use for communicative purposes, whether produced physiologically - for example, with our vocal apparatus, the muscles we use to make facial expressions and gestures - or technologically - for example, with pen and ink, or computer hardware and software ... Semiotic resources have a meaning potential, based on their past uses, and a set of affordances based on their possible uses, and these will be actualized in concrete social contexts ... (p. 3).

The interrelation between the occurring semiotic resources is important for multimodal research, as each individual semiotic resource contributes with different meaning potentials and affordances that are only partial in relation to the overall message that is being communicated (Jewitt 2014, p. 27).

Multimodal research is rooted in social semiotics, which is a theory of meaning and communication that focuses on how the creator of a message employs different semiotic resources for creating meaning in a given context (Wong 2019, p. 2). Meaning making is, therefore, regarded as a social process within social semiotics (Jewitt 2014, p. 33), because a message is considered to reflect and realize the objectives of its creator (Machin & Mayr 2012, p. 17; Kress 2011, p. 36). According to Australian semiotician Gunther Kress (2011), the creator of a message actively chooses which semiotic resources to use to convey specific meaning and, thereby, seeks a selective match between “...what is to be meant with what can best express that meaning” (p. 41). The chosen semiotic resources are, thus, highly influenced by the motivations and interests of the creator in a given context (Jewitt 2014, p. 17), which is why multimodal communication is regarded as a “window onto its maker” (ibid., p. 33).

By investigating the chosen semiotic resources in a given context, a framework of discourses, including ideas, values and attitudes, can be identified within the communicated message (Machin & Mayr 2012, p. 20). According to Jewitt (2014), multimodal communication is always discursively shaped, and all modes of communication, thereby, offer different ways to express discourses (p. 28). For this reason, the scholar argues that “different discourses may be brought into play modally and, therefore, the choice of modes may itself be used analytically to indicate the presence of different discourses in specific texts” (Jewitt 2014, p. 28). Theo van Leeuwen (2005) describes discourses as “socially constructed knowledges of some aspect of reality ... developed in specific social contexts, and in ways which are appropriate to the interests of social actors in these contexts ...” (p. 94). To clarify van Leeuwen’s description, a social actor is considered to be the creator of a message in this particular instance. Through the discourses within a message, the creator, thereby, establishes specific associations that influence and shape recipients’ understanding of something in a given context (Machin & Mayr 2012, p. 20). For this reason, multimodal discourse scholars David Machin and Andrea Mayr (2012) underline that communication is a social construction (p. 10).

### 3.1.1 Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen

For this thesis, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's (2006) approach to Multimodal Discourse Analysis is chosen, because it is a widely recognized and common framework for analyzing multimodality that addresses meaning making through both verbal and visual modes of communication (Bateman, Wildfeuer & Hiippala 2017, p. 48). The approach has been proven suitable for investigating complex multimodal messages in a large body of literature (Maier 2011, p. 156), as the approach acknowledges the value of different semiotic resources and presents a framework for decoding messages and their underlying discourses that are constructed collectively by the interrelation of the semiotic resources (Ly & Jung 2015, p. 50). Kress and van Leeuwen underline how different modes of communication constantly interact with each other to create meaning and discourse and, therefore, argue that modes should be analyzed collectively rather than individually (Jones 2012, p. 39). The theorists' approach to Multimodal Discourse Analysis is, thus, considered highly applicable for this thesis, as it offers a common metalanguage that enables a thorough investigation of both verbal and visual modes of communication within one single framework. Furthermore, the approach is considered applicable, since it has previously been used for similar marketing research to investigate tv commercials (Maier 2011) and public service advertising campaigns (Liy 2019), among others. For this reason, the theoretical framework can be employed to investigate how American sports brands portray Black Lives Matter through verbal and visual modes of communication and how the sports Brands perceive Black Lives Matter through the underlying discourses in the advertisements.

Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) theoretical framework for Multimodal Discourse Analysis is tripart, as the theorists suggest that communication fulfills three major functions: *ideational*, *interpersonal* and *textual* (p. 15). The three functions will be accounted for in the following paragraphs:

## Ideational Function

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), any mode of communication represents “the world around and inside us” (p. 15). The *ideational function* of a mode, therefore, reflects how the creator of a message experiences and perceives parts of the world (ibid., p. 42). This is realized verbally by linking nouns with verbs and visually by linking people or objects with processes to communicate a comprehensive story (Jones 2012, p. 90). The theorists argue that a mode can have *narrative patterns* that reflect unfolding actions or events and/or *conceptual patterns* that reflect a generalized and timeless classification of people, objects and environments through their attributes (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006, p. 59).

## Interpersonal Function

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), any mode of communication establishes social interaction and relation (p. 15). The *interpersonal function* of a mode, therefore, reflects how the creator of a message establishes a relationship with the recipients of the message (ibid., p. 42). The theorists argue that a mode can directly address recipients and, thereby, *demand* something from the recipients by encouraging some form of engagement with or response to the message that is being communicated (ibid., p. 118). A mode can also indirectly address recipients and, thereby, *offer* something to the recipients - often in the form of items of information or objects of contemplation in the message that the recipients are passively exposed to (ibid., p. 119).

*Gaze*, *distance* and *angle* are important concepts that influence the relationship that is established with the recipients through visual modes of communication.

- The *gaze* of the represented people can either acknowledge the recipients or not. If the represented people look directly at the camera (and at the recipients), it indicates that they are interacting with and, thereby, directly addressing the recipients (ibid., p. 117).
- The *distance* of the represented people, objects and the environment from the camera suggests the type of relationship that is established with the recipients, as “social relations determine the distance (literally and figuratively) we keep from one another” (ibid., p.

124). A close *distance* reflects an intimate relationship, interest and involvement, while a far *distance* reflects an impersonal relationship, formal character and alienation (ibid., pp. 124-125). Similarly, a close *distance* reflects that the represented is within the recipients' reach, while a far *distance* reflects that the represented is out of the recipients' reach and for contemplation only (ibid., pp. 127-128).

- The *angle* of the represented people, objects and environment reflects the recipients' perspective and the power relation between the represented and the recipients. A high *angle* indicates that the recipients have the power, a low *angle* indicates that the represented has the power and an *angle* at eye level indicates equality and no power difference between the recipients and the represented (ibid., 140).

### **Textual Function**

According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), all individual modes of communication combine to create an interrelated text - a unified message, in which the modes both interrelate with each other and with the specific context they are produced for (p. 15). The *textual function* of modes, therefore, reflects how the composition of the occurring verbal and visual modes of communication collectively realize textual meanings (ibid., p. 43).

Within the composition of verbal modes of communication, it is important to investigate how textual meaning is realized through the chosen *vocabulary*, including the possible prevalence of specific words and connotations (Machin & Mayr 2012, pp. 30-34).

Within the composition of the visual modes of communication, it is important to investigate how textual meaning is realized by foregrounding specific visual elements to the recipients (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006, p. 176). *Salience* indicates how elements attract recipients' attention to different degrees and includes the placement of people or objects in the image, the relative size of people and objects in the image, differences in sharpness of focus (ibid., p. 177) along with tonal and color contrasts (ibid., p. 202). Adding to this, a center placement is considered to reflect the core of the communication (ibid., p. 196) and, in the same way, a foreground placement is considered more salient than a background placement (ibid., p. 202).

*Modality* is a concept that has a large influence on textual meaning, because it reflects the reliability of the communicated message (ibid., p. 154) and how realistic the visual communication seems to the recipients (Jones 2012, p. 92). Generally speaking, *modality* refers to the “truth value or credibility of statements about the world” (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006, p. 155). Within verbal communication, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) suggest that *modality* is related to “auxiliary verbs which accord specific degrees of modality to statements, verbs like may, will and must ... and their related adjectives ... and adverbs” (p. 155). Within visual communication, the theorists suggest that *modality* relates to currently dominant conventions of visual representation:

We judge an image real when, for instance, its colours are approximately as saturated as those in the standard, the most widely used photographic technology. When colour becomes more saturated, we judge it exaggerated, ‘more than real’, excessive. When it is less saturated we judge it ‘less than real’... And the same can be said about other aspects of representation, the rendition of detail, the representation of depth, and so on. Pictures which have the perspective, the degree of detail, the kind of colour rendition, etc. of the standard technology of colour photography have the highest modality, and are seen as ‘naturalistic’. As detail, sharpness, colour, etc. are reduced or amplified, as the perspective flattens or deepens, so modality decreases (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006, p. 159).

Adding to this, photographs are considered highly realistic compared to drawings or paintings, because photographs offer true representations of reality (Jones 2012, p. 92). In this regard, photographs in black and white can be considered realistic in some instances (ibid., p. 92). To exemplify, black and white images in newspapers can be regarded as reliable, because a high degree of credibility is attached to newspapers, as they offer truthful statements about the world (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006, p. 154; Jones 2012, p. 92).

### **3.1.2 Challenges of Multimodal Research**

Even though Multimodal Discourse Analysis is considered highly applicable for investigating the research question of this thesis, it is important to understand and consider the possible

challenges of multimodal research. According to Jewitt (2014), multimodal analyses can seem impressionistic, as the fluid nature of semiotic resources can make it challenging to derive specific meanings: “how do you know that this gesture means this or this image means that?” (p. 29). However, the scholar underlines that semiotic resources are contextual and that the challenge of interpretation can be resolved by linking the semiotic resources to the larger context and social function that the overall message is created for (ibid., p. 29). For this reason, Jewitt (2014) argues that multimodal research is problematic if it fails to go beyond a merely detailed description of the occurring semiotic resources and underlines the importance of investigating “what kind of discourses are being articulated in a context and why, what is the social function of the representations being described” (p. 29). In other words, it is essential to place the multimodal message in a broader framework in order to fully understand its function and, thereby, go from perception to critical comprehension.

As this thesis seeks to investigate advertisements in the form of videos, it is also important to consider the challenges of moving images. Moving images are very complex constructions that carry rich meaning (Bateman & Schmidt 2012, p. 28). According to Bateman, Wildfeuer & Hiippala (2017), moving images are based on a large integration of various forms of expression that create unified audiovisual messages, including “a rich variety of visual cues (themselves ranging over naturalistic images, animation, written language) but also an almost similarly rich variety of audial cues (ranging over sound, music and spoken language) ...” (p. 328). The scholars, therefore, argue that it can be challenging to convert dynamic moving images into static, written analysis (ibid., p. 332). However, the scholars point out that the objective of a multimodal analysis of moving images is not to fully re-create the moving images in question, but rather provide sufficient cues and select representative information that reflect a coherent narrative, as “there is no point in attempting to show the film frame-by-frame because this is never perceived by any viewer in any case” (ibid., pp. 332-333). In other words, the principal goal of multimodal analysis of moving images is to reveal how they are constructed to convey broader meanings.



## **4. Methodology**

In the following section, we will outline our methodological choices and considerations to this thesis starting with philosophy of science, where we describe our chosen paradigm. Furthermore, we will outline our research design, data collection, method of analysis and discuss the considerations associated with our methodological choices.

### **4.1 Philosophy of Science**

The paradigm to this thesis consists of the ontological position of constructivism, the epistemological position of interpretivism along with a qualitative research approach, which will be elaborated in the following subsection.

When engaging with research, it is essential to reflect upon the paradigm that determines how the research will be conducted. A paradigm encompasses “...a cluster of beliefs and dictates which for scientists in a particular discipline influence what should be studied, how research should be done, [and] how results should be interpreted” (Kuhn 1970, as cited in Bryman 2012, p. 630). In this regard, Guba (1990) suggests that researchers must specifically reflect upon ontology, epistemology and methodology (p. 18).

Since this thesis seeks to investigate how American sports brands portray BLM in their advertisements through the use of Multimodal Discourse Analysis, the thesis has a point of departure in how the American sports brands understand BLM and convey messages about their respective worldviews. For this reason, the thesis embraces a constructionist ontological position. Ontology refers to how we as researchers make sense and meaning of the social world (Porta & Keating 2008, p. 21). In this regard, constructionism suggests that the social world is continuously constructed by social actors and, thereby, in “a constant state of revision” (Bryman 2012, p. 33). Meaning making of the social world is, therefore, constantly constructed through action and interaction by social actors (ibid., p. 34), which is why Bryman (2012) emphasizes discourse studies as a way of understanding meaning, as discourses entail how social actors influence and shape the social world through various forms of communication (p. 34).

In this way, social actors are deemed essential for making meaning of the social world, which simultaneously underlines the significance of how American sports brands make meaning of BLM. The American sports brands' advertisements actively mirror their respective worldview and, thereby, provide an understanding of how the brands respectively conceptualize BLM. As elaborated in the theoretical framework of this thesis (Section 3), meaning making is essential to Multimodal Discourse Analysis, because discourses are considered to be socially constructed knowledge of aspects of reality that reflects and realizes the objectives of social actors (van Leeuwen 2005, p. 94). Discourses, thereby, shape the understanding of something in a given context (Machin & Mayr 2012, p. 20). Thus, the American sports brands can be considered significant social actors who take part in shaping society through socially constructed knowledge of BLM in their advertisements.

American sports brands' perceptions of BLM, thereby, constitute the foundation of this thesis. For this reason, the thesis embraces an interpretivist epistemological position. Epistemology refers to how we as researchers approach and develop knowledge of the social world (Porta & Keating 2008, p. 21). In this regard, interpretivism suggests that one can only understand the social world by investigating the subjective perceptions that social actors have of the social world (ibid., p. 25). This implies that social actors can perceive the social world in different ways, which underlines the significance of how American sports brands respectively perceive BLM through the messages they convey in their advertisements, which we as researchers have to interpret. In relation to this, van Leeuwen (2005) stresses that researchers within the field of multimodality "...are concerned not with the absolute truth but with the truth as speakers and writers and other sign producers see it, and with the semiotic resources they use to express it" (p. 160). Therefore, this thesis does not aim to uncover one absolute truth about American sports brands and BLM but aims to develop rich knowledge of the brands' respective perceptions and conceptualizations of BLM through verbal and visual modes of communication.

Following the aforementioned ontological and epistemological positions, this thesis will employ a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research emphasizes meaning making and will, thereby, enable us to investigate how the American sports brands convey meaning about BLM

(Gibbs 2018, pp. xii-xiii). The qualitative research approach will be elaborated in the following subsections.

## **4.2 Research Design**

Common to all empirical inquiries is that they follow a specific set of methodological choices, which enable a researcher to move from research questions to conclusions, and this is referred to as a research design (Yin 2009, p. 26). In the following subsection, we will outline the research design of the thesis.

### **4.2.1 Descriptive Research**

Since this thesis seeks to investigate how American sport brands portray BLM in their advertisements, it can be considered to be descriptive in nature. To elaborate, descriptive research seeks to “...generate knowledge about what characterizes a phenomenon, such as its substance...” (Alvesson & Sandberg 2013, p. 14) and it is, therefore, considered a “...means of discovering new meaning, describing what exists, determining the frequency with which something occurs and/or categorizing information...” (Dulock 1993, p. 154). Adding to this, Dulock (1993) suggests that descriptive research is relevant to employ when little to no information is known about a particular phenomenon or for understanding emerging and new phenomena (p. 155). As the BLM movement is a rather new phenomenon in general and the death of George Floyd in May 2020 has facilitated the recent increase of corporate engagements in the social movement - especially within the sports industry - we consider it as a new and emerging phenomenon that is relevant to investigate. The descriptive nature of this thesis can, thereby, contribute with rich knowledge of how American sports brands in particular ascribe meaning to the BLM movement through advertising. Furthermore, it can contribute with an understanding of the role corporations play in the social movement and what they seek to achieve through the underlying messages in their advertisements.

#### 4.2.2 Qualitative Research

As mentioned in Section 4.1, we believe that this thesis calls for a qualitative research approach. In the following paragraphs, we will explain what qualitative research involves and why we have chosen this approach.

According to Gibbs (2018), it is challenging to pin out a single definition of what qualitative research encompasses (p. xii). Especially because it entails different methods and approaches to data (Bryman 2012, p. 382). Thus, in order to grasp what qualitative research may encompass, we turn to Miller and Brewer (2003), who suggest that qualitative research is concerned with social meanings, whereas quantitative research is concerned with numerical, statistical data (p. 239). According to the scholars, people are regarded as “meaning endowing and discursive” (ibid., p. 239) in social sciences, because people are capable of attributing and articulating meanings to the world. The scholars, therefore, suggest that society is “...composed of people’s perceptions of the social world, which means that knowledge of the social world is incomplete unless we also understand people’s social meanings” (ibid., p. 239). For this reason, qualitative researchers are committed to view and understand the social world from the perspective of those being studied (Bryman 2012, p. 399). In other words, qualitative researchers seek to uncover “...how people construct the world around them, what they are doing or what is happening to them in terms that are meaningful and that offer rich insight” (Gibbs 2018, pp. xii-xiii). The main purpose of qualitative research is, therefore, to describe, understand and interpret social and human phenomena, interaction or discourse in considerable detail (Lichtman 2014, p. 38). In addition, the purpose is also to identify patterns and relationships within the research data, including differences and similarities across “...cases, settings, actors, situations, motives and so on” (Gibbs 2018, p. 188). In this regard, the whole context relating to the data is important for qualitative research (ibid., p. 11).

