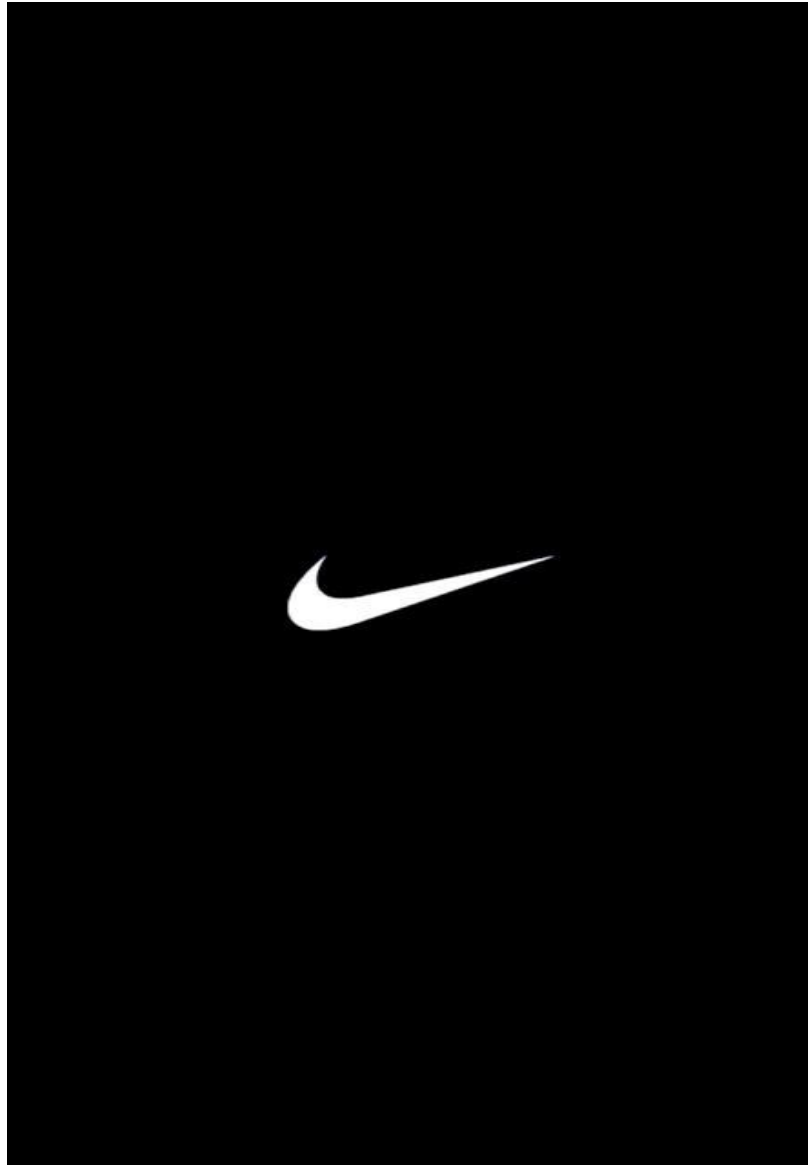


**Signifier and Signified: A Study of Nike**



In recent years, there has been an increase in the strain between companies and their relationship with their clientele. This is due to the idea that we have about the companies, whose products we consume, basically tell us what we want to hear about their beliefs, or practices as a company. We believe that the companies that sell to us the idea of their social political awareness, for those of us who regard ourselves as being socially and politically aware, are automatically genuinely aligned with our beliefs. This has been the case for many companies such as Dove and Nike. with the ideals of their consumers. In truth the interest of any company is to produce economic capital, for, as artist and author, Alex Wolf has explained, "Capitalism is an economic system not a moral one." A company which was built and continues to survive in an economic system will only continue to successfully do so by ensuring that it remains economically sound. This essay will focus on analyzing the different tools and strategies or methods companies have used to influence their clientele to partake in the consumption of their products, using Nike and it's 30th annual *Just Do It* ad as the focal point for this discussion. This analysis will utilize the science of semiotics, Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulations* in relation to the social media pop culture phenomena Lil' Miquela.

On September 5th 2018, Nike released its 30th anniversary "Just Do It" campaign, in which former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick was named as the face. Along with Nike's "Just Do It" ad which featured Colin Kaepernick, came a series of images, such as the image shown to the left, depicting an image of Kaepernick with the caption, "Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything." At the bottom of



the image can be seen Nike's popular, swoosh followed by Nike's popular slogan, "Just do it." The image of Colin Kaepernick has become, itself, a symbol, signifying the fight against police brutality in America, which is also associated with the ongoing fight for civil rights for targeted minority groups. He has also merged his image with the actions and political beliefs of the Black Panther Party by simply, when posing for the cover of GQ magazine, dressing in all black with a black leather jacket while also showcasing his afro, this style of fashion being similar to that of members of the Panther party.

