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The “Woke” Effect: The Critical Debate on Identity Politics and its Impact on Brand Storytelling

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays the concept of wokeness has become a familiar part of public discourse and the media. The term originated in the early twentieth century to denote an awareness of the socio-political pressures affecting black Americans. However, from 2014 onwards, it has evolved significantly and gained greater meaning and influence, changing its original meaning. Today it is synonymous with statements on social networks or brand advertising campaigns, the subject of discussion in various fields from the socio-political and educational sphere to the world of communication.

The object of study of this thesis is the influence of “woke” culture and the critical debate on identity politics and its impact on communications and storytelling in contemporary culture, as in visual arts, journalism and brand communication. This thesis aims to analyze how this debate has contributed to the social imagination, changing not only the narrative, but also the communication tools themselves, such as social networks, cinematography and brand communication through advertising campaigns. The objectives of this study are, first of all, to determine how wok culture has influenced and continues to influence contemporary communication, both in a broad and narrower sense. Second, defining an understanding of how consumers identify brands’ activism and advertising campaigns that truly support “woke” culture or use it as a tool, the so-called “woke-washing” advertising, and how this impacts the perception of brand authenticity. Also, an important part of this study is to analyze the impact of the culture of complaint on modern storytelling in the digital sphere.

For achieving these goals, the thesis refers to a wide range of cultural objects and to the increasing number of critical studies on this topic. Case studies that represent different perspectives of the context in question allow one to narrow the focus of the study and provide a deeper understanding of the research object. The content analysis involves the study of posts, storytelling and visual and graphic materials, including images and videos, in this case the analysis of interviews, messages on social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube), as well as films and commercials. The analysis of specific

case studies allows to delve into a practical example to evaluate the impact of the “woke” effect on real multimedia products of specific brands and their advertising campaigns.

This thesis consists of five chapters. The first one examines the history and development of the term “woke”. The second chapter analyzes how “woke” culture influences ~~in~~ the uses of storytelling in contemporary communication. The third chapter is devoted to the manifestation of “woke” culture in the digital environment and its influence on aesthetic artifacts. The fourth chapter is devoted to the analysis of brand authenticity and its transformations. Finally, the last chapter focuses on some case studies which seems to be paradigmatic of the woke impact on brand storytelling.

The first chapter deals with the history of the term and its development, examining various approaches to its definition. The term is still evolving, as the attitude towards it over the past years has changed radically, referring first to the fight against the oppression of the black minority and then to the wider context of political claims for social justice and equality. The debates around “woke” culture are multi-faceted and still ongoing, and they reflect deep social tensions around various issues relating to social justice, freedom of speech and the balance between promoting inclusivity and respect for individual rights. Finding a common ground and constructive dialogue among the polarized viewpoints on this topic remains a major challenge.

The second chapter devotes the analysis to the manifestations of “woke” culture in social media storytelling. In this context, the impact of woke culture shows its significance by increasing the representation of diverse voices and experiences, with platforms like Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and others providing opportunities for minority groups to directly share their stories and perspectives, bypassing traditional media industry intermediaries. This has led to the proliferation of narratives that challenge conventional norms and highlight the struggles of underrepresented communities. However, alongside this positive shift, there is also the phenomenon of the culture of complaint, which involves publicly shaming individuals or organizations for behaviors that are considered ethically unacceptable, and social campaigns to boycott or ostracize individuals or brands. While this culture of complaint is effective in holding powerful figures and institutions accountable for harmful actions or statements, it also raises concerns about due process, freedom of expression, and the potential for excessive punishment. The intersection of “woke” culture and culture of complaint can sometimes

lead to debates over issues such as cultural appropriation, political correctness, and censorship. This debate highlights the tension between the desire for greater inclusion and the need to respect individual rights and freedoms. Overall, the manifestation of “woke” culture in social media storytelling reflects a broader social shift toward greater awareness and activism around social justice issues. However, it also highlights the complexities and challenges of addressing these issues in an increasingly connected and digital world.

The third chapter analyses the impact of “woke” culture on digital media. A “woke” culture appears to have emerged across digital media and the world, turning them into powerful tools for inclusive popular culture. On the one hand, it allows for greater representation and diversity, resulting in filmmakers and content creators often incorporating different characters, narratives, and points of view into their work, as well as challenging stereotypes that have traditionally been dominant. Although the “woke” culture has brought positive changes to the modern world, it has also been criticized for some potential negative effects, particularly symbolism, where various characters involve superficiality without primary development or significance to the story. Second, the simplification of complex social issues for educators in modern storytelling, resulting in a lack of power and perhaps leading them to easily digestible moral lessons. At the same time, one of the significant problems has become censorship and self-censorship due to the emphasis of culture, being woke of political correctness and sensitivity to marginalized communities. Ultimately, there is a risk of walking away from what is achieved – a lack of diversity in terms of account restrictions, points of view and creative freedom. Movies and cartoons such as “Barbie”, “Gone with the Wind”, “Cleopatra”, and “The Little Mermaid” and others are analyzed. While woke culture continues to generate important debates and positive changes in the modern world, it is important to remain critical and aware of its pitfalls to ensure the creation of a more inclusive and socially responsible film industry, which is one of the key tools for moving a culture that can reflect and shape social attitudes and values.

In chapter four, “woke” authenticity in brand culture refers to a brand’s attempt to align with social justice values in a way that feels authentic and genuine to consumers. This phenomenon has evolved over time under the influence of various social, cultural and economic factors and in the initial stages was expressed in corporate social responsibility, which became widespread in the second half of the 20th century, which

became the basis for brands to engage in more systematic and organized activities. The emergence of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram has revolutionized the way brands communicate with consumers. The Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements have brought issues of race and gender inequality to the forefront of public consciousness, and some brands have responded by expressing solidarity and taking concrete action to address issues of diversity, equity and inclusion within their organizations. Despite the growing trend toward “woke” authenticity, brands are facing backlash and criticism for how they address social justice issues. Critics argue that some brands are engaging in “woke-washing”, using social justice messages as a marketing tool without making meaningful internal changes or addressing systemic issues in their industries. Inspired authenticity in brand culture continues to evolve as social, political and cultural dynamics change. Overall, the story of the woke authenticity in brand culture reflects a growing recognition of the influence of business in shaping social values and norms.

The final chapter aims to demonstrate the role of woke culture in brand storytelling on social media, advertising campaigns and, as a case study, an analysis of so-called “woke-washing” advertising, as important implications of “woke” culture in brand storytelling and analysis individual storytelling cases of such brands as Nike, Dove, Reebok, Gillette and others. The impact of woke culture on brand storytelling is significant: it has changed the way companies communicate their values, communicate with consumers and position themselves in the marketplace. Brands are increasingly incorporating diverse characters and narratives into their stories to reflect the realities of a diverse consumer base and promote inclusivity, while also incorporating social justice messages into their narratives to align with progressive values and ideas. “Woke” brands use user-generated content and community engagement as part of their storytelling strategies. This involves amplifying the voice of your customers and engaging in dialogue with them on social issues. “Woke” culture has had a profound impact on brand storytelling, driving a shift towards more diverse, inclusive and purposeful storytelling. Brands that embrace “woke” principles in their stories not only help connect with socially conscious consumers, but also contribute to broader social and cultural change. At the same time, increased digitalization has made an additional contribution and has strengthened the possible acceleration of consumer reactions and expression of their

attitude towards brand campaigns, including negative experiences of brand cancellations, boycotts, etc. Thus, being controversial in the socio-cultural discourse, the topic of “woke” culture, while introducing serious transformational changes in the communications of brands and consumers, remains very controversial in this area.

This thesis makes an attempt to clarify key aspects of the relationship between woke discourses and digital culture and brand storytelling, recognizing the fluid and increasingly contested nature of woke concepts and the need to bring caution and clarity to the ways in which woke is enacted. Overall, this research demonstrates a variety of perspectives on the issue of woke culture and the role it plays in the development or change of communication tools, reflecting a broader shift in society towards greater awareness, activism and social change. “Woke” culture represents a significant shift in social norms, values, and attitudes, especially regarding social justice, equality, and activism and their representation in communication. Analysis of its manifestations in contemporary communication helps to understand the main driving forces of this cultural shift and its consequences for various aspects of society, because it has a direct impact on media, advertising and messaging, shaping how brands and organizations communicate with their audiences. Critical debate about identity politics is crucial to understand its impact on digital communication tools and brand storytelling in particular, because it is important for understanding cultural shifts, addressing complex issues, promoting authenticity and inclusivity, exploring power dynamics, resolving controversy, and encouraging dialogue. Analyzing “woke” culture in contemporary communication promotes dialogue between diverse parties to discuss complex social issues, share diverse perspectives, and find common ground for collective action and change.