Where quantitative data is regarded as countable and measurable, qualitative data is regarded as meaningful, because it includes any form of human communication, including written, audio

or visual communication along with behavior, symbolism and cultural artefacts (Gibbs 2018, p. 3). This underlines the nature of qualitative data, which is rich and detailed (ibid., p. 140).

Since this thesis aims to investigate how American sports brands portray the BLM movement in their advertisements, it calls for a qualitative research approach. The advertisements constitute a form of human communication - written, audio and visual - created by the respective brands, which we as researchers have to describe, understand and interpret in order to grasp its messages. The advertisements, thereby, constitute a rich and detailed qualitative dataset, in which the American sports brands attribute and articulate meanings about the BLM movement. For this thesis, qualitative research, thus, makes it possible to investigate the BLM movement as a phenomenon from the perspective of the brands and, thereby, uncover the brands' respective perceptions and constructions of the social world. In addition, as the theoretical framework to this thesis suggests (Section 3), the qualitative research approach will be informed by multimodal perspectives to investigate the American sports brands' advertising messages through Multimodal Discourse Analysis.

When engaging with qualitative research, Bryman (2012) argues that the focus is typically on depth rather than breadth, which means that findings from qualitative research reflect a "contextual uniqueness and significance of the aspect of the social world being studied" (pp. 390-391). The scholar adds that qualitative research typically entails an intensive study of a smaller data selection with certain characteristics (ibid., pp. 390-391). In addition, Gibbs (2018) argues that qualitative data is often purposefully selected based on the topic in focus or the theoretical perspective of the research, which underlines how the chosen dataset does not reflect a broader population (p. 139). Instead, the data is strategically selected, because it demonstrates interesting perspectives (ibid., p. 139). This stands in contrast to quantitative research, where data is typically randomly selected and, thus, able to provide generalizable findings that can reflect broader and larger populations (ibid., p. 139). As this thesis is rooted in the death of African American George Floyd in May 2020 and the subsequent global flare up of the BLM movement, it is important to underline that the purpose of this thesis is to gain a deep and profound understanding of recent advertising messages relating to the BLM movement from

specific American sports brands. We, therefore, wish to strategically investigate American sports brands that have published advertisements relating to the BLM movement following the death of George Floyd and examine the ways in which they are similar to and different from each other. We are, thus, interested in specific meanings and perceptions and not on generalizing findings to other American brands.

#### **4.2.3 Comparative Case Study**

According to Lichtman (2014), qualitative research typically entails a deep and rich investigation of human phenomena rather than broad and abstract investigation (p. 44). To this, the scholar adds: “An important aspect of the investigation is to look at the whole rather than isolate variables in a reductionist manner. If we want to understand something fully, we need to look at it much more completely” (ibid., p. 44). For this reason, a comparative case study design is chosen for this thesis, which allows a thorough examination of two or more cases with similar research methods (Bryman 2012, p. 72). A comparative case study aims to “...seek explanations for similarities and differences or to gain a greater awareness and a deeper understanding of social reality” (ibid., p. 72). This research design, thereby, enables us as researchers to conduct a profound examination of a limited number of recent advertisements from American sports brands and compare and contrast them with each other in order to gain a rich understanding of corporate advertising messages concerning the BLM movement.

#### **4.2.4 Research Strategy**

When conducting any type of inquiry, it is inevitable to reflect upon the research strategy, which involves the relationship scholars have between theory and research (Bryman 2012, pp. 24-26). There are two main strategies that scholars can follow, depending on what the aim of the inquiry is. To elaborate, researchers can, on one hand, follow the deductive strategy, which implies that inquiry is conducted to test a theory (Brinkmann & Tanggaard 2020, p. 310). More precisely, the deductive strategy involves that “the researcher, on the basis of what is known about in a particular domain and of theoretical considerations in relation to that domain, deduces a hypothesis (or hypotheses) that must then be subjected to empirical scrutiny.” (Bryman 2012, p.

24). Thus, with this strategy, both knowledge and theory guide the inquiry in terms of data collection and findings (ibid., p. 24). On the other hand, scholars can follow the inductive strategy, which is a strategy to research that is relevant to employ when scholarship is conducted with the purpose to create new theory or provide explanations to certain social phenomena (Brinkmann & Tanggaard 2020, p. 310; Gibbs 2018, p. 6). With this research strategy, findings are shaped by the data (Bryman 2012, p. 26), and it encompasses that “...priori assumptions and theoretical ideas should not be used to interpret data, rather the social meaning inherent in the data alone should be used as the basis for any empirical generalisation or theoretical statement” (Brewer 2003, p. 2). Thus, the inductive strategy involves letting the data unfold itself without examining it with predetermined assumptions. It also implies that theoretical ideas only can derive based on an examination of the social meaning that exists within the dataset.

As stated in the previous section (section 4.2.2), we wish to place emphasis on the social meaning within the advertisements to uncover how American sports brands portray BLM. Because of that, we will try to free ourselves from predetermined assumptions and theoretical ideas, since we want the data to unfold itself and focus on the inherent meaning that can be identified within the advertisements. By doing this, we, thereby, engage with the inductive research strategy (Bryman 2012, p. 26; Brewer 2003, p. 2). Although we want to approach this research without any predetermined assumptions and theoretical ideas, Gibbs (2018) notes that this can be relatively difficult to do, as literature and already existing knowledge and ideas can impact the ways in which qualitative researchers go about their studies (p. 7). Prior to this thesis, we have read a great amount of literature on the topic in focus in order to gain a preliminary insight into the topic and to prepare the literature review of this thesis. As a result, we, thereby, have general ideas of what could be found, or what to look for when examining our dataset, which ultimately characterizes the deductive research strategy (Bryman 2012, p. 24). Furthermore, even though we mainly want to place emphasis on the data and what it entails, our theoretical framework of Multimodal Discourse Analysis has guided us to form one of our sub questions, which involves an examination of the messages that are conveyed in the advertisements through verbal and visual modes of communication. Since verbal and visual communication is rooted in multimodality

(Machin & Mayr 2012, p. 1), it is, thereby, an indicator of how we are engaging with the deductive research strategy.

Thus, it is evident that we will approach our thesis with both the inductive and deductive research strategy, and this mix is more formally referred to as analytical induction and an iterative approach (Brinkmann & Tanggaard 2020, p. 310; Bryman 2012, p. 26). This approach to research enables us to continuously move back and forth between theoretical ideas and data, and we can, thereby, both let our data unfold itself to uncover the social meaning within it, but it also allows us to approach our data with predetermined theoretical ideas of multimodality as an overall framework for analyzing the advertisements (Bryman 2012, p. 26).

### **4.3 Data Collection**

In the following subsection, the chosen sampling approach will be explained along with an introduction to the chosen cases to elaborate the dataset for this thesis.

#### **4.3.1 Purposive Sampling**

When conducting research, it is important to reflect upon how data should be approached. As our research question has a focus on American sports brands and recent advertisements related to the BLM movement, we have employed a purposive sampling approach to gather our data. Purposive sampling entails when researchers purposefully search for and choose a dataset that is related to and guided by the research question in focus (Bryman 2012, p. 416). This sampling approach allows us to purposefully and strategically choose cases that are relevant and suitable for the research question and a comparative study and to, thereby, ensure an alignment between the dataset and the research focus.

The three American brands NIKE, Jordan and Converse, who are owned by the American corporation NIKE, Inc., are chosen as cases for this thesis. A description of NIKE, Inc. along with the three brands' relevance and suitability for this thesis will be elaborated in the following subsections.



#### 4.3.2 Introduction to Cases

NIKE, Inc. is an American multinational corporation that describes itself as a “...designer, marketer and distributor of authentic athletic footwear, apparel, equipment and accessories for a wide variety of sports and fitness activities” (Nike News 2011). The corporation is an international leader within the manufacturing of sportswear and athlete equipment (Distelhorst, Hainmueller & Locke 2015, p. 3) and the largest seller of athletic footwear and apparel in the world (NIKE, Inc. 2020, p. 27). In 2020, the global revenue of NIKE, Inc. was 37.4 billion US dollars (ibid., p. 31) and the corporation had approximately a total of 75,400 employees worldwide (ibid., p. 6). NIKE, Inc.’s portfolio brands include the brand NIKE, the brand Jordan (which is a division of the brand NIKE) along with the wholly-owned subsidiary brand Converse (ibid., p. 62). The three brands are considered iconic, as they have worldwide recognition (ibid., p. 6). However, according to NIKE, Inc. (2020), North America was a key geographical market for the corporation in 2020, where sales of NIKE, Jordan and Converse products accounted for approximately 39% of the corporation’s global revenues in the United States alone (p. 2). In 2020, the United States also held the lion’s share of the global sports apparel and footwear industry with 32.2%, which underlines the prominence of the North American market (Shahbandeh 2020b).

NIKE, Inc.’s strategy is: “...to achieve long-term revenue growth by creating innovative, “must-have” products, building deep personal consumer connections with our brands and delivering compelling consumer experiences through digital platforms and retail” (NIKE Inc. 2020, p. 27). According to NIKE, Inc. (2020), the corporation’s success is highly determined by its’ ability to maintain, promote and grow the image and reputation of its brands along with the ability to maintain positive consumer perceptions of the integrity, purpose and culture of each brand (p. 10). In this regard, the rapidly changing media environment is highlighted, as NIKE, Inc. increasingly relies on a digital dissemination of advertising campaigns on social media, because the corporation believes that social media can accelerate and amplify the publicity of the corporation’s brands (ibid., p. 10). Additionally, NIKE, Inc. relies on endorsements from “...professional athletes, sports teams and leagues, as well as other public figures, including

artists, designers and influencers to develop, evaluate and promote our products, as well as establish product authenticity with consumers” (ibid., p. 11).

NIKE, Inc. (2020) is continuously aware of “changes in U.S. or international social, political, regulatory and economic conditions...” and how these changes can impact the corporation’s business operations (p. 14). In this regard, NIKE Inc. places great emphasis on improving the conditions for both individuals and the communities around them, and the corporation has continuously engaged with sociopolitical matters in advertising efforts, including supportive messages about the LGBTQIA+ community (Nike 2019) and the Black community (Cosentino 2019, p. 54). Montez de Oca, Mason and Ahn (2020) argue that NIKE, Inc. has pioneered socially responsible campaigns within the sports industry for decades (p. 3). Similarly, marketing scholars Sarkar and Kotler (2018) stress that the corporation has become a “poster child” for brand activism - in other words, a corporate representative that is leading change within social and political matters (chp. 3). Because of NIKE, Inc.’s history and continuous engagement with sociopolitical matters, we find it interesting to investigate how the corporation’s three brands NIKE, Jordan and Converse have chosen to deal with the recent global flare up of the BLM movement following the killing of George Floyd in May 2020. In the following paragraphs, a description of the three brands and their individual engagement with the BLM movement will, therefore, be described:

## **NIKE**

NIKE is an American brand that encompasses “...performance athletic footwear, apparel, equipment, accessories and services across a wide range of sport categories, amplified with sport-inspired lifestyle products carrying the Swoosh trademark” (NIKE, Inc. 2020, p. 62). The brand’s product offerings include the categories: Running, NIKE Basketball, Football, Training and Sportswear (ibid., p. 1). Even though NIKE’s footwear and apparel products are primarily created for athletic purposes, a large percentage of consumers use the products for casual or leisure purposes (ibid., p. 1). Within the United States, NIKE is considered one of the most popular brands. NIKE is a brand of choice for many American consumers when selecting footwear, which

is why NIKE has been dominating the footwear market in the United States for several years (Sabanoglu 2020). To exemplify, NIKE held the largest share of the U.S. athletic footwear market in 2017 with 35.6% (Shahbandeh 2020a). In 2020, NIKE generated the large majority of NIKE, Inc.'s global revenues with a total global revenue of 26.9 billion US dollars.

NIKE describes its mission as follows:

Our mission is what drives us to do everything possible to expand human potential. We do that by creating groundbreaking sport innovations, by making our products more sustainably, by building a creative and global team and by making a positive impact in communities where we live and work (NIKE n.d. a).

Concerning communities, NIKE is committed to stand up for equality, which is one of the brand's core values and, in this regard, the brand highlights standing up against systemic racial injustice on its official webpage (NIKE n.d. b). To this, NIKE adds: "Our brand would not be what it is today without the powerful contributions of Black athletes and Black culture. And our belief in human potential inspires us to lead in addressing equality's most persistent barriers" (ibid.).

Out of NIKE's social media platforms, the brand has the largest outreach on Instagram with a total of 151 million followers globally at the time of writing (May 29, 2021). On May 30, 2020, NIKE published an advertisement addressing the BLM movement in the form of a 1-minute-long video on its official global Instagram account with the text: "Let's all be part of the change. #UntillWeAllWin" (@nike 2020). This video will constitute a part of the thesis' dataset.

## **Jordan**

Jordan is an American brand that "...designs, distributes and licenses athletic and casual footwear, apparel and accessories predominantly focused on basketball using the Jumpman trademark" (NIKE, Inc. 2020, p. 1). It is "...a premium brand of footwear, apparel and accessories inspired by the dynamic legacy, vision and direct involvement of Michael Jordan. The Jordan Brand made its debut in 1997 and has grown into a complete collection of performance and lifestyle products" (Nike News 2011). According to NIKE, Inc. (2020), Jordan is currently one of

the corporation's top-sellers of footwear, and it is expected that the brand will continue to grow within the global footwear category (p. 1). To exemplify, Jordan held the second largest share of the U.S. athletic footwear market in 2017 after NIKE with 15.7% (Shahbandeh 2020a). In 2020, Jordan generated a total global revenue of 3.6 billion US dollars (NIKE, Inc. 2020, p. 31).

Jordan describes its purpose as follows:

Our purpose is to create inspiration and access that helps youth create a better future. Jordan Brand isn't just what you wear and how you play. It's the confidence to find your voice, own your style, and change the game both on and off the court. Driven by the legacy of Michael Jordan, we inspire the world to achieve greatness on their own terms (NIKE n.d. c).

Concerning a better future, Jordan puts "community over everything" (NIKE n.d. d). On its official webpage, Jordan highlights its commitment to fight for equal opportunity and justice of Black people as the brand sees itself as a part of that community: "Jordan Brand is us, the Black Community" (ibid.).

Out of Jordan's social media platforms, the brand has the largest outreach on Instagram with a total of 21.8 million followers globally at the time of writing (May 29, 2021). On September 30, 2020, Jordan published an advertisement addressing the BLM movement in the form of a 1 minute 30 seconds long video on its official global Instagram account with the text: "Action Over Words" (@jumpman23 2020). This video will, likewise, constitute a part of the thesis' dataset.

## **Converse**

Converse is an American brand that "...designs, distributes and licenses casual sneakers, apparel and accessories under the Converse, Chuck Taylor, All Star, One Star, Star Chevron and Jack Purcell trademarks" (NIKE, Inc. 2020, p. 1). Converse has "...a diverse portfolio including premium lifestyle men's and women's footwear and apparel" (Nike News 2011) and the brand "...has built a reputation as "America's Original Sports Company"™ and has been associated with a rich heritage of legendary shoes" (ibid.). Converse is a predominant brand within footwear in the

United States and one of the most popular brands in the world (Sabanoglu 2021). In 2020, Converse generated a total global revenue of 1.8 billion US dollars (NIKE, Inc. 2020, p. 31).

Converse describes its mission as follows:

Our mission. Converse is empowering today's daring spirit of youth by celebrating freedom of expression through individuals and their movement(s). Today, youth demand more. We constantly evolve to think and behave in new ways to ensure we continue to stand for creativity, rebellion and daring spirit for the next 100 years (Converse n.d. a).

Converse strives to have a positive social impact on communities (Converse n.d. b) and highlights its commitment to stand up against racism, police brutality and senseless violent acts that are killing Black people on its official webpage (Converse n.d. c). To this, Converse stresses that "All lives cannot matter until Black lives matter" and adds: "We know this is not a new problem. Black people have fought against injustice for over four hundred years. To those using their voices in the fight for justice, we will no longer be a witness. We stand with you in action" (ibid.).

Out of Converse's social media platforms, the brand has the largest outreach on Instagram with a total of 10.1 million followers globally at the time of writing (May 29, 2021). On October 9, 2020, Converse published an advertisement addressing the BLM movement in the form of a 36-second-long video on its official global Instagram account with the text: "'It's what you do when everyone is watching that defines you.'" — @juliuserving #ConverseAllStars" (@converse 2020). This video will, likewise, constitute a part of the thesis' dataset.

