

**Establishing Control Over Competitive Market Spaces Through Strategic Branding  
and Messaging in Niche Markets:**  
*A qualitative content analysis of Under Armour and Nike's female and soccer market  
strategic communications*

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## **Introduction**

Shoppers can browse any athletics apparel store and expect to be inundated by swooshes and three rising stripes indicating the dominance of sporting brand giants Nike and Adidas. While Nike and Adidas have traditionally ruled the American sporting goods market, a young up-and-coming brand founded on grit and entrepreneurial thinking is quickly joining the ranks among market trailblazers. Under Armour, a 19-year-old sporting goods company founded in a college football player's grandmother's basement, has surged tremendously in its short lifespan and is now challenging top-dogs Nike and Adidas for valuable market share.

Under Armour has demonstrated impressive market growth over the past two decades, but the corporation and its founder, Kevin Plank, are not satisfied. Now, to gain a greater competitive edge in the athletic apparel industry, Under Armour will have to find a way to take two of its problem niches—the female niche and the soccer niche – and address them together by developing a stronghold in the contested US women's soccer market. By pushing to strategically penetrate the US women's soccer market, Under Armour would have the potential to establish control and secure the niche, drive out competition and expand laterally into other contested niches to gain greater overall market share and create sustainable growth. Under Armour will have to focus heavily on distinctive branding, messaging and strategic communication strategies in order to truly distinguish itself as a corporation and compete for these saturated, highly-competitive market niches.

Under Armour's push to take over the American athletic apparel market can be analyzed as an example of a corporation leveraging strategic communication tactics to propel market expansion. As global markets become increasingly competitive, corporations

must continue to find new ways to meaningfully engage consumers and distinguish their brands in order to contest these saturated market environments (Thomas, 2015). Social media strategic communication in particular has become an imperative part of companies' overall strategies, and any business' success "will be partly owed to its success within social media" (Qualman, 2011, xiii). Social media strategy is especially important for emerging companies, as social media provides one of the best opportunities for younger brands to build recognition and earn free media. Thus, strong messaging and branding on social media can help turn an emerging brand like Under Armour into a competitive-market leader (Hansen, 2015).

This thesis' research will focus on the broader business question of how up-and-coming companies can rely on strategic branding and messaging to penetrate a niche market and subsequently take greater control over a competitive market as a whole (Moore, 2002). To answer this question, Under Armour will serve as a qualitative content analysis case, as Under Armour's social media messaging and branding has helped the 19-year-old company establish a globalized community, build extensive brand recognition and earn millions of dollars worth of free media. Under Armour's efforts have also helped the company distinguish itself and push toward outcompeting much larger, richer and more established athletics brands (Hansen, 2015).

By studying the social media branding and messaging strategies of Under Armour, this research will provide greater insights into how the young corporation can continue to leverage social media strategic communication to penetrate a niche market and compete more squarely with behemoth athletic companies like Nike. On a broader scale, this research will provide valuable insights into how emerging corporations can rely on

strategic messaging and branding to establish footholds in contested niche markets, expand laterally and grow in a sustainable manner (Moore, 2002).

## **Literature Review**

To begin, the literature review will highlight current athletic apparel market conditions and develop a framework of branding and messaging strategies, especially in the female and soccer markets, in order to better guide Under Armour's future strategic communication efforts in these markets. The literature will start by considering how major corporations successfully develop strong brands in competitive markets. Next, it will focus on methods that have been used to appeal to the female market. Literature will then focus on Nike as an example in both successful and unsuccessful branding and messaging strategies in the female market. After highlighting Nike, the review will conclude with information on branding the women's soccer niche.

### ***Branding in competitive athletics markets***

Understanding branding is an extremely important factor in developing successful brands in competitive markets, as "achieving a better understanding of sport brand personalities enables sports organizations to monitor the key brand personalities to effectively market and position to their target consumers and differentiate them from the competitors" (Kim, Magnusen & Kim, 2012, 77). In other words, branding is essential for marketing, targeting consumers and standing out from competitors. Researchers have suggested branding plays one of the most important roles in the success of athletics corporations. According to one study, the success of sports brands depends most heavily on, in order of importance, competency (is the brand able and a market leader?), creativity

(is the brand imaginative and original?), ruggedness (is the brand brave and enthusiastic?), excitement (is the brand fun and witty?), sincerity (is the brand diligent and hardworking?) and energy (is the brand lively and vigorous?) (Kim, Magnusen & Kim, 2012).

A brand is considered most legitimate when it “meets consumers’ interests, offers an acceptable image by corresponding to their values and gives meaning to their experience of buying or consuming” (Lebrun, Souchet & Bouchet, 2013, 360). If the consumer values ruggedness, wants to contribute to a culture of ruggedness and wants to be perceived as rugged, the brand must have a high level of ruggedness in order to successfully connect with its target market. In other words, individuals are drawn to products and brands “to the degree to which the brand delivers on important identity concerns, tasks, or themes, thereby expressing a significant aspect of the self” (Fournier, 1998, 364). Brands must be congruent with the personal brands of the target market in order to succeed (Lebrun, Souchet & Bouchet, 2013).

Measuring and monitoring athletics brands personalities helps athletics brands build emotional connections with consumers making purchasing decisions based on how they want to express themselves and how athletics brands can help them do so (Kim, Magnusen & Kim, 2012). While brands present certain personalities that consumers may either accept or reject, consumers also play a role in defining and redefining brand personalities. Consumers at least partially contribute to defining and shaping brand personalities, so it is necessary that brands fully understand their followers in order to also understand their consumer-produced personalities and to foresee how followers may shift elements of brands’ personalities in the future (Thomas, 2015).

Developing a clear picture of an athletics brands can also help determine whether sponsorships of athletes and/or teams are successful business and messaging strategies by determining if the brand and the sponsored athletes/teams have congruent brand personality scales (Kim, Magnusen & Kim, 2012). For example, if a brand has established its perceived personality as innovative and ingenious, sponsoring an athlete with a personal brand rooted in tradition and conventionalism would not be a smart business move for the brand because the brand personalities are not aligned. Both parties involved should naturally reinforce the other party's brand personality in order to leverage the partnership to the fullest extent (Kim, Magnusen & Kim, 2012).

Strong branding is an integral step toward corporate success, but the ability to effectively appeal to niche markets, like the female athletics market, is also highly important. But what do experts consider successful and unsuccessful methods of tapping into the female market?

### ***Targeting the female market***

Professionals have long debated the best branding and marketing practices toward female consumers as women typically make up the most lucrative market segment. Targeting the female market and targeting the male market should not be approached in the same manner, though, as research shows women and men process and respond to marketing in very distinct ways (Patterson, O'Malley & Story, 2009).

There are a number of common themes throughout marketing pieces that favorably engage and appeal to female consumers. Women's informational processing styles reveal they experience more purchase intent toward marketing that is "harmonious" and includes verbal elements, while they experience less purchase intent toward marketing that relies

on negativity toward other brands, direct brand comparisons and purely visual elements (Putrevu, 2004). Men are more receptive to direct brand comparisons and purely visual marketing, but female consumers tend to believe these elements detract from a brand's genuineness and sincerity (Beyond Pink, 2005). Because female and male responses toward marketing are so different, gender-specific marketing campaigns are a necessity (Putrevu, 2004).

Female consumers are also much more sensitive to details of marketing. Because of this higher sensitivity, even a single word or image element can significantly alter a woman's reception of a company's messaging and branding (Patterson, O'Malley & Story, 2009). Despite female consumers' heightened sensitivity and detail orientation, women still tend to prefer marketing that focuses on general categorical attributes instead of highly product-specific attributes. For example, women will tend to favor marketing that emphasizes a t-shirts' comfort level over marketing that focuses on something as specific and specialized as the t-shirts' one-of-a-kind reflective properties (Putrevu, 2004). This kind of highly specific, product-oriented marketing evokes direct brand comparisons, which females don't tend to prefer, as previously mentioned (Beyond Pink, 2005).

Thematically, female consumers engage most with marketing pieces they consider informative and entertaining. Young female consumers in particular respond extremely positively to and engage most with entertaining marketing content. This finding suggests entertainment value should be emphasized more and informational value should be emphasized less for younger female consumers, while informational value should be emphasized more and entertainment value should be emphasized less for older female consumers (Logan, Bright & Gangadharbatla, 2012). While there is a clear preference for

entertaining and informational marketing, female consumers also desire consistent messaging and brand experience. Female consumers do not like when a brand's digital marketing is highly entertaining but the brand's traditional marketing is more serious and informational, for example. All branding and messaging should be seamlessly integrated and consistent (Beyond Pink, 2005).

Other marketing themes attractive to the female segment include messages of empowerment, confidence and capability (Gallay, 1999). These messages help reinforce the emotional connections women are apt to form with brands (Patterson, O'Malley & Story, 2009; Parent & Seguin, 2008). Female consumers favor this type of messaging that promotes a connection between a woman's authentic self and her sense of confidence and empowerment (Cole & Hribar, 1995). However, brands should recognize female consumers favor messages of empowerment but dislike "superwoman stereotypes." Women are more interested in being comfortable in their own skin than being a "superwoman" and fulfilling some sort of perfect, idealistic role (Gallay, 1999).

When considering female consumers' responses toward athletic brands in particular, women from different cultures exhibit different preferences. Globally, most female consumers of athletics brands perceive brands more positively when they portray the egalitarianism of togetherness. However, female American consumers of athletics brands tend to perceive brands more positively when they express a sense of independence and an autonomous quest for success (Arsenault & Fawzy, 2001).

Young female consumers also have specific likes and dislikes in athletic apparel marketing that utilizes female athletes. Female consumers that are teenagers or younger favor marketing pieces with female athletes appearing motivated (displaying a sense of

passion), authentic (looking like a real athlete who knows what she's doing), mentally tough (appearing focused) and relatable (seen as someone the consumers want to become) (Krane et al., 2011). Young female athletes were split, nearly in half, over whether they liked or disliked female athletes being portrayed as "girly", but in a sporty setting, in marketing pieces (Krane et al., 2011). For example, this kind of marketing image could feature a girl in feminine clothing with her hair and makeup done but standing on a basketball court (Hallmann, 2012).

Women exhibit different consumer behavior and marketing preferences than men, but they also consume sports and participate in athletics differently, which may affect their potential for targeting by brands. For example, women's most common sports consumption motives include sports' action, drama and the opportunity to escape from routine. On the other hand, men are much more concerned with associating with successful teams, showing off their knowledge of favorite players and sports, and deriving social identity from sports (James & Ridinger, 2002). Additionally, men are more inclined to care about nitty-gritty sports statistics, and see athletics as an opportunity to validate their manhood. Women care more about personal narratives and the storylines surrounding sports (McBride, 2011). Based on these key differences in sport consumption habits, marketing campaigns targeting females should emphasize action, drama and escapism, and include more personal narratives and storylines. Brand emphasis on sporting knowledge, social identity development, hyping up top teams, specific statistics, or personal identity validation is not as important to female consumers.