CHAPTER 1

“WOKE”: HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE TERM

“Woke culture”, often referred to also as “wokeism” or “woke ideology”, is a term that has been used to describe a social and cultural movement aimed at addressing issues of social justice, inequality, and systemic discrimination. It emphasizes awareness and action against various forms of oppression, including those related to race, gender, sexual orientation, and so on.¹

The roots of the political uses of the word “woke” are in the name of a popular national movement by young supporters of Abraham Lincoln in the 1860 presidential election period. This movement was called the Broad Awake, which advocated for worker’s rights and the abolition of slavery. The half-million members of the movement were known for turning political rallies into celebrations, marching at night by torchlight in colorful costumes, music and fireworks. However, the term woke itself appeared much later and most researchers agree that the first the word “woke” appeared in the lyrics of a song during the thirties. “Woke is not a movement in the traditional sense of the word. The first recorded use of the phrase ‘stay woke’ was in blues great Lead Belly’s 1938 song *Scottsboro Boys*, dedicated to nine black teenagers whose execution for rapes they never committed was only prevented by years of international protests” (Neiman 2003, 7). The song of Lead Belly, whose real name was Huddy Ledbetter, is about the Scottsboro Boys, nine black teenagers who were wrongly accused of rape and later sentenced to death. The song warns of the dangers of a racially biased justice system and ends with the line “better stay woke”. The singer advised black people traveling in Alabama to stay woke and keep their eyes open. Two years later, in 1940, a member of

¹ There are a lot of books, which describe the origin and evolution the term woke and its interpretations, such as *Culture of Complaint* by Robert Hughes (1993), *The Great Reset* and *Beyond Woke* by Michael Rectenwald (2020), *La religion woke* by Jean-Francois Braunstein (2022), *Left Is Not Woke* by Susan Neiman (2023), scientific publications of James Spencer Atkins, Nicholas Allen, Francesca Sobande, Seema Gupta, and others. Hughes book is a sort of anticipation of the criticism against the woke culture. On woke culture, its evolution and changing perception of woke see the article “*The misappropriation of “woke”: discriminatory social media practices, contributory injustice and context collapse*” by Nicholas Allen.

the United Negro Mineworkers promised that striking members would stay longer woke than their opposition. Pulliam-Moore (2016) traced the evolution of the term to musical artist Erykah Badu in her 2008 song *Master Teacher*. Pulliam-Moore (2016) referred to the Urban Dictionary's definition of woke: "Being woke means being aware. Knowing what's going on in the community" (Pulliam-Moore, 2016). Yet, he claimed that the meaning changes depending on who is using the term and with whom it is being used. He offered a definition of the term stay woke:

"Finally, according to Pulliam-Moore, "woke can also refer, mockingly, to (White) people whose perspectives on race change suddenly after learning about historical injustice". He observed that "woke has taken on a more complex meaning in recent years, a complexity that is worth exploring" (Caldera 2018, 5).

The Oxford English Dictionary traces the history of the term back to the 1960s, the heyday of student barricade riots and black demonstrations. However, in those days many new words and expressions appeared that today are no longer remembered. So, by the current heyday of the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM), woke has already entered all dictionaries as a designation for a new ideology that prioritizes the achievement of social, racial and sexual justice through persecution and "positive discrimination" of the majority in the name of the rights of oppressed minorities:

When Martin Luther King stood before Morehouse College's graduating class to deliver the first draft of an address that would serve as his go-to speech for the rest of his life, he knew he was becoming a pariah. By 2 June 1959, the US government had already started a program aimed at "maintaining the existing social order" by "neutralizing individuals perceived as threats". Long before King warned the students against complacency and racial backlash, the FBI had created what a Senate intelligence report referred to as "labels without meaning" that would eventually convince white Americans that King was an anti-American Marxist hellbent on destroying their beloved country (Harriot, 2022).

King gave his “Staying Wide” speech, explaining that there would be nothing more tragic in this period of social change than to allow our mental and moral attitudes to sleep while these enormous social changes take place:

But less than a decade later, many white Americans were ignoring the central theme of King’s most consistent message: stay woke. By 1964, a majority of white New Yorkers felt that the civil rights movement had “gone too far”. In 1965, a Gallup poll found that 85% of Americans believed that communists were involved in the civil rights movement. By 1966, only 36% of white Americans believed that King “helped the negro cause” (Harriot, 2022).

Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech at the National Cathedral on March 31, 1968, indeed provided a powerful and comprehensive message about the importance of staying awake and vigilant in the face of injustice. In this speech, often referred to as “Staying Wide Through Revolution”, King addressed the realities of racism and inequality in the United States and urged his audience to remain alert and engaged in the struggle for freedom and justice. By incorporating Bible verses into his homily, King underscored the moral imperative of the civil rights movement and its roots in spiritual and ethical principles. He emphasized that the fight against injustice was not just a political or social issue but a deeply moral one, requiring courage, perseverance, and faith. King's message resonated with the broader theme of staying woke or aware of systemic racism and oppression. He recognized that challenging the status quo would inevitably provoke backlash and resistance from those invested in maintaining the existing power structures. However, he urged his congregation to remain steadfast in their commitment to justice and equality, despite the challenges and dangers they may face. King's speech at the National Cathedral encapsulated the essence of the civil rights movement and its ongoing struggle for racial justice and equality. His words continue to inspire generations of activists and serve as a reminder of the importance of staying vigilant and engaged in the fight against oppression and injustice, both then and now.

However, there is another direction in assessing the emergence of this term. According to him, the word is believed to have been first defined in print by William

Melvin Kelly, a black writer, in an article published in the *New York Times* in 1962. Speaking of black slang, Kelly defined woke as someone who is well-informed, up to date. Black people later used the term woke for decades to refer to the complaints against racism and other issues, but the word did not enter the mainstream until much later.

While Erykah Badu's song *Master Teacher* certainly contributed to the popularization of the term “woke”, its emergence as synonymous with social awareness likely began earlier and was influenced by a combination of cultural, political, and social factors. The term woke has roots in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and has been used within black communities for decades to describe a state of heightened awareness or consciousness, particularly regarding social and political issues affecting marginalized groups. Its usage predates the release of *Master Teacher* in 2008 and can be traced back to at least the 1930s, as mentioned earlier. However, it was not until the rise of social media platforms like Twitter in the late 2000s and early 2010s that the term began to gain wider recognition and adoption beyond black communities. On platforms like Black Twitter, activists and influencers popularized the term woke as a descriptor for individuals who were actively engaged in social justice issues and aware of systemic inequalities and oppression. Additionally, the term gained further prominence during the Black Lives Matter movement, which emerged in response to police violence and racial injustice in the United States. Activists and organizers used the term “woke” to mobilize supporters and call attention to issues of racial discrimination and police brutality. Overall, while Erykah Badu's song *Master Teacher* may have contributed to the popularization of the term woke, its emergence as synonymous with social awareness was influenced by a broader cultural shift and ongoing social justice movements. It reflects a growing awareness and activism around issues of inequality, discrimination, and social justice that has been building for decades.

The word woke has become part of the Black Lives Matter movement. At the same time, it became not only a symbol of awareness of injustice or racial tension, it became a word, even a call to action. Activists woke up and called on others to stay woke. Within the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, being woke signifies more than just awareness of injustice or racial tension; it represents a commitment to challenging systemic racism, advocating for social change, and actively working towards racial justice and equality. It has become a rallying cry for activists and supporters who are dedicated to dismantling structures of oppression and building a more just and equitable society.

Furthermore, the term woke has transcended its origins within black communities and has been adopted by a broader audience, including allies and supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement. It serves as a reminder of the ongoing struggle for racial justice and the importance of remaining vigilant and engaged in the fight against racism and inequality. When the Black Lives Matter movement captured the world's attention during anti-racism protests following the 2014 killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, it was inseparable from the phrase "stay woke". The word is short, and the stop consonant "k" has a strong plosive effect. It is suitable for tweets and newspaper headlines. Violating the expected rules of grammar is disruptive. It has all the necessary qualities for universal use. The concept of being woke within black American communities does indeed have historical roots dating back to at least the 1930s, but its recent resurgence, particularly online on platforms like Black Twitter, has taken on a specific urgency and meaning. In contemporary usage, being woke serves as a call to awareness, activism, and vigilance against racial injustice, particularly in the context of police violence and systemic racism within the criminal justice system. This specialized use of the term reflects the ongoing struggles and experiences of black individuals and communities in the United States, where issues of police brutality and racial discrimination remain pervasive and deeply entrenched. Being woke is not just about being aware of these injustices, but also about actively challenging and resisting them, both in terms of immediate threats and the broader structures of oppression that perpetuate them. It is important to recognize that the recent popularization of the term "woke" in mainstream discourse often overlooks its origins within black communities and its historical significance as a tool of resistance and empowerment. As such, there is a risk of misappropriation and dilution of its original meaning and context.

Other theorists, such as Tony Thorne, suggest that wokeness began to emerge closer to the 1940s, but retain the same meaning of being alert or "woke" to the injustices faced by black people in America:

Black philosopher Maisha Cherry also believes that the history of wokeness stems in part from articles such as those discussed below by William Kelly, and that the term may have originated as early as the 1940s. In addition, she believes that wokeness also emerged in the consciousness of black people. Increased

efforts from the 80s to the 90s, particularly regarding how some rappers, dubbed conscious rappers, used terms such as woke to draw attention to how social structures function to systematically oppress them. Another major example of this is writer James Baldwin, using the concept of relatively conscious whites and relatively conscious blacks (Allen 2023, 3).

Baldwin uses the concept of people whose consciousness was developed to be attuned to social injustice, especially towards the black community, and were prepared for both. Romano suggests that between this early use and the 2000s, the term remained in force. This type of usage is in black communities with little use of the phrase in the wider community, but its use on Twitter by black users has steadily increased since shortly after its founding in 2006. During this time, two new meanings were added: staying alert to cheating partners and staying literally woke. However, the original meaning of staying woke of racial injustice in the justice system was retained, and all three uses appeared to remain limited to use within the black community (online and offline). Romano and others also note the influence of music in popularizing the term in the community at the time, particularly with songs like Erykah Badu's *Master Teacher* and Childish Gambino's *Redbone*, the latter of which featured prominently in the black horror film *Get Out*. Romano notes a sharp increase in Twitter usage of "Wake's" political message surrounding racially motivated police violence following the release of both songs. "Around 2013-2014, the black community's reaction to the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson saw the word begin to gain traction online both within and outside the black community. Immediately after this event, the hashtag #StayWoke began to appear more often in tweets about the Ferguson protests, deliberately referencing the message of staying vigilant against racially motivated police violence" (Allen, 2023). During the remainder of the decade, this use increased and both the phrase stay woke and the hashtag are increasingly used by black communities and activists online, with this as their primary meaning.