Kaepernick, due to his actions, has also become likened to the common characteristic of the hero. Similar to the popularized David and Goliath story,



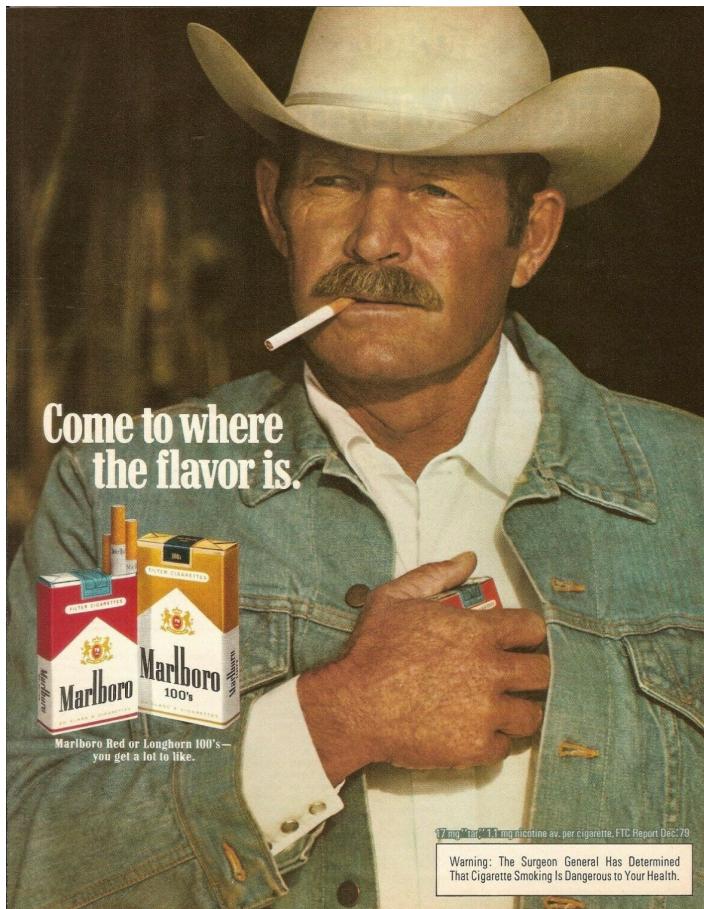
Kaepernick being David and America, including the NFL being the Goliath of this scenario. Because of this he is now also attached to the attributes that make up a hero, as commonly illustrated throughout history. These traits being the exhibition of strength, courage, determination, resilience, justice and, morally upstanding behavior. The connotative meaning this image holds is then reinforced by the text accompanying it. This brings more

attention to the heroic nature of Kaepernick's actions.

By associating its slogan with this image of Kaepernick, combined with the overlaid text reinforcing his place as a hero in our society, Nike has, as a result,

attached itself to the political and social righteousness of all that Kaepernick has come to represent and is now, by the use of this ad, the world is being reminded of him being a representation of. Nike is then using this ad as a means to communicate to its consumers that it is on the side of civil rights and the fight against police brutality.

This marketing strategy by Nike is similar to the Marlboro man marketing



campaign by Marlboro. By combining their product, but more importantly, their brand, with the image of a cowboy, which has been depicted through mainstream media as a tough, cool extremely masculine, “badass” of an individual, they have now conveyed to their consumers that their product is used by individuals who fit this character. This then encourages individuals to consume their product, due to the fact that they, whether consciously

or subconsciously, hope to be perceived as individuals who display these same characteristics. Because of this, the Marlboro cigarette becomes a sign indicating to the world that if they come across someone who smokes cigarettes that person holds the same characteristics as the Marlboro man. Though the message is different for Nike

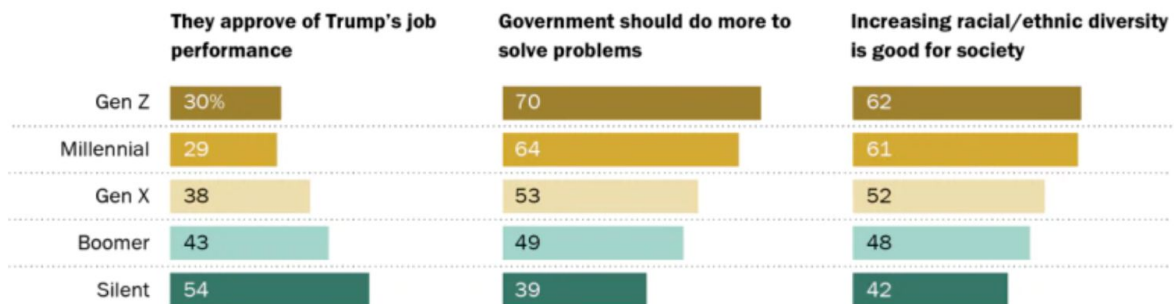
products, the result is the same. By merging their slogan with the image of Colin Kaepernick they have now mutated their products into symbols. In this case, Nike products are signifying to the world that those who wear their products most likely are on the side of justice and civil rights, along with also signifying fashion forwardness, wealth, or athleticism.

There is much to be said about the way the cultural codes of our current society have played a very big part in the choice of Nike to air these ads and to continue this marketing campaign route. In March of 2017, Nike announced its marketing offensive strategy for the coming year, which they referred to as their “12 key city” initiative. For this strategy, Nike would be taking a more direct and intimate, or personal approach to their communication with their consumers. They would do this by choosing the 12 cities which produced their highest rate of consumers. Within this list, both Los Angeles and New York City were included as the only representations of North America. This means that throughout the entirety of the United States, New York City, NY and Los Angeles, CA held the companies highest consumer population. It has also been expressed that Nikes's highest consumer population is located in North America. Among the 12 key cities announced in Nike's marketing offense, there were no Canadian cities mentioned. Because of this, it can be gathered that among all of their consumer data, Nike’s highest population of consumers is located in New York City, NY and Los Angeles, CA. When looking at the popular political and social-political stances of these two cities it is clear that Nike is indeed following the cultural codes of their consumer demographic. However moving past their specific consumer demographics, the vast majority of the