The conditions of the American women's athletic apparel market will now be considered in order to better understand current market conditions and justify the female market's presence in this study.

### ***Current state of the women's athletic apparel market***

This thesis will research and analyze creative messaging strategies in the women's athletic apparel market due to the extremely profitable nature of the market, as shown through the coming market data. The female athletic market will also be a segment of focus due to Under Armour's traditional lack of success within this lucrative market (Townsend, 2013).

In 2011, 56 percent of the US apparel market's value came from the female market (U.S. Apparel Market, 2015). In other words, the US female apparel market is more valuable than the men's and children's apparel markets combined. In 2012, American female consumers spent \$1 billion on active sportswear products. Male consumers spent half of that amount on active sportswear products the same year, making the female sportswear market roughly twice as valuable as the male sportswear market (Apparel market, 2015). Thus, the female apparel market is an extremely valuable market segment in which Under Armour could financially prosper by becoming a more significant stakeholder.

Now, Nike will be considered as an example to further investigate how a major athletics corporation has failed and succeeded at utilizing branding to connect with the female market.

### ***Nike as a case in branding to the female market***

Nike can serve as a telling example in branding to the female market as the corporation has received praise and criticism for its branding efforts toward women. Nike

has excelled with women by tapping into a consumerist desire that especially resonates with the female market – women want sports apparel they can use for both working out and nonathletic, casually-fashionable purposes (Fowler, 1999). Nike has continued to grow its brand by providing these kinds of multipurpose product lines, especially to the female market. Along with actively attempting to provide desired products to the female market, Nike actively attempts to develop a meaningful relationship with women through its messaging strategies (Helstein, 2003).

Nike has experienced both successes and difficulties developing relationships with female consumers. Currently, Nike is “positioned as the (albeit contestable) expert in the domain of sport for female athletes” due to the public’s perception of Nike as a knowledgeable brand (Helstein, 2003, 289). Nike has gained control over the female market by producing and branding the concept of female athletic desire, specifically (Helstein, 2003). Through Nike’s powerful representational images and messaging of female athletic desire, Nike has produced an image of a “new woman” that combines both femininity and fierce athleticism (Hallmann, 2012, 34). In addition to producing the idea of a new kind of woman, Nike focuses its messaging pieces around an appeal to a more “authentic self” that can be realized through exercise as opposed to unnatural beauty culture (Cole & Hribar, 1995, 352). By focusing strategic messaging to the female market on the concept of a modern woman that embodies femininity, athleticism and authenticity, Nike has been able to successfully build relationships (emotional and personal) with the female customer (Parent & Seguin, 2008).

Nike’s female-market messaging began with the development of this new kind of woman and evolved to position this new woman as a challenger of social constraints and

stereotypical portrayals of femininity (Grow, 2008). Female consumers tend to receive these types of marketing narratives extremely well, as the narrative and societal commentary becomes the object of Nike's discourse instead of the product (Helstein, 2003). For example, a video ad for Nike sneakers showing an overweight girl completing a race in last place is effectively selling a narrative of perseverance and empowerment instead of merely sneakers (Helstein, 2003). Nike's storylines have produced reoccurring themes of emancipation and empowerment in the vast majority of the company's female communication pieces (Helstein, 2003). According to Nike, "working on the body as a means for taking control of, caring for, and displaying one's self" pushes women closer toward emancipation and away from social constraints and stereotypical portrayals of femininity (Cole & Hribar, 1995, 362). Therefore, by positioning its products as tools for working on the body and claiming working on the body helps women reach emancipation and avoid constraints, Nike ascribes itself as a means of female liberation.

Although "Nike relies and has succeeded on an emancipatory narrative," this messaging strategy became especially resonant in the female market when combined with a theme of excellence (Helstein, 2003, 283). Nike's narrative of excellence establishes legitimate female athletes as women who refuse to accept anything less than superiority. By merging themes of emancipation and excellence, Nike has woven a multilayered communication campaign that preaches both democratic principle and elitist paradigm (Cole & Hribar, 1995). The two narratives balance each other by simultaneously preaching elitism and equality. Emancipation is achievable to every single athlete and team, while excellence is only truly attainable to one triumphant athlete or team. Nike's multifaceted communication strategy is lauded in the women's market, as it harnesses two seemingly

conflicting principles and pairs them to create a more powerful messaging campaign for women (Helstein, 2003).

While some communication experts have lauded Nike's messaging strategies in the female market, others have criticized the company's female messaging due to its contradictory nature. Accusations of inconsistency within Nike began when Nike first started marketing to women in 1987 and company executives feared the brand would not be taken seriously because female athletes were not yet legitimized in the public eye (Helstein, 2003). Phil Knight, former-chairman and CEO of Nike, admitted to being scared that the women's sub-brand had too much potential to "pinkify" the Nike parent brand (Grow, 2008, 328). Due to this fear, Nike's communication strategy in the women's market remained rooted in very patriarchal messaging (Grow, 2008). Instead of receiving equal treatment as the parent Nike brand, the Nike women brand remained separate and unequal, which has led some marketing experts to criticize Nike for its attempt to promote female emancipation while still relying on a foundation of patriarchal messaging (Grow, 2008).

Many of Nike's most heavily criticized marketing pieces communicate women are capable of empowerment through sport and the Nike corporation. However, this message actually detracts from Nike's conceptualization of empowerment as the company is essentially suggesting women lack the agency to empower themselves without the help of a mega-corporation like Nike (Lucas, 2000). Women's lack of power and agency is symbolically embedded even further into Nike's messaging through the use of floral, plaid, smiley face and other similar images in a number of Nike's marketing pieces targeted to women. Critics have denounced Nike for its production of these overly feminine messages

because the company simultaneously feared “pinkifying” the parent Nike brand but also promoted these girly stereotypes. Some critics have labeled Nike as contradictory because the company intentionally produced stereotypically feminine marketing yet still feared the women’s sub-brand would turn the parent Nike brand too “pink” (Grow, 2008).

Nike also subliminally suggests a lack of female agency through its gradual approach toward a variation of cause-related marketing. Nike knows it can sell more swooshes if the corporation tells girls that buying the swoosh will empower them (Lucas, 2000). Thus, Nike prescribes itself as the solution to the problem of female empowerment and gender stigma in sport, and tells women they have the brand’s permission to be whoever they want to be (Helstein, 2003). By marketing itself as a critical solution, though, Nike’s messaging again suggests women lack the agency to empower themselves without the permission and help of a traditionally patriarchal company in a traditionally patriarchal industry. Thus, Nike’s messaging to female targets may not legitimately promote gender equality in sport to the full extent women desire (Arsenault & Fawzy, 2001).

In addition to representing empowerment as desirable but not independently attainable due to a lack of female agency, some of Nike’s messages toward the female market also portray “both excellence and emancipation as desirable and possible, but in effect, unattainable” for the typical female consumer (Helstein, 2003, 278). Nike never wants female consumers to feel as though they have achieved the promised emancipation because this achievement would result in women losing reason to continue to return to the Nike brand in pursuit of the portrayed emancipation. Therefore, Nike relies on messages of emancipation, but by doing so also reiterates the very constraints from which emancipation seeks to escape. Critics claim Nike attempts to lock women in a cyclical

pursuit of emancipation and excellence instead of actually attempting to make women feel emancipated and empowered meaningful ways (Helstein, 2003). As shown, Nike serves as a noteworthy example of successfully and unsuccessfully branding to the female market. Now, methods of branding to the female soccer market in particular will be explored.

### ***Branding in the women's soccer niche and current market segment conditions***

It's important to develop an understanding of branding specifically to the women's soccer niche due to business models' emphasis on using niche markets as overall market entry points and establishing control over these niches to spur sustainable growth. Market experts recommend corporations focus on taking over a single niche market, forcing out the competition and subsequently using that niche as an entry point to move laterally and establish control over other niches. By transitioning "from an early market base to a strategic target market in the mainstream," corporations become more able to force out the competitor, secure the market and move out to take over additional market segments "on the way toward overall market domination" (Moore, 2002, 66). Under Armour has the opportunity to follow this business model by using the US women's soccer market as a market entry point. Under Armour should push for control over the women's soccer market because it is an increasingly growing market with a large number of female consumers. Additionally, women's soccer is a competitive space in which there is no true market share leader, making it ripe with potential for significant market entry. Current conditions of the US women's soccer market will now be highlighted in order to justify its use as a market entry point, followed by an overview of literature on branding to the women's soccer niche.

Since the implementation of Title IX, women's soccer has boomed in the US. Forty percent of FIFA-registered youth soccer players in America are now girls, marking a huge increase in female participation in the sport. In 2006, this percentage equated to more than 1.5 million registered female youth players. While FIFA has not officially updated its report since 2006, the number of registered female youth players is now likely approaching 2 million. More than half of the world's registered female youth players reside in the US alone, making the US the most valuable female youth soccer market in the world (Morris, 2015).

Youth female soccer players are sticking with the sport through high school and higher competition levels at record rates. Nearly 20 percent of high school female athletes now play soccer, totaling approximately 375,000 participants and 47 percent of all high school soccer players. Women's soccer is also the only high school sport that has experienced a steady increase in participation since 1980. Now, women's soccer is the third-most played high school sport, barely following basketball and volleyball. Due to its continuous growth, "soccer looks like it has a good chance at taking the top spot in the next 10-20 years" (Morris, 2015, 2).

The proportion of American women in the soccer market increases as playing level increases. More than 1,100 US colleges have women's soccer teams – that's 200 more women's soccer teams than men's soccer teams (Division I Soccer, 2009). Fifty-three percent of NCAA collegiate soccer players are female, including 61 percent of those in Division I programs (Morris, 2015). As of 2009, 93.1 percent of Division I schools had women's soccer programs, while only 59.2 percent had men's soccer programs (Division I Soccer, 2009). As data demonstrates, females are steadily taking over a greater and greater

share of the American soccer market, making it a lucrative niche for athletics corporations attempting to reach more female consumers. But how can athletics brands effectively target the women's soccer niche?

Branding in the soccer market usually involves a heavy emphasis on building strong emotional bonds between soccer brands and consumers (Hill & Vincent, 2006). Developing emotional connections with consumers is especially important in sports because "with the exception of entertainment, religion and politics, the emotional response from sports fans is stronger than in any other industry" (Richelieu & Lessard, 2014, 287). Not only are emotional appeals extremely powerful in the sporting industry – they are also one of the most effective ways for a sporting brand or franchise to build long-term appeal instead of only immediate appeal for an imminent event (Hallmann, 2012). While emphasizing the immediacy of an event may help generate more instant consumer engagement, brands should still focus most heavily on long-term engagements and the development of brand loyalty in all marketing efforts (Hill & Vincent, 2006).