In the early 2000s, the meaning of the word woke was a warning/reminder to be vigilant about the structural trend of police violence against blacks in the United States. In 2023, the meaning of the word "woke" has changed to refer to someone who is overly concerned with social justice issues in a somewhat trite and disingenuous manner. Next,

it is important to look at how an important term and word in a certain environment began to be supplemented with negative connotations.

The strong change in meaning in the years between these cases can be attributed, apart from some political aspects, to the process of so-called misappropriation, largely caused by online social networks such as Twitter and others. This process brought the word woke out of a marginalized community into wider public use and in the process stripped it of the original meaning given to it by that community and replaced it with a caricature of a new, wider public meaning. “Misappropriation can be defined as a category of phenomena in which a given resource is taken and unfairly used by someone to whom it does not belong. In the cases I am interested in, these resources are conceptual (words, concepts, theories, etc.) and do not belong to the appropriator, since they are not part of the social community that created the resources they stole. These conceptual resources are used unfairly because by taking them away, these communities lose control over their meanings, distorting them over time” (Allen 2023, 6). This type of appropriation has become the most common due to the active development of social networks. At a very broad level, the essence of misappropriation can be expressed as follows: the term “x” is used in a certain cultural context in the social networks of a certain social group A (as well as in the real conversations of this community), as a result of a series of processes, the wider community B begins to use the term “x” in both social media and offline conversations. The phrase Woke or Woke began to gain traction on Twitter, exposing it to wider community scrutiny and misappropriation like never before.

First, activists outside the black community became woke and understood the language of their movements. “For example, Romano cites activists from the 2017 American Women’s March who tweeted the phrase, as well as photographs of some of their stay woke banners. This is supported by Miles-Hercules and Joshua Adams, among others, who argue that the initial appropriation of the term by white progressives laid the groundwork for reactionary forces later to caricature the term” (Allen 2023, 7).

Like many terms that have become popular and widely supported in African American communities, it has been appropriated by people who consider themselves allies. Conservatives then took it and weaponized it as a way to demonize people who were interested in social justice, equality and freedom:

This misappropriation took an expansionist turn as it applied the term to social justice issues outside the black community, such as LGBTQ+ rights, class issues, and feminism more broadly. “In their blog post for Oxford Dictionaries, giving an example of MTV’s 2016 list of new words: [MTV] defines it simply as to be in the know especially regarding current events and cultural issues. In MTV’s conceptualization, woke simply means awareness, without any connection to black oppression or the consciousness it had when it came back into wider use in 2013. Thus, woke was racially sanitized for a wider audience (Allen 2023, 6).

However, this not only expanded the range of appropriate cases for the use of the term, but also expanded the meaning of the term to the cultural practice of judging people for lacking the right views or beliefs regarding issues of social justice. The first people to start using the term were white progressives and what they sort of used to mean it. So, in the expansion phase, progressives misappropriated the word woke and expanded it to social justice issues in general, and began the process of entrenching normative practices associated with woke, complete with social censure for being out of date about related practices and terminology.

This first phase of expansion helped lay the groundwork for the cartoon phase, ushering in the idea of the term wokeness as applied to social justice issues in general, and initiating the normative practices associated with this expanded awakening. Pundits both on Twitter itself and in mainstream news outlets have jumped at the opportunity to criticize strawmen versions of the terms woke and woke culture based on this extension:

The real goal of wokeness is to divide the world into hyper-socially conscious, self-appointed guardians of language and behavior, and the rest of humanity. Similar views proliferated in subsequent years from both the left and the right, progressives and reactionaries, so that the term woke took on a caricatured meaning. People on the left caricatured woke as condemning people who were seen as performative in their social justice values, while people on the right caricatured it as condemning people who overused or exploited political correctness for their own gain (Allen 2023, 10).

Next comes a phase of silence in which the original meaning of the phrase “remain vigilant against racially motivated police violence” has been largely hidden from society at large. Overall, to the point that it has begun to exert external social pressure on the black community to abandon the term, despite the fact that many black Twitter users and activists continue to use the term’s original meaning in all of these phrases. Black Lives Matter and Racial Equality Movement are closest to the original meaning. But supporting a movement that may be external to the community it refers to is clearly not the same as the meaning of the original term, which is as a member of the black community, to remain vigilant to racially motivated police violence and structural racism in the justice system.

Thus, not only the British public, but also pollsters have a vague idea of the meaning of the word woke. There is some evidence that this ongoing misappropriation is beginning to obscure the term even within the black community:

Furthermore, many have noted that it is a common practice for black community terms to be misappropriated and then to be abandoned like this in particular, one of the earliest known printed examples of the word woke comes from William Kelly’s article on white appropriation black slang terms in the 60s. Additionally, I am not suggesting that this distortion of the word woke completely prevents attempts to warn about police violence in the black community or otherwise critique structural racism, but its disruption does provide a clear example of how the terms used by marginalized people are discussed these issues could be seriously undermined (Allen 2023, 10).

The appropriation of the term can be viewed through the concept of “context collapse”, introduced by Alice Marwick and Dana Boyd to describe the removal of social boundaries that occurs when different people enter a place in which multiple social contexts that they usually share collide. Although our focus is on the strong form of context collapse that occurs online, it is easier to understand the phenomenon they describe if first to consider context collapse in the real world: “Boyd argues that social media and Twitter in particular create a version of context collapse that is two degrees stronger. First, Twitter collapses more contexts than any other real-life example of context

collapse. By being structured in such a way that all tweets are public and searchable by anyone, Twitter greatly collapses a large group of people into a single Twitter-based super-context. It is like a wedding to which everyone in the world has been invited. Second, collapsed Twitter context persists longer than real-world examples” (Allen 2023). Thus, Twitter and similar social networking sites represent a hitherto unprecedented context collapse in which users can never be sure how to act on the platform or who their audience is:

In the case of Black Twitter, some people outside of the Black community subscribe to a media ideology of all Twitter users can participate in all Twitter topics. These people then see tweets from, for example, a black activist at a BLM protest using the hashtag #staywoke and assume that this Twitter user shares their media ideology. However, instead, Black Twitter writers have a media ideology that they write for their own community of Black Twitter users. That’s why they used the hashtag to target the group that would interpret the term as a warning. Be careful about racially motivated police violence. However, due to the collapse of the context, the general audience does not realize the discrepancy between their media ideology and the author’s (Allen 2023, 17).

Thus, they feel entitled to use this word without understanding the essential aspects invested by the black community and thus replacing them with their own structurally biased vision. If the phrase had remained in its original context, this would not have happened or at least would not have been so explicit since there would have been no mismatch of media ideologies or collapse of context to fuel the misappropriation. This is why the contextual collapse of social networks is critical to explaining the accelerating growth of this phenomenon. Moreover, as the use of a new meaning continues, the specific instances of injustice that contribute to it become more severe and begin to sever the connection between the concept and the word for all users, not just users misappropriating in the wider community and risk destabilize the concept within the black community itself. Sufficient and sustained appropriation of this kind will eventually lead to a phase of obfuscation in which some members of the black community may have to consider abandoning, replacing, or reclaiming the term.

Cancellation is another example of a context collapse case. The term cancel, like woke, began to be popularized on Black Twitter after its use in the reality show *Love and Hip Hop* in 2014, although, as with the word woke, traditions to which his calls probably go back to the distant past. Cancel culture originated on Black Twitter around 2015 and is designed to call out highly problematic people, products, and companies on the carpet and hold them accountable for their misdeeds. This trend was intended to encourage members of marginalized groups to reconsider their choices and provide financial, digital and moral support for events, celebrities, films, music and trends that do not practice or support equality and inclusion. “Andre Brock concurs, arguing that what separates ‘cancel’ in its original sense from the caricature we later saw is that the original cancel practice was ‘often a critique of systemic inequality rather than an attack against specific, individualistic transgressions’—this critique of the wider structural issues which cause racism were of paramount importance” (Allen 2023, 20). Back then, cancel, like woke, was an important concept for Black Twitter users to conceptualize their world and communicate with each other about structural racism and warnings about which companies and people to avoid because of their complicity in its maintenance. However, as with woke, cancel has received its own online misappropriation by outsiders in the Black Twitter community. This again took the form of a phase of expansion and caricature. The first is the use of “cancel” outside the black community to cancel people on all social justice issues that are not explicitly related to structural racism. This was facilitated by its widespread use on Black Twitter, as well as the discrepancy between users’ media ideologies. This was accompanied by a similar denunciation of cancel culture, which acquired the expression wokeness when its caricatured meaning became most common. Again, this cartoon could draw on examples from the expansion phase, as well as drawing on the incongruent media ideologies and structurally biased hermeneutical resources of the broader community to effectively reinforce the meaning of this cartoon. For example, the word woke filled a gap in describing the necessary heightened awareness that Black people must develop regarding police violence/racial injustice in the justice system, which until it was coined, could not be conceptualized within pre-existing hermeneutical resources of the black community. However, the effect of ongoing context collapse has been to undermine and change the meaning of the word woke to the extent that it has caused some black activists to resist using the word and may mean that many members of the black community (especially younger generations) do

not come to learn its meaning or study an obscure version of it. The result, then, is the reintroduction of the conceptual gap that the term woke was created to fill.