#### **4.3.3 Suitability of Cases**

It is evident that NIKE, Jordan and Converse all highlight that they are committed to stand up against racism and injustice of Black people on their official webpages. In addition, the three brands have engaged with the BLM movement following the killing of George Floyd, as they have individually published an advertisement in the form of a video on their respective global Instagram accounts after George Floyd's death. In this regard, it can be argued that NIKE, Jordan

and Converse are similar cases, and that the dataset consisting of three Instagram videos is comparable.

Likewise, it is evident that NIKE, Jordan and Converse are American brands involved with the design and distribution of athletic and casual footwear, apparel and accessories. The three brands have a clear connection to sports, which is why it can be argued that they can be regarded as American sports brands and, thereby, comparable cases. NIKE, Jordan and Converse have worldwide recognition and are considered some of the most iconic and popular brands in the world, which underlines the comparability of the cases. In addition, the United States constitutes a key geographical market for all three brands, which is why it can be argued that the brands are similar both in regard to products and markets.

For this reason, NIKE, Jordan and Converse are regarded as highly suitable for a comparative case study. The chosen dataset will enable us to profoundly investigate the three advertising videos and compare and contrast their contents to gain a rich understanding of how some of the most popular American sports brands, who have a massive global outreach, choose to communicate corporate messages about the BLM movement online.

#### **4.4 Our Research Position**

When conducting a qualitative inquiry, a discussed question is whether researchers are members of the people and communities they are examining or not (Dwyer & Buckle 2009, p. 54). This is generally debated in relation to research that involves observation or other types of ethnographic methods (ibid., p. 55). However, Dwyer and Buckle (2009) emphasize that it is relevant to reflect upon the researcher's position within all qualitative inquiries, as a researcher "plays such a direct and intimate role in both data collection and analysis" (p. 55). The scholars, therefore, add that researchers should reflect upon if they have an insider position towards the studied phenomenon, which means that they share certain perceptions and experiences with the phenomenon in focus (ibid., p. 55), or an outsider position, which means they do not share the same perceptions and experiences (ibid., p. 55).

As we have stated in the literature review of this thesis, the BLM movement has a focus on racial injustice in the United States and emphasizes the killings of unarmed Black people by police officers (Section 2.1.1). Since neither of us are Black people nor citizens of the United States, we generally consider ourselves as outsiders, as we do not share the same experiences or perceptions as the aforementioned groups of people. However, it is important to stress that the three advertisements are published on NIKE's, Jordan's and Converse's respective global Instagram accounts, which can potentially reach out to any social media user in the world. The three advertising messages are, thereby, not restricted to Black people or citizens of the United States but are rather open to interpretation and comprehension by any recipients. It can, therefore, be argued that an outsider position is not restrictive in this particular instance, as the brands have intentionally published the respective advertisement messages on a far-reaching social media platform. To put in perspective, if the advertising messages were products of marketing campaigns published only in the United States, it could have provided possible challenges to interpret the data, as the messages would have been created for an audience which we as researchers, naturally, were not a part of, since we are situated in Denmark.

Adding to this, we consider ourselves as insiders in relation to NIKE, Jordan and Converse as brands, because we are familiar with the brands and can be regarded as consumers of their products. Additionally, since we both have Instagram accounts, we have been exposed to the brands' advertisements and content on social media and can, thereby, be regarded as recipients of their advertising efforts.

#### **4.5 Method of Analysis**

The advertisements from NIKE, Jordan and Converse will be comparatively analyzed with Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen's framework for Multimodal Discourse Analysis (Section 3.1.1). The Multimodal Discourse Analysis of the three advertisements will, therefore, be tripart and examine the *ideational function*, *interpersonal function* and *textual function* of the occurring modes in the advertisements in order to interpret and comprehend the interrelation of the modes along with the overall messages and discourses that are being conveyed. The analysis of

the three advertisements will include theoretical concepts relating to the *ideational*, *interpersonal* and *textual functions* when relevant, and all theoretical concepts will appear in cursive to create a theoretical overview for the reader. In our approach to Multimodal Discourse Analysis, we will consider written and spoken language as verbal communication and all visual elements in moving images as visual communication.

#### **4.5.1 Data Processing**

Throughout the analysis, we will continuously demonstrate and substantiate our interpretations and analytical findings by implementing thick descriptions, including quotes of verbal communication and screenshots of visual communication from the advertisements. This will support thorough reader overview and understanding of our interpretations and analytical arguments. Furthermore, it will improve the readability of the thesis, as the reader will not have to move interchangeably from the analysis to the appendices.

Thick descriptions are important for our analysis, as it gives an account for how we observe the advertisements under examination (Jewitt 2014, p. 50). The thick descriptions will, therefore, involve detailed descriptions of the advertisements by NIKE, Jordan and Converse in order to create a rich insight into what they respectively encompass. These descriptions will be implemented in the beginning of the analysis to explain our analytical starting points.

As Multimodal Discourse Analysis entails a focus on both verbal and visual communication, the quotes of verbal communication and screenshots of visual communication will be included to substantiate our analyses and support reader overview. With regard to the verbal communication in the advertisements, transcription is necessary in order to thoroughly examine what is being communicated (Bryman 2012, p. 482). When transcribing data, there are several transcription keys to follow depending on the research focus. For this thesis, we are only interested in what is being said, which is why we will conduct a simple transcription of the communicated words rather than annotating phonethics and the like. This will be included in the analyses as quotes when relevant with references to the appendices. With regard to the visual



communication in the advertisements, visual imagery is also necessary for the analysis, which is why we will make screenshots of the moving images and include them directly in the analysis when relevant.

## 5. Analysis

To begin the analysis, we will provide a description of the three advertisements in order to establish a comprehension of the advertisements' contents. Firstly, NIKE's advertisement is 1 minute long (@nike). The advertisement consists solely of different pieces of text in a white color on a black background along with subtle piano music playing throughout the entire advertisement. There is, therefore, only written and no spoken communication in the advertisement.

Secondly, Jordan's advertisement is 1 minute 30 seconds long (@jumpman23). The advertisement consists of a combination of visual communication in the form of different kinds of video clips and images that are both in color and in black and white, and of verbal communication in the form of spoken words from both narrators and people in the videos clips along with subtitles and messages in written text. The video clips are of people speaking closely into the camera, including the founder Michael Jordan, people playing basketball and masses of people participating in protests. The images are of Michael Jordan, basketball players, people in athletic clothes and people participating in protests.

Finally, Converse's advertisement is 36 seconds long (@converse). The advertisement is a combination of visual and verbal communication. The visual communication consists of different types of video clips that are both in color and in black and white. The video clips are of athletes playing basketball, close ups of basketball players and their athletic garments along with masses of people participating in a protest. The verbal communication consists of spoken words from a narrator and background noises from the basketball court and the protest along with written text in the form of subtitles.

As subtitles are generally used on social media as a textual overlay to increase the accessibility of videos to the consumers (Perez 2021), the analysis will not take subtitles into consideration as an important mode of communication for the advertisements.

## 5.1 Ideational Function

### A narrative of racial injustice and inequality

When considering that Kress and van Leeuwen suggest that the *ideational function* of modes reflect how the creator of a message experiences and perceives parts of the world (Section 3.1.1), it can be argued that a similar *narrative pattern* can be identified within the three advertisements. All the advertisements build upon a narrative which focuses on racial injustice and inequality within the Black community and encourages the recipients to take active part in improving the issues in focus. When looking at the advertisements individually, NIKE focuses on the issue of racism and unjustified killings, Jordan focuses on the issue of inequality and injustice within the Black community and Converse focuses on the issue of racial injustice of Black people.

The *narrative pattern* (Section 3.1.1) within NIKE's advertisement encourages recipients not to be passive and ignore the issue of racism. In the beginning of the advertisement, NIKE states: "For once, Don't Do It." (Appendix 1) and subsequently adds: "Don't turn your back on racism." (ibid.). The first quotation offers great significance to the *narrative pattern* (Section 3.1.1) of the advertisement, as it is an altered version of NIKE's iconic slogan "Just Do It", which reflects NIKE's brand identity and constitutes a consistent tagline throughout the brand's advertising efforts (Creative Review n.d.). A slogan is generally employed to create a clear brand image, maintain continuity in advertising efforts and increase brand recall (Mathur & Mathur 1995, p. 60). As a slogan, "Just Do It" is regarded to have universal resonance, because it encourages consumers to overcome their individual obstacles and accomplish their personal goals (Gigante 2013). According to Mathur and Mathur (1995), many brands choose to change their slogans due to reasons such as changes in consumer values, the competitive landscape along with a desire to reposition the brand or to improve the financial performance of the brand (p. 60). However, the scholars underline that a change of slogan can, ultimately, have a negative impact on the advertising and weaken the brand image (ibid., p. 60). When considering the literal meaning of the two versions of NIKE's slogan, the altered slogan "Don't Do It" stands in complete contrast to the original slogan "Just Do It". The altered slogan, thereby, urges consumers to do the opposite

of what NIKE has been encouraging up until this advertisement. By altering its iconic slogan to match the purpose of the advertisement, it arguably shows that NIKE builds upon its tagline to fit into a new, sociopolitical context, while still maintaining NIKE's well-known brand identity.

The *narrative pattern* (Section 3.1.1) within Jordan's advertisement stresses that Jordan perceives itself as a part of the Black community and is committed to shape a better future in which equal opportunity and social and economic justice prevails for everyone. In the beginning of the advertisement, Jordan states: "Jordan brand is us, the Black community" (Appendix 2, l. 1-2) and subsequently adds the brand is: "Bigger than the basketball court" (ibid., l. 5). Later in the advertisement, Jordan once again states that: "Jordan brand is us, the Black community" (Appendix 2, l. 31-32) and subsequently adds that: "The fight for equal opportunity and equal justice is ours" (Appendix 2, l. 33-35). These quotations offer great significance to the *narrative pattern* (Section 3.1.1) of the advertisement, because it can be suggested that they indicate that Jordan perceives itself as a brand with a greater purpose than the products it is selling, which predominantly focus on basketball, and actively place the brand in the forefront of an attempt to achieve equal opportunity and justice for everyone. Thus, Jordan arguably deems it important to take part in improving certain sociopolitical matters as a brand. However, in the advertisement, Jordan also states that: "What may be impossible alone is possible together" (Appendix 2, l. 29-30) and that allies can join the brand in the fight, to which it is added that: "We will unite as one family" (Appendix 2, l. 44) - "we" being the brand and the allies. For this reason, it can be argued that the advertisement also encourages recipients to take part in the matter in focus alongside Jordan.

The *narrative pattern* (Section 3.1.1) within Converse's advertisement stresses that Converse perceives a collective participation in improving the issue of racial injustice as a conduct of great importance. In the advertisement, Converse states: "But the truth is, it is what you do when everyone is watching that defines you." (Appendix 3, ll. 3-4). This quotation offers great significance to the *narrative pattern* (Section 3.1.1), because it can be suggested that Converse perceives one's true character to be reflected through the actions one undertakes in public. Through the visual communication in the advertisement, it arguably becomes apparent that

Converse refers to actions relating to the improvement of racial injustice of Black people, which will be elaborated in the following subsection.

In this way, the three advertisements are clearly rooted in a sociopolitical context, which correlates with de Bakker et al.'s (2013) view of social movements that revolves around corporations' engagements in the sociopolitical landscape. At the same time, it correlates with Mc Carthy and Zald's (1973) and Krinsky's (2019) view of social movements, which underlines that changes within the sociopolitical landscape require collective participation and support of individuals or larger groups of people. Furthermore, since the advertisements have a unified focus on racial injustice and inequality within the Black community, the advertisements conceptualize current issues related to race, which correspond to Vallocchi's (2009) emphasis on matters such as racism and violence within the promotion of changes in society. Due to this particular focus, the advertisements can be perceived to reflect the concept of woke advertisements, in which Ashlee, Zamora and Karikari (2017) suggest that corporations recognize and create awareness of the social injustice and inequality that takes place in society, especially in relation to Black people.

In addition, the unified woke advertising focus on racial injustice and inequality regarding Black people can be perceived to generally match with NIKE's, Jordan's and Converse's respective brand values. To elaborate, as elucidated in the introduction to the cases in Section 4.3.2, NIKE has a mission to make a positive impact in communities, where one of the brand's core values is to stand up for equality, particularly with regard to racial injustice facing Black people. In relation to this, NIKE acknowledges that Black athletes and Black culture has a powerful influence on the brand (Section 4.3.2). In a similar fashion, Jordan has a purpose to create a better future and, therefore, places great emphasis on community and a commitment to fight for equal opportunity and justice of Black people, as Jordan perceives itself as a part of the Black community (ibid.). Similarly, Converse has a mission to positively impact communities and, therefore, highlights its commitment to stand up against racism, police brutality and violent acts that are killing Black people. In relation to this, Converse stresses that all lives cannot matter until Black lives matter (ibid.). In this way, all three brands' have core beliefs in which they are committed to promote

racial justice and equality of Black people in society. As the brands' commitment to the Black community is directly stated on their respective official webpages, it can be suggested that it is used to communicate the essence of what NIKE, Jordan and Converse stand for and, thereby, their brand values. For this reason, it can be suggested that the three brands' advertisements relating to racial injustice and inequality of Black people align with the brands' values. This correlates with findings by Montez de Oca, Mason and Ahn (2020), Lima and Øksnevad (2020) and Vredenburg et al. (2020) which underline that in order to make woke advertisements that do not appear to be opportunistic in the eyes of the consumers, corporations must ensure an alignment between the sociopolitical issues in focus and the brand values.

### **Conceptualization of BLM**

When looking closer into the three advertisements' *narrative patterns* (Section 3.1.1), they all include verbal and visual communication that is indicative of the BLM movement. Within NIKE's advertisement, a clear *conceptual pattern* can be identified, because it reflects a generalized classification of an environment (Section 3.1.1), in which NIKE focuses on the issue of racism within the United States. To elaborate, NIKE states: "Don't pretend there's not a problem in America. Don't turn your back on racism. Don't accept innocent lives being taken away from us." (Appendix 1, ll. 2-4). Through the choice of words, NIKE employs a generalized classification of the United States by explicitly connecting "America" with "racism" and "unjustified killings". Therefore, it can be argued that the advertisement is rooted in sociopolitical issues in the United States and is, furthermore, an indicative of the BLM movement, which centralizes on white supremacy and violence inflicted on Black people (Black Lives Matter n.d. a). As the brand addresses the BLM movement solely through written text, it correlates with findings by Singer (2014) and Graber (1990) which advocate for communication solely appearing in the form of text, as it allows a more focused and thorough information processing.