Developing sporting brand loyalty rests heavily on the brand's ability to transcend the game and become more of a lifestyle for consumers (Richelieu & Lessard, 2014). Consumers become much more attuned to sporting brands when the brand is about more than just the playing field. Consumers want to be able to somehow incorporate the brand into their every day lifestyles and make the brand about more than merely a game (Jowdy & McDonald, 2003). Sporting brands that can effectively shift into this type of lifestyle brand tend to become stronger and more popular than competitor brands (Richelieu & Lessard, 2014).

Additionally, the strongest sports brands embody both tangible and intangible elements for consumers. Tangible elements contributing to branding may include game results and merchandising design, while intangible elements may include emotional consumer experiences, social interactions and feelings of pride (Richelieu & Lessard, 2014). By incorporating tangible and intangible factors, sporting brands develop a more strategic and integrated marketing approach to develop meaningful relationships with consumers. Integrated branding should also utilize a variety of platforms to communicate these tangible and intangible factors, including traditional advertising, sponsorship deals, new media marketing, event management and further brand development (Holt, 2007). By utilizing a diverse variety of platforms, sports brands can more effectively reach all relevant consumers regardless of geographic location and other limiting factors (Richelieu & Lessard, 2014).

The American women's soccer niche is a uniquely valuable market space because "nowhere else is women's soccer the cultural equivalent of – or even superior to – the men's game as it is in the United States" (Markovits & Hellerman, 2003, 14). Branding the women's soccer market can be particularly complicated, though, because the women's soccer market is susceptible to the sensationalist effect. The sensationalist effect is when women's soccer garners large waves of attention, media coverage and fan engagement because the US women's national team is succeeding in high-stakes competitions, like when the team won the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup. Because the women's soccer market has the tendency to surge and shrink depending on the national team's schedule and performance, it's important for women's soccer brands to take full advantage of and capitalize on these powerful waves of patriotism (Jowdy & McDonald, 2003). At the same

time, branding in the women's soccer niche needs to be rooted in more than patriotism since these surges are temporary and aren't enough to sustain long-term brand development and marketing (Southall, Nagel & LeGrande, 2005).

Branding in the women's soccer market also requires strong strategy because girls and women do not tend to be sports consumers to the same extent as boys and men (Southall, Nagel & LeGrande, 2005). Since female sports consumers are more difficult to reach than male sports consumers, it's important to determine and effectively target the most receptive female audiences to sports branding. College-aged females and younger typically favor women's soccer more than older female demographics, so women's soccer brands should focus on reaching the younger female demographic (Hallmann, 2012). While older women tend to be less receptive, soccer moms are also an important target demographic, as they tend to hold the most household purchasing power and will engage with women's soccer brands on behalf of their daughters (Southall, Nagel & LeGrande, 2005).

While the discussed literature provides a foundation on traditionally successful and unsuccessful methods of branding, targeting the female market and branding in the women's soccer niche, the literature fails to fully discuss how an emergent company can leverage branding and marketing in the social media age to penetrate a niche market and gradually take greater control over a highly-competitive market space. This thesis' research will fill these gaps by exploring an up-and-coming corporation's use of social media branding and messaging.

The thesis will now seek to determine what kinds of creative branding and messaging strategies Under Armour should use in its social media campaigns in order to

penetrate the women's soccer niche. The thesis will produce arguments for strongest branding and messaging strategies based on primary data and lessons from existing literature. By its conclusion, the thesis will develop a strategic guide and recommendations on how Under Armour can establish control over the contested US women's soccer market by utilizing the identified messaging strategies. The research questions guiding the thesis' qualitative content analysis and the development of the strategic communication guide for Under Armour will be:

*RQ1: What is Under Armour's thematic messaging and branding strategy in the women's athletic and soccer market on Facebook, YouTube and Instagram, and how does it compare to Nike's strategy?*

*RQ2: What are the strengths and weaknesses of the emphasized themes in Under Armour and Nike's branded social media content?*

Following a description of this study's methods, the thesis will gather the appropriate data and explain the data's findings. Then, the thesis will offer analysis and discussion of each research question's findings. Finally, a strategic communication guide and best-practices guide for Under Armour will be outlined based on the research's findings and conclusions.

## **Methods**

To answer these research questions, Under Armour and Nike will be used as cases in a qualitative content analysis on strategic communication and branding in a competitive market space. This thesis' research will use Under Armour and Nike as cases because a qualitative content analysis with specific cases-of-focus is more capable of providing

significant depth into the larger issue of using strategic communication to spur market penetration (Flyvbjerg, 2006). The qualitative content analysis on the cases of Under Armour and Nike will feature social media content from a number of the cases' digital platforms.

First, in order provide further insights into Under Armour's desired market takeover, companies Uber and Airbnb will be considered as brief examples in market penetration. A concise overview of Uber and Airbnb's rise will highlight the business strategies of two major companies that found entry points into competitive markets and subsequently established control over the markets. Uber and Airbnb will be discussed since they have achieved what Under Armour is attempting to do – utilizing a niche market as a market entry point and consequently taking over the market as a whole.

### ***Case studies of Uber and Airbnb's market penetration***

As discussed in the female market and women's soccer market literature, the women's soccer market is a lucrative yet somewhat-untapped niche. Case studies on Uber and Airbnb demonstrate the value of penetrating a relatively untapped niche, like the US women's soccer market.

Much like what Under Armour is attempting to accomplish, Uber and Airbnb began as start-ups in extremely competitive environments and gradually grew to dominate their respective markets. Now, Uber is de-monopolizing the taxi industry and overtaking competitors like Lyft, and Airbnb is redefining the travel industry and providing enticing alternatives to hotels (Suslo, 2014). The two companies can serve Under Armour as valuable cases in taking over contested markets.

Uber, a ride-sharing transportation startup founded in 2009, is now the world's most-valuable startup. Uber is worth \$50 billion and has grown to take over an industry once dominated by the taxis (Chart: Uber, 2015). Uber's rapid ascension has been assisted by huge sums of funding, celebrity endorsements, a problem-solving mentality and steady market expansion. Uber has raised billions of dollars in funding over five short years and is now backed by financial giants such as Fidelity Investments and Google Ventures, as well as a cohort of celebrities like rapper Jay Z and actor Ashton Kutcher (Ingham, 2014). Uber's determination to raise as much capital as possible has allowed the company flexibility in improving its prototype, expanding its geographic market and expanding its service line to include multiple car and service options (Weise, 2015). Like Uber, Under Armour should consider devoting a certain amount of capital specifically to market penetration efforts.

Celebrities have also helped propel Uber into the spotlight with their public endorsements of the ride-sharing service. Actress Lindsey Lohan, actor Neil Patrick Harris and rapper Snoop Dogg all publicly utilized and/or backed Uber in its early years (Ingham, 2014). As a result, Uber was thrust into focus and went viral on social media platforms, creating a frenzy to join the ride-sharing service similar to the frenzied push to join Facebook a few years earlier (Suslo, 2014). Earning both strong financial backing and public endorsements from celebrities was a huge asset for start-up Uber (Ingham, 2014). Celebrity endorsements may be equally as important, if not more important, for athletics brands.

Uber has also succeeded because it continues to find ways to solve problems for normal people. Taxis used to monopolize the city transportation market, allowing taxi companies to charge inflated prices. There were also disconnects between taxis and city

dwellers in need of a ride, sometimes resulting in long waits and an inability to find a taxi. Uber took note of these problems and created an in-demand solution, which has allowed the company to perform so well (Ingham, 2014). Uber provided a cheaper alternative to taxis and essentially de-monopolized the industry. Additionally, Uber built its prototype around the consumer experience, allowing the consumer to summon a ride at the push of a button and see exactly where their ride is and how long it will take to arrive. By positioning itself as a problem-solving company, Uber immediately gained a competitive edge over the taxi industry and other competitors who were not evolving to meet the wants and needs of consumers (Suslo, 2014). Under Armour has the opportunity to push the same kind of problem-solving unique selling proposition, as Under Armour's original claim to fame was its unique sweat-wicking shirts.

Finally, Uber has benefited and rapidly grown by steadily expanding into new markets. As soon as Uber establishes a sizable customer base in one city, it shifts focus and pushes expansion into another. Then, as soon as Uber established a number of thriving stronghold markets in the US, the company looked international and started tweaking aspects of the company so it could successfully roll out in China (Ingham, 2014). Uber shows companies aiming to take out the competition cannot remain stagnant. They must find a market entry point, establish control over it and continue to expand laterally into new markets in order to outpace competitors (Weise, 2015). Uber effectively achieved what Under Armour has the potential to do by using the women's soccer niche as a market entry point and later expanding into other women's and/or soccer niches.

Airbnb is another key example of how a start-up can enter a contested market and successfully rise to the top. Airbnb is a lodge-sharing company founded in 2008 that allows

customers to list, find and rent rooms and properties all over the world at a cheaper rate than hotels (Airbnb, 2015). It is now the world's third most-valuable startup with an evaluation of \$25.5 billion (Chart: Uber, 2015). Similar to Uber, Airbnb rose to the top of the travel industry thanks to its problem-solving mentality and steady market expansions.

While Uber solved the problem of the taxi monopoly, Airbnb solved the problem of expensive travel accommodations. Traditionally, hotels have been the only accommodation option for tourists visiting new places. However, hotels tend to be pricey, even though customers only receive one room. The lack of alternative options beyond the crowded hotel market made the travel accommodation market ripe for entry (Dishman, 2015). Airbnb entered the travel accommodation market and provided an appealing alternative for both cheap and high-end travelers (Airbnb, 2015). The company solved this price problem by allowing Airbnb members to rent rooms and homes from locals for anywhere from 30 percent to 80 percent cheaper than hotel rates (Campos, 2014). By allowing members to provide the company's accommodation listings, Airbnb also solved a problem of limited choice. Instead of being confined to area hotels, travelers are now free to choose from a wide variety of single rooms, full apartments and full homes thanks to Airbnb. Airbnb, like Uber, shows how valuable a problem-solving mentality is for market penetration.

Airbnb has also sustained its success and continued to grow through steady market expansions. Airbnb has grown by focusing on building listings and establishing a strong market presence in one city, then quickly expanding into another city as soon as it's established control. Once Airbnb's US market presence fortified, the company looked abroad and began researching and tweaking its services to transition into and operate effectively in international markets (Campos, 2014). Additionally, Airbnb has started

testing service expansions to go with its accommodation listings. The company is attempting to diversify its business by offering cleaning and property services for hosts. Airbnb used Los Angeles as its market entry point and has steadily expanded to compete for travel accommodation market shares all over the world. Airbnb and Uber have both achieved what Under Armour has the potential to do by entering a contested market and rising to the top to overtake major competitors.

Despite the overwhelming successes of Uber and Airbnb's market penetrations, aggressive market expansions are not always successful. For example, consider Dr Pepper's botched attempt to take its popular soda brand and use it to penetrate the condiments market. Dr Pepper tried to utilize its well-liked, distinct flavor to create a line of soda-flavored marinades and barbeque sauces. Unfortunately for Dr Pepper, its attempted market expansion has flopped and been called outlandish by branding experts. Dr Pepper targeted a niche market with potential for entry, but ultimately failed because it lacked "a logical fit with the parent brand, leverage for competitive advantage and opportunity to enhance the brand and produce sales" (Austin, 2013, 1). Companies looking to expand, like Under Armour, should take note of market expansion failures and make sure their own expansion efforts fit logically within the overall brand, provide an opportunity for competitive advantage and augment the parent brand in a meaningful way.