population on this planet, with each new generation, is being filled with individuals who would agree with Kaepernick and most liberal, or leftist actions and points of view. As explained by Colby Itkowitz, of the Washington Post, “Gen Z teens and young adults have overwhelmingly adopted left-leaning beliefs similar to those of the millennials before them. They overwhelmingly disapprove of President Trump, believe the government should do more and reject American exceptionalism. It’s not uncommon for young people to hold liberal views that moderate as they age. But Gen Zers grew up in a very different world than previous generations. The oldest among them was 11 when the first black president was elected. They became teenagers as same-sex marriage was legalized around the country. They also, according to Pew, will be the most racially diverse and well-educated generation.”(Colby Itkowitz, “The next generation of voters is more liberal, more inclusive and believes in government”).

**Gen Z and Millennials differ from older generations in views on Trump, role of government and growing diversity in U.S.**

*% saying ...*



Source: Surveys of U.S. adults ages 18 and older conducted Sept. 24-Oct. 7, 2018, and U.S. teens ages 13 to 17 conducted Sept. 17-Nov. 25, 2018.

“Generation Z Looks a Lot Like Millennials on Key Social and Political Issues”

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

This again lends further to the argument that Nike has, with this marketing campaign, followed the culture codes of this generation and the future generations to come. It is

now culturally both acceptable and expected for individuals and companies to both partake in social-political and political issues, and exhibit more left-leaning positions (depending on their target demographic). This tactic, again, is similar to the actions of the Marlboro man marketing campaign used by Malboro in the mid-1950s until the late 1990s. During this time period, it was culturally expected and acceptable for men to exhibit and aspire to demonstrate hyper-masculine behavior. Because of this Malboro understood that by making their product into a symbol that men could use to convey hyper-masculine character traits, which men believed would make them more likable or more sought after, their consumers would naturally flock to their product.

Nike's marketing campaign strategy relies on cultural codes and the understanding that once something or someone becomes a symbol, such as an Icon in this instance, it is possible to attach yourself, or a brand or an idea to said symbol in order to associate the idea or in this case a brand with said sign. This can also be utilized to further add, or completely alter the meaning of a sign, which in part is what Nike has done by merging the ideas previously associated with the company, with the ideas that are now associated with the face or image of Colin Kaepernick. As a result of this campaign, their stocks increased by 30% and their image has now been associated with the heroism of Kaepernick.

A Forbes article, published in 2017, stated that in March of that year, while Nike's global revenue was up 6%, it was slowing to 5%, and in North America, which is the companies largest market, grew by only 4%, which as stated in the article was, "a pace the company can't be satisfied with." One of the ways they believed they would be able

to get these numbers up was by having a more personal relationship with their customers in 12 cities which held their highest consumer demographics, which the company referred to as their “Consumer Direct Offense.” These “12 Key Cities” included New York, London, Shanghai, Beijing, Los Angeles, Tokyo, Paris, Berlin, Mexico City, Barcelona, Seoul, and Milan. Nike predicted that these 12 cities would generate more than 80% of the companies revenue. According to the article, Nike was getting this data through their client demographic information (Danzinger, Forbes).

When looking at the breakdown of the company's consumer demographic in North America alone, which, as previously stated, holds the largest number of consumers for the company, it can be seen that “13% of Americans identify as African American, yet 18% of Nike buyers are black. Latinx people account for 16% of the population but represent 19% of Nike buyers. And, Asians Americans account for 3% of the population, but 5% of Nike customers.” As for the Caucasian population of North America, 75% of Americans identify as white, however, only 67% of them are consumers of Nike products, and among that 67%, Nike’s information shows that the majority of those customers agree with Colin Kaepernick's stance (tmz). Furthermore, in a Washington Post article, “Millennials, those Americans between the ages of 22 and 37, are projected to surpass baby boomers as the nation’s largest living adult generation in 2019, and fully 44 percent of them are of some race other than white. For post-millennials, that number rises to 48 percent, and for post-post-millennials (American children under age 10), it grows to more than 50 percent.” The article goes on to explain that the majority of the individuals making up these generations are far



more forward-thinking than previous generations, and also want more of their products and content to include a socially aware, and progressive stance on political issues.

Based on this information, and the content in the Colin Kaepernick ad, Nike's prime reasoning behind taking this public political stance is to in fact further their own economic gain. They recognize that the large majority of their consumers and the population at large is moving further towards a progressive world, one in which Nike will most likely be relevant because of this. They have capitalized off of this age of digital activism on social media platforms, which made an ex-football player a face of political activism. Because of this, Nike has already grossed more revenue and will continue to in the near future.

The relationship between Nike and Kaepernick as well as our own relationship to the ex-Quarterback is similar to that of the computer-generated social media influencer and musical artist is known as Miquela Sousa otherwise known as Lil' Miquela. Lil Miquela is a digitally generated character, created by the tech startup company known as Brud. Though it has never been officially announced by the company, due to its intention of remaining as low-profile as possible, many believe that Lil' Miquela is being utilized as a sort of social test or experiment. This character, who only lives on the internet, specifically on Instagram, through carefully posed pictures and fabricated narratives of the life of Lil' Miquela, has led her to the stardom of the social media influencer market. As a result, she has, just as other social media influencers have, begun selling her image as a means to promote products, establishments, and brands. When speaking on the role of semiotics in the relationship companies as well as her

and the companies audience, have had when it comes to explaining the way such a phenomena is possible is extremely similar to that of Nike's use of Colin Kaepernick for their ad campaign.