Similarly, the *conceptual pattern* (Section 3.1.1) within Jordan's advertisement reflects a generalized classification of an environment, in which Jordan focuses on the issue of inequality and injustice within the Black community. To elaborate, Jordan states: "Jordan brand is us, the

Black community” (Appendix 2, l. 31-32) and “The fight for equal opportunity and equal justice is ours” (Appendix 2, l. 33-24). Through the choice of words, Jordan employs a generalized classification of the Black community by explicitly connecting it with the need for a fight for equal opportunity and equal justice. It can, therefore, be suggested that Jordan does not perceive equal opportunity and justice to be the case within the Black community at the present time of the advertisement. For this reason, it can be argued that the advertisement is rooted in sociopolitical issues regarding the Black community and, furthermore, an indicative of the BLM movement, which centralizes on injustice of Black people (Clayton 2018, p. 449) and White supremacy (Black Lives Matter n.d. a). Through the visual communication in the advertisement, the connection to the BLM movement arguably becomes more apparent, as the text “BLACK LIVES MATTER” is visible on pieces of garments and several images and video clips of protests are included, which are considered essential elements of the BLM movement (Rickford 2015, p. 36). This is also the case in Converse’s advertisement, as the *conceptual pattern* (Section 3.1.1) visually reflects the BLM movement and the issue of racial injustice of Black people in general through the text “BLACK LIVES MATTER” on pieces of garments and the inclusion of video clips of protests. Examples from both advertisements can be seen in the following six screenshots:



*Jordan: (Screenshot 1, 2 and 3)*



*Converse: (Screenshot 4, 5 and 6)*

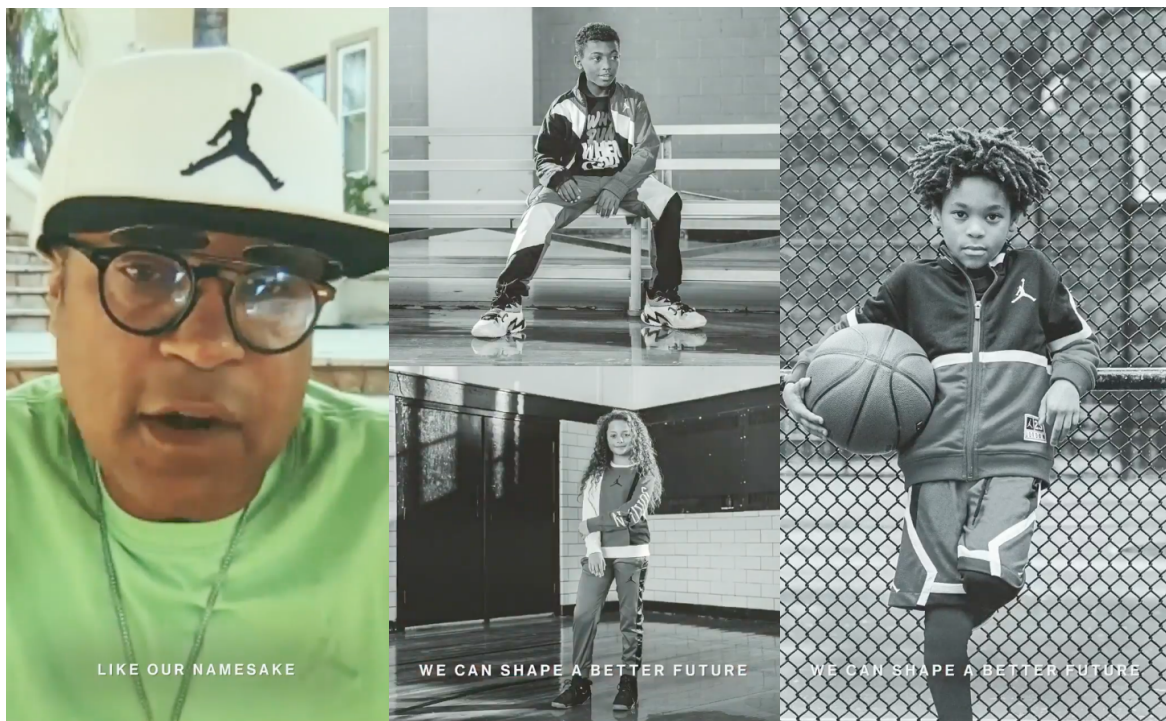


The inclusion of t-shirts and jerseys with the text “BLACK LIVES MATTER” along with “EQUALITY” and “PEACE” arguably contribute with a reference to the significant wave of activism within the NBA in the wake of George Floyd’s death that was presented in the introduction of this thesis (Section 1). As stated in the introduction, many NBA players participated in protests and were allowed by the NBA to incorporate social justice messages on their basketball jerseys instead of their last names during games (Huish 2020), which Screenshot 2 from Jordan’s advertisement clearly depicts. Additionally, NBA players have also been wearing black t-shirts with the text “BLACK LIVES MATTER” in white during the basketball season of 2020 (New York Post 2020), which Screenshot 5 from Converse’s advertisement arguably depicts. On a noticeable facet of this, the basketball athletes in Screenshot 1 of Jordan’s advertisement and Screenshot 4 of Converse’s advertisement can be seen wearing the same t-shirt. It can be assumed that the t-shirts have been issued by either the NBA or the NIKE, Inc. enterprise for the athletes to use during protests. Furthermore, both of the athletes have their fists raised, which can be interpreted as another reference to the BLM movement, as raising one’s fist has been highly used during BLM protests to showcase resiliency and power (National Geographic 2020). The two brands’ visual communication in the advertisements, thereby, underlines the reference to the social movement and taking a stand on the issue of racial injustice and inequality. Since both advertisements employ visual modes of communication to convey messages, it corresponds to findings by Çoşkun (2015), who stresses the importance of visuals for modern media, as they express meaning beyond solely verbal communication. In addition, as both advertisements rest upon an interrelation between verbal and visual modes of communication, it also corresponds to findings by Yang (2019), who underlines the usefulness of both verbal and visual communication for advertisements, because the modes reinforce each other and, thereby, create more powerful messages that can better engage the recipients.

In this way, the three brands’ conceptualizations of the BLM movement match recent findings of woke messages by Sobande (2019) and Montez de Oca, Mason and Ahn (2020) who highlight that woke advertisements draw on verbal and visual elements directly associated with social movements and pressing issues in society.

## Conceptualization of the brands

The three advertisements all include visual communication that is indicative of the brands. Throughout the advertisements, both Jordan and Converse include images and video clips of their various footwear, apparel and accessories and, thereby, clearly incorporate and display their products. This contributes to the advertisements' *conceptual patterns* (Section 3.1.1), because it reflects a generalized classification of Jordan and Converse and their respective products. In this regard, it is important to note that the majority of Converse's advertisement takes place in basketball courts and includes basketball athletes, which arguably reflects a specific part of Converse's product portfolio that has a dedicated collection to footwear, apparel and accessories for basketball (Converse n.d. d). Both of the advertisements, thus, have a clear focus on basketball products. Examples of this can be seen in the following six screenshots, where shoes, different pieces of garments and accessories are depicted with the brands' logos:



Jordan: (Screenshot 7, 8 and 9)



*Converse: (Screenshot 10, 11 and 12)*

As the *ideational function* reflects how the creator of a message perceives parts of the world (Section 3.1.1.), it can be argued that Jordan's and Converse's clear display of basketball products communicates to the recipients that the products are an essential part of the brands.

Building on the focus of basketball, Jordan repeatedly includes the basketball player Michael Jordan in the advertisement, who is the focal point and founder of the Jordan brand. This arguably contributes to the advertisement's *conceptual pattern* (3.1.1), as it can be interpreted that Michael Jordan reflects the general essence and backbone of the brand. Examples of this can be seen in the following three screenshots:

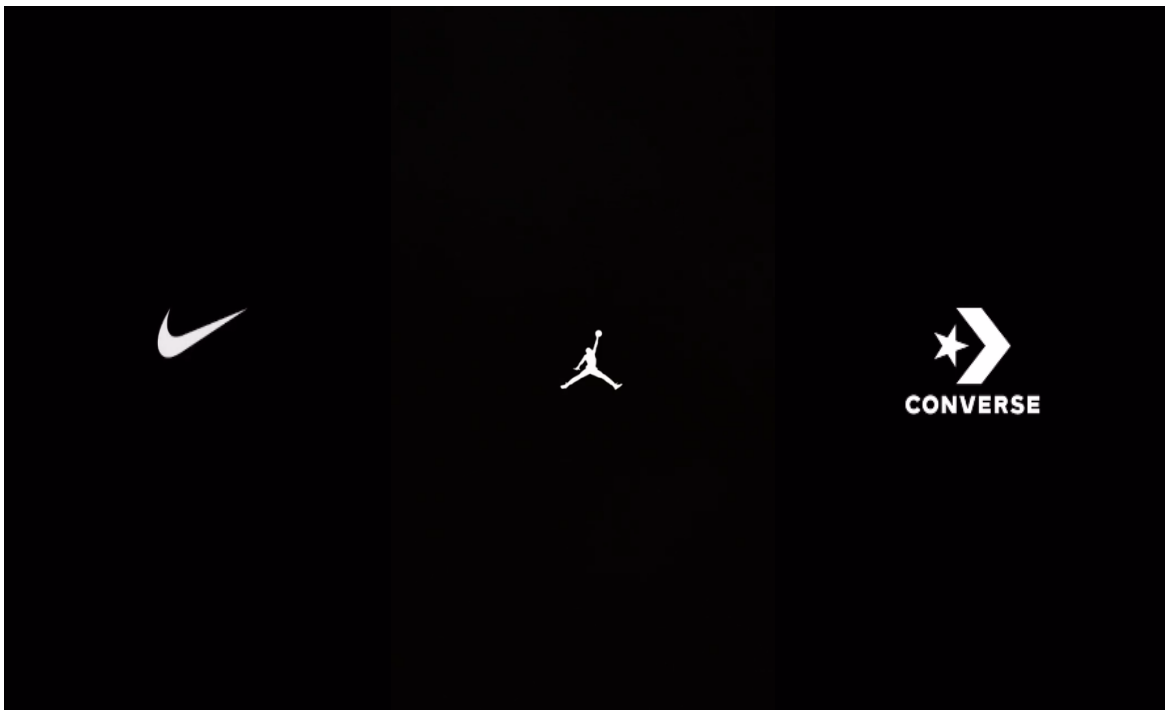


*Jordan: (Screenshot 13, 14 and 15)*

It is not unusual that the founder of a brand appears in an advertisement. According to Goldin (2018), the founder or CEO of a company is considered an important marketing tool, because he or she plays a vital role as the primary promoter of and spokesperson for the brand in question. Nevertheless, the inclusion of Michael Jordan can be suggested to be significant in this particular instance, as he has been heavily criticized for his neutral image and lack of engagement in the racial issues Black people are facing in society throughout the years (Crockett 2008, p. 258). The public has previously accused Michael Jordan of taking "...commerce over [his] conscious" (Wise, Bembry & Johnson 2016) and steering "...clear of politics and black advocacy" (Washington 2020). However, in June 2020, almost a month after George Floyd's death, Michael Jordan announced that the Jordan brand will be pledging \$100 million "...over the next 10 years to organizations dedicated to ensuring racial equality, social justice, and greater access to education." (ibid.) and he publicly stressed his commitment to the causes in question: "I'm all in with Jordan Brand, the Jordan family and our partners, who share a commitment to address the historical inequality that continues to plague Black communities in the U.S" (NIKE News 2020).

By repeatedly including Michael Jordan in the advertisement, it can, thereby, be suggested to underline that both the founder and the brand are invested and engaged in the issues in focus.

The three advertisements share a similar closing remark, in which their respective brand logos appear in white on a black background in the last frames of the advertisements. This arguably contributes to the advertisements' respective *conceptual patterns* (Section 3.1.1), because it underlines that the three brands are the senders of the communication. This can be seen in the following three screenshots:



*NIKE, Jordan and Converse: (Screenshot 16, 17 and 18)*

As the logos are direct reflections of the three brands, they are arguably also indirect reflections of the values and product offerings that the brands encompass. It can, thus, be suggested that the logos are employed at the end of the advertisements to identify NIKE, Jordan and Converse and promote the brands in a broader sense.

## Findings of the Ideational Function

The findings within the *ideational function* (Section 3.1.1) of the modes in the three advertisements firstly indicate that NIKE perceives racial injustice as an issue in the United States that needs to be handled. Furthermore, because of the fact that NIKE has altered its iconic slogan and consistent advertising tagline to match the context of the advertisement, it can be suggested that the findings indicate that the brand perceives the BLM movement to be of great importance. Secondly, the findings point out that Jordan perceives injustice and inequality within the Black community and the BLM movement in general to be of great importance. Furthermore, the findings point out that the brand is committed to exceed its corporate purpose of selling products to fight for justice and equality for the Black community alongside its allies and potential recipients. However, the findings also reveal that the advertisement displays Jordan's products throughout the advertisement.

Finally, the findings indicate that Converse perceives a collective participation in improving the issue of racial injustice as a conduct of great importance, and that the brand wants to encourage the recipients to participate in the matter in focus. However, the findings also reveal a consistent usage of the brand's products in the advertisement.

## 5.2 Interpersonal Function

### Use of pronouns

As Kress and van Leeuwen suggest that the *interpersonal function* of modes reflects how the creator of a message establishes a relationship with the recipients of a message (Section 3.1.1), it can be argued that the three advertisements *demand* something from the recipients, as they directly address the recipients and encourage them to engage with the messages that the advertisements are conveying (ibid.).

Through verbal communication, all three advertisements employ pronouns to directly address the recipients and signal a unity between the brands, the recipients and the Black community. To elaborate, NIKE addresses the recipients through the use of the pronouns: "us", "you" and "all"

(Appendix 1). As NIKE uses the pronoun “you” three times, it can be suggested that the brand underlines the importance of the individual’s role within the issue of racial injustice. In the advertisement, NIKE states: “Don’t turn your back on racism.”, “Don’t think this doesn’t affect you.” and “Don’t think you can’t be part of the change.” (Appendix 1, ll. 3-8). In this regard, the sentences arguably accentuate the responsibility of the individual. Furthermore, as NIKE uses the pronouns “us” and “all” (Appendix 1), it can be suggested that it contributes to establish a collective sentiment, in which NIKE stresses that both the recipients and the brand itself must stand together in order to handle the racial injustice issue in focus.

In a similar fashion, Jordan addresses the recipients through the use of the pronouns: “us”, “our” and “we” (Appendix 2). Two times in the advertisement Jordan states: “Jordan brand is us, the Black community” (Appendix 2, l. 1-2; Appendix 2, l. 31-32). By doing so, the brand connects itself to the Black community by using the pronoun “us”, and it can, therefore, be suggested that the advertisement especially addresses members of said community. However, as Jordan also states that “allies” (Appendix 2, l. 43) can join Jordan in the fight for equality and justice, it can be suggested that the advertisement also addresses any recipients that want to support the cause and issue in focus. Furthermore, Jordan states: “Our past teaches us that no matter the obstacles, no matter the struggle, we can shape a better future” (Appendix 2, l. 20-23). It can be suggested that the pronouns “our”, “us” and “we” contribute to establish a collective sentiment, in which Jordan stresses that both the recipients and the brand itself can work together to overcome the issue of inequality and injustice within the Black community.

Similarly, Converse addresses the recipients four times with the pronoun “you” (Appendix 3), and the consistent usage of the pronoun, thereby, arguably reinforces the importance of the recipients’ role within the issue of racial injustice.

### **Seek to influence behavior**

When looking into the *demand* (Section 3.1.1) of the advertisements even further, NIKE employs imperatives to influence the recipients’ behavior and encourage engagement, while Jordan and Converse use representations of people.



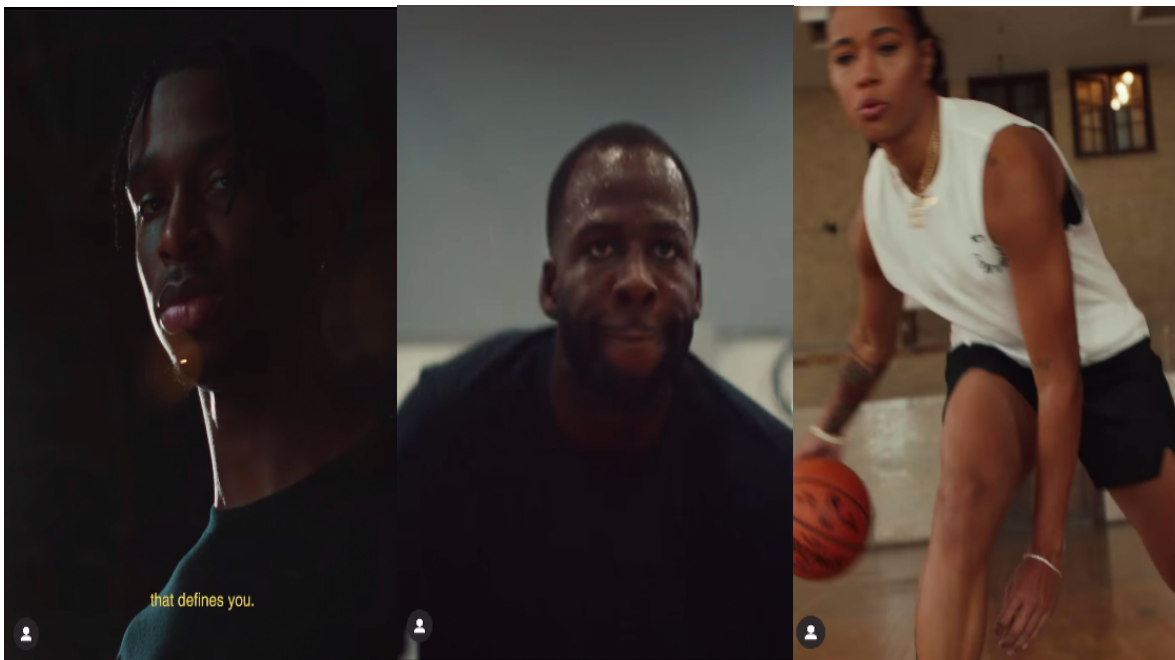
To elaborate, NIKE uses the two imperatives “Don’t” and “Be” (Appendix 1) throughout the advertisement. As imperatives are employed to influence behavior through expressives of commands (Merriam Webster n.d. a), it can be argued that the advertisement clearly seeks to influence the recipients’ behavior. The imperative “Don’t” (Appendix 1) is used eight times, and it implies a command or sincere request not to do something (Merriam Webster n.d. b). NIKE, thereby, articulates eight specific things that the brand does not want the recipients to do, which all refer to the *narrative pattern* (Section 3.1.1) of not being passive and ignoring racism. Moreover, the imperative “Be” (Appendix 1) is used at the end of the advertisement, where NIKE states: “be part of the change.” (ibid.) This imperative encourages the recipients to actively take part in combating the racial injustice issue that is apparent in the United States. In this way, the brand urges recipients to avoid specific behaviors in order to counteract racial injustice and inequality in society. It can, therefore, be suggested that NIKE explicitly specifies certain behaviors that can help promote racial justice and equality along with how both the brand and the recipients can make a difference through their conducts. Thus, it can be suggested that the advertisement seeks to make a genuine impact in society through explicit communication which arguably does not appear to be opportunistic. This matches recent findings of woke messages by Montez de Oca, Mason and Ahn (2020) who highlight that consumers find corporations’ advertising engagements in sociopolitical matters most authentic, if the corporation takes a clear stand and offers relief in the form of solutions to the problem in focus, which, thereby, does not make the advertisement appear to be superficial.