Uber and Airbnb demonstrate the kind of successful market penetration Under Armour should push to replicate, while Dr Pepper demonstrates the kind of unsuccessful market penetration from which Under Armour can learn. Now, Under Armour will be highlighted and justified as the corporation of focus and its market status in various segments will be considered.

### ***Under Armour as the study's brand of focus***

Under Armour has been chosen as the qualitative content analysis' case of focus due to its emergent positioning in the athletic market. Even though Under Armour has enjoyed rapid growth in revenue and market shares, it is still significantly smaller and less profitable than competitors Nike and Adidas (Sporting Goods/Sportswear Companies, 2014). In 2014, Under Armour's fiscal year earnings per share was .95, while Nike's EPS was 2.97 and Adidas' EPS was 2.35 (Under Armour, Inc. Revenues & Earnings Per Share, 2015). In other words, Under Armour's earnings per share are still only about one third of Nike and Adidas'.

The athletic apparel market is highly competitive and many of Under Armour's more established competitors do "have significant competitive advantages, including greater financial, distribution, marketing and other resources, longer operating histories, better brand recognition among consumers, more experience in global markets and greater economies of scale," thus making Under Armour a good focus corporation for research studying penetration into highly-competitive markets (Under Armour, Inc.- Annual Report, 2015, 11). Additionally, Under Armour has been chosen as the brand of focus because little to no academic research has been done on the brand or any other athletic brands aside from Nike and Adidas, as the literature demonstrated. Under Armour will bring a new perspective to existing research on market penetration by an emergent brand. While another major athletic brand could also warrant reason for study, Under Armour is especially relevant as the brand is Nike and Adidas' most comparable competitor and most capable of realistically entering a contested market spaces and succeeding (Sporting Goods Top 50, 2014).

Finally, Under Armour has been chosen as the corporation of focus due to its past struggles in the female market and the importance of its performance in the female market moving forward. In its early years, Under Armour branded itself as a macho company that primarily operated in the football niche. Now, Under Armour is heavily focusing on moving past that macho image and developing its women's brand in order to sustain the company's growth (Mirabella, 2014). Under Armour hopes to make the women's sub-brand a \$1 billion segment of the company by the end of 2016, and eventually a larger part of the company than the men's segment (Meehan, 2013). Market experts claim "women's apparel will be the battleground going forward." Thus, Under Armour serves as a valuable focus corporation in this study that is researching branding and messaging to the female market (Mirabella, 2014, 2).

Under Armour has established itself as a legitimate leader in the athletic apparel market in just 15 years, warranting the company's study, as it may become the market's future leader. Even though Under Armour wasn't founded until 1996 and is much younger than other leading athletics brands like Nike (founded in 1964) and Adidas (founded in 1949), Under Armour was ranked third in the top 50 global sporting brands based on share of purchases in 2014, with 22 percent of sporting goods consumers having purchased at least one product from Under Armour (Sporting Goods Top 50, 2014). In 2014, Under Armour also surpassed Adidas as the second-largest sports apparel market shareholder in the US (McNew, 2015). Despite its novelty, Under Armour is accounting for more than one-fifth of sporting goods purchases, propelling the company to overtake competitor Adidas as the second-largest American market shareholder (Sporting Goods Top 50, 2014).

In 2014, Under Armour reported \$3.08 billion in global net sales. This was \$720 million and 31.7 percent more than the company's 2013 global net sales, demonstrating just how rapidly Under Armour has grown (Under Armour, Inc.- Annual Report, 2015). Huge increases in sales have led business experts to deem Under Armour one of the fastest-growing retailers in the US (Under Armour, 2015). The company's rapid growth has been attributed to its moisture-wicking fabric technologies, eco-friendly business practices, high levels of brand recognition and smart sponsorship deals, in particular. Under Armour has also been able to cultivate a lot of success through organic grassroots development and messaging without "big, splashy marketing campaigns" (Stock, 2014, 1).

A large part of Under Armour's marketing strategy has centered on creating links between Under Armour products and professional athletes (Under Armour, Inc.- Annual Report, 2015). Currently, Under Armour's biggest sponsored athletes include NFL quarterback Tom Brady, Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps, Olympic skier Lindsey Vonn, NBA champion Stephen Curry, principal ballerina Misty Copeland and golfer Jordan Spieth (Mirabella, 2014). Under Armour spent \$330 million on total marketing efforts in 2014, which was a sizable increase from previous years (Under Armour, Inc.- Annual Report, 2015). This increase in marketing expenses shows Under Armour is devoting significant focus toward its marketing campaigns in order to continue its growth.

Under Armour's best-selling products are its apparel products, which accounted for 75 percent of the company's global net sales in 2014 (Net Sales Share, 2014). Under Armour made \$2.29 billion in net revenue from apparel sales in 2014, marking a 30 percent increase from its 2013 apparel sales net revenue. This large increase in apparel sales revenue again displays the rapid rate at which Under Armour is growing. In 2013,

Under Armour generated twice as much revenue from its men's apparel sales than its women's apparel sales, which only accounted for 30 percent of Under Armour's business (Meehan, 2013). Thus, even though Under Armour has been able to grow at impressive rates, the company still relies very heavily on the men's market, while the women's market remains mostly untapped. In fact, Under Armour used to have significantly less market share than competitor Lululemon simply because Under Armour diverted little to no attention toward the female market, while Lululemon provided an in-demand, female-only athletics outlet (Petro, 2015). Based on Under Armour's past performances in the women's market, an executive from Under Armour's third-largest shareholder claims "the general view is Under Armour stinks at women's." However, every year Under Armour's women sub-brand grows as a percentage of the company, which proves there is potential for Under Armour to more fully leverage the female market (Townsend, 2013, 1).

Under Armour still has a lot of unfulfilled potential in the women's market, as shown through female athletics market data and trends. The company was the eighth most-recognized sporting goods brand amongst US female consumers in 2014, alluding to a substantial disconnect between Under Armour's branding and female consumers. Seventy percent of US female consumers recognized the Under Armour brand, showing Under Armour remains much less recognizable than competitors Nike and Adidas, who had 97 and 91 percent recognition rates, respectively (U.S. Women's Brand, 2014). Additionally, significantly more male consumers consider Under Armour their favorite athletic apparel brand than female consumers, perhaps suggesting Under Armour is still somewhat defined by its original macho branding. Thirty percent of men most favor Under Armour, while only 12 percent of women favor the company the most. These skewed results reiterate the fact

that Under Armour continues to garner support from and rely on the male market much more than the female market (Apparel market, 2015).

While Under Armour has traditionally struggled in the female market, the company has also been a nonfactor in the soccer niche. Similar to how Under Armour originally positioned itself as masculine company and emphasized masculine branding, Under Armour also originally positioned itself as a football company and honed in on football much more than other sports, especially soccer (Hansen, 2015). Because of this lack of focus on soccer, Under Armour has significant untapped market potential in the soccer niche. As previously discussed, Under Armour should focus on using the female soccer niche as a market entry point to drive its two trouble market segments up together. The soccer segment is rapidly growing and includes a large number of female consumers making it a prime market target for Under Armour. In addition, the soccer niche is a competitive space where numerous major sporting brands joust for market share but no single brand dominates, leaving the market more open for the taking.

Currently, Under Armour earns the vast majority of its income from the football and basketball markets, but has very little brand presence in the soccer segment (Under Armour, Inc.- Annual Report, 2015). Under Armour's first significant entry into the soccer market occurred in 2012 when the corporation agreed to sponsor Barclays Premier League's Tottenham Hotspur Football Club for five years and \$50 million. This is Under Armour's first sponsorship of a European football club within one of the big five European leagues (Thomas, 2015). The sponsorship deal was even bigger for Under Armour because Tottenham Hotspur is valued as the tenth most-valuable football brand in the world (Brand Value Ranking, 2015). Other Under Armour-sponsored soccer clubs include Chilean club

Corporación Club Social y Deportivo Colo-Colo and Mexican clubs Cruz Azul Futbol Club A.C. and Deportivo Toluca F.C. (Under Armour, Inc.- Annual Report, 2015). Under Armour's initial sponsorship expansions into the soccer market received praise, as "firms consistently investing in sponsorship outperform market averages" (Kruger, Goldman & Ward, 2014, 225).

Under Armour's first significant entry into the soccer market produced some telling information about public perceptions of a newcomer brand in a contested market space. Under Armour has experienced a competitive edge as a market newcomer, as publics have started to perceive popular brands like Nike and Adidas as being undistinguishable and forced upon fans (Thomas, 2015). In comparison, soccer fans perceive Under Armour as unique and distinctive. This study suggests the notion of unabashed loyalty to a brand should be reconsidered, as a fresh brand in a contested market space has the potential to surge (Thomas, 2015).

Specifically, research on Barclays Premier League fans found that a sense of brand uniqueness equates to creative choice, counter-conformity, avoidance of similarity and true ownership (Thomas, 2015). Under Armour's perceived newness and uniqueness in the soccer market made the brand come to mind more readily during purchasing decisions, made the brand an asset for identity creation and increased brand engagement beyond the soccer market (Thomas, 2015). Through a market novice like Under Armour, fans found new brand associations as a way to "construct, cultivate and express their identities" and make certain statements to themselves and to others (Kemp & Childers, 2012, 509). Thus, Under Armour should not be scared to penetrate new niches as a market newcomer.

### ***Nike as the study's comparative brand***

Nike has been selected as the content analysis' comparative brand to Under Armour because Nike is Under Armour's biggest competitor in the US and worldwide (Leading 10, 2015). Nike leads all athletic brands in revenue globally and in the US. Thus, Nike will be used as this study's comparative brand to Under Armour since Nike is the most financially-dominant athletic apparel brand, in addition to being the "most-loved brand by far" according to American teens and college students (Lutz, 2015, 1). Furthermore, Under Armour is specifically focused on finding ways to overtake Nike, as Under Armour CEO Kevin Plank says "overtaking Nike as the world's largest sportswear maker" is one of his biggest goals for the company (Foster, 2016, 31).

In 2015, Nike earned \$30.6 billion in global revenue. Approximately \$8.6 billion of Nike's revenue came from apparel sales, making Nike the domestic and global leader in athletic apparel sales. In 2015, Nike earned \$14.6 billion in revenue from its men's products and \$5.7 billion in revenue from its women's products, showing Nike, like Under Armour, depends much more heavily on the male market than the female market. Nike's women's market revenues grew by 15 percent from 2014, though, while the men's market revenues grew by only 5 percent, demonstrating how the untapped women's market may have greater potential for growth. Nike's most-profitable sports niches are running, basketball and soccer (Nike 2015 Form 10-K, 2015). Nike's inclusion as this study's comparative brand will provide greater insights into the soccer niche since soccer is one of Nike's most-profitable market segments.