The definition, explored by Rima Basu and J. Spencer Atkins among the others, suggests that being woke is a kind of epistemic normative tool that allows one to monitor and avoid moral errors in belief formation. Basu views awakening as an ecological awareness of moral demands against the backdrop of one's circumstances. Atkins, meanwhile, views wokeness as a kind of epistemic virtue, the cultivation of which promotes awareness of when it is appropriate to consider alternative explanations for topics that may arise from stereotypes about marginalized people. Both rely on extending the scope of epistemic justification to the moral realm through the controversial idea of "moral encroachment." There is no single agreed upon doctrine of moral encroachment, but roughly speaking, it is the idea that certain moral factors somehow influence epistemic justification. According to both authors, being aware of these moral factors and adjusting one's standards accordingly is what it means to use being woke in an epistemic context. In later work, Atkins developed an alternative definition of woke as a kind of group bias in forming beliefs about marginalized group members. "Atkins builds his second definition on the foundation of Sarah Stroud's epistemic partiality account concerning friendship. He also employs Goldberg's names for the features Stroud discusses. Roughly speaking, Stroud argues that when considering an accusation about a friend, we owe them additional partiality in the form of due diligence before" (Allen 2023, 25).

Atkins argues that wokeness can be understood as a form of epistemic partiality in a similar way, only towards members of marginalized social groups rather than towards friends. He argues that this bias uses all four characteristics that Stroud proposes for friendship in society in addition to two new functions. The first of these additional epistemic mechanisms is Extent of Inquiry: a woke person is not only more likely to scrutinize beliefs about a member of a marginalized social group, but will also spend more time looking for counter-evidence or otherwise assessing the extent to which racist structures determine the perceived validity of a belief. The second new mechanism is Ignore Base Rate. Base rates represent the percentage of a given item in the local population:

For example, if the base percentage of people working in an office who are managers is 10%, then in an office of 100 people we would expect about 10 to be managers. But remember the Social Club example, these base rates also risk perpetuating stereotypes due to historical oppression that has led to base rates being hidden when viewed in the abstract. Consequently, the Woke person in Atkins' new account is suspicious of justification based on base rates that affect marginalized people. Despite the differences in Definitions 1 and 2, the result when Atkins applies this new definition to the social club example is roughly the same. Relying specifically on the mechanisms of basic rate of disdain and degree of inquiry, the agent of woke-as epistemic bias will also require a higher degree of evidence/certainty to justify “whether a belief promotes pervasive racism or whether a belief recognizes individuality [not a stereotype]” (Allen 2023, 26).

Both Basu and Atkins considered wokeness as awareness of social injustice in general. Both Basu and Atkins discuss wokeness as an awareness of social injustice in general, as well as some epistemic feature (moral claim/virtue/epistemic mechanism) that helps avoid ethical and epistemic pitfalls. social injustice. Focusing on social censure for being woke, these accounts frame it as a demand/virtue/epistemology mechanism that primarily exists for non-marginalized agents exploring marginalized spaces or situations to avoid the pitfalls (moral or epistemic) of casual racism/sexism/classism etc. Atkins gives the example of a woke cop who is aware of the possibility that a young black man wearing a hoodie simply likes his hoodie and does not signal gang membership. It should be clear that the original meaning of the word woke could not even logically be used in this way, as it was so tied to awareness of police violence against black people that the idea of a woke cop is an oxymoron. Note that such a sentence could only make sense because of how the misattributed extended meaning gave rise to the social censure function of wokeness on which Atkins and Basu based their explanations. However, the fact that the use and users of this term were wrested by their reports from the black community into the hands not only of outside privileged investigative agents, but even of the police themselves, should be more than enough to show that they represent a clear a case of misappropriation of the extension (and perhaps even caricature in the case of the police).

According to Charles Mills, epistemologies of ignorance in matters related to race are so entrenched that any conceptual resources that work to reveal ways of not knowing, of not seeing the world, are a threat to psychological and social comfort, a threat to humanity. “First, people who are oppressed in current social systems develop conceptual tools to understand their experiences, often filling hermeneutical gaps within their communities” (Davidson 2023, 5). The development of this epistemic resource can be the completion of the process. But secondly, perhaps the term has been picked up by others and knowledge is produced and disseminated through different lines. This allows for a growing understanding between people who perceive the systems of which they are part differently due to their identities. Third, if the term is adopted by those who have more power in current systems of social relations, the concept and its use are likely to change as a result of this adoption. This is sometimes reflected in the concept of co-optation. “Changing the way a concept is used usually occurs by watering down the concept to make it less threatening and more acceptable. When the role of participation of marginalized participants in the process of knowledge production is obscured (epistemic disengagement), the social, political and cultural context that shaped the meaning of the word is obscured. Fourth, the changed or shifted concept is then taken up by the opposition - those who wish to preserve the current power structures. The term, although misused and abused, is now used as an insult” (Davidson 2023, 5). There has been a marked change in the social use of the term and the meaning that is implied or inferred from its use in different contexts. For example, if we take “intersectionality” to mean only that people have multiple identities, rather than as a way to define that the intersections of two oppressed identities work together to create complex experiences that cannot be reduced or explained by the experiences of either oppressed identity.

In J. Spencer Atkins’s (2023) article “Defining Wokeness”, published in the journal *Social Epistemology*, the author offers an account of wokeness as an antiracist epistemological concept that can be consistent with standard views of epistemic justification. The “standard view” goes something like this: our beliefs are justified insofar as we believe according to the evidence. The popularity of the standard view, as opposed to views such as moral encroachment (the view that moral claims can influence what we can justifiably believe), encourages Atkins to provide an account of awakening consistent with the standard view. “In contrast, for example, Basu (2019) provides a

succinct description of what it means to be woke using the concept of moral encroachment: To be woke is to be aware of the moral demands of one's surroundings. As far as our epistemic practices are concerned, this is a requirement to be aware of the moral value of our beliefs about each other" (Davidson 2023, 8). The standard analysis of Atkins' views on wokeness begins with Stroud's 2006 work on partiality in friendship and then argues for a partiality-based analysis of what it means to be woke. The author argues that people with woke attitude, through a number of mechanisms, are partial to members of oppressed groups, giving them the presumption of innocence. Just as one might, for example, seriously examine accusations against our friends, a woke person seriously examines accusations against members of historically oppressed social groups: "Atkins focuses on base-rate neglect throughout the article in relation to Gendler's (2011) article, which argues that we cannot be both rational and satisfy our moral demands in an unjust world because our moral demands require us to neglect base-rate rate. Base rates refer to the percentage of the population with a particular characteristic" (Davidson 2023, 13).

Gendler (2011) uses this concept to argue that in a world of social inequality and a cognitive system prone to racial bias, our commitment to racial egalitarianism means that we must disregard basic norms and thus be irrational. Atkins uses this concept to argue that a woke person will not form beliefs about people based on baseline indicators. In particular, Atkins argues that base rates are like stereotypes and that using base rate information to make a statement about a person counts as stereotyping that person. While the author does structure the published version of the article by pejoratively describing progressive politics as woke, broader language and connections to specific epistemic practices are missing throughout the article. This concern is particularly evident in the very rapid examination of concerns about the appropriation of black English. When it comes to concepts developed by historically oppressed groups to understand their own experiences, social and cultural context will always matter in how these terms are used and even what they mean in a given context. Additionally, the newspaper's positioning as an anti-right media outlet may seem to indicate that new information or understanding is emerging about what needs to be done when the name "woke" is used as an insult.

The woke or wokeism movement is often associated with left-wing political views due to its emphasis on social justice, inclusion, and progressive values. This is consistent with many of the principles that leftist ideologies prioritize, such as advocating for

marginalized communities, challenging systemic inequalities, and promoting social change. Both directions do have intersections. First, the idea of social justice, for both tracks there is a strong focus on social justice issues, including racial inequality, gender discrimination, LGBTQ+ rights and economic inequality. Both the left and the woke movement prioritize LGBTQ+ rights and work to create inclusive environments that respect diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. Related to social justice, of course, is the idea of inclusion and diversity. Thus, “wokeism” strives for greater representation and inclusivity in all aspects of society, consistent with the left’s desire for diversity and equal opportunity for historically marginalized groups. Second, both movements recognize the concept of intersectionality, which suggests that different forms of oppression (such as racism, sexism, and classism) intersect and reinforce each other, affecting people in complex ways. Third, a critique of power structures, in which both always challenge systemic inequality, often focusing on dismantling oppressive institutions. From this, activism and grassroots movements are formed: both the left and wokeism encourage grassroots activism, whether through protests, information campaigns or community organizing, to stimulate social and political change. And finally, environmental justice. The intersection of environmental justice and social justice, which is a focus of some groups on the left, is also recognized by the Woke movement as it addresses how environmental issues disproportionately impact marginalized communities.