In contrast, both Jordan and Converse employ the represented people in the advertisements to encourage engagement through a direct *gaze* and close *distance* to the camera lens. Examples of this can be seen in the following six screenshots:





*Jordan: (Screenshot 19, 20 and 21)*



*Converse: (Screenshot 22, 23 and 24)*

As the majority of the screenshots inserted above illustrate, the represented people are looking directly at the camera. Their *gaze* (Section 3.1.1), thereby, indicates that they acknowledge the recipients. In addition, all of the represented people have a close *distance* to the camera, which according to Kress and van Leeuwen suggests an intimate relationship, as a close *distance* reflects social interest and involvement (ibid.). For this reason, Jordan's and Converse's choice of visual communication throughout the advertisements gives an impression that the brands are directly addressing the recipients. The employed *gaze* and *distance*, thereby, influence the perspective from which the recipients are experiencing the advertisement, and since it has an intimate character, it can be suggested that the visual communication appeals to the recipients' emotions. This correlates with findings by Özbölük and Kurtoğlu (2019) who stress the necessity of visual communication in advertising, as it can invoke emotions and better engage recipients, along with findings by Fahmy, Bock and Wanta (2014) who emphasize how visual imagery in advertising can help to influence behavior.

When considering the perspective from which the recipients experience the advertisements in greater detail, it is relevant to consider the camera *angle*, since Kress and van Leeuwen argue that the *angle* reflects the power relation between the represented and the recipients (Section 3.1.1). In this regard, when looking at Screenshot 19-21, the represented people in Jordan's advertisement are seen from an eye level *angle*, which according to the theorists indicates an equal power relation between the represented and the recipients (ibid.). In contrast, when looking at Screenshot 22-24, the represented people in Converse's advertisement are seen from a slightly lower *angle*, which, according to the theorists, indicates that the represented people have power over the recipients (ibid.). Since all the represented people in Converse's advertisement are Black and the *narrative pattern* (ibid.) of the advertisement entails participation in improving racial injustice, it can be argued that the slightly lower *angle* creates a sentiment in which Black people are emphasized as being important, as the recipients are, technically, looking up to the represented people throughout the advertisement.

## Use of celebrity endorsers

The advertisements by Jordan and Converse arguably also *offer* something to the recipients through images and video clips that encourage contemplation (Section 3.1.1). The two advertisements indirectly address the recipients through the use of several American athletes that aid in communicating the brands' messages, which the recipients are passively exposed to. Examples of this can be seen in the following six screenshots:



*Jordan: (Screenshot 1, 25 and 26)*



*Converse: (Screenshot 4, 5 and 22)*

To elaborate, the screenshots from Jordan's advertisement are of highly profiled professional American basketball players Rui Hachimura, Carmelo Anthony and Russell Westbrook respectively, who can be seen wearing "BLACK LIVES MATTER" on their shirts and participating in protests. Within the advertisement, Jordan includes several other leading male and female athletes from the NBA that have signed endorsement deals with the brand (NIKE n.d. e). Besides the three aforementioned athletes, it involves basketball athletes such as Ray Allen, Blake Griffin, Chris Paul, Zion Williams, Jason Tatum, Kemba Walker, Luka Dončić and Maya Moore (ibid.). In a similar fashion, the screenshots from Converse's advertisement are of highly profiled professional American basketball players Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, Draymond Green, Kelly Oubre Jr and Natasha Cloud respectively, who can be seen directly addressing the recipients, wearing "BLACK LIVES MATTER" on their shirts and participating in protests. The athletes are from the NBA and have all signed endorsement deals with the brand (DePaula 2020; Kleen 2020).

Celebrities can be employed in marketing efforts to help achieve specific objectives (Pradhan, Duraipandian & Sethi 2014, p. 456). According to Rahman (2018), consumers are more attentive

to advertisements that include celebrity endorsers (p. 366) and deems a brand more trustworthy if the brand is endorsed by celebrities (p. 371). It can, therefore, be argued that the inclusion of the athletes helps to strengthen the credibility of the advertisements. Additionally, celebrities can be employed in marketing efforts to persuade consumers, as celebrities are regarded to be opinion-leaders (ibid., p. 372) and aspirational reference groups which consumers aspire to identify with (Kamins 1990, p. 4). When such a large number of athletes are associated with the BLM movement and the messages that Jordan and Converse convey, it arguably also strengthens the appeal and awareness of the advertisements. Since the athletes are a part of the NBA, it is assumed that they have a high degree of recognition and respect among fans and followers within sports. When looking at the abovementioned athletes' Instagram followers, the number of followers ranges from 91 thousand to over 16 million at the time of writing (May 29, 2021), which underlines their large platforms. It can, therefore, be suggested that the athletes are included to positively influence the recipients of the advertisement to engage with BLM and appeal to a broad audience. This matches recent findings of woke messages by Sobande (2019) who highlight that woke advertisements draw on celebrities and their public images to convey woke messages relating to Black social justice.

In addition, Jordan also indirectly addresses the recipients through the use of American musicians that aid in communicating the brands' messages, which can be seen in the following two screenshots:





*Jordan: (Screenshot 27 and 28)*

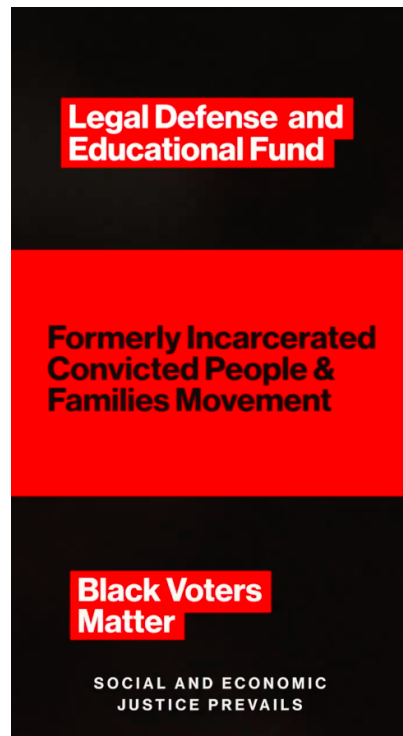
The two screenshots are images of American rapper Travis Scott and American singer-songwriter Billie Eilish respectively, who are both world renowned celebrity endorsers of the Jordan brand (Air Jordan n.d. a; Air Jordan n.d. b). It can be suggested that the use of musicians broadens the appeal of the advertisement even further, as the focus then exceeds solely sports. When looking at the musicians' Instagram followers, Travis Scott has 40.1 million and Billie Eilish has 85.9 million at the time of writing (May 29, 2021), which underlines their large platforms and global outreach. For this reason, it can be argued that Jordan employs both athlete and musician endorsers in the advertisement to raise awareness about the issue in focus, to indicate that it is an issue of great importance due to the active support of various endorsers and to appeal to a broad range of recipients.

Although employing celebrities in marketing efforts can have a positive outcome, it is important to note that it can also entail negative consequences for the brand in question. To elaborate, by linking the brand with the personal life, reputation and ethical image of a celebrity, it can negatively affect the brand's image if the celebrity in question receives negative publicity

(Rahman 2018, p. 371). To give an example, when world renowned golf athlete Tiger Woods signed an endorsement deal with NIKE in 2003 for a golf product line, NIKE's market share increased from 1% to 3.9% in the course of eight months (Chung, Derdenger & Srinivasan 2013, p. 271). However, rumors of infidelity heavily damaged Tiger Woods' public reputation, which, ultimately, led several sponsors to terminate their endorsement deals with Woods (Knittel & Stango 2014, p. 21). NIKE did not choose to terminate its deal with Woods, but his infidelity scandal had a negative impact on the brand, as research has shown that the scandal led to losses in revenue, profits and sales for NIKE (Chung, Derdenger & Srinivasan 2013, p. 291).

### **Commitment to BLM**

In addition to the use of celebrity endorsers, Jordan also *offers* (Section 3.1.1) information to the recipients that encourages contemplation about the BLM movement and Jordan's commitment to fight racial inequality and injustice through both verbal and visual communication. To exemplify, regarding its brand, Jordan states: "Jordan brand is a family that dares to dream big and works to overcome all" (Appendix 2, l. 24-25). Regarding its commitment, Jordan states: "We will amplify the voices demanding change" (Appendix 2, l. 39) and "We will partner to ensure social and economic justice prevails" (Appendix 2, l. 40-41). Through statements like these, Jordan communicates information to the recipients about the brand's values and the concrete initiatives that the brand wants to undertake regarding the issue in focus. It can be suggested that the statements contribute to convincing recipients that Jordan has a genuine interest in improving the conditions within the Black community.



Jordan: (Screenshot 29)

Concerning initiatives that Jordan wants to undertake, the inserted screenshot above appears simultaneously with the statement: “We will partner to ensure social and economic justice prevails” (Appendix 2, l. 40-41). The visual communication *offers* three different pieces of information to the recipients. Firstly, Legal Defence and Educational Fund is mentioned, which is an American legal organization that seeks to eliminate disparity and achieve racial justice and equality (LDF n.d.). Secondly, Formerly Incarcerated Convicted People & Families Movement is mentioned, which is an American network of over 50 civil and human rights organizations that seeks to transform the criminal justice system in the United States (FICPFM n.d.). Lastly, Black Voters Matter is mentioned, which is an American organization that seeks to increase power in marginalized Black communities, especially by increasing voter registration (Black Voters Matter n.d.). In this way, it can be suggested that the interplay between the verbal and visual communication contributes with specific information about three causes that Jordan supports. As described in the analysis of the *ideational function* of the advertisements (Section 5.1), Michael Jordan announced that the Jordan brand will be pledging \$100 million in order to ensure racial equality, social justice and greater access to education. Adding to this, in an official



statement on July 29, 2020, Jordan announced that the brand will donate \$1 million to both the Legal Defence and Educational Fund and the Formerly Incarcerated & Convicted People and Families Movement along with \$500,000 to Black Voters Matter (NIKE News, 2020). As the advertisement was published on Instagram on September 30, 2020, it can be argued that Jordan makes use of clear references in the advertisement to the brand's prior economic commitment to the issue in focus. At the same time, the brand arguably elucidates examples of three causes to the recipients of how they can support social and economic justice within the Black community.

In this way, it can be argued that Jordan has a genuine interest in improving the conditions within the Black community through concrete economic solutions. It can, therefore, be suggested that the advertisement seeks to make a genuine impact in society through explicit communication which does arguably not appear to be opportunistic. This matches findings by Montez de Oca, Mason and Ahn (2020) who highlight that consumers find corporations' advertising engagements in sociopolitical matters most authentic, if the corporation takes a clear stand and offers relief in the form of solutions to the problem in focus, which, thereby makes the advertisement not appear to be superficial. However, the economic contributions can arguably also be perceived as a strategic engagement by Jordan in order to meet with today's increasingly belief driven consumer demands (Cone Communications 2017). To elaborate, it was emphasized in the literature review that consumers will purchase a product if a brand advocates for issues the consumers care about themselves (Section 2.1.3). By making the large donations to specific causes, it can be suggested that Jordan indirectly increases the appeal of the brand to belief driven recipients, who, then, can be more inclined to purchase products from Jordan in the future.

### **Findings of the Interpersonal Function**

The findings within the *interpersonal function* (Section 3.1.1) of the modes in the three advertisements firstly reveal that NIKE employs imperatives to influence behavior and directly addresses the recipients through pronouns throughout the advertisement, which indicates both

self-reflection and self-persuasion. To elaborate, the brand arguably wants the recipients to reflect upon how they, individually and collectively, can be part of a change in regard to the racial injustice issue. More importantly, the findings also reflect a noteworthy power relation between NIKE and the recipients. The brand's use of imperatives arguably establishes a sentiment in which NIKE perceives itself as a brand that has the authority to issue requests and commands to its recipients about matters relating to racial injustice.

Secondly, the findings reveal that both Jordan and Converse visually establish an intimate relationship with the recipients and directly address the recipients through pronouns and the represented people throughout the advertisement, which indicate a collective sentiment and encouragement. The findings also indicate that both brands use a vast amount of celebrity endorsers to influence a broad audience of recipients and give them motives to take part in the fight themselves. While Jordan communicates its own commitment to the fight for equality and justice and how allies can join the brand and Converse communicates that participating in improving the issue of racial injustice is a conduct of great importance, both brands also emphasize their respective products throughout the advertisements. This arguably shows that the brands find it important for the recipients to have an awareness of the brands' products in addition to the sociopolitical issues in focus.

### **5.3 Textual Function**

#### **Racial injustice and inequality as a problem in society**

Kress and van Leeuwen suggest that the *textual function* of modes reflects how the composition of modes realizes specific textual meanings (Section 3.1.1). By looking into the concept of *vocabulary* (ibid.), both NIKE and Jordan shape an understanding of BLM through a discourse, in which they characterize racial injustice and inequality as a problem in society. To elaborate, NIKE's advertisement includes a prevalence of negatively charged words that assist in underlining the racial injustice issue in the United States. These words consist of: "problem", "racism", "innocent lives being taken away" and "excuses" (Appendix 1). As the advertisement starts by stating that "there is a problem in the United States" and subsequently mentions "racism",

“innocent lives being taken away” and “excuses”, it can be argued that the chosen *vocabulary* characterizes the issue of racial injustice. More specifically, it can be suggested that the advertisement reflects standpoints from the BLM movement, as one of the focal points of the movement is police killings of unarmed Black people (Ince, Rojas & Davis 2017, p. 1819). By linking “racism” and “innocent lives being taken away” (Appendix 1), NIKE arguably refers to the abovementioned focal point implicitly.

When looking into the word “excuses” (Appendix 1) in greater detail, the determiner “any more” is placed in front of excuses: “Don’t make any more excuses.” (Appendix 1). As “any more” is used to describe “...an indefinite quantity of something” (Cambridge Dictionary n.d. a), it arguably indicates that NIKE perceives excuses concerning racism as a problem that has been occurring until the present time. Thus, by requesting recipients to not make any further excuses, it also indicates that NIKE implicitly urges the recipients to acknowledge the issue of racial injustice. It can be suggested that this acknowledgement can be interpreted as one of NIKE’s solutions to the issue in focus.

In a similar fashion Jordan’s advertisement includes a prevalence of negatively charged words in connection with inequality and injustice within the Black community. To exemplify, these words consist of: “struggle”, “obstacle”, “fight” and “impossible” (Appendix 2), which connote something that prevents progress (Cambridge Dictionary n.d. b) and is very difficult to achieve (Cambridge Dictionary n.d. c). By connecting these words with racial inequality and injustice, it can be argued that Jordan establishes an impression that it is an issue that has a very negative impact on the lives of the people within the Black community and impedes them from living a life on equal terms with everybody else.

Through the advertisements, NIKE and Jordan, thus, shape a discourse in which an awareness of the current problems facing Black people is prominent. It can, thereby, be suggested that the two brands perceive the BLM movement to be rooted in fundamental difficulties facing the Black community. This correlates with recent findings by Sobande (2019), who highlight that woke advertisements draw on messages of Black people being inferior in society.

## Participation and collective action as a solution

Regarding the concept of *vocabulary* (ibid.), all three advertisements also shape an understanding of BLM which emphasizes that the issues of racial injustice and inequality can be overcome through participation and collective action. The advertisements shape a discourse concerning solutions to the issues in question through the choice of words.

Even though the majority of NIKE's advertisement emphasizes a problem through the use of imperatives which urge recipients to avoid certain behavior, the ending of the advertisement emphasizes that being a part of change is the solution, as "Be part of the change" (Appendix 1) is included three times in a row. The repeated use of this sentence arguably promotes clarity and assists to stress the importance of the message. In the third repetition of the sentence, "let's all" is placed at the beginning of it: "Let's all be part of the change." (Appendix 1, l. 10). As "let's" is a contraction of the verb "let" and the pronoun "us", the usage of the contraction together with the pronoun "all" arguably establishes a sentiment in which NIKE encourages everyone, including the brand itself, to help combat the racial injustice issue. With regard to solutions, NIKE also states: "Don't think you can't be part of the change." (Appendix 1, l. 8). As the auxiliary verb "can't" is included in the sentence, it reflects the concept of *modality*. Since *modality* is regarded by Kress and van Leeuwen to reflect the credibility of statements about the world (Section 3.1.1), the usage of the auxiliary verb arguably helps NIKE to underline that the brand is certain that individuals are actually able to help combat racial injustice. Thus, by employing this auxiliary verb, NIKE arguably emphasizes the role of the recipients and how their actions can make a difference.