Lil Miquela is a young, attractive and is extremely popular on instagram, these being the quality aspects which, according to Yoree Koh and Georgia Wells of the Wall Street Journal, "ticks off all the boxes for a model of the moment"(Koh, Wells, **Wall Street Journal**). Along with her ticking off the aforementioned boxes, she is also portrayed to be a social activist, which in the state of the world we are in now, associates many positive socially acceptable, and admirable qualities to her character and more importantly her image. This image is what companies look to, which as stated earlier, can be used as a tool to associate those same qualities to their company's or brand's image, which depending on the company's target demographic will acquire for them more cultural capital which then can and will make the transition into serving as economic capital for said companies.

Kaepernick and Lil Miquela would be, argued by theorist Jean Baudrillard, the same. This being because of the fact that our primary or only way of connecting to either of them, is through these digital platforms, Instagram, Youtube, Spotify, twitter etcetera. In other words, the authenticity, or realism, of the individuals or characters which we are, in this case, being influenced by, don't exist as humans, they exist as images that hold signs or symbols which we as audiences find ourselves clinging to. As has been proven by the creation of both Lil Miquela and her story, including her trials and tribulations, which have included the fabricated altercation between herself and her

antagonist known as Bermuda, a right-winged Trump Supporter, which encouraged Miquela's supporters and followers to increase express their support of Miquela and disdain for the actions of Bermuda, The importance of reality is no longer a concern for consumers of this day and age, the story seems to be the primary concern.

In order to successfully produce the physical manifestation of this project, I would have to do the following: utilize twitter's api to query for tweets mentioning Nike and Colin Kaepernick, with this information I hoped to be able to acquire data regarding the geolocation of the specific profiles associated to the specific tweets or retweets mentioning Nike and Kaepernick which I planned to project on one of the walls in the passage gallery, show an image of Nike's stock report from 2018 to the present, and create a zine to further express the many ideas and points I wanted to communicate to my audience. I planned to then visualize this data for users to be able to view or interact with. When presenting my project to my class I was given the idea to, to avoid overwhelming myself, focus on how I would like to design the visualization and write a sample program iterating through placeholder data to make sure I liked the design I had in mind, before going through trying to acquire the twitter data. Being that both aspects of this project would be rather difficult. So to begin my project I focused on the design of the visualization. For the design I wanted to steer away from the usual rather flat method of using plots overlaid on a map to go about communicating information related to geolocations. I wanted something with more of an organic feeling to it, to truly show the lively nature of the data being communicated. Upon looking through a magazine

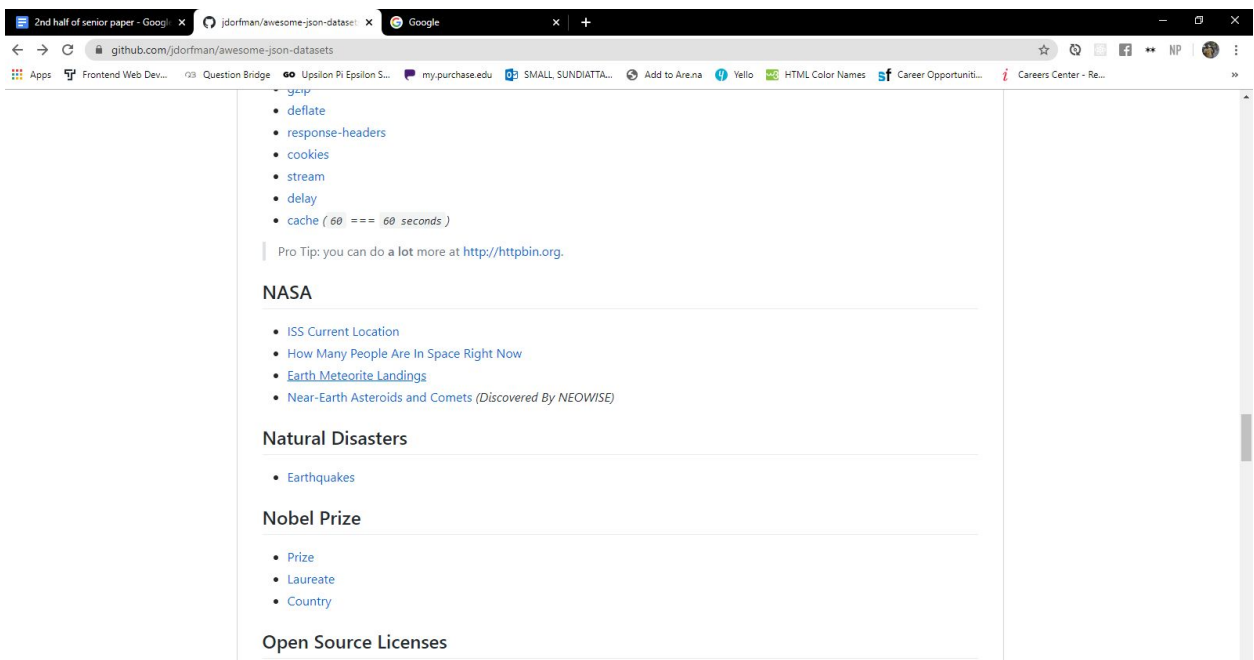
entitled, "A Magazine Curated By" I found a section on beehives and was immediately inspired.