One of the directions, most often the right conservative wing of political forces, considers the awakening as part of leftist ideology and refers to the foundations of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, which was formed in the 20th century. The key message of such political discussions is that this school of philosophy focused on social justice and the need to level the hierarchy of power and gained its popularity in the 1990s in the USA and Western Europe, first in the university environment, and later left universities and moved to the media information and corporate culture, becoming a new foundation for moral culture. Michael D. Rectenwald, an American author, former professor at New York University, and a critic of the modern social justice movement, reflects on the theme of awakening, like many right-wing politicians, believes that the ideas of social justice are direct ideological descendants of the Frankfurt School and are built on two key principles - institutional racism and white privilege that is reinforced by white guilt. The second strand of their criticism of the woke is that the leftist movements,

to which they include the awakening, are waging a culture war on the cultural and historical heritage, the so-called deconstruction of the American South, by tearing down and desecrating monuments to historical figures who fought for the Confederacy and describe US history as a form of self-justification that needs to be deconstructed. A similar view is categorized by the more radical views of right-wing movements and their rebuke of the woke movement that those who are being woke make Americans hate cultural identity:

The goal of this new cultural crusade is to free the country and its citizens from fundamental sins. The goal is to destabilize the concept of human existence, to fragment and eradicate hierarchy, history, meaning and fundamental human identity: a person must be nothing in order to be something. Human relationships turn from a source of connection into a cause of confrontation; groups of people are reductively and discriminatorily simplified into certain into certain categories – oppressors or oppressed – while ignoring others (Sobande 2022, 5).

Adjacent to the right-wing movement are political-religious movements, which also believe that the awakening movement leads not to evolution, but to revolution, the result of which will be a broken, fragmented society, where a radical deconstruction of man is carried out, applicable only to certain categories of oppression, turns man into a collection of social identity. Sociologists Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning highlight how today's society suffers from a culture of victimhood. They see it as a transition period between a culture of honor, with which they share an aggressive response to insults to reputation, and a culture of dignity, from which they take recourse to legal authorities to resolve conflicts. Victimhood is established as a kind of moral status that increases depending on the degree of suffering and injury suffered by the oppressed. And if sacrifice is a virtue, then privilege is a vice. Those who are offended develop hypersensitivity to slights and an inability to resist or interpret the other in a benevolent manner. They seek social control by publicly condemning macroaggressions, brief and trivial daily verbal, behavioral and environmental insults, intentional or unintentional, that express hostility, humiliation or negative racial, gender and sexual orientation, as well as religious slights and insults. For the perpetrator, who may also identify as a victim, micro-aggressions can

be invisible. For those who suffer from them, micro-aggressions pose a threat to their safety because they reinforce the dominance of some people and groups over others. When everything is fine, everything can be offensive. Thus, the appeal of this competitive victimization is revealed: higher moral status is achieved by combining multiple identities of victims and falsifying charges without any risk, and also, according to representatives of the right wing or religious right groups, the awakening movement moves from justice to vengeance and further to the abolition of power. To sever all ties to power, which is defined as existing around an irreconcilable axis of oppression, the hanging movement proposes to rewrite history. The first step in this reprogramming is the destruction of memory: the demolition of statues and monuments, the banning of books and films, etc., which is already expressed in the growing popularity of cancel culture.

Therefore, criticism of the woke movement on the right often revolves around a few key points. First, identity politics, emphasizing group identities such as race, gender and sexual orientation, which they believe can lead to division and resentment rather than promoting unity and understanding. Second, cancel culture, where individuals or institutions are ostracized or boycotted for expressing views that are considered offensive or insensitive by the standards of the woke movement. Critics say it suppresses free speech and creates a chilling effect on public discourse. Third, social justice activism, which often goes too far, leading to over-categorization and even extremism in the struggle for social change, for example, the dismantling of traditional social and power structures and institutions. Fourth, victim culture, in which people in the revival movement are encouraged to view themselves primarily as victims of oppression rather than as agents of change or self-learning, is therefore dangerous and can lead to a sense of entitlement and dependence rather than stability and self-confidence. Negative connotations associated with the term woke often arise from criticism that it is used to describe people who prioritize political correctness or virtue over meaningful action or understanding of social issues, viewing “woke” as a manifestation of being overly sensitive or overzealous in identifying perceived injustices, sometimes to the point of intolerance of dissenting views or lack of nuance in understanding complex issues. Finally, right-wing wokeness leads to the erosion of free speech, suppressing and promoting a climate of fear where people are hesitant to express dissent for fear of being

ostracized or labeled as bigots. This can have a chilling effect on open discourse and intellectual diversity, ultimately limiting thinking.

The overzealousness and intolerance of woke culture, they argue, often exhibits a form of moral absolutism, where certain viewpoints are considered inherently right or wrong based on ideological criteria. This can lead to intolerance of dissent and a reluctance to engage in constructive dialogue or compromise. There is a perception that those who do not adhere to the prevailing orthodoxy of woke culture are demonized or marginalized. Political-religious groups are concerned that awakening culture is leading to the erosion of traditional values and institutions such as family, religious beliefs and national identity, promoting radical social change at the expense of stability and continuity, leading to social fragmentation:

At the same time, however, woke and wokeness was also weaponized by the right, deturning it from its initial meaning in the struggle for civil rights into an insult used against anyone who fights fascism, racism and other forms of injustices and discrimination as well as to signify a supposed progressive over-reaction. It became, in other words, a convenient shorthand to negate the ‘negative ideologization’ of the extreme right. Anti-woke discourse became an integral part of what in political discourse analysis is called ‘semantic and ideological polarization’ (Cammaerts B., 2002, 730).

Despite quite sharp criticism from the right, also political left movements find room to criticize the awakening, viewing it as part of neoliberalism, which emphasizes individual responsibility and freedom of choice. In this context, wokeness is sometimes interpreted as an individualistic desire for social awareness and activism. This focus on individual action and awareness can distract from the systemic analysis and collective action that is often needed to address the root causes of social injustice. Secondly, left-wing movements are concerned about the ongoing marketization of social justice, that is, within consumer culture, social justice principles are commodified, which is reflected in how companies can engage in woke-washing, using progressive rhetoric or imagery to promote their products and improve their brand image without making significant

changes to address social issues. This could lead to the co-optation and erosion of activist movements for commercial gain. Also, neoliberal ideology promotes the idea of meritocracy, where success is supposedly determined by individual talent and effort, from this perspective wokeness can be seen as a form of cultural capital - a marker of social status and moral superiority achieved through education, awareness and consumption of socially conscious media or products. It can reinforce inequality by suggesting that those who are not woke are somehow morally inferior or less worthy. It is important to note that neoliberalism has been criticized for its role in distracting attention from structural inequalities and systemic injustices.

The emphasis on individual action and choice can serve to obscure larger economic and political forces that perpetuate oppression. In this context, the emphasis on personal identity and awareness associated with wokeness can sometimes distract from the need for broader structural change. Neoliberalism tends to promote competition and individualism rather than collective action and solidarity. The emphasis on personal identity and self-expression within woke culture can sometimes lead to the fragmentation of social justice movements as different groups prioritize their own specific issues and identities. This fragmentation can weaken collective efforts to address systemic problems and challenge established power structures. To summarize, while wokeness may involve genuine efforts to promote social justice and awareness, it can also be co-opted and commodified within neoliberalism, leading to individualistic, market-driven approaches that may ultimately undermine efforts to achieve meaningful social change.

Certainly, the debate around “woke” culture is truly heated and multifaceted. On the one hand, proponents argue that it has played a critical role in raising awareness of social justice issues such as systemic racism, gender inequality, LGBTQ+ rights and other forms of oppression. They see it as a necessary step towards addressing historical injustices and promoting inclusivity and equality in society. However, critics argue that “woke” culture has indeed gone too far in some respects. They often point to instances of what they see as overzealousness, intolerance and censorship within the movement. Concerns are commonly raised about “cancel culture,” where people are shamed or ostracized for expressing dissent and the control of language and ideas. Ultimately, the debate around “woke” culture reflects deeper social tensions around issues of social justice, free speech, and the balance between promoting inclusivity and respecting

individual rights and freedoms. Finding common ground and constructive dialogue among these polarized viewpoints remains a major challenge:

Therefore, the very concept of truth is relative and depends only on who and for what purposes of domination this truth is formulated. That is, the truth primarily depends on whether we listen to the oppressor or the oppressed. It is this knowledge that is protest and serves as the basis for the deconstruction of texts, concepts and meanings. But the only thing that cannot be deconstructed is the experience of people who have lived through the experience of oppression. Why? After all, the narrative of a victim of oppression cannot in any way help establish an even greater system of oppression, so such a narrative is outside the system. Thus, in just a couple of decades, the new Marxists went from rejecting the concept of objective reality to the existence of multiple realities, and then to denying representatives of oppressor communities the right to their own reality. That is, from now on, the vision of the world by a black lesbian transgender with a disability is declared the only true one, but the picture of the world from a white man of traditional sexual orientation—or rather, a representative of the phallogentric cisgender-normative patriarchy—does not deserve any trust and has no right to exist at all, because that all this is a narrative of representatives of the oppressors in order to brainwash everyone (Braunstein 2022, 20).

The name wokeism comes from the African American word for “woke” and refers to awareness of social justice issues and the numerous Puritan Protestant revivals that occurred in the United States after independence in 1776. It is for this reason that the French Philosopher J. F. Braunstein, in his seminal book on the subject, calls wokeism is a religion, a view shared by linguist John McWhorter. The movement took root in American academia. It was quickly imported into Europe and is now widespread in Western culture. Universities in the West have traditionally been, at best—in their early days—fanatics of established religions, rather than creators of new beliefs. From biology, accusations of virilism and racism spread to other disciplines, including mathematics, gradually covering all hard sciences. The woke movement’s hostility to the hard sciences is built into its creed. In particular, he is categorically against the recognition of objective reality and the existence of the principle of universality. In short, this movement is

completely antithetical to the Enlightenment. History offers a stunning surprise here: who would have thought a few years ago that opposition to the emancipation of science from religion was possible? However, this is exactly what is happening: Wokeism's antagonism to science is the exact opposite of the paradigm shift of knowledge that occurred in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, during the times of Copernicus, Kepler, Tycho Brahe and Galileo.