Similarly, Jordan's advertisement includes a prevalence of positively charged words in connection with the commitment and actions that can combat racial inequality and injustice, which stand in complete contrast to the aforementioned negative *vocabulary*. To exemplify, these words consist of: "strength", "perseverance", "will", "excellence", "better", "overcome", "possible", "prevails" and "change" (Appendix 2), which connote continued effort and determination (Cambridge Dictionary n.d. d) and success in dealing with something (Cambridge Dictionary n.d. e). By connecting these words with commitment and actions, it can be argued that Jordan establishes

an impression that the negative impact on the Black community can be counteracted, defeated and improved.

Throughout the advertisement, auxiliary verbs such as “may”, “can” and “will” are included, which indicate the concept of *modality* that reflects the credibility of statements about the world (Section 3.1.1). With regard to actions, Jordan states: “We can shape a better future” (Appendix 2, l. 23). The usage of the auxiliary verb “can” arguably help Jordan underline that the brand is certain that both the brand and allies/recipients are able to help combat racial injustice and inequality - both individually and collectively. With regard to Jordan’s own commitment, the brand states: “We will match commitment with action” (Appendix 2, l. 37-38), “We will amplify the voices demanding change” (Appendix 2, l. 39), “We will partner to ensure social and economic justice prevails” (Appendix 2, l. 40-41) and “And we will educate and affirm so allies can join us in the fight” (Appendix 2, l. 42-43). The usage of the auxiliary verb “will” arguably help Jordan establish trustworthiness and stress the brand’s obligation and promise to the actions it intends to undertake going forward. At the end of the advertisement, Jordan states: “We will unite as one family, united by the belief that lasting change will finally come” (Appendix 2, l. 44-45). Here, the usage of the auxiliary verb arguably helps Jordan make predictions about the future, in which the brand is certain that the active involvement of the brand and recipients will have a positive impact on the Black community. When looking at the statement “...lasting change will finally come” (Appendix 2, l. 46) in greater detail, the adjective “lasting” is placed in front of “change”, and the adverb “finally” is placed in front of “come”. The adjective “lasting” is used to describe something that has a continuing or permanent effect for a long time (Cambridge Dictionary n.d. f), and “finally” is used to describe something that takes place after a long time or after difficulties (Cambridge Dictionary n.d. g). In this way, it can be argued that Jordan is of a firm conviction that a collective involvement in the issue in focus can permanently defeat the difficulties that have prevented the Black community to achieve equality and justice throughout time. Throughout the advertisement, Jordan also uses the noun “family”, the verb “unite” and the adjective “united” to emphasize a collective sentiment (Appendix 2). For example, when stating that allies can join the brand in the fight against racial inequality and injustice, Jordan adds: “We will unite as one family, united by the belief that lasting change will finally come” (Appendix 2, ll.

44-46). In this way, it can be suggested that Jordan employs a certain *vocabulary* that indicates unification as a way of signalling that the brand will stand together in solidarity with everyone who decides to join the fight in question. The use of the noun “family” arguably helps to emphasize a sense of loyalty and genuine care.

Converse’s advertisement includes the two sayings: “They say that what you do when no one is watching is what separates you” (Appendix 3, I. 1) and “But the truth is, it is what you when everyone is watching that defines you” (Appendix 3, II. 3-4). When looking into the chosen *vocabulary*, a favoring of the second saying becomes apparent. As Converse adds: “But the truth is” (Appendix 3, I. 3) before the second saying: “It is what you do when everyone is watching that defines you” (Appendix 3, I. 4), it can be argued that Converse uses the noun “truth” to stress that the brand perceives the second saying to be in better accordance with its beliefs. As “truth” is, then, connected to the second saying, it can be interpreted that “untruth” is indirectly connected to the first saying. Additionally, in the first saying, Converse uses the verb “separates” (Appendix 3, I. 1) to describe that actions undertaken in private sets a person apart from others (Merriam Webster n.d. e). In the second saying, Converse uses the verb “defines” (Appendix 3, I. 4) to describe that actions undertaken in public determines the qualities of a person (Merriam Webster n.d. f). In this way, Converse arguably stresses that even though actions undertaken in private can set a person apart from others, it is the actions that a person undertakes in public that truly identifies the person.

When placing the second saying in the larger context of the advertisement, it can be argued that the saying has a clear collective sentiment, because it perceives actions undertaken in public to reflect a person’s true character. As the advertisement has a focus on the BLM movement and taking a stand on racial injustice, the actions undertaken in public can, in this case, be interpreted to be any form of participation relating to the issue in focus. Thus, it can be suggested that Converse indirectly communicates to the recipients that collective participation in improving the issue of racial injustice is a conduct that the brand perceives to be of great importance. However, it can be argued that Converse’s verbal communication is subtle and abstract in nature, as the brand does not explicitly specify what this collective participation may encompass nor address

the brands' own commitment to the issues in focus. The advertisement only offers a saying, which the individual recipient can interpret in different ways.

Thus, through the advertisements, the three brands shape a discourse in which solving the racial injustice issues is prominent. It can, thereby, be suggested that all three brands have a positive outlook, where they perceive participation and unity as important solutions to racial injustice and inequality. This particular discourse correlates with recent findings within the creation of woke messages, where Sobande (2019) and Montez de Oca, Mason and Ahn (2020) highlight that woke advertisements accentuate determination, optimism, messages of empowerment that seek to create encouragement and transformation along with how consumers have the ability to promote changes in society.

### **Creative language use**

By looking closer into the chosen *vocabulary* (Section 3.1.1) within the advertisements, NIKE and Converse realize specific textual meanings through creative language use. To elaborate, NIKE uses the idioms "Don't turn your back on racism." and "Don't sit back and be silent." (Appendix 1, ll. 3-7) to reflect passive behavior through figurative language. To exemplify, to turn one's back on something or someone is a figure of speech that implies rejection or abandonment (Merriam Webster n.d. c), and to sit back is a figure of speech that implies someone who does not make an effort to follow through with certain things (Merriam Webster n.d. d). The two examples are similar in meaning and, thereby, emphasize the passiveness to racial injustice that NIKE wants the recipients to avoid. The use of figurative language can arguably appeal to the recipients' emotions and make the recipients comprehend NIKE's messages more vividly, as it can be suggested that one can envisage the passive acts in their minds through the level of detail that the two figures of speech encompass.

In addition to this, the chosen *vocabulary* in NIKE's advertisement connotes a two-part meaning, as all sentences with the imperative "don't" can be interpreted as communicating a problem and a solution at the same time. To exemplify, when looking at the sentence: "Don't turn your back on racism" (Appendix 1, l. 3), it can be interpreted that turning one's back on racism is a problem,

as the idiom indicates rejection. When NIKE urges recipients to avoid this specific behavior, it can be argued that not turning one's back on racism is a solution. Moreover, as it can be suggested that acknowledgement is the opposite of rejection, the sentence is implicitly urging recipients to acknowledge racism. In this way, the two-part meaning becomes important for the textual meaning that is realized in the advertisement.

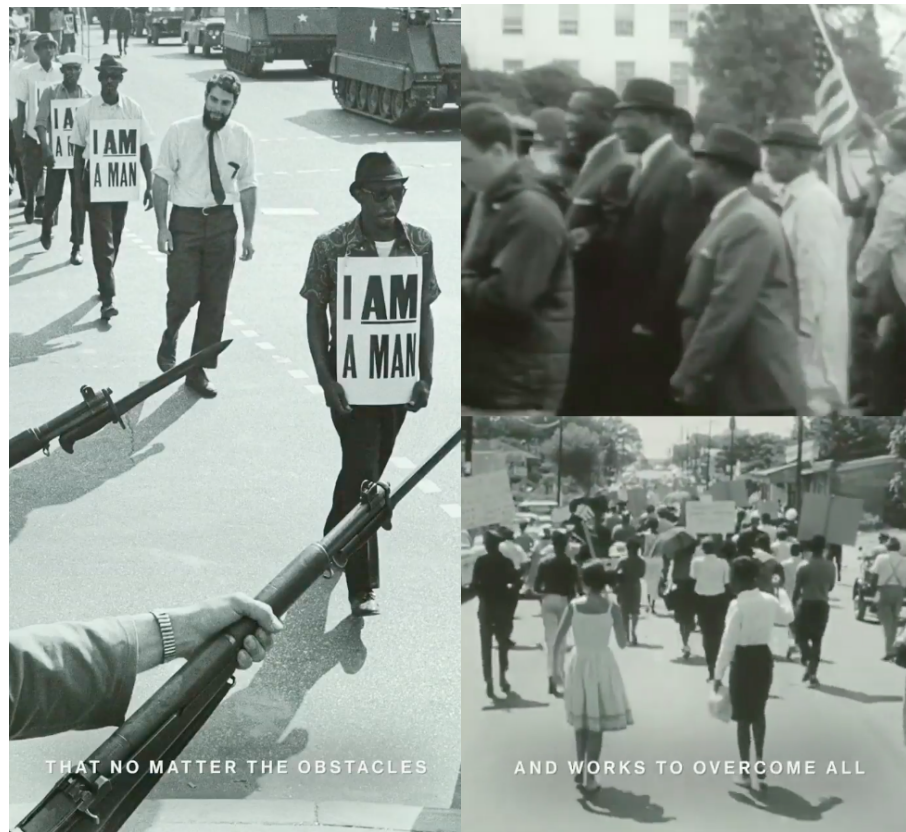
As stated prior, Converse includes two sayings in the advertisement: "They say that what you do when no one is watching is what separates you" (Appendix 3, l. 1) and "It is what you do when everyone is watching that defines you" (Appendix 3, l. 4). The first saying implies that the actions one undertakes in private reflects a person's core self and true character (Robbins 2017). The saying became widely known through the American basketball coach John Wooden (ibid.), who is highly renowned for his motivational quotes that provide guidance on how to achieve success in basketball and life in general (The Wooden Effect n.d.). This suggests that the chosen *vocabulary* has a clear connotation and connection to basketball, which contributes to the focus on basketball that is evident throughout Converse's advertisement. Bearing this in mind, the second saying implies that one's true character is reflected in the way one presents oneself and the actions one undertakes in public (Pavlo 2012). It can, therefore, be argued that the two sayings have contradicting perceptions of true character, as the first favors actions in private while the second favors actions in public. In this way, the pronouns "no one" (Appendix 3, l. 1) and "everyone" (Appendix 3, l. 4) become important for the textual meaning that is realized in the advertisement, as the pronouns arguably underline the contradiction between the two sayings.

### **Representation of time**

When looking at the composition of modes, the advertisements by Jordan and Converse realize specific textual meanings through the representation of time. To elaborate, in Jordan's advertisement, the brand uses images and video clips in black and white in connection with the statement: "Our past teaches us that no matter the obstacles, no matter the struggle, we can shape a better future" (Appendix 2, ll. 20-23). These images and video clips distinguish



themselves from the rest of the visual communication in the advertisement and contribute with a significant truth value to the communicated statement, as they bear evidence of being taken from a different point in time. This can be seen in the following two screenshots:

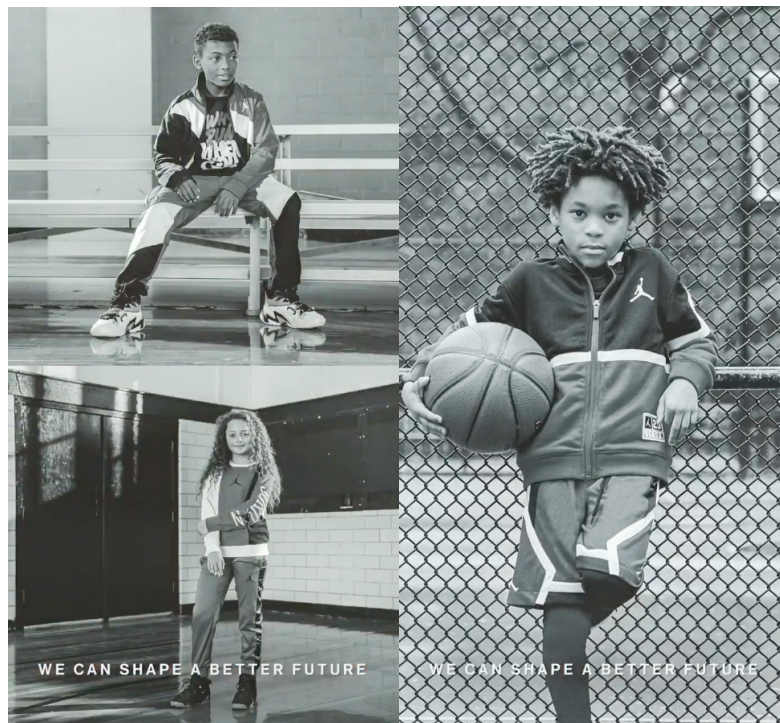


*Jordan: (Screenshot 30 and 31)*

In the first screenshot, several Black men can be seen walking with a sign that says “I AM A MAN”, and in the second screenshot, several Black men and women can be seen protesting, and their style of clothing indicates that the scenery does not reflect the present day. “I Am a Man” refers to a strike in Memphis, Tennessee in 1968, in which Black sanitation workers protested against economic disparity and poor working conditions (Brown 2018). The strike gained support of Martin Luther King Jr. who was the leader of the CRM (ibid.), which was a social movement in the United States that focused on racial justice and equality during the 1950s and 1960s (Clayton 2018, p. 449). In this regard, it is important to note that the BLM movement is emphasized as a modern version of the CRM in the literature review (2.1.1). Thus, it can be suggested that Jordan makes use of past time in the advertisement to make a connection between the two social

movements and to underline that what is happening in society today in relation to Black people is an extension of what has also happened in the past.

In addition to making use of the past in the advertisement, Jordan also makes use of the future. To elaborate, Jordan states: “Our past teaches us” (Appendix 2, l. 20) and “We can shape a better future” (Appendix 2, l. 23), to which the following two images in black and white appear simultaneously:

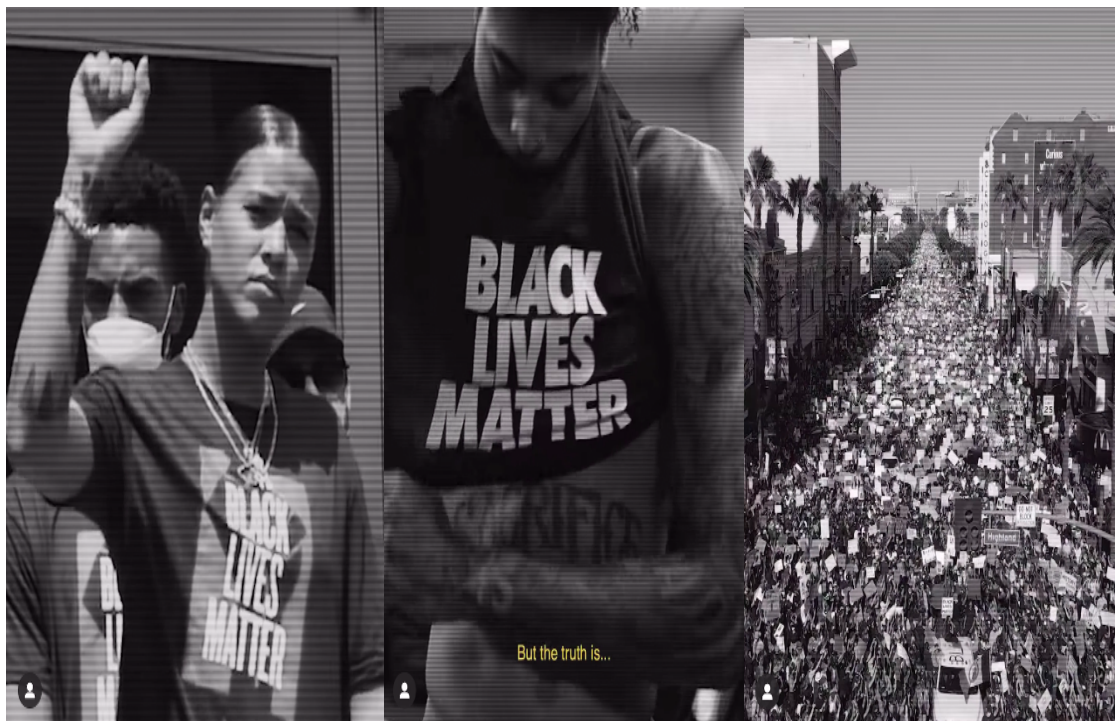


*Jordan: (Screenshot 8 and 9)*

As the represented people in the screenshots are evidently of a young age, it can be argued that Jordan perceives young people to play an important role for achieving racial justice and equality, as the brand verbally connects the images of young people with the future. According to Clift (1987), a child can be regarded as “...a symbol of future potentiality as well as the carrier of the heritage of the past. The child is symbolic of the past, coming into being from generative forces that preceded it, yet for it the future is an open possibility”. Thus, it can be interpreted that Jordan visually employs young people to indicate that younger generations are important for the BLM movement. As described in the literature review in Section 2, it is especially people from

generation Z and Y who have participated in the BLM protests following the death of George Floyd (Davis 2020; Morano-Williams 2020), as these younger generations are generally very conscious of constant issues in society such as violence and racism (Sarkar and Kotler 2018). In this way, the prominent role of young people in relation to achieving racial justice and equality arguably becomes evident in Jordan's perception of BLM.