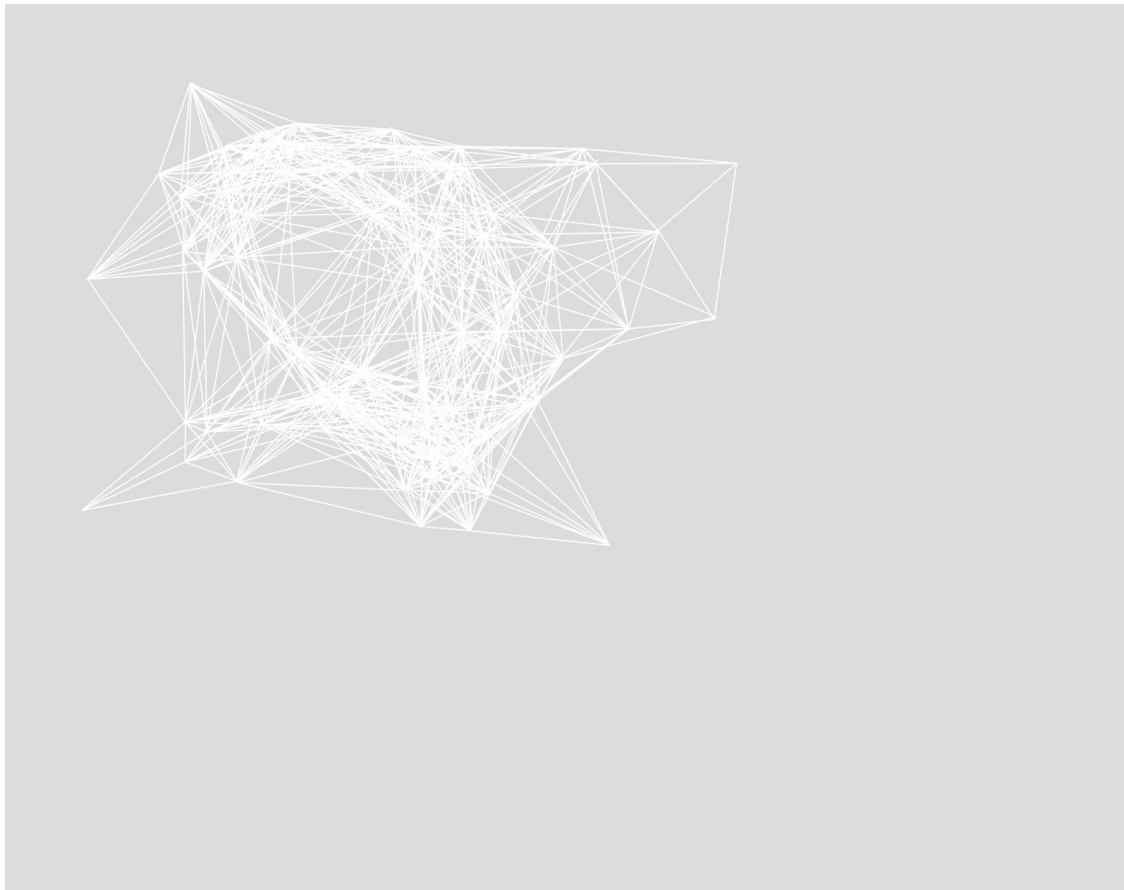
I knew that at my current level as a developer, I wouldn't be able to create a visualization that looked exactly like the beehives shown above, so I searched for a way to be able to simply connect multiple ellipses on a page with lines. Upon finding a method for doing so, I wrote a program that would make it so that about 130 ellipses would be drawn and bounce around the screen. Should they be less than 120px away from each other a line would be drawn between them. I also made it so that the canvas of the sketch was split up into thirds. Then if instructed the computer to change the color of the lines and the ellipses depending on which area of the canvas they entered. The end result looked like so,



Once I was able to create the way I wanted the visualization to look I went about the next step, which was, as previously stated, finding a set of easily procurable data that I could use as a placeholder to test the visualization. I was able to find a set of meteorite landings on earth from NASA found by Justin Dorfman.



This data included the coordinates of each of the landings so it was perfect for the purposes of my project to be used as a way to visualize locations. I found that upon iterating through the data to go about creating ellipses for each of the coordinates given in the dataset, I was only able to visualize about 60 to 80 at a time. Any more than 80 and the sketch would crash. So the visualization would have to look a little different than how I initially planned for it to look. No longer could I have over one hundred or even up to one hundred coordinates visualized in one sketch at the same time so I decided to go about splitting up the visualizations by the regions within the United States which each of the states resided in, in order to be able to visualize as much data as I possibly could.