In 2015, Nike earned \$2.3 billion in revenue from soccer-related products, making Nike a well-established player in the soccer niche. Most of Nike's soccer-market revenues

come from cleats sales, but Nike also profits substantially from soccer training gear and kit sales (Nike 2015 Form 10-K, 2015). Nike's presence in the soccer segment is also heavily felt due to its extensive endorsements of elite teams and players. The company sponsors Portuguese player Cristiano Ronaldo, Brazilian player Neymar, English player Wayne Rooney, Spanish squad FC Barcelona, the US national teams, the Brazilian national teams and the National Women's Soccer League, for example (Smith, 2015). Since Nike does hold significant control over the soccer market, the company will provide this study with valuable examples of branding and messaging strategies to the soccer niche.

Currently, Nike enjoys dominance over the American female market, too. In a 2014 survey of more than 4,200 female consumers 13 years and older who had purchased a product from an athletics brand, 49 percent of respondents had purchased a Nike product within the past year, while only 22 percent of respondents had purchased an Under Armour product (Top 25, 2014). American female consumers also cited Nike as their favorite athletic apparel brand. Fifty-one percent of respondents named Nike as their favorite athletic brand, while 12 percent of respondents chose Under Armour as their favorite athletic apparel brand (Apparel market, 2015). As shown, Nike has a significant edge on Under Armour in the female market, making the female market all the more important to Under Armour's expansion efforts. In order to analyze how the companies' branding and messaging strategies compare in the female and soccer markets, a qualitative content analysis will be performed on a number of Nike and Under Armour's social media platforms.

**Content sample**

The qualitative content analysis on cases Under Armour and Nike will analyze content from the following platforms:

Under Armour Women's Facebook	Under Armour Women's Instagram	Under Armour's YouTube			
Nike Women's Facebook	Nike Women's Instagram	Nike Women's YouTube	Nike Soccer's Facebook	Nike Soccer's Instagram	Nike Soccer's YouTube

Each brands' existing women-specific and soccer-specific platforms' content will be pulled since this thesis seeks to analyze the companies' branding and messaging strategies in the female and soccer markets. There will be no coding for Under Armour Women's YouTube, Under Armour Soccer's Facebook, Under Armour Soccer's Instagram or Under Armour Soccer's YouTube because no such pages currently exist. Due to Under Armour's current lack of female and soccer sub-brand YouTube channels, Under Armour's main YouTube account will be included in the sample in order to provide a comparative base to Nike's YouTube channels.

Facebook, Instagram and YouTube have been selected as the platforms from which content will be pulled due to their pervasive nature amongst the target markets of athletic apparel brands. Facebook is the US' most popular social media site, with 72 percent of adult Internet users utilizing the platform. Facebook is even more popular with women, as 77 percent of female adult Internet users are on Facebook. Eighty-two percent of online adults between the ages of 18 and 29 use Facebook, and 79 percent of online adults between the ages of 30 and 49 use Facebook, reiterating the platform's popularity with the target-age demographic of athletic apparel brands. Facebook also has the most engaged users.

Seventy percent of users log on daily, including 43 percent of users who log on several times per day, making it an important platform for brand engagement (Duggan, 2015).

While Instagram is less popular among the general population, it's still very popular with younger demographics. Fifty-five percent of online adults between the ages of 18 and 29 use Instagram. Online women also use Instagram at a higher rate than online men, with 31 percent of online women using the platform versus only 24 percent of online men.

Instagram is becoming a more and more valuable platform as its frequency of usage has rapidly increased. Currently, 59 percent of Instagram users visit the platform daily, marking a ten-point increase in daily visitors from 2014. Thirty-five percent of users visit the platform multiple times per day (Duggan, 2015).

YouTube is also an extremely popular social media platform among online adults. In 2013, 72 percent of online adults used YouTube, making it the second most-popular social media platform behind Facebook. Like Facebook and Instagram, YouTube is even more popular among women. Eighty-two percent of online women between the ages of 18 and 29 used YouTube in 2014 (Anderson, 2015). Additionally, YouTube has become a popular outlet for consumers looking to engage with brands through both entertaining videos and more traditional, long-form advertisements. For example, Nike Football's YouTube page was the fifth most-popular YouTube brand channel in 2015 with 2.2 million subscribers, demonstrating how YouTube can be of significant value to sporting brands (Most-Subscribed YouTube, 2015).

Another reason social media platforms have been selected as this study's sources of content is because there is a void in social media branding research. The majority of studies on athletic apparel branding have focused on traditional advertising and marketing instead

of social media branding, as seen in the literature review. Thus, this research will contribute to a lack of information on how brands operate and strategically target consumers through different social media platforms.

Every post on the chosen platforms and accounts between Aug. 1, 2015, and Nov. 30 2015, will be thematically coded. This date range has been selected in order to retrieve the most current content from the brands. Four hundred sixty-six pieces of content will be pulled from the brands' chosen platforms during this date range, providing the study with ample content for coding.

### ***Procedure***

This study will use conventional qualitative content analysis for its methodology (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). A conventional content analysis will be performed due to the fact that this method is generally used "with a study design whose aim is to describe a phenomenon," making it appropriate as this study aims to describe phenomena in athletic corporations' branding and messaging strategies through social media (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, 1279). This research does not intend to rely on preconceived categories, but instead seeks to derive categories that emerge directly from the data in order to gather new insights grounded in real, current data. Based on the aims of this study, conventional qualitative content analysis is the most appropriate method of choice (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

The content analysis will begin with a preliminary overview of and familiarization with all pieces of content, otherwise known as a preliminary soak of the data (Hall, 1975). The content will be read repeatedly in order to achieve immersion and gain a greater sense of any overall trends. Then, content will be closely analyzed in order to begin deriving

codes, and key concepts and messages will be noted. These key concepts and messages that emerge from the sample will become the initial coding scheme. Codes will then be grouped into larger categories dependent on how the codes are connected (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Based on the grouping of codes, overarching categories will begin to emerge and will be used to arrange codes into meaningful sets (Patton, 2002). Following the development of categories, definitions for each category and code will be developed. Examples of each code and category will also be selected from the data in order to exemplify the given definitions (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

Following the content analysis, findings will be discussed and compared and contrasted to relevant literature in the discussion section. This thesis' discussion will also highlight how the findings contribute to the larger body of literature on branding and messaging strategies and will suggest additional research ideas for the future (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Finally, emergent messaging patterns and creative branding themes will be analyzed and ultimately used to develop a strategic messaging plan for Under Armour's market penetration into the women's soccer niche.

## **Findings and Analysis**

This section will analyze the thematic messaging and branding strategies used by Under Armour and Nike in the women's athletic and soccer market through Facebook, YouTube and Instagram.

### ***#PowerInPink campaign and redefining femininity***

Throughout the sample, Under Armour leveraged a female-specific hash tag campaign—primarily on Instagram but also on Facebook—that sought to connect with

women and redefine standards of femininity. The campaign, identified by the use of #PowerInPink at the end of posts, communicates a woman's ability to be feminine while also being athletic, tough and strong. The campaign's theme is rooted in the idea that femininity and elite athleticism do not have to be mutually exclusive. Under Armour is emphasizing an overhaul in traditional ideas of femininity and their typical inclusion of dainty, fragile stereotypes. By intertwining symbols of toughness and "girlyness," Under Armour provokes the viewer to reconsider what they think of as feminine.

Two ads best summarized this theme through the #PowerInPink campaign. The first ad shows a yogi doing a challenging headstand pose, balanced on only her fingertips and head while her right leg extends straight out in front of her and her left leg arches behind her back. The yoga pose appears elegant and graceful, almost like a dancer's pose, and the woman appears somewhat girly due to her hot pink tank and her leggings with hot pink accents. But the pose's difficulty and the woman's athletic intensity and skill are also evident through the woman's defined arm and leg muscles and her face's blank stare and deep concentration. The caption reads "Let your strength shine through #PowerInPink," reiterating the two core elements of the image—the woman's strength as displayed through her strained muscles and the demanding pose, and an element of girlishness as displayed through the apparel's hot pink colors, which immediately grabs the viewer's eye and serves as the focal point of the image (UnderArmourWomen, 2015a).

The second exemplary #PowerInPink ad shows the back of a woman sitting on a gym floor. Like the prior ad, the viewer's eye is immediately drawn to the woman's clothing, as her tank and knee socks are bright pink. The pink is the focal point of the image—the rest of the image, including the floor, the walls, the mat, the weight and the rest

of the woman's clothing, is all black. The woman's clothes are tight and show her womanly physique, but there is also sweat seeping through the back of the tank, which reads "TOUGH AS HELL." The woman is bracing herself with one hand against the floor, while her left arm extends straight over her head, lifting a large kettle bell weight. The woman's left arm muscles and back muscles are evidently bulging and straining to hold the weight up. She is gazing up at the weight with purposeful focus. The caption reads "Tough always rises above #PowerInPink." Like the previous ad, this ad's caption reemphasizes and merges the woman's toughness and the flashiness of the pink (UnderArmourWomen, 2015b).

### ***Women's athletic wear as extension of fashion and communal culture***

Nike's messaging and branding in the women's athletic market focuses on the intersection of athletics and fashion and the construction of a communal culture through the Nike swoosh. The Nike Women Instagram, Nike Women Facebook and Nike Women YouTube accounts all emphasize themes of trendy style and camaraderie. These themes communicate that women can still look fashionable and street-ready in Nike athletic apparel, and that women can become part of a greater community by donning the Nike swoosh.

Nike's strategy of branding its women's line as fashion and not just athletic wear is especially clear through Nike's YouTube. For example, one video shows professional basketball player Skylar Diggins modeling Nike's new fleece line. Nike totally removes Diggins from her professional athlete identity, though. If a viewer watches the video without sound and has no knowledge of who Diggins is or what she looks like, it's impossible to tell the woman in the video is an athlete, much less an elite professional athlete. She struts around with photographers following her, occasionally pursing her lips,

turning to look over her shoulder, or striking poses that show off her clothing. Diggins never appears in action or with anything that alludes to basketball. Additionally, she wears heavy makeup, including deep purple lipstick and sparkly eye shadow. She also has her hair done, modeling as it's blown by a fan or flipping it over her shoulder as Nike's photographers give her directions. Roughly half of the video is shot in black and white, adding to the dramatic and artistic feel. Even when Diggins' voiceover enters the video, she makes no mention of basketball. She vaguely mentions adversity and challenges, but there is still a clear separation between Diggins as the model in the video and Diggins as the elite WNBA star (Nike, 2015a). Because the overall nature of the video makes Diggins appear as a model instead of an athlete, the video also makes the fleece line Diggins is modeling appear as a runway fashion line instead of a athletic apparel line.