In contrast to this, Converse uses images and video clips that bear evidence of being from the present time in black and white in connection with the statement: "But the truth is, it is what you do when everyone is watching that defines you" (Appendix 3, ll. 3-4). This can be seen in the following three screenshots:



Converse: (Screenshot 4, 5 and 6)

As described in the *ideational function* of the advertisements (Section 5.1), many NBA players participated in protests and were wearing black t-shirts with the text "BLACK LIVES MATTER" during the basketball season of 2020 in the wake of George Floyd's death, which Screenshots 4-5 arguably depict. In addition, the raised fist in Screenshot 4 has already been interpreted as a

gesture relating to the BLM movement of the present day in Section 5.1, which underlines how Converse makes use of present time in the advertisement to reflect recent events.

Since Jordan's and Converse's images and video clips are in black and white and, thereby, reduced in color and naturalistic character, it can be theoretically argued that they have a decreased *modality* (Section 3.1.1). However, according to Kress and van Leeuwen, black and white images can be considered reliable in some instances (Section 3.1.1). Since the images and video clips in question are used to represent something that has happened in the United States in the past and present, it can be argued that they are used to provide reliable and credible visual examples of what Jordan perceives to be obstacles and struggles which the Black community has faced in the past along with what Converse perceives to be participation in the BLM movement in the present time.

According to Wolburg (2006), who has researched the way time is employed in American advertising, messages conveyed through advertising are generally directed at the past, present or future (p. 705), and time messages can be part of central arguments and be used to influence the receivers (p. 697). The scholar firstly suggests that time messages relating to the past can be used to relive the past (p. 700) and inform recipients about meaningful past events (p. 716). In this regard, it can be argued that Jordan's advertisement has clear references to past events concerning the CRM movement and the Black people's protests of racial justice and equality during the 1950s and 1960s. In this way, it can be said that the advertisement seeks to influence the recipients to be aware of Black people's past. Secondly, the scholar suggests that time messages relating to the present can be used to orient towards the present time (p. 706) and to communicate a call to action (p. 705). In this regard, it can be argued that Converse's advertisement has clear references to relatively recent events concerning the BLM movement and seeks to both show and influence examples of participation in the movement in question. Thirdly, the scholar suggests that time messages relating to the future can be used to highlight expectations of the future (p. 706) and communicating that results in the future must be planned in the present (p. 704). In this regard, it can be argued that Jordan's focus on young people



reflects a form of expectation that these people will contribute to improving the future of Black people and overcoming the past struggles of the Black community.

### Foregrounding of people

When considering the concept of *salience* by Kress and van Leeuwen, which entails how elements attract recipients' attention (Section 3.1.1), the advertisements by Jordan and Converse clearly foreground the represented people in the advertisements through their placement and size. Examples of this can be seen in the following six screenshots:



*Jordan: (Screenshot 19, 20 and 21)*



*Converse: (Screenshot 4, 5 and 6)*

As the screenshots indicate, the represented people are placed in the center of the frames, which makes the people *salient*, as Kress and van Leeuwen suggest that a center placement reflects the core of the communication (Section 3.1.1). In addition, the relative size of the people in the frames is large, which arguably attracts the recipients' attention to the represented people and the messages they are communicating in the advertisement to a larger degree.

When looking further at the represented people in the two advertisements, Jordan includes people of different races and genders, which can be seen in Screenshot 21. This arguably shows a foregrounding of diversity in the support of racial injustice and inequality facing Black people and, furthermore, a sentiment of unity and solidarity, which was interpreted as an important focus of Jordan's advertisement in Section 5.2.

As the represented people in Converse's advertisement are wearing t-shirts with the text "BLACK LIVES MATTER" and are participating in protests, it arguably shows a foregrounding of the BLM movement. Since the text appears in a white color on black t-shirts, it arguably foregrounds "BLACK LIVES MATTER" even further, as black and white are clear contrasts.

### Foregrounding of verbal communication

Relating to the concept of *salience* by Kress and van Leeuwen (Section 3.1.1), the advertisements by NIKE and Jordan clearly foreground elements of the verbal communication to the recipients through the use of visual cues. To elaborate, NIKE's advertisement solely consists of written text that is placed in the center of the images. An example of this can be seen in the following screenshot:



NIKE: (Screenshot 32)

As Kress and van Leeuwen suggest that a center placement reflects the core of the communication (Section 3.1.1), the text in the images is made *salient*. Since the written text appears in a white color on a black background, it arguably foregrounds the written communication further, as black and white are clear contrasts. To elaborate on this even further, NIKE foregrounds the imperatives in the advertisement through the use of visual cues which

emphasize the communicated messages. In each sentence with imperatives, the imperative appears first on its own and is, subsequently, combined with the rest of the request after a few seconds. An example of this can be seen in the following two screenshots:

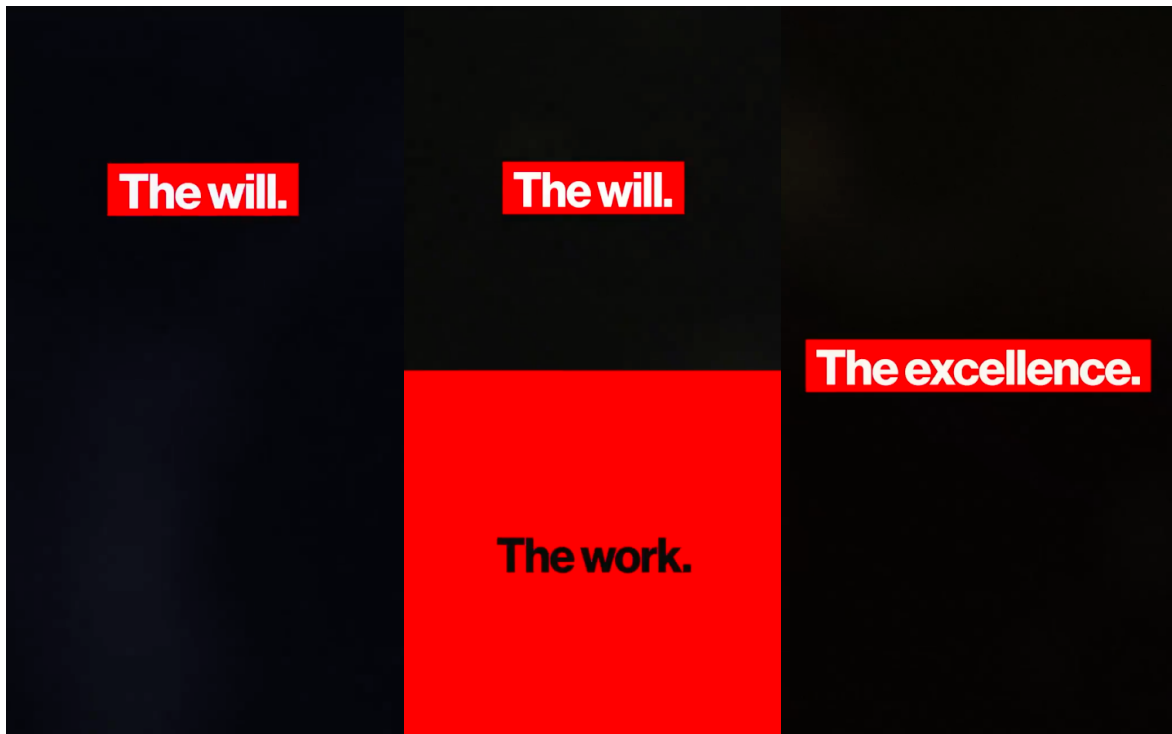


*NIKE: (Screenshot 33 and 34)*

When the individual imperative is combined with the rest of the request, the imperative appears in a bolder font, which ultimately foregrounds the imperative and underlines what behavior the recipients should avoid. Using Screenshot 33 and 34 as an example, NIKE urges recipients to not pretend that there is not a problem in America and, thereby, to acknowledge the problem in question. In this way, even though it was emphasized in the *ideational function* of the advertisements (Section 5.1) that NIKE solely addresses the BLM movement through verbal communication, the advertisement clearly makes use of visual cues to foreground specific words to the recipients. This correlates with findings by Fahmy and Wanta (2005) which emphasize that moving images can be used to communicate messages more effectively.



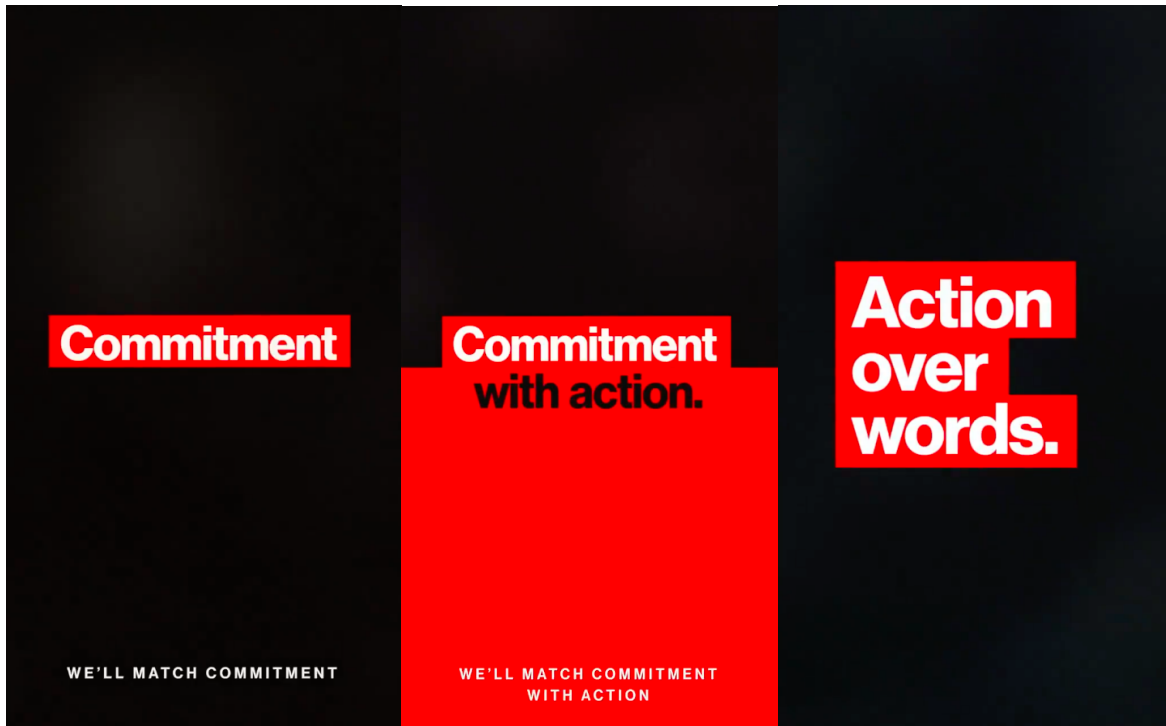
In a similar fashion, elements from Jordan’s verbal communication are also made *salient* (Section 3.1.1) in the advertisement through the use of visual cues that underline the communicated messages. An example of this can be seen in the following three screenshots:



*Jordan: (Screenshot 35, 36 and 37)*

The inserted screenshots above appear simultaneously with the statement: “The will, the work, the excellence” (Appendix 2, l. 15-17), in which Jordan uses “will”, “work” and “excellence” as attributes to describe former generations of the Black community. As seen in the three screenshots, differences in color contrast of red, white and black are used to foreground the statements, and it can, therefore, be suggested that this is employed to capture the recipients’ attention during the communicated message.

Another example of this can be seen in the following three screenshots:



*Jordan: (Screenshot 38, 39 and 40)*

Screenshots 38 and 39 appear simultaneously with the statement: “We will match commitment with action” (Appendix 2, l. 37-38), and Screenshot 40 appears at the end of the advertisement simultaneously with the statement: “Action over words” (Appendix 2, l. 47). As the screenshots have “action” in common, it can be suggested that Jordan wants to underline that the brand is committed to take sincere action on the issue in focus and to keep this information clear in the recipients’ consciousness throughout the advertisement.

### **Foregrounding of products**

As mentioned in Section 5.1, both Jordan and Converse incorporate their respective basketball products throughout the advertisements. In relation to this, the products are continuously made *silent* (Section 3.1.1) in the two advertisements through a center placement and a large relative size. Examples of this can be seen in the following five screenshots:



*Jordan: (Screenshot 7, 9 and 14)*



*Converse: (Screenshot 10 and 11)*

It can, therefore, be argued that both Jordan and Converse clearly foreground their products in the advertisement to make the recipients pay attention to the brands' product offerings. When considering the concept of advertising in general, it entails the promotion of a brand's products and services, which is why it is rather natural for products to be displayed in advertisements.

As mentioned in the literature review (Section 2.1.3), 87 percent of consumers in the United States will "...purchase a product because that company advocated for an issue they cared about" (Cone Communications 2017). In relation to this, Eyada (2020) suggests that consumers today are considered to be increasingly belief driven and they, therefore, continuously purchase products that they can identify themselves with (p. 30). To this, the scholar adds: "Consumers consider the products they buy as an extension of their view, values, beliefs, and lifestyles, considering it a form of political and social act, and an opportunity to make an impact" (ibid., p. 31). In a similar fashion, Dahlen, Lange and Smith (2010) emphasize that "to a certain extent, individuals express who they are, which group they belong to or aspire to join, and project status, role and achievement through the brands they purchase" (p. 7). In this way, it can be understood that consumers are increasingly interested in purchasing products from brands whose values align with the individual consumers' beliefs. Consumption has, thereby, become a meaningful and moral act for consumers in today's society through which they can express their individual sociopolitical standpoints.

When considering this in relation to Jordan's and Converse's inclusion of products in the advertisements, it can be suggested to positively influence belief driven consumers who support the BLM movement and racial justice and equality in general to purchase products from the two brands. Jordan's and Converse's support and commitment to BLM can, thus, arguably be transferred onto the consumers who purchase the brands' products. As Jordan mentions that allies can join the brand in the fight and Converse mentions that what people do when everyone is watching is important, it can be interpreted that one can become an ally by purchasing NIKE products and that it is significant to be seen with Converse products when supporting BLM. In

this way, the brands can arguably capitalize on their woke engagements while meeting increasing consumer expectations regarding sociopolitical matters (Feldmann 2016, p. 81).

Building on this, the literature review (Section 2.1.3) emphasizes that although brands use their platforms to create awareness of social injustice issues through woke advertising, it can have a negative effect on the brands in question (Vredenburg et al. 2018; Vredenburg et al. 2020, p. 444). This can be the case if the brands incorporate woke initiatives into their advertising efforts but fail to ensure an alignment with the sociopolitical matter in focus and the brands' values (ibid., p. 445) or if the advertisements have a clear focus on increasing profits (Selmani 2020). As it was underlined under the *ideational function* of the advertisements (Section 5.1), the narratives of all three advertisements clearly align with the respective brands' values and, thus, appear to reflect an authentic interest in racial injustice and inequality. For this reason, it is interesting to take the focus on increasing profits into consideration, as Selmani (2020) stresses that this can be regarded as woke capitalism (p. 11).