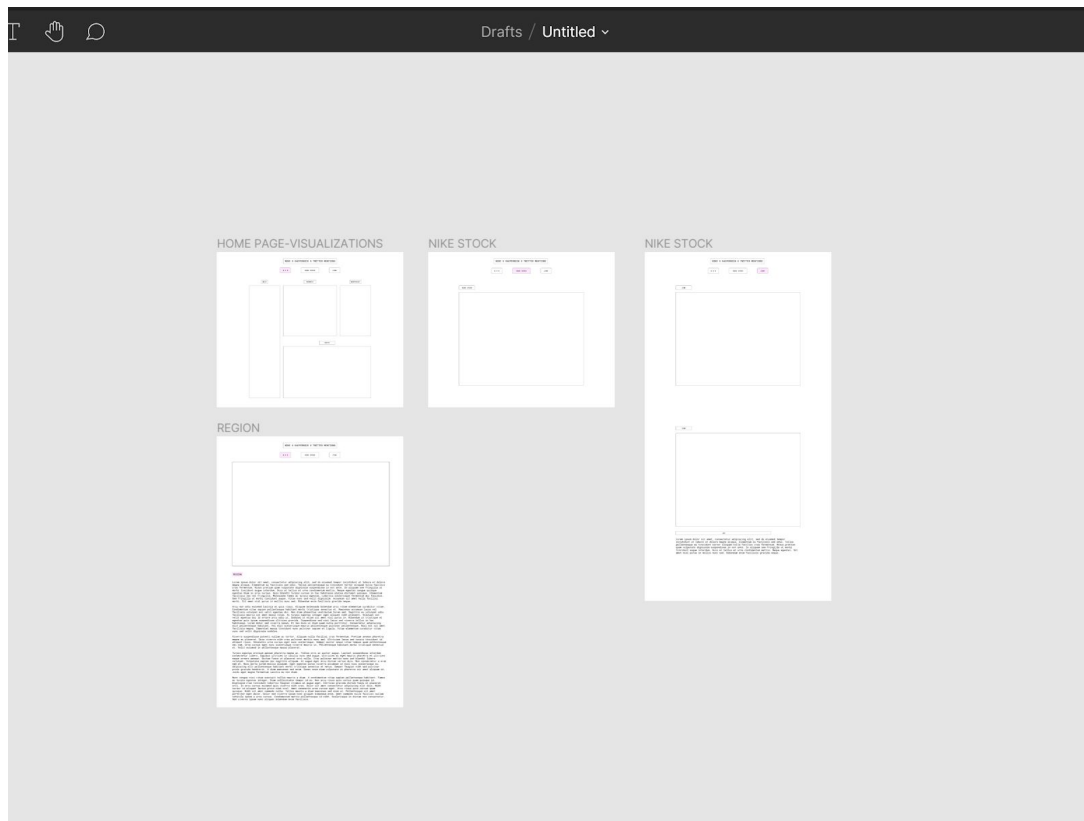


Though I came into this roadblock, the fact that I was able to iterate through a json file and visualize the specific data I wanted to from the dataset was a victory to say the least. The next part of the project I then had to go about figuring out was the back end. This means, the utilization of twitter's api to request the data I needed, using node.js, in order to create the visualization. I struggled with the api for quite a while. The main issue being the following: Twitter's api seemed to be split up in a way which would only allow you to make specific queries at a time. I was able to search for specific tweets mentioning Nike and Colin Kaepernick but wasn't able to find the geolocation of the profiles associated with those tweets, or the location of where the tweets were sent from. There was another section within the api which was dedicated to geolocations, however this one would only allow you to make queries in which you were to input a specific geolocation (the longitude and latitude) and the api would then give you a particular number of tweets within a specific mile or kilometer range. Neither of these were able to give me the information I needed in order to visualize the necessary data.

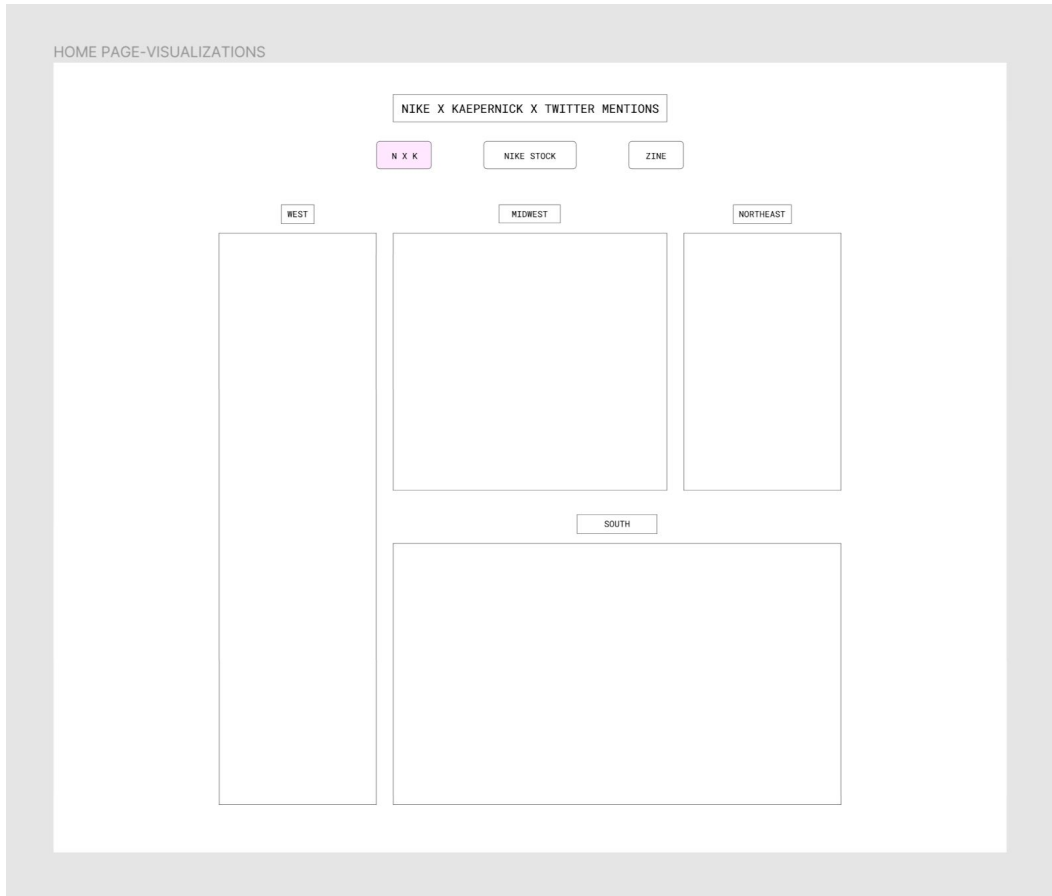
Soon after this the Covid-19 pandemic forced myself and many others living on campus to move back home and as a result the physical aspect of my project became null and void. I was no longer able to create physical versions of my zine, nor was I able to project my visualization in the passage gallery. However thankfully I was lucky enough to be working on a project that could easily be transferable to the web. Which many of my peers did not have the luxury of being able to do.