Woke ideology took on religious characteristics, Braunstein argues in his book. According to him, it fills a perceived void of ultimate truth in today's post-religious society. The influence of woke ideology seems to have reached all levels of society. Braunstein cites examples of Disney inviting its white employees to reflect on their privilege, political activists shaping the academic climate at universities and targeting old-school professors, and the growing number of anti-racism courses.

According to Brownstein "in the name of fighting discrimination, a new intellectual terrorism is taking place in Western societies". Brownstein warns that this movement overthrows all conventional thinking and its goal is to deconstruct the cultural and scientific heritage of the West, accused of systemic sexism, racism and colonialism. The woke movement began in American universities, but is now rapidly sweeping Western societies. Brownstein notes that its rise is similar to that of Protestant revivalists in the 18th and 19th centuries. According to the philosopher, "for the first time in modern history, a kind of cult is born in universities with its own vision of the world, its own dogmas, its own followers, its own rights and its own quasi-sacred texts. Although wokists claim to have invented a new theory, they do not act as if they are working for a better world, Brownstein says. Their religion is a religion of purification and magical thinking, where there is no forgiveness" (Braunstein 2022, 23). According to Braunstein, the same elements are observed in wokeism: "I can feel like a man or a woman, but also an animal, a river. However, only in the world of the metaverse can you change your body at will. In fact, it will lead to a catastrophe with irreversible damage" (CNE.news 2022).

The reason why wokeism was called a new religion is secularism, for all its cultural dominance, has failed to offer a sound philosophy of meaning and purpose, nor has it provided any moral framework for how to act in the world other than be a good person because the alternative is undesirable for everyone. Wokeism, on the other hand,

has developed its own view of reality with its own set of values and narratives. From the ashes of secular humanism rises a new civil religion:

Wokeism offers everything that secularism could not provide and has quickly filled the God-shaped hole in our culture. He implies his version of truth, justice, righteousness, sin and judgment. It gives meaning to its adherents through its metanarrative of social conflict, power struggles, and the struggle for redemptive freedom. Dismantling these oppressive power structures helps give purpose to the individual and the collective. These values are reinforced in public rituals such as teaching sensitivity or confronting white fragility (Funk 2020, 10).

There is a strong community aspect and people feel part of something bigger than themselves. Also inherent in this social progress is a hypothetical future utopian society freed from the evils of the current repressive system:

Above all, however, wokeism offers what every sinful human heart deeply yearns for, namely, moral justification. People believe that they act fairly in this world, and by being fair, sometimes they do. But often everything they do is just posturing or, worse, destructive. The ideas of sin (privilege), righteousness (sacrifice), and damnation (cancellation) are firmly ingrained in wokeism. Although it provides rituals of repentance (“check your privilege” and “allyship”) and piety (kneeling during the anthem or hanging black squares), it never offers forgiveness (Krylova 2023, 5).

It is important to note that while there is overlap between the Woke movement and left-wing ideologies on many issues, not everyone on the political left fully accepts or agrees with all aspects of wokeism. There can be debate and disagreement within any ideological spectrum. Moreover, the term wokeism is sometimes used pejoratively to criticize the movement’s perceived excesses or perceived shortcomings. Despite many similarities, the term wokeism or woke does not strictly refer to any specific political movement. Entering public discourse through African American vernacular English, the

term became a way to describe heightened awareness of social and political issues, especially those related to racial inequality and social justice. Over time, it has evolved and been adopted by various social and political groups, and its use can vary widely.

Language is complex and dynamic, and terms such as wokeism can have different meanings and connotations depending on the context and individual interpretations. As a result, discussions about the term often involve a range of perspectives and nuances. Exposing wokeism usually refers to criticism or discussion of aspects of the woke or woke's movement, often focusing on its perceived excesses, inconsistencies, or potential negative consequences. It is important to approach such discussions with an understanding of the complexity and diversity of perspectives on the topic. Key common aspects that critics of wokeism may target are an overemphasis on identity, cancel culture where people are boycotted or criticized for opinions or actions that are considered offensive, which some see as stifling open dialogue and debate. Also, some critics worry that the push for inclusivity and avoidance of offense could infringe on free speech and discourage open discussion of different viewpoints. Among other things, there is a fear that an emphasis on cultural sensitivity may lead to avoidance of intercultural interactions, inhibiting understanding and appreciation. At the same time, it is difficult to rule out that we are seeing a simplification of complex problems, potentially losing sight of deeper causes and solutions. All of this can lead to division and polarization of society, framing issues in a binary manner of "us versus them." It is important to approach discussions of wokeism with the understanding that points of view may vary widely, and any criticism must be based on well-informed and detailed analysis. Like any cultural movement, wokeism has its complexities, supporters and critics, and an in-depth study of its various aspects is necessary for a comprehensive understanding.

Opponents of social movements have begun to derisively use the term woke, suggesting that it is a disingenuous form of activism. Many critics now associate the word with what they consider political correctness, cancel culture and left-wing bias. The term woke is often used in a pejorative or disparaging sense by those critical of social justice movements. "Woke" is not a fixed or static concept, but one that is constantly evolving and adapting to new cultural and political contexts. This is why it is important to engage in ongoing dialogue and reflection about what it means to be "woke" and how to create positive change in the world. Perhaps it was this context black people's awareness of their

history and their ability to resist injustice that made the awakening so ripe for the disastrous mutation it has now undergone. Indeed, the violent transformation of vernacular language reflects the way countless other black ideas and intellectual contributions have been denigrated. In many ways the message was distorted and «black lives matter» became “anti-white sentiment” which was banned in school and gave birth to “all lives matter”. And just as Black Lives Matter became known to the world through the power of Twitter, social media has facilitated the rapid spread of woke and other Black cultural creations beyond the communities in which they were formed. But who’s to blame for the particularly feverish escalation around the word woke that peaked with the 2020 reckoning on racial justice, which at the time sparked a wave of interest among Americans eager to learn more about systemic racism.

For some, wokeness is now a derisive stand-in for diversity, inclusion, empathy and, yes, Blackness. Not long ago, the W.O.K.E. law proposed by name DeSantis received publicity and wide discussions: “According to it, teachers and educational institutions in Florida are already limited or limited by fear in freely teaching students about many of the events and people that make up the history of this country. Indeed, under this law, even the stories of American icons such as Martin Luther King Jr. are allegedly banned from some Florida classrooms” (Guy 2023, 5).

Since its emergence in black grassroots activist spaces and increased political consciousness, the term woke has changed its meaning. It is now widely synonymous with statements on social media that are supposed to indicate investment in solving social problems. Injustice, particularly anti-Blackness and racial injustice, have also become the subject of heated criticism. Using key case studies such as the “I Take responsibility” and Instagram eclipse campaigns of 2020, this commentary elucidates how cultural traditions and the affordances of both social media and celebrity have shaped conceptualizations of wokeness.

By analyzing the arguments against BLM and other so-called «woke» movements are movements for social, racial and gender justice that use the same conceptual language, one can try to find a subtle but not immediately noticeable connection between the far right, on the one hand, and liberals and leftists, on the other hand. The terms woke and wokeism originated from a specific historical event and were

used by Black Lives Matter to refer to systemic racism. However, it has become common to refer to activism on US college campuses as wokeism, thereby appropriating the term to describe protest efforts by students to silence conservative/right-wing speakers (Kocze 2022,3).

However, being conservative or right-wing in an academic context does not necessarily mean that one should be silenced. The concept of woke/wokeism reached Europe, especially the United Kingdom, where it was used by conservative parties, right-wing media and even the general public. The words woke and wokeism are used by conservative illiberal and far-right leaders and pundits to portray the threat to the existing European cultural and social order posed by the ideologically infused religious establishment. Such leaders push the buttons of liberals and leftists by claiming to support dangerous identity politics, they also condemn those who defend human rights as those who are subject to fashionable whims. These conservative discourses share common themes, namely attacks and ridicule of individuals, groups, institutions, and case studies that criticize gender and racial discrimination and structural oppression.

In this way, they trap liberals and the left into delegitimizing and not acknowledging the claims of human rights activists regarding historical and structural injustice. The trapped liberals and leftists either remain silent and indifferent, or use the same subtle language, albeit with different emphases, against those called woke groups, institutions and research within the conceptual framework of illiberalism. However, constructive criticism of and dissatisfaction with liberalism expressed by racial and gender minorities is neither illiberalism nor illiberalism. Likewise, constructive criticism of certain trends in social justice activism is not anti-social justice or anti-social justice; rather, it is a long-standing unresolved and hostile dialogue—or, more typically, nothing more than a solitary monologue. Moreover, grievances with the left expressed through identity politics tend to mask classist, exploitative, and oppressive practices. Examining the language of anti-woke discourse helps reveal the subtle connection between the far right and trapped liberals and the left, which creates a dual attack on social justice that is being used by conservative illiberal and far right leaders. “Bart Cammaerts in his recent article offers an instructive theoretical framework for deconstructing the anti-woke culture war and understanding its logic and long-term impact” (Kocze 2022, 4). According to Cammaerts, the far right cleverly used and benefited from Gramsci’s left-

wing conceptual framework, which they embedded in Schmittian polarization and the distinction between friend and foe. Following this idea, paradoxically, far-right movements have adopted Gramsci's left-wing conceptualization and repackaged fascist ideas as normal and acceptable under neoliberal capitalism. Cammaerts argues that Gramsci's revolutionary ideas are being popularized at the current historical stage not by the left, but by the extreme right, which has achieved a new illiberal authoritarian order.