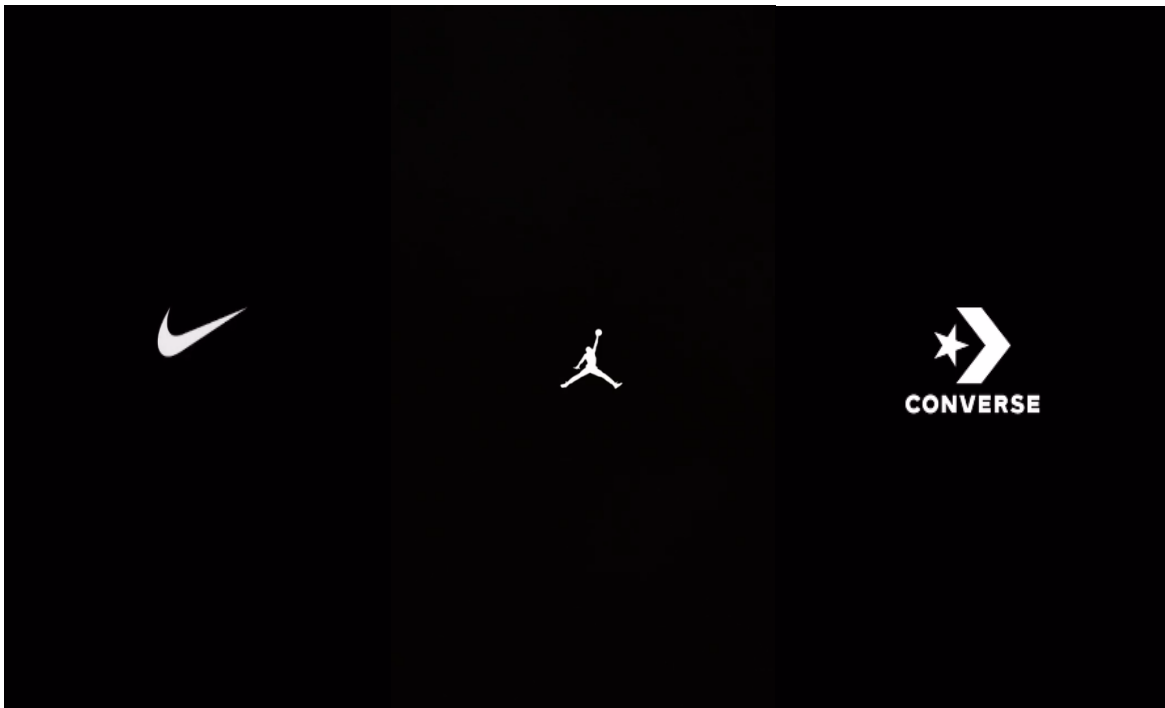
While it is natural for products to be promoted in advertising in general, it can be suggested that it can lessen the sincerity of brands' sociopolitical commitments in relation to woke advertising. Taking the advertisement by NIKE as an example, the brand solely forerounds verbal communication of racial injustice and inequality and, thus, does not include any visuals of the brand's products. Instead, NIKE relies upon an altered version of the brand's iconic slogan to promote the brand as a sincere supporter of BLM. In this way, NIKE employs its brand identity to position the brand as being woke, which, then, can indirectly influence belief driven consumers to support the brand as a whole by purchasing NIKE's products. In contrast, Jordan and Converse directly employ the brands' products in the advertisements as a way of actively promoting their product offerings besides the sociopolitical matters in focus. It can, thus, be suggested that Jordan's and Converse's focus on visual cues that display the brands' product offerings can be interpreted as a direct attempt to increase profits.

Furthermore, in this regard, it is important to consider the aforementioned fact that Converse's advertisement conveys abstract verbal communication about collective participation in BLM, which the individual recipient can interpret subjectively. In addition, the advertisement does not

offer concrete solutions nor the brand's own commitment to the issue in question. In this way, the messages in the advertisement can be perceived to be subtle, and when they are accompanied by a *salience* (Section 3.1.1) of Converse's product offerings, the advertisement's focus on BLM can appear superficial. It can, thus, be suggested that the brand's objective of promoting its products becomes prevalent in the advertisement.

### **Foregrounding of logos**

As mentioned in Section 5.1, the three advertisements share similar closing remarks, as they all end with frames in which the brands' respective logos are displayed. This can be seen in the following three screenshots:



*NIKE, Jordan and Converse: (Screenshot 16, 17 and 18)*

As the screenshots indicate, the logos are made *salient*, since they are placed in the center of the image. As *salience* attracts recipients' attention according to Kress and van Leeuwen (Section 3.1.1), it can be argued that the brands employ their logos to recapitulate that they are the sender of the messages within the advertisements and, furthermore, to end the advertisements with a

symbol that encompasses everything the brands stand for, including values, commitments and product offerings.

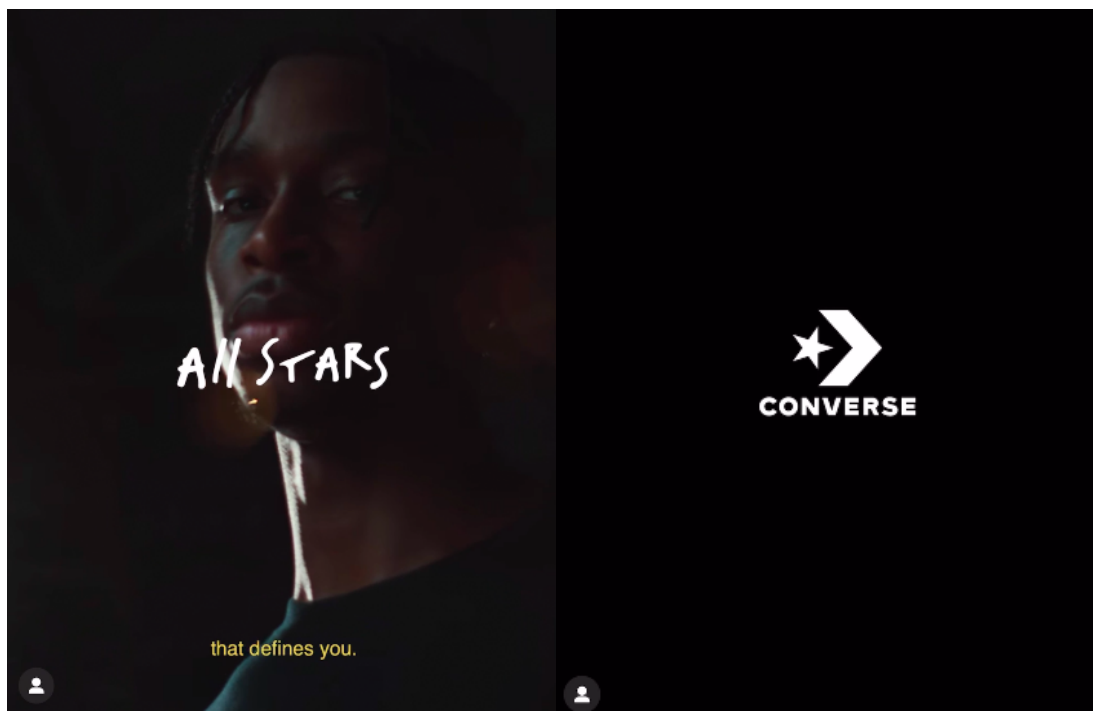
In the ending frames of Jordan's advertisement, the logo subsequently appears with letters that constitute the word "UNITE" and, furthermore, with the statement "Action over words". This can be seen in the following two screenshots:



*Jordan: (Screenshot 17, 41 and 42)*

It can be suggested that the word "unite" refers to the clear *narrative pattern* (Section 3.1.1) throughout the whole advertisement that has a focus on standing together to achieve racial justice and equality. Both with regard to a unity within the Jordan brand as a whole, including its athlete and celebrity endorsers, and with regard to a unity with Jordan and its recipients. In addition, it can be suggested that the statement "Action over words" is used to foreground Jordan's message that sincere action is necessary to combat the issue in focus.

In the ending frames of Converse's advertisement, the logo appears right after a frame of Shai Gilgeous-Alexander with the text "ALL STARS". This can be seen in the following two screenshots:



Converse: (Screenshot 43 and 44)

To elaborate, “ALL STARS” is one of Converse’s collections, which seeks to embrace people’s differences through an inclusive collection that views everyone as stars (Converse n.d. e). The center placement of “ALL STARS” arguably attracts the recipients’ attention to the specific product collection. However, since the focus of the advertisement is the issue of racial injustice and the BLM movement in general, it can be argued that the employment of “ALL STARS” creates a sentiment of diversity and inclusion in which everyone, no matter the color of their skin, can be considered stars.

### Findings of the Textual Function

According to Kress and van Leeuwen, the *ideational function* of all individual modes combines to create a unified message (Section 3.1.1). Firstly, the textual meaning that is realized in NIKE’s advertisement conveys a clear and unified narrative in which NIKE urges recipients to avoid being passive and ignoring racial injustice. Furthermore, NIKE encourages recipients to contemplate their individual roles and abilities to combat the issue in focus, especially with a reference to



“Don’t Do It”, which is a revision of the brand’s iconic slogan. Through the written communication, the problem of and solutions to racial injustice are simultaneously highlighted through a prevalence of a negatively charged vocabulary and a consistent use of the imperative “don’t”. The urgency of the narrative is reinforced by NIKE through the visual foregrounding of the imperatives. In this way, it can be argued that NIKE realizes a textual meaning within the advertisement that seeks to fit NIKE’s brand identity into a sociopolitical context and influence the recipients’ behavior regarding racial injustice.

Secondly, the textual meaning that is realized in Jordan’s advertisement conveys a clear and unified narrative in which Jordan perceives itself as a part of the Black community and is committed to shape a better future where equal opportunity and social and economic justice prevails for everyone. Furthermore, Jordan encourages recipients to take part in the matter in focus in unity with the brand, especially through the use of athlete and celebrity endorsers that show their support. Through the written communication, racial injustice and inequality is presented as a problem through a prevalence of a negatively charged vocabulary, and the solutions to the problem in focus is presented through a prevalence of a positively charged vocabulary and a consistent use of modal auxiliary verbs that establish trustworthiness and stress Jordan’s ascribed obligations as a brand. Through the visual communication, Jordan establishes a relationship of intimate character and appeals to the recipients’ emotions through the represented people who are talking in the advertisement along with visual cues concerning the BLM movement and the CRM, which reinforce the narrative. In addition, Jordan simultaneously integrates its footwear, apparel and accessories throughout the advertisement, which displays examples of the brand’s products to the recipients and, thereby, a profitable interest. In this way, it can be argued that Jordan realizes a textual meaning within the advertisement that the brand deems it important to improve certain sociopolitical matters as a brand and encourages recipients to join Jordan to fight for racial equality and justice, while still integrating the brand’s products.

Thirdly, the textual meaning that is realized in Converse’s advertisement conveys a clear and unified narrative in which Converse perceives one’s true character to be reflected through the

actions one undertakes in public - more specifically, the actions relating to the improvement of racial injustice of Black people. Furthermore, Converse encourages recipients to participate in improving racial injustice, especially through the use of basketball athlete endorsers that show their support to the matter in focus. Through the written communication, collective conduct is presented to be favorable through the chosen vocabulary. Through the visual communication, Converse establishes an intimate relationship with the recipients and appeals to their emotions through the represented people in the advertisement and the visual cues relating to the BLM movement, which reinforce the narrative. Additionally, Converse simultaneously foregrounds its footwear, apparel and accessories throughout the advertisement, which showcases examples of the brand's products to the recipients and, thereby, a profitable interest. In this way, it can be argued that Converse realizes a textual meaning within the advertisement that the brand deems it important to participate in improving certain sociopolitical matters as a brand - and does this by providing motives for recipients to undertake supporting actions, while still foregrounding the brand's products.

## 6. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to investigate how American sports brands portray BLM in their advertisements with a point of departure in the case of NIKE, Jordan and Converse. A focus was particularly on what kind of messages the advertisements convey through verbal and visual modes of communication, what kind of understandings of BLM the advertisements shape along with how the advertisements align with the brands' values.

The analytical findings from the Multimodal Discourse Analysis elucidate that the advertisements build upon a similar narrative that focuses on racial injustice and inequality within the Black community and encourages the recipients to take active part in improving the issues in focus, which reflects woke advertising. More specifically, NIKE focuses on the issue of racism and unjustified killings in the United States, Jordan focuses on the issue of inequality and injustice within the Black community and Converse focuses on the BLM movement in general and, thereby, the issue of racial injustice of Black people.

The analytical findings reveal that the advertisements convey different messages through both verbal and visual modes of communication. All three brands employ pronouns to directly address the recipients and signal a unity between the brands, the recipients and the Black community. While NIKE additionally attempts to influence the recipients' behavior through a foregrounding of imperatives, Jordan and Converse establish an intimate relationship with the recipients and appeal to their emotions through images of people.

When looking further into the relationship that is created with the recipients, the advertisements establish three different power relations. As NIKE uses imperatives as expressives of commands to influence behavior, it positions the brand with a power and authority to issue commands to the recipients. In contrast, Jordan employs an eye level camera angle throughout the advertisement that positions the brand with an equal power relation to the recipients and underlines a unification. Additionally, Converse uses a lower camera angle to emphasize Black people as important in parts of the advertisement, which positions the represented Black people

with a power over the recipients, as the camera perspective makes the recipients look up to the represented people. In this way, the findings indicate that NIKE seeks to promote its messages from a position of authority, while Jordan seeks to promote its messages from a position of equality and Converse seeks to promote its messages by positioning Black people as powerful.

The advertisements by Jordan and Converse shape an understanding of BLM through visual cues in which the social movement is portrayed as directly associated with the phrase “Black Lives Matter”, protests and raised fists to the recipients. In contrast, NIKE shapes an understanding of BLM through statements in which the movement is portrayed as directly associated with racism and killings. Adding to this, the analytical findings reveal that both NIKE and Jordan shape an understanding of BLM through a discourse, in which they characterize racial injustice and inequality as a problem in society that impedes Black people from living their lives on equal terms with everyone else. The two brands, thereby, perceive the BLM movement to be rooted in fundamental difficulties facing the Black community. All three advertisements also shape an understanding of BLM which emphasizes that the issues of racial injustice and inequality can be overcome through participation and collective action. The advertisements shape a discourse concerning solutions to the issues in question which stresses that the issues facing the Black community can be defeated. All three brands, thereby, have a positive outlook, where they perceive participation and unity as important solutions to racial injustice and inequality.

To portray BLM, the brands take advantage of brand and celebrity images to strengthen the appeal of the advertisements and influence the recipients. NIKE uses an altered version of the brand’s iconic slogan “Just Do It” to promote the brand as a sincere supporter of BLM. In contrast, Jordan and Converse heavily rely on images of world-renown American professional basketball athletes and musicians, who have millions of followers on a global scale, to promote their messages.

When looking into how the advertisements align with the brands’ values, the analytical findings reveal that the unified woke focus on racial injustice and inequality regarding Black people matches with NIKE’s, Jordan’s and Converse’s respective brand values. All three brands have core

beliefs in which they are committed to promote racial justice and equality of Black people in society. With regard to woke advertising, the analytical findings reveal that NIKE explicitly specifies certain behaviors that can help promote racial justice and equality. Similarly, Jordan explicitly states its commitment to the issues in question along with concrete initiatives the brand supports economically, which the recipients, likewise, can support. The explicit nature of the brands' communication, thereby, reflects a genuine interest in making an impact in society through concrete solutions. In contrast, Converse only offers abstract communication relating to collective participation in BLM and does not specify the brand's commitment nor concrete solutions, which is why the brand's engagement can be considered relatively superficial.

On a noticeable facet of this, the findings reflect that Jordan and Converse clearly foreground their product offerings throughout the advertisements. As consumers are increasingly belief driven today and view consumption as meaningful and moral acts that can express their sociopolitical stances (Eyada 2020; Dahlen, Lange and Smith 2010), the salience of products can, on one hand, positively influence consumers who support BLM to purchase from the brands. On the other hand, a focus on increasing profits in woke advertising is emphasized as capitalistic in the literature (Selmani 2020), because it can make the advertising efforts appear opportunistic rather than sincere. As Jordan has explicitly stated its commitment and support of BLM, it can be perceived that the objective of promoting BLM is still prevalent in the advertisement. However, the subtle nature of Converse's messages along with the salience of product offerings makes the objective of increasing profits more prevalent in the advertisement.

The key analytical findings in this thesis, thereby, reveal that NIKE's, Jordan's and Converse's choice of verbal and visual communication has a large influence on the way BLM is portrayed in the advertisements. On one hand, the brands' individual values align with the sociopolitical issues in focus, as each brand has core beliefs in which it is committed to promote racial justice and equality of Black people in society. When considering literature on woke advertising by Vredenburg et al. (2020), Montez de Oca, Mason & Ahn (2020) and Lima and Øksnevad (2020), the alignment between sociopolitical issues and brand values reflects a genuine interest and commitment to promoting changes in society, which is why the advertisements can be

interpreted to be sincere in this regard. Nevertheless, the findings significantly reveal that a lack of specificity in the communication, which is the case with Converse's advertisement, and a salience of products, which is the case in both Jordan's and Converse's advertisement, can make the advertisements appear to be opportunistic. This is a principal finding, since the analysis reveals that an advertisement can be perceived as woke capitalistic even though it aligns with a brand's values, which the literature argues reflect a genuineness of woke advertisements (Vredenburg et al. 2020; Montez de Oca, Mason & Ahn 2020; Lima and Øksnevad 2020).

In this way, this thesis contributes with principal findings that call for future research to examine the relationship between woke advertisements and capitalistic interests of corporations. Future research could favorably examine woke advertisements from a consumer perspective in order to gain a rich understanding of the factors that influence the perception of advertisements to be either sincere or opportunistic - especially in relation to the incorporation of product offerings. This is considered relevant, as a corporation's intentions behind a woke advertisement may not be equal to the way the recipients interpret the advertisement. Furthermore, as this thesis is limited to three American sports brands, future research could, likewise, beneficially examine a larger case sample within sports or across industries in order to obtain nuanced findings in the field of woke advertisements and BLM.

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