Seeing that I was making no headway with this api in the moment, I decided to go about designing the user interface for the website which the visualization would be

living on. I decided to create a website in order for the site to have a place to live after the show regardless, so, being that I was now forced to do so, which meant that I needed to prioritize the overall design of the site as much as I had the backend development, and the visualizations themselves. So, using a design software known as Figma, I was able mock up the layout for the site.







This page would serve as the home page, showing each of the regions, and the previously shown visualization each one being a different color. Each visualization would link to another page which would host the visualization and below it specific information regarding the states within each region.

## REGION

NIKE X KAEPERNICK X TWITTER MENTIONS

N X K

NIKE STOCK

ZINE



### REGION

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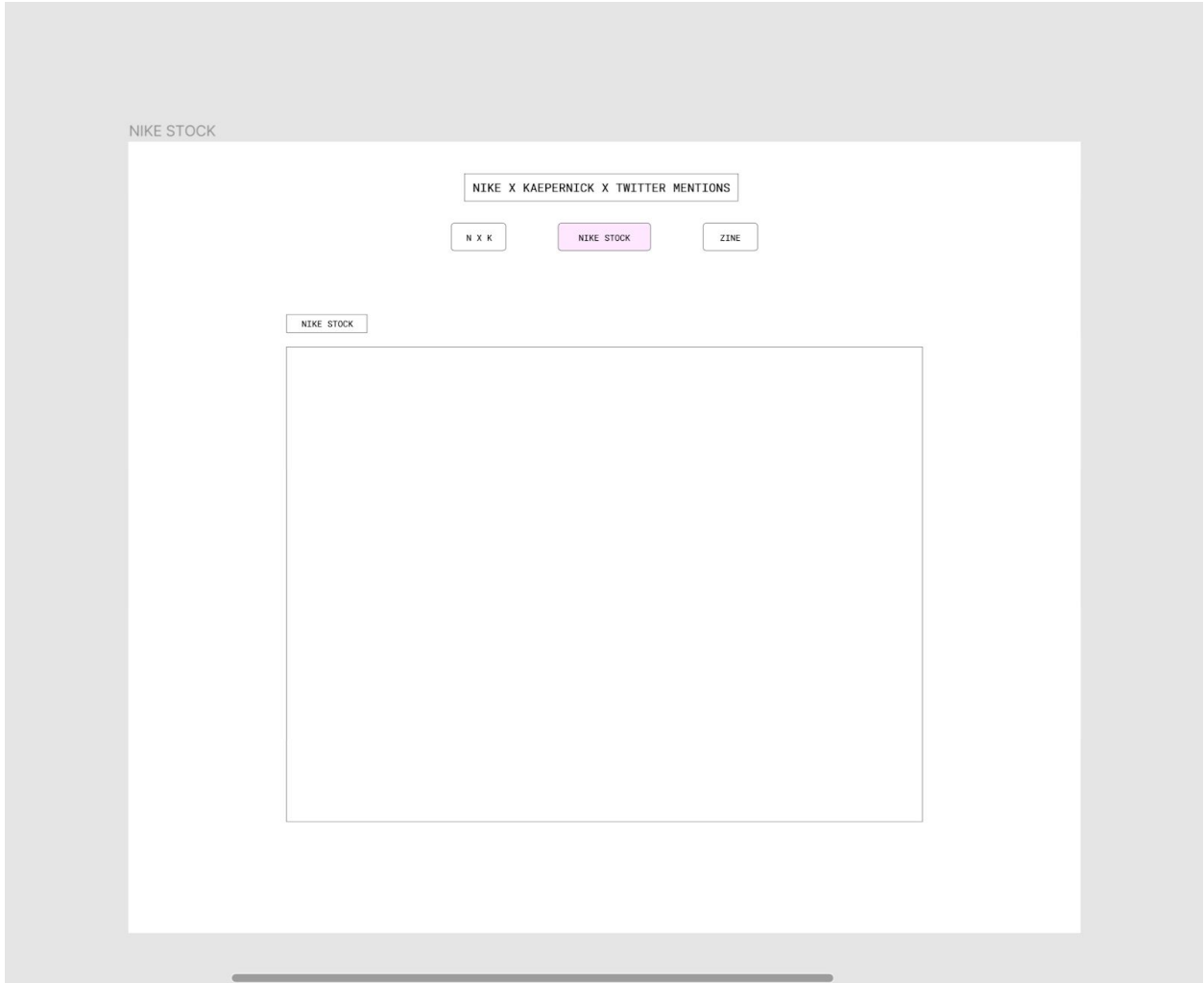
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These pages would serve as the previously mentioned visualization pages which would include information about the states within each region.



This page would serve to show Nike's stock report since 2018.

# NIKE STOCK

NIKE X KAEPERNICK X TWITTER MENTIONS

N X K

NIKE STOCK

ZINE

ZINE



ZINE

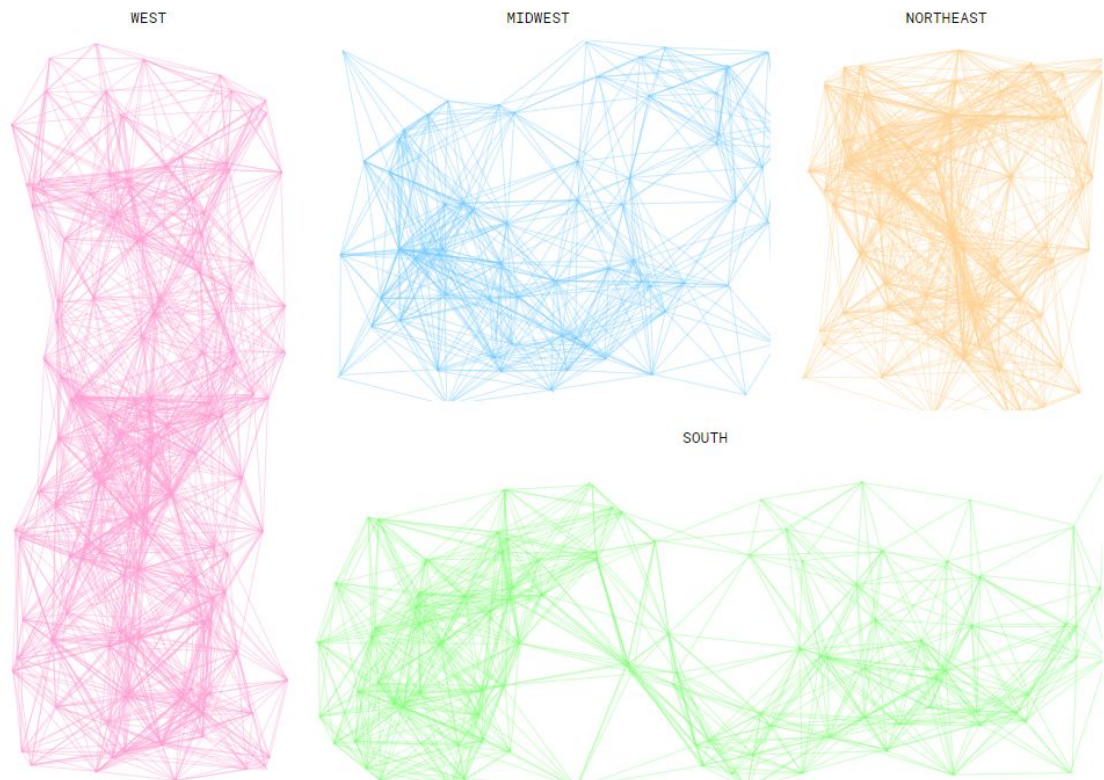


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The above page would host the zine.

After designing the site, I went about building out the site. I found however that there was a problem regarding the amount of p5.js sketches I was able to include on a webpage at a time. In order for me to have multiple canvases on one page I had to use iframe elements. In order to use this element, to show each of the sketches, I had to create new web pages which each sketch lived on and then use the iframe element to show those pages on the same page at the same time.



I was then faced with figuring out the backend issue. Being that the api would not allow me to request the data that I needed, I was forced to make a new twitter account

and search for tweets mentioning Nike and Kaepernick. I would then follow about 400 accounts associated with the respective tweets, and then go on to each account I followed, look in their bio for their location, which, out of the 400 profiles only 200 included their location. From there, I put that information into a json file for me to iterate through in order to visualize said data. In other words, instead of using twitter's api I created my own data set based on the information I found manually through the app.

Through this data set I was able to create visualizations demonstrating the amount of people in specific regions as previously stated. From the data I found, the regions which had the highest number of profiles mentioning Nike and Colin Kaepernick were primarily in the south. The second highest being in the western region, the third being in the northeastern region, and the least being in the midwest. This was surprising to me at first, because of the fact that the information that I found provided by outside sources previously mentioned points to the fact that the majority of people who buy Nike products are located in Los Angeles and New York City. I then realized that the reason for this may very well have to do with the fact that the south held more states than either of the other regions, and the second highest being the west which held the second highest number of tweets, and so on. What I did find out which aided in my hypothesis was the fact that the northeast and west exhibited the most positive comments about Kaepernick as opposed to the south and the midwest.

With this project, every aspect from the design of the visualization to the points made about strategies utilized by corporations in order to influence their consumers to buy their products, I must re-emphasize the importance of the organic nature of data in

general, specifically the data surrounding human activity. This is the information which is used to sell to us, along with many other things. If I was to revisit this project, more specifically the topic of the importance of data in the modern world with regards to human activity, I would like to bring more attention to the many other ways human focused data has been used, in order to bring more attention to the importance of acquainting ourselves with our own digital footprint.

We are constantly bombarded with entertainment and advertisements which are based on the information we provide corporations about ourselves and what we want. Our information is worth billions of dollars. Shouldn't we know how this information is being used, and more importantly what we can gain from it?

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