African-American history is American history. However, the United States has spent decades trying to transform and change the truth about the history of African-Americans in the education system, starting with public schools. And, unfortunately, in schools, children still do not receive the kind of education that objectively tells about slavery and the history of African Americans in general. In 2021, 47 bills were introduced in 23 different state legislatures aimed at limiting the teaching of topics related to race and slavery. The most recent addition to this list of laws is the Stop W.O.K.E Act (Stop the W.O.K.E Act), signed into law by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis on April 22, 2022:

For those of us who work to raise white racial consciousness, simply getting whites to recognize that our race gives us an advantage is a serious effort. Defensiveness, denial and resistance run deep.” It is obvious that there are those in power who want to silence and suppress any conversation or education on issues of social justice and diversity. This is a transparent attempt to protect white fragility and maintain the status quo of systemic oppression (Guy 2023).

Thus, the struggle for resistance can sometimes be categorical in nature, but it does not blindly exclude the need for a deeper and more objective study of history and its interpretation in today's time accepting the belief is justified especially in cases where the belief is negative. This partiality is borne out in four features:

European man, once the hero of the conquest of America, now becomes its demon; and victims who cannot be brought back to life are canonized. On both sides of the border between Europe and the local historians, tar brush and gold leaf are at the ready, and instead of the vicious old stereotypes, we have a whole

new set of equally misleading stereotypes. Our predecessors made a hero, almost a saint, out of Christopher Columbus. He has monuments from Barcelona to the Antilles (which he discovered, although it is unknown which island he landed on) and throughout the North (Hughes 1993, p. 116).

Indeed, slavery was at the core of the classical world. Most of their slaves were white Caucasians, and in ancient times slavery had nothing to do with skin color. The word “slave” meant a person of Slavic origin. In the 13th century it spread to other Caucasian peoples enslaved by armies from Central Asia: Russians, Georgians, Circassians, Albanians, Armenians, all of whom found ready buyers from Venice to Sicily, Barcelona and throughout the Muslim world:

But the African slave trade as such, the black trade, was a Muslim invention, developed by Arab traders with the active cooperation of black Africans, institutionalized with the most unrelenting cruelty several centuries before the advent of the white man on the African continent, and continues to this day. long after the slave market in North America was finally crushed. Historically, this traffic between the Mediterranean and sub-Saharan Africa begins with the very civilization that Afrocentrists are so keen to call black ancient Egypt (Hughes 1993, p. 142).

It is clear that in the end only Europe, as well as North America, were able to think about the abolition of slavery, “only the enormous moral and intellectual force of the Enlightenment, directed against the terrible oppression that slavery represented, was able to put an uneven and difficult end of trade. It seems surprising to me that we now have so-called historians who are ready to hush up this fact” (Hughes 1993, p.146).

Due to exploring the origins and development of the term woke, it can be seen how there are many conflicting accounts not only of its origins, but also of its interpretation, as well as the manipulation of the term by different groups. Next, it will be important to assess how woke culture has been developed in modern communication –

digital storytelling, cinematography, as well as how the woke culture has been marketed in the world of brands and their communication with consumers.

The evolution of the term woke culture is undeniably a significant topic in contemporary discourse, reflecting broader societal shifts, ideological tensions, and the complexities of identity politics. Understanding its changing meanings and implications is crucial for navigating the complexities of modern social movements, activism, and cultural dynamics. Woke culture emerged from African American Vernacular English to describe heightened awareness of social and political issues, particularly those related to racism and social injustice. Over time, it has expanded beyond its original context, becoming a catch-all term for progressive values, activism, and cultural consciousness. One of the key aspects of the term's evolution is its intersection with digital culture and social media. Platforms like Twitter and Instagram have played a significant role in popularizing and disseminating woke discourse, enabling conversations about social justice to reach broader audiences. However, this digital landscape also fosters polarization, echo chambers, and performative activism, shaping the way “woke culture” is perceived and practiced. Furthermore, the term has become a focal point for debates about political correctness, free speech, and the boundaries of acceptable discourse.

CHAPTER 2.

COMMUNICATION AND “WOKE” CULTURE

2.1. “Woke Culture” in Social Media Storytelling

In today’s world, social media has become an integral part of all online communications, with the advent of social media platforms, virtual interaction has become possible on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat, WhatsApp, etc. Although there are problems with the decline qualities of real interaction, social networks not only entertain, but promote friendship and help build relationships. Using more social media platforms helps create more connections and more information, and storytelling could be very useful in this sense.² On the one hand, such connections contribute to the accumulation and formation of communities, on the other hand, they can influence emotions, strengthening them, even causing emotional shocks:

Storytelling is one of the oldest ways of communication and an ancient art since humans are natural storytellers. The ability of brands to communicate in new and innovative ways has been made possible by the power of digital technology and social media. In modern marketing, less emphasis is placed on the goods and services that are produced and provided, and more on the experiences that are generated by brands to provide consumers with a variety of stories to share. Storytelling’s persuading potential has attracted marketing academics

² There are not so many authors who investigate this subject fundamentally, most of all try to understand the phenomenon of woke and its impact to storytelling throw the publications and essay, for example Seema Gupta in the article «Brand Storytelling in Digital Media: An Emerging Perspective» (2022), Francesca Sobande, Akane Kanai and Natasha Zeng in their publication “The Hypervisibility and Discourses of «Wokeness» in Digital Culture” (2022) and others. On “wokeness” and digital culture, see “The Hypervisibility and Discourses of «Wokeness» in Digital Culture”, D. Guna Graciya and Deepa Viswam “Social Media and Emotional Well-being: Pursuit of Happiness or Pleasure” (2021), on “cancel culture” see “You are Cancelled: Virtual Collective Consciousness and the Emergence of Cancel Culture as Ideological Purging” by Joseph Ching Velasco (2020), “Cancel Culture on Twitter: The Effects of Information Source and Messaging on Post Shareability and Perceptions of Corporate Greenwashing” by Brandon Nguyen (2020), Maxin Sydney Waani, J. A. Wempi “Cancel Culture as a New Social Movement” (2021).

encompassing marketing strategy and tactics, brand philosophy, consumer psychology, and behavior (Garmston, 2019; McKee and Gerace 2018, 20).

Storytelling involves brand promotion, product placement, and customer-brand relationships. Digital storytelling is prevalent in every business, from computer games to animated cartoons: “Smartphones and platforms like YouTube have exploded professional digital storytelling... digital storytelling refers to the use of digital media to produce and disseminate stories” (Gupta, 2022, 183)

Digital storytelling is one of the most powerful tools in the content marketing arsenal of both individual companies and socio-political groups or activists.

Social media activism is becoming increasingly visible, with people sharing content online advocating for various social issues and marginalized groups. This form of activism can lead to blurring the lines between effective allyship and posting messages with other motives. Some people may feel the need to become active on social media to avoid social exclusion. Consequently, this may motivate them to engage in performative activism. People engage in performative activism, speaking out solely for the purpose of maintaining a social image rather than providing meaningful and progressive support for a social cause” (Abdalla, D’Souza 2022, 2).

Some scientists conceptualize social media activism as a fundamentally communicative process that involves people’s communicative actions to collectively solve problems: “Social media storytelling refers to the exchange of knowledge and meaning via digital resources” (Canella 2017, 4). Brands and consumers use social media storytelling to share experiences in meaningful ways: “Social media platforms provide storytellers with tools to communicate ordinary life to a large audience. As a source of engagement, social media has changed conventional marketing communication methods” (Valos 2016, 3). Besides, “social media has changed the way followers interact and communicate on online platforms from passive to active message senders of brands” (Gupta 2022, 185).

Social media provides people with the opportunity to share their opinions and stories and organize collective action. It has a ripple effect that can influence various components of social movements, from resource mobilization to actual interventions:

“Social media platforms such as Twitter not only serve as a form of communication, but are also considered dominant organizational mechanisms that form the basis of social movement structure. Ultimately, social media acts as a tool to facilitate the rapid development of social movements that move from online to offline from time to time” (Abdalla, D’Souza 2022, 3). Participation in online activism may encourage people to also participate in offline activism, as small online actions may make it easier for them to participate in larger offline actions. Also, activism on social networks can lead to the emergence of a social identity among people, formed on the basis of similar interests, morality, solidarity, common beliefs on a given issue, efficiency and injustice. It is also clear that the opposite effect can occur when offline activism inspires online action. Social networks and platforms can act as a critical tool for gathering new participants in offline protests:

With the advent of mass media in modern society, it has become easier to expand one's influence in society as there is a high demand for social recognition as well as the desire to be part of something bigger than oneself. Additionally, through careful analysis of an individual's perceived group status, Social Identity Theory is able to predict behavior and propensity for social mobility between groups. Essentially, if a person engages in anything even remotely outside the ideals of the in-group, he will be rejected and pushed into the outgroup (Abdalla, D’Souza 2022, 4).

Social media platforms were originally designed to allow people to engage in various forms of online interaction. This technology has firmly penetrated various spheres of society. It has become a powerful force in modern life, paving the way for the rise of digital participatory cultures and social movements. Social media has certainly brought both benefits and harms to modern life, from the convenience of online shopping to the widespread spread of deliberate online misinformation. Social networks have allowed people to constantly be connected, despite distance and other physical limitations. However, this has also led to the emergence of an always-on digital identity and continuous communication:

Virtual engagement of lives has been made possible with the advent of social media. Almost 80% of the day are spent virtually on Facebook, Instagram,

Twitter, YouTube, Snapchat, etc. Usage of social media to connect to and communicate with the ones we care about is always healthy, termed as social networking. Social dysfunction occurs when the constant communication leads to the point where our real or offline life gets replaced by virtual or online life (Graciyal, Viswam, 2021, 99).

With everyone glued to their devices, the line between online and real life is blurring. Thanks to this development, new forms of collective work have emerged at the intersection of society and technology. “Americans are increasingly turning to social media for news and political information and to encourage others to get involved with a cause or movement. Social media also can serve as an important venue where groups with common interests come together to share ideas and information. And at times, Twitter, Facebook and other social media sites can help users bring greater attention to issues through their collective voice” (Anderson 2016, 3). In recent years, these platforms have provided new arenas for national conversations about race and racial inequality. Some researchers and activists credit social media – in particular, Black Twitter – with propelling racially focused issues to greater national attention: “In fact, two of the most used hashtags around social causes in Twitter history focus on race and criminal justice: #Ferguson and #BlackLivesMatter. In addition to social and political issues, social media also serve as places where conversations about race intersect with a number of issues, including pop culture, sports and everyday personal experiences” (Anderson 2016, 4). In recent years, social media have become a common way for political groups and social movements to organize. “On Twitter’s 10-year anniversary, the site published a list of the most used hashtags related to social causes. Two of the top three were directly related to issues of race. According to Twitter, #Ferguson was the most used social-issue hashtag in the 10-year history of the platform, while #BlackLivesMatter was third” (Anderson 2016, 4).

Hashtag activism is a way for individuals to engage in discourse around a particular subject within the space created by social media. Activists define social issues through online discourse. A way activists define social issues through online discourse is through the creation and selection of hashtags, which become a centralizing tool and symbol. By using a shared hashtag, social media creates a space for collective storytelling, especially when users’ stories would be otherwise marginalized or invisible, because of

the nature of online discourse, users also engage in counter-storytelling, in which users respond to the stories dominant to a movement by telling their own dissenting narratives. From 2009, Twitter started hyperlinking and compiling hashtags, making them searchable and increasing their usefulness as identifiers. So, most hashtags were created naturally and the groups began to use hashtags as a tool for promotion their message. Accordingly, since 2014, as the problem of police use of force, especially against black people, has escalated, some activists began promoting hashtags as a tool for identifying their messages and as a way to show solidarity, which eventually became the foundation of the Black Lives Matter movement, whose organizers made using the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter as a key element of its strategy. Thus, the online discussion directly influenced and consolidated the offline movement:

Unlike the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag, the mentions of #AllLivesMatter from July 2013 to March 2016 were nearly evenly split between positive and negative posts. About one-third of #AllLivesMatter tweets were supportive of the general sentiment, but few focused on a larger movement. In contrast to the use of #BlackLivesMatter, posts which used #AllLivesMatter in a positive manner were less likely to connect their posts with a broader social agenda. Only 7% of the tweets using #AllLivesMatter took this position. Notably – and in contrast to the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag – #AllLivesMatter did not have a specific organization backing it or promoting its use in its early stages (Anderson 2016, 5).

Social media has not only become a lens for sharing information, but has also paved the way for the rise of digital participatory culture and social movements. It is obvious that one of the leading movements of being woke is not only began to develop more actively thanks to social networks, but also subsequently used this tool as the main method of declaring and defending its principles, as a method of struggle, which will be discussed further using the example of cancel culture. But first, it seems useful to analyze how awakening can be met on social media. Woke spreads first for its ironic right-wing humor and criticism aimed at the perceived sensibility of left-wing social justice warriors. “Thus, Woke materializes as the latest iteration of the ongoing mockery of the «snowflakes» of millennials and Generation Z culture” (Sobande, Kanai and Zeng 2022, 6). Understanding modern woke territory: Woke like a new snowflake, the term alludes

to whiteness. This designation includes the use of white celebrities becoming involved in the fight against racism through campaigns such as “I Take Responsibility”: “In the ‘I Take Responsibility’ campaign, influencers and celebrities who showed themselves in ‘I take responsibility’ became shining examples of white people who ‘got it wrong’ while trying to ‘do the right thing’” (Sobande, Kanai and Zeng 2022, 6). As Graefer (2016) writes about affective capitalism, ridiculing and shaming celebrities is an established genre of entertainment; however, while such critiques can be seen as democratizing, they further entangle audiences in circles of consumption that reinforce the unequal structures of individuality under capitalism: “For example, such ridicule tends to perpetuate the practice of focusing on an individual, such as a celebrity, in an attempt to expose and expose one's subjective motives” (Sobande, Kanai and Zeng 2022, 7):

The second aspect of the digital woke culture, which can be noted as one of the widespread, is the superficial adherence to the ideas of woke in the format of depicting current topics and thoughts consonant with the woke culture in posts and videos on Instagram, in other words, Instagram wokeism without a deep study of the topic and, in fact, the fight against oppression of minorities. “This aesthetic form often stands for swipe able, pastel-toned explanations that condense complex issues of racism and inequality into digestible, social media-ready form” (Sobande, Kanai and Zeng 2022, 10). At the same time, such an insincere form is easily caught and a huge number of memes and jokes are created based on it. For example, Influencers in the Wild, a humorous Instagram account with 4.9 million followers, has built its account on publishing content that catches influencers in the act of creating content. During BLM activities in 2020, Influencers in the Wild published several photos of influencers posing at protests; most often, but not exclusively, young white women.

Social media supports visibility as a primary means of conducting politics. In this context, woke can be seen as a response to both the growing but uneven pressures and the rewards of being recognized as woke, amplified by the rhythms and infrastructure of social media. Consequently, the dual status of wokeness becomes apparent when one reflects on the contradictory ways in which people's actions can be simultaneously praised and policed for being supposedly woke. “Social networking sites are often used to discuss social and cultural issues, and a substantial majority of social media users – white, black and Hispanic – report they encounter content on these platforms about race or race relations” (Anderson 2016). But the amount of race-related content users report seeing on

social media varies considerably across racial and ethnic groups, with blacks being especially likely to see content that pertains to race on these platforms.

In general, Americans are much more likely to see posts related to race or race relations than they are to personally post or share race-related content. Even so, roughly four-in-ten social media users indicate that at least a few of the posts they share are related to racial issues. And just as black social media users are more likely than whites to come across posts about race on social media, they are also more likely to personally share or post-race-related content (Anderson 2016, 8).

Social media campaigns such as 2015's "BlackOutDay" on Twitter and Tumblr, as opposed to 2020's "BlackOutTuesday" on Instagram, were events in which black users of these platforms sought to collectively flood the system with images of themselves carrying enormous positive resonance for many. Visibility or visibility is thus promoted as the primary means of activism in the current moment. The competition for visibility and attention in digital culture means that identity categories themselves can often be simplified, misunderstood, reified, and distorted to suit the needs of searchability and perceived mass appeal. Digital rhetoric from #BlackLivesMatter activists is disseminated in a variety of ways, including to many Twitter users, and often spreads rapidly across Twitter and various media outlets more broadly. An ecological metaphor is necessary to capture the significant complexity and scale of the online and offline spaces that #BlackLivesMatter seeks to transform. One system in the rhetorical ecology of wokeness is the Twitter ecosystem. Twitter and other online spaces are commonly referred to as ecosystems to highlight the many constantly moving parts that make up these ever-evolving online platforms. Twitter consists of Twitter users, the tweets they write, and a network of other users who read and share each other's tweets. Twitter itself consists of a number of active subsystems, one of which is Black Twitter. Black Twitter—not actually a distinct platform, but a term for the various hashtags and rhetorical conventions of Black people on Twitter—is associated with the #BlackLivesMatter movement, but includes many activities that are not explicitly associated with #BlackLivesMatter.

Woke people are satisfied with their level of fulfillment and achievement and put a positive spin on their underlying experiences of exclusion, discrimination and exclusion:

I've been through a lot, but now I'm #waking up to injustice, they might tweet. In this sense, the term gives community and the status of consciousness... In modern parlance, woke and not woke are binary, black and white options that do not reflect the diversity of thought or identity, or the understanding that we all naturally represent a tangle of contradictions. As Whitman said, I am big; I can accommodate a lot of people. We may be aware or aware of something, but few of us can claim to be woke to injustice of all kinds, and even fewer call themselves awakened or enlightened (Chandra 2016, 3).

While Twitter has immense potential to facilitate social justice activism and amplify marginalized voices, its effectiveness ultimately depends on how users navigate its features, engage with each other, and address the platform's inherent limitations: "An assessment of Twitter's potential for social justice issues suggests that Twitter has the potential to allow voices that previously lacked a platform to now speak, be heard, come together, share ideas and interests, and mobilize" (Bouvier 2020, 4). The influence of hashtags such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter are commonly cited as examples of how this process can bring injustice to the attention of the general public, creating pressure to bring perpetrators to justice and even leading to problems in power relations. "Other research points to Twitter's activist and democratizing potential in social and political movements around the world, such as protests in the Middle East, and negotiations over government control of media and censorship" (Bouvier 2020, 4). Social media platforms such as Twitter not only act as a form of communication, but are also dominant organizational mechanisms that form the basis of social movement structure. Ultimately, social media acts as a tool to facilitate the rapid development of social movements that move from online to offline from time to time. As the word woke has become a vague but polarizing generalization for a wide range of concepts such as activist, feminist, liberal, anti-capitalist and, of course, anti-racist, it has expanded significantly beyond its strong roots in African-American culture into woke:

There is some continuity between the derