

# How Big a Risk Did Nike Take with Controversial New Ad?

## Article

Over Labor Day weekend, you might have seen social media users protesting Nike's new ad featuring Colin Kaepernick, the former NFL quarterback who sparked controversy by kneeling during the national anthem, by cutting Nike logos off socks and burning Air Jordans.

Brands taking stances on hot-button issues can be risky. But in an increasingly polarized political climate, some are courting controversy and can afford to alienate a vocal minority. A

survey conducted last year by **Sprout Social** found **two-thirds of US internet users want brands to take a stand on social and political issues**

**Actions Taken by US Internet Users When They Agree vs. Disagree with a Brand's Stance on Social/Political Issues, Sep 2017**

% of respondents

	Agree	Disagree
Show greater brand loyalty	52%	4%
Purchase more from a brand	44%	3%
Recommend brand to friends/family	35%	4%
Publicly promote/praise brand	28%	3%
Purchase less from brand	9%	53%
Warn family/friends about brand	9%	38%
Boycott brand	5%	33%
Publicly criticize brand	4%	20%

Note: ages 18+

Source: Sprout Social, "Championing Change in the Age of Social Media," Jan 9, 2018

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When consumers agree with a stance, brand loyalty increases while the leading action taken by those who disagree is buying less from a brand. A retail brand as big as Nike wouldn't take chances with this marketing approach without calculating potential repercussions first.

In a July 2018 poll by **Morning Consult**, 46% of US adults opposed NFL players kneeling during the anthem. But there were stark differences in opinion by political affiliation and age. Republicans were 81% in opposition (even higher than when first polled in September 2017), while 20% of Democrats opposed the protest. Only 24% of respondents ages 18 to 29 thought kneeling was unacceptable. This figure rose with age, climbing to 55% for those ages 45 to 54 and to 69% for those 65 and older.

In a separate survey by Morning Consult focusing on millennial attitudes toward brands, advocating for civil rights had the greatest impact—more so than gay rights or gun control—on company likability, cited by 56% of respondents.

Specifically, 67% held a favorable opinion about Nike, ranking it at No. 11 among the 25 most loved brands by millennials. Fully 55% considered Nike to have "strong, positive values." When probed, the leading reasons were that it was a well-run business (48%), possessed supportable values (20%) and had good ethics (19%).

In the above mentioned Sprout Social survey, more offended consumers (53%) said they'd purchase less often from brands that didn't share their values than those who would buy more

from brands in line with their social or political views (44%). But Nike's target market is probably not older Republicans, lessening the potential impact of a boycott.

According to a January 2018 **Weber Shandwick** study that identified two consumer activist groups (boycotters and "BUYcotters"), younger consumers worldwide were more likely to buy from companies to show support (41%) than boycott to demonstrate distaste (33%). Looking forward, 34% of US consumers anticipated they would take more boycotting action over the next two years, while a greater number (45%) expected to increase BUYcotting frequency in that same timeframe.