Additionally, Nike leverages its messaging and branding in the women's market to tell women they can become apart of a greater communal "swoosh" culture if they wear Nike. For example, one Nike ad shows a large workout class in San Francisco performing a side plank. The women, too numerous to count, fill a huge warehouse-like room. Every woman is in exactly the same pose—a side plank on her right arm, balancing on the right side of her feet and her right elbow, with her left arm extended straight over her head. Every woman pictured appears athletic and in-shape, as they all wear small athletic clothing and are successfully holding the post. There is one woman in the foreground that the viewer can see most clearly. She wears a neon yellow tank with a large Nike swoosh across it. Like the rest of the women, she appears athletic but also feminine—she's not visibly exerting an abnormal amount of energy or sweating, and she appears to be wearing

some makeup. The image is paired with the caption, “strength in numbers leads to strength in you #betterforit” (NikeWomen, 2015a).

The phrase “strength in numbers” and the scene of the huge workout class of seemingly identical athletic women communicate a sense of fellowship and camaraderie amongst the women. The caption tells viewers that all of these women are better for working out together. The ad also reflects what appears to be a somewhat exclusive culture, one in which you can’t immerse yourself unless you’re athletic and wear Nike, like the women in the picture. The women in the picture are fairly indistinguishable—all wearing tight athletic clothing that shows their fit bodies while they hold the side plank with what appears to be ease.

### ***Selling the swoosh’s associated meanings of innovation and craftsmanship***

Nike’s major thematic messaging strategy in the soccer market focuses on product iconography, innovation and craftsmanship. By repeatedly emphasizing its products’ branded swoosh and the features that make the product unique and superior, Nike builds a synonymous understanding of Nike Soccer products and innovation and craftsmanship. In other words, Nike continuously alludes to themes of innovation and craftsmanship so consumers are trained to think innovation when they see a swoosh, and think Nike when they desire quality craftsmanship. Nike’s branding of its soccer products doesn’t center on selling the product—it centers on selling the iconography and innovation behind the product. Allusions of innovation, creativity and engineering dictate the tone and style of the ads, whereas products and sponsored athletes play a much more minimal role in the content.

Nike's association building between the swoosh and innovation/craftsmanship can be seen throughout the Nike Soccer Instagram, Nike Soccer Facebook and Nike Soccer YouTube pages. Whenever Nike introduces a new cleat, the cleat's swoosh is the focus of the picture and the caption always includes descriptors like "innovative," "entrepreneurial," "one-of-a-kind" or "unique." For example, some of Nike Football's most typical, craftsmanship-oriented ads read, "relentless creativity, engineered to precision," "premium craft, unstoppable innovation," "the most innovative Tiempo ever" and "merging aesthetic and innovative contemporary design." The majority of Nike Football's ads are basic close-up shots of cleats with no accompanying athletes or fancy background. The ads completely focus on the cleats and its details. The accompanying captions tell viewers how to view the cleats—as a creatively engineered product, as an innovative work of craftsmanship, as the most innovative cleats ever, and as an innovative and aesthetically pleasing design (NikeFootball, 2015a; NikeFootball, 2015b; NikeFootball, 2015c; NikeFootball, 2015d).

Nike further reinforces these associations by occasionally leveraging endorsements from its sponsored soccer players and using the same formula—a basic close-up shot of the product and a caption with similar thematic keywords to form brand associations. For example, one ad shows French National Team player Blaise Matuidi holding a new pair of Nike cleats. The shot is minimalistic, with the background completely darkened and only Matuidi and the cleats illuminated. Even Matuidi is partially obscured by the darkened background, and he wears a dark blue Nike shirt that further contributes to his secondary presence. The focal point of the image is clearly the cleats, which are half neon blue and pop with color against the background and Matuidi. The cleats are also the only fully

illuminated things in the image. The image includes Matuidi but its still very minimalistic, leaving greater weight to the caption, which describes the cleats as “from master craftsmen” and “technologically crafty.” The caption attributes desirable qualities to the cleats, but the caption combined with the image also makes it seem like Matuidi is confirming that these cleats are indeed “from master craftsmen” and “technologically crafty” (NikeFootball, 2015e).

### ***Branding Under Armour as the underdog through sponsored athletes***

While Nike has deeply infiltrated the soccer market, Under Armour has only just started to expand into the market within the last few years. At the time of the procedure, Under Armour had no soccer-specific social media accounts. However, one can still gain insights into Under Armour’s thematic messaging and branding strategies in niche sports markets through Under Armour’s general YouTube, Facebook and Instagram accounts.

Under Armour’s branding depends heavily on its sponsored athletes. The vast majority of Under Armour’s content on all three of the brand’s accounts focuses on endorsed athletes who, according to Under Armour, epitomize what the brand is about. Under Armour sponsors and creates content surrounding athletes who are considered underdogs—players who are not necessarily favored to succeed but continue to find ways to do so anyway. By consistently sponsoring these “underdog” athletes, Under Armour is branding itself as a reflection of its endorsed athletes—an underdog of a brand that continues to find ways to succeed against the odds.

Under Armour’s branding strategy idealizes the notion of being an underdog through its sponsored athlete selection and content. The corporation’s core endorsed athletes include Stephen Curry, an underweight and undersized NBA player who’s

currently the MVP of the league; Misty Copeland, the first African-American principal dancer of the American Ballet Theatre; Tom Brady, a sixth round NFL draft pick and a four-time Super Bowl champion and three-time Super Bowl MVP; and Jordan Spieth, a 22-year-old golfer and 2015 Masters and US Open champion. Under Armour strategically endorses these kinds of against-the-odds athletes to further brand itself as an underdog that's continuously exceeding expectations.

Under Armour repeatedly glamourizes the underdog status through its content, which focuses much more heavily on athletes than specific Under Armour products. For example, consider an Under Armour Facebook ad that shows a picture of Buffalo Bills player Ronald Darby catching a ball during a game against the Cleveland Browns. Darby is jumping up, a few feet off the ground, and his body is completely outstretched toward the ball hanging in the air. He's caught the ball, despite Browns player Andrew Hawkins tight coverage and his arm extended in Darby's face. The caption of the photo reads, "rookie's just a label #ProtectThisHouse" (Under Armour, 2015a). The caption helps the viewer realize Darby's catch is even more impressive than initially assumed, as Darby is only a rookie playing against older, much more experienced NFL veterans.

Under Armour repeatedly promotes this idea of using the status as an underdog to exceed expectations and push performance to new levels. Under Armour continues this narrative even when its content does not include professional athletes. For example, one Under Armour ad features an unrecognizable girl sitting on a track against a fence with her legs sprawled in front of her. Her face isn't very visible, but her posture and downturned eyes suggest she's exhausted from pushing her physical limits on that track. The caption says, "Set your goals. Break every one of them" (UnderArmourWomen, 2015c). The caption

implies the girl has pushed her limits and just exceeded whatever she's previously accomplished.

Under Armour's emphasis on glorifying the underdog also helps the company connect with a valuable customer base. By embracing the role of the underdog instead of fighting it, Under Armour expresses a sense of cool confidence and tenacity despite the fact that Under Armour is not the market leader. Because of this positioning, Under Armour is more likely to resonate with consumers who want to go against the grain and try something new, and a narrative of "different is good" also repeatedly appears throughout Under Armour's content. For example, one ad features Misty Copeland, the first African-American principal ballerina, performing a difficult ballet pose in an empty gym. She balances on the tips of her right toes, while her left leg is extended straight up behind her head. Her muscles are clearly engaged and her hard, focused face suggests the post requires a lot of strength and focus, even for someone so advanced. Everything in the gym is brown and all of Copeland's clothing is neutral, which places more focus on Copeland, whose glistening skin and toned limbs pop against the dull brown background. The ad's caption reads, "Break the mold. Cast a new one #IWILL" (UnderArmourWomen, 2015d). Copeland is used as a glamorized example of paving one's own path and breaking out instead of conforming to the norm.

Similarly, another ad features Jordan Spieth walking across a green with a focused, hyped-up look on his face, pumping his fist in the air in celebration. It's unclear what just happened based on the picture alone, but the accompanying caption reads, "Some play the game. Others drive it. Introducing the new #1 and the next generation" (UnderArmour, 2015a). The ad's messaging emphasizes the fact that Spieth represents a new era of golfers,

or the “next generation” of golfers who are breaking out and shaping the game on their own terms. It also reinforces exceeding expectations, as Spieth is introduced as the new #1 and a driver of the game despite his youth and relative inexperience in comparison to the vast majority of his veteran competitors.

***“I Will What I Want” campaign and selling aspiration and self-determination***

While Nike’s thematic messaging emphasizes selling the innovation and craftsmanship behind the product, Under Armour’s messaging emphasizes selling the sponsored athlete and his or her drive and self-rule. Under Armour’s most extensive campaign throughout the sample was the “I Will What I Want” campaign, which focuses on underdog athletes controlling their own destinies and finding success through relentless ambition and self-determination. The campaign is identifiable through “I Will What I Want,” #IWILL or #RuleYourself. The central theme of the campaign is self-determination and the idea that every individual has control over their achievements and success. The campaign’s content focuses on Tom Brady, Misty Copeland, Jordan Spieth and Stephen Curry. Each athlete is used as an example of the extreme success that is attainable through self-rule, hard work and determination. Additionally, the campaign does not focus on Under Armour’s products—it only focuses on the aspiration and self-determination as displayed through these athletes.

A quintessential example of the function of the “I Will What I Want” can be found through a YouTube video featuring Tom Brady training. The video opens on a sweating, panting Brady performing a footwork drill. The video then shifts to hundreds of Bradys, all performing the same cardio workout on a football field. The hundreds of Brady clones then perform another footwork drill, followed by a plyometric drill, followed by a passing drill.

The video concludes with a satisfied-looking Brady and the text, “you are the sum of all your training. Rule yourself. I will” (Under Armour, 2015b). The hundreds of Bradys repeating the same drills with such intense focus and physical exertion allude to Brady’s self-determination and his conscious choice to train so hard and repetitively, which has helped him become one of the most decorated quarterbacks in the NFL.

Another example of Under Armour’s use of the campaign to sell aspiration and self-determination can be seen through an ad that shows Jordan Spieth walking across a green with the accompanying caption, “take the looks others ignore #RuleYourself #IWill” (Under Armour, 2015b). This post merges Under Armour’s self-determination thematic messaging and its against-the-grain branding. Spieth’s self-determination and active choice to “take the looks others ignore” portrays him as an aspirational sports icon, but the post’s messaging also portrays a sense of distinction that is only found in those athletes willing to devote their lives to training relentlessly and completely ruling themselves athletically.

Under Armour contributes to the self-determination narrative even when its content doesn’t include Brady, Copeland, Spieth or Curry. One of Under Armour’s Facebook ads features an unrecognizable girl doing pushups. She is grimacing and dripping sweat, clearly struggling to continue. The caption reads, “You will get it with persistence #IWillWhatIWant” (Under Armour Women, 2015a). Even though it lacks the campaign’s core athlete representatives, the post still aligns with the campaign’s overall strategy, emphasizing that with persistence you can will the results you desire. The featured athletes provide an aspirational example of what consumers should aim to be and can be through self-determination and willpower.

## **Discussion**

The implications of the content analysis' main findings will now be discussed and analyzed in relation to the literature and professional circumstances.

### ***Merging “girly” and “tough” to promote new ideas of femininity***

As seen through its #PowerInPink campaign, Under Armour promotes an intersection of girliness and toughness in a significant amount of its women's content. The #PowerInPink campaign may offer Under Armour a competitive edge over Nike's branding in the women's athletic market thanks to its different approach to traditional signs of femininity. Nike has traditionally relied on patriarchal messages to communicate to the women's market because corporate executives feared the women's sub-brand had too much potential to “pinkify” the overall Nike brand (Grow, 2008, 328). Thus, much of Nike's messaging avoided explicit signs of femininity despite being directed toward a distinct, feminine audience. By deliberately including pink and its associated meanings in the #PowerInPink campaign, Under Armour is strategically using a symbol Nike feared, using the symbolism of pink to redefine femininity instead of perpetuating stereotypes of femininity. Such thematic messaging is likely to resonate well with women as it builds on notions of empowerment, confidence and capability; it promotes an image with which women want to identify—a new kind of athletic yet feminine woman instead of a woman defined by tradition and patriarchy; and it helps better distinguish Under Armour's branding from Nike's branding (Gallay, 1999; Kim, Magnusen & Kim, 2015).

The explicit inclusion of “girly” iconography in addition to overt representations of toughness and strength also allows Under Armour to appeal to a wider spectrum of women. Under Armour should know the importance of diversity-friendly branding based

on its previous branding struggles. In its youth, Under Armour completely branded itself as a macho, football-obsessed corporation. Such branding allowed Under Armour to establish a significant market stake amongst manly men and football players, but it also pigeonholed the company and made breaking into other sports niches and the women's market much more difficult (Mirabella, 2014). Thus, Under Armour's branding in the women's market and its allusions to traditional femininity and female machismo helps the company avoid repeating its earlier mistakes and pigeonholing itself with one specific consumer. The #PowerInPink campaign has the ability to appeal to wide spectrum of women—those who identify as more girly and those who identify as more masculine.

### ***Expanding consumer reach by merging athletics and fashion***

Nike is also creating content that helps the company expand its consumer reach to a wider spectrum of women. Nike's branding of its women's products as both workout gear and fashion lines tells women that Nike is for elite athletes and stylish women purely interested in trendy fashion alike. For example, the Diggins YouTube video shows how Nike brands its product lines as clothing that can fulfill different desires for different target markets. Diggins is seen modeling the new line as if she is a runway model, but Diggins also serves as a representative for an extremely elite group of athletes (Nike, 2015a). Such marketing is effective as Nike is tapping into the hot trend of "comfort is queen." Women are more focused on seeking products that offer both form and function, or attractiveness and performance potential (Petro, 2015, 1). By merging athletics and fashion, Nike is able to bridge the gap typically found between fashion and sports, and expand brand reach to a much wider audience well beyond only athletes.

Crossing the athletics threshold and extending more into the fashion world has traditionally been one of Nike's greatest strengths in the women's market. Women desire multipurpose clothing that they can wear when they work out and when they want to look casually stylish (Fowler, 1999). However, Nike should still exercise caution when branding its athletics products as fashion lines and using sponsored athletes in more of a model capacity, like the Diggins video. While women desire clothing that can be both fashionable and athletic, they respond much more positively to marketing that includes appeals to a more authentic self instead of the unnatural beauty culture that's often found in the world of fashion (Cole & Hribar, 1995). Thus, Nike's athletics-and-fashion marketing should feature authentic representations of the "average" woman instead of overly glamorous, unrealistic representations of women. Nike's #BetterForIt campaign, which featured everyday women instead of professional athletes or models, is most closely aligned with women's desires for authenticity (Petro, 2015).

### ***Branding through comradeship versus individualism***

Much of Nike's thematic messaging in the women's market promotes the notion of comradeship through a communal "swoosh" culture, whereas Under Armour Women's content tends to promote a more solo pursuit of excellence through personal willpower. Themes of comradeship and individualism both resonate with women in different ways, but geographical location determines which theme resonates with the women's market the best. International female consumers tend to favor branding that communicates the egalitarianism of togetherness, while American female consumers respond more positively to images of individualism and autonomy (Arsenault & Fawzy, 2001). Thus, Nike's tendency to brand itself as a creator of "togetherness" may resonate well with women on a

global scale, but the thematic messaging may be less effective in the US due to women's differing preferences. On the other hand, Under Armour's emphasis on a solo pursuit of success is a strong messaging strategy with American women, as "Western culture is generally individualistic, prizing independence and self-fulfillment in almost all areas" (Jay, 2012, 87). Under Armour may want to incorporate more representations of comradeship when targeting international women specifically.

Nike's emphasis on comradeship and the creation of an exclusive Nike culture also risks perpetuating a theme for which Nike has been criticized in the past: Nike is the lone prescription for women attempting to empower themselves (Helstein, 2003). Because critics have previously denounced Nike for similar messaging strategies, Nike should avoid branding itself in such a way that suggests women have a dependence on the brand for this "exclusive" kind of empowerment and comradeship (Arsenault & Fawzy, 2001). Instead, Nike should continue to focus on developing meaningful, emotional relationships with female consumers, for which it's been praised in the past (Parent & Seguin, 2008). These consumer relationships are stronger and more loyal when they're rooted in empowerment and authenticity instead of exclusivity and brand necessity (Helstein, 2003).

### ***Detail-oriented branding versus lifestyle branding***

Nike and Under Armour also exhibit different approaches to what they're selling behind the product. Nike's content stresses detailed marks of technological innovation and creative craftsmanship, especially in the soccer market. Because of this, the majority of Nike Football's posts combine a product close-up and short caption with a few thematic key words instead of utilizing action images or story-development captions.. On the contrary,

Under Armour's content focuses more on selling generalized lifestyle habits of willpower and determination and almost no references to specific product details.

While Nike tends to most heavily emphasize details of innovation and craftsmanship in its content geared toward men, women are actually more sensitive to such detailed-oriented marketing. However, even though women are more sensitive, they prefer this type of marketing less than men (Patterson, O'Malley & Story, 2009). Men are more receptive to specific details and statistics, while women are much more interested in personal narratives and storylines (McBride, 2011). Thus, Nike's detail-oriented content is more effective and engaging within the male market and should continue to be leveraged through primarily male accounts, like the Nike Football accounts.

Under Armour's focus on lifestyle messages over specific product details is a stronger strategy for appealing to general audiences and building brand loyalty. Under Armour's use of the "I Will What I Want" campaign has helped the brand transcend individual sports markets and promote the campaign as more of a self-determination lifestyle movement. Under Armour's transcendence of sport is valuable, as athletic brand loyalty depends heavily on brands' ability to double as general lifestyle brands and sporting brands (Richelieu & Lessard, 2014, 287). Under Armour's "I Will What I Want" campaign also builds on an overarching narrative and storyline instead of honing in on specific details and statistics, which women prefer (McBride, 2011). If Under Armour can successfully plant an association between its brand and this sort of lifestyle movement in consumers' minds, Under Armour will be more able to transcend the sports market, resonate with a wider variety of consumers and increase brand loyalty.

### ***Leveraging underdog positioning to further expand into niche markets***

In addition to emphasizing lifestyle themes, Under Armour relies on an underdog's narrative for its brand positioning and its endorsed athlete selection. By self-identifying as the underdog, Under Armour positions itself well to expand into new sports niches. Under Armour can further position itself as the gritty underdog in its untapped niches, like the women's soccer market.

For example, Under Armour has leveraged its underdog branding to expand more into the men's soccer market using Memphis Depay. Depay, a member of Manchester United, is a rising soccer star for Manchester United and the Dutch national team. Under Armour has used Depay in much of its soccer content to emphasize surpassing goals and expectations. Under Armour's "slay your next giant" campaign revolves around Depay beating expectations and surprising everyone who doubted his place on Manchester United. The campaign follows Depay setting a personal goal, conquering it, and immediately working toward the next goal (Barker, 2015). Even though many of Under Armour's athletes, like Depay, aren't yet extremely successful, established icons, women don't care—only men are notably concerned about associating with the best teams and players and displaying their knowledge of team and player histories, specifically (James & Ridinger, 2002, 263). Women are much more attracted to the underdog narrative (McBride, 2011). Under Armour has the potential to follow the advice of its Depay campaign and "slay its next giant" by penetrating a niche market, building up market share, and expanding into the next market (Moore, 2002, 66).

### ***Under Armour's reliance on sponsored athletes for brand development***

As seen through Under Armour's use of Depay and other athletes, Under Armour uses its sponsored athletes to sell consumers ideals of aspiration and self-determination. With the help of its sponsored athletes, Under Armour has constructed an extensive thematic messaging campaign rooted in the self-rule and ambition of underdog athletes. Under Armour runs a risk of relying too heavily on its sponsored athletes to promote its underdog narrative, though. If Under Armour endorses an athlete who's viewed as an underdog turned self-made success story, then Under Armour receives the exact branding it wants from the athlete. But if that athlete starts to underperform and become irrelevant, disappearing amongst other middle-of-the-pack athletes, then Under Armour is associating its brand with perceptions of mediocrity instead of perceptions of relentless determination. Of course, there's no way to tell what the future will hold for sponsored athletes, but Under Armour must exercise caution in depending so heavily on its athletes. It's extremely important that Under Armour and its endorsed athletes continue to demonstrate congruent brand personalities, or else consumers' brand perceptions of Under Armour may change in undesired ways (Kim, Magnusen & Kim, 2012).

Additionally, Under Armour can continue to use its sponsored athletes for strong brand development by tapping into them for product insights. Under Armour's massive lineup of sponsored athletes give the company access to valuable product-development information, like which products perform best, which last longest, which are most comfortable and much more (Foster, 2016, 34). Under Armour should constantly leverage its endorsed athletes for product feedback, which will help the corporation continue brand development and produce higher-quality products for consumers.

## **Strategic Plan and Recommendations**

A strategic thematic messaging and branding plan will now be developed for Under Armour based on the study's findings and analysis. These recommendations are aimed to help Under Armour strengthen its messaging and branding strategies in comparison to Nike's, and to help Under Armour expand into more niche markets, like the women's soccer market, in order to establish more market control.

### ***1. Expand reach in women's market by including more leisurely-athletic content***

Under Armour and Nike have both utilized branding strategies to expand consumer reach. Under Armour's female-specific #PowerInPink campaign helps the company resonate with women who identify as more girly and women who identify as more masculine. Similarly, Nike appeals to a wider audience of women by pushing the intersection of athletics and fashion and branding its product lines to appeal to both the fashionably-casual woman and the elite female athlete. However, Nike's branding in the women's market still resonates with a greater number of women thanks to its ability to transcend the sports to a greater degree than Under Armour's #PowerInPink campaign.

Under Armour should find additional ways to expand consumer reach and appeal to a wider audience through its branding, especially in the women's market. In order to expand to a wider female audience, Under Armour should emphasize the fashionable qualities of its women's products; similar to how Nike positions its women's product lines. Since Under Armour depends so heavily on content centered on sponsored athletes instead of specific products, Under Armour's content is mostly directed toward an audience of serious female athletes instead of a general, more leisurely active female audience. Nike's branding is more able to connect with all women because it incorporates both athletic

elements and non-athletic elements, like current fashion trends. Under Armour should also try to expand to the entirety of the women's market by producing content that can appeal to athletes and non-athletes alike.

Creating more leisurely-athletic content is especially important because women increasingly desire multipurpose athletic clothing lines. The sportswear industry has been shifting more and more toward catering the growing trend of women wanting yoga pants to wear to the grocery store or men wanting sneakers to wear to work, for example. This is why Lululemon experienced such massive success in the women's market—it was the only brand fully catering to serious female athletes and leisurely-active women alike. While Under Armour's branding has traditionally appealed to athletes specifically, not tapping into this leisurely-athletic market trend would hurt Under Armour's potential to expand its customer base. Since women are the primary drivers of this market trend and Under Armour is striving to rapidly grow its women's business, Under Armour should strive to satisfy female consumers' desires and produce more leisurely-athletic content in order to increase its brand presence with this particular type of female consumers.

## ***2. Further pursue market positioning as lifestyle brand***

Brand loyalty and success in the athletics market depends heavily on the brand's ability to transcend the sports world. While transcending the sports world will help Under Armour expand consumer reach in the women's market, it will also continue to help Under Armour position itself as a lifestyle brand and promote increased brand loyalty. Lifestyle brands are more popular amongst consumers as they appeal to athletes and non-athletes alike, but Under Armour's positioning as a lifestyle brand can also help the corporation more easily transition into new niche sports markets, like the women's soccer market.

Under Armour should continue to push the notion that it is spurring a lifestyle movement rooted in willpower and self-determination. By emphasizing this lifestyle narrative, Under Armour may foster a powerful brand association in consumers' minds. Then, if and when Under Armour decides to expand more into relatively untapped sports niches, Under Armour will already have a greater degree of brand loyalty and recognition in the market. For example, even if a women's soccer player is skeptical about trying Under Armour's women's soccer products because they aren't as established or popular as competitors', the player may be more willing to try Under Armour's products if she has been exposed to the brand's lifestyle narrative of willpower and self-determination. If Under Armour can shift at least some consumer focus toward its lifestyle branding, then consumers may have a stronger reason to try new Under Armour products even if they know little about specific product details.

Under Armour can also make use of its recent tech acquisitions to improve its lifestyle brand positioning and to emphasize that it's more than a sweat-wicking t-shirt company. Under Armour has spent nearly \$1 billion expanding into the tech industry, purchasing fitness and nutrition app companies and investing large sums of capital into them (Foster, 2016, 28). By doing so, Under Armour has amassed the world's largest digital health-and-fitness community, with more than 150 million users. Under Armour's expansion into the tech world gives the company a chance to use the app users' lifestyle data to drive more general lifestyle product development (Foster, 2016, 31). This data is especially rich for Under Armour since more than 60 percent of the apps' active users are women—the market Under Armour is most aggressively targeting (Foster, 2016, 34). Under Armour should take full advantage of its tech sub-brand by data mining users'

analytics and using the data to learn more about both leisurely-active and extremely active women. Based on the data, Under Armour can better develop product lines specifically tailored to different kinds of active women lifestyles.

### ***3. Self-identify as “alternative” athletics brand for consumers***

Under Armour obviously has a huge competitor in Nike, but it also has a valuable opportunity to establish itself as the new, exciting, different alternative to the dominant corporation. Under Armour already somewhat does this by branding itself as the underdog in comparison to Nike, but if Under Armour can further promote its positioning as an out-of-the-box, alternative brand, it has a greater chance for success in the soccer market, which is essentially monopolized by Nike.

Nike has a huge stake in the soccer market, but there is evidence that consumers are increasingly attracted to new, different brands that are more outside the norm. Research shows consumers are more likely to resist brands that are prescribed to them as their only option, and increasingly prefer not to appear exactly like everyone else. Under Armour has a valuable opportunity to scoop up these consumers who are looking for something different than the standard Nike products that dominate the soccer world, from youth soccer leagues to top professional leagues. Because Adidas has become less popular in the American soccer market and Nike has enjoyed mostly-unchallenged market reign, the American soccer market is now ripe with entry potential for a third-party competitor to seriously contest market share.

Under Armour has to actively promote this positioning as the desirable alternative, though. The company should do this by further weaving notions of uniqueness and individuality into its soccer brand’s DNA. Along with branding itself as the alternative to

the market giant, Under Armour will have to produce soccer products that align with its alternative branding. Because consumers desire congruence between brand personality and products, Under Armour would only suffer by branding itself as a distinct alternative then producing soccer products that merely mirror Nike's. Under Armour's soccer product line should give consumers what they want — a chance to differentiate themselves from their peers and a unique, distinctive escape from the market ruler.

#### ***4. Utilize sponsored athletes to kickoff expansion into niche markets***

Under Armour has had great success with its sponsored athletes. Misty Copeland, Stephen Curry, Jordan Spieth, and others have all helped propel Under Armour into the spotlight thanks to strong alignment between Under Armour's brand personality and the sponsored athletes' brand personalities. While Under Armour shouldn't entirely depend on sponsored athletes for brand development and promotion, leveraging sponsored athletes in additional untapped sports niches is one of Under Armour's most promising ways of kicking off strong expansion into new markets.

Signing Memphis Depay was a huge move for Under Armour in the international soccer world, but Depay may not resonate strongly enough with American consumers to have a significant impact in the US soccer market. Under Armour does endorse American players Jermaine Jones, Jeremy Sieverts and Kelley O'Hara, but the brand still lacks that one quintessential American soccer player who can represent the underdog and fully carry an Under Armour sport-specific campaign, similar to how Stephen Curry is utilized by the brand.

Under Armour should pursue an additional endorsement in the American women's soccer market in order to kickoff strong brand expansion into the niche. Concentrated and

highly-intentional integrated marketing and the development of an ongoing narrative surrounding a new archetypal Under Armour athlete can help the brand stake a greater claim in the women's soccer niche. Of course, this player would have to fit well within Under Armour's brand personality and underdog narrative. One strong potential candidate for Under Armour's sponsorship is Mallory Pugh.

Pugh, just 17-years-old, is the youngest woman to ever be chosen for a US soccer Olympic qualifying roster. The US Women's National Team called Pugh to training camp in January 2016, and just a few weeks later Pugh recorded her first cap and scored her first goal. Now, Pugh has nine caps to her name and is commonly deemed the future of American women's soccer. Pugh's storyline is similar to Under Armour golden boy Jordan Spieth's—a young, extremely talented athlete who's new to the professional scene but it immediately driving success and asserting herself as the future of the sport. Pugh's young age also gives her added sponsorship value, as she'll be able to resonate with youth female players but will gradually attract resonate more with the general population as she matures with the team and eventually takes its leadership torch. If Pugh decides to forgo the upcoming professional season to attend UCLA this fall, Lindsey Horan, Jaelene Hinkle and Emily Sonnett are also strong candidates for sponsorship.

Additionally, Under Armour's use of strong sponsored athletes to develop compelling, engaging storylines is particularly effective in the female market. Female consumers are the ones who desire and favor this kind of branding and messaging. If Under Armour picks up a player like Pugh, the corporation should feature her as the centerpieces of content and narrative development in its market push. This type of content has been proven most effective at engaging women and and keeping them returning for more.

## ***5. Include greater variety of athlete-based content and product-based content***

Despite the importance of sponsored athletes to Under Armour's branding and messaging strategy, Under Armour should still strive to include both athlete-based content and product-based content. As exhibited by Nike, detail-oriented advertising is also a very strong marketing method that helps build deep-rooted brand associations. Because Nike continuously pairs its swoosh with references to craftsmanship and innovation, the swoosh and craftsmanship and innovation eventually become at least somewhat synonymous in consumers' minds. Even though Under Armour's athlete-centered campaigns are effective in its own ways, Under Armour is still ultimately trying to sell its products. If consumers think of Under Armour and think of Stephen Curry but nothing about Under Armour products, then Under Armour isn't aiding its final business goal of selling merchandise.

Under Armour should not diminish its athlete-centered branding strategy, but the company should include more product specifics in addition to its sponsored athlete content. This may be especially helpful in the women's market, as women are more receptive to detail-oriented marketing. Additionally, specific product qualities hold greater weight in sports niches than in the general sports market. Because of this, Under Armour's more generalized lifestyle branding is an effective way to reach more general sports consumers. However, if Under Armour wants to penetrate the women's soccer market more deeply, it should follow a similar branding and messaging strategy to what it initially used when first penetrating the football market.

Under Armour gained market momentum by repeatedly emphasizing its sweat-wicking technologies and football products' specific, innovative details. Under Armour should execute a similar detail-oriented product campaign in the women's soccer market to

differentiate its products from competitors', position itself as a unique brand alternative and diversify its overall branding and messaging strategy. Under Armour should then partner its detail-oriented messaging with sponsored athlete content to add increased legitimacy to its claims. If Mallory Pugh is shown with Under Armour cleats, then Under Armour cleats suddenly possess both the detailed craftsmanship and the accompanying star-power storyline consumers desire.

### **Conclusion and Limitations**

This thesis offered a broad look at how corporations utilize strategic communications on various social media platforms to brand in niche markets. By examining Under Armour and Nike's Instagram, YouTube and Facebook accounts over the course of four months, this study was able to analyze how different companies leverage social media strategic communications for branding. Findings demonstrated how Under Armour and Nike execute thematic messaging and branding strategies on social media to differentiate from the competitor and engage different markets.

Previous scholarship has discussed branding and messaging strategies in the female and soccer markets through traditional advertising, but there is little discussion on branding and messaging strategies in niche markets during the social media age. Future research should analyze how consumers respond to different social media messaging and branding strategies, analyzing what kinds of content drives consumers to favorably engage with the content and to take subsequent action with the brand.

This thesis verified how thematic messaging through social media is now an integral part of building brand identity and penetrating niche markets. No longer are compelling

print advertisements or commercials enough to effectively reach consumers and sustain business. Now, brands must turn attention toward strategic communication strategies on social media in order to develop brand identity and connect with niche market consumers to the fullest extent. After all, “stores *have* become obsolete, in many cases...and the best way to keep your company successful is to embrace social media, fully incorporating Facebook, Twitter, and other social channels into your strategy” (Holmes, 2015, 1). Corporations must realize social media messaging’s impact on branding and market expansion potential. By fully embracing social media strategic communications as a legitimate, vital component of business strategy, corporations can better prepare to expand into new markets and challenge well established competitors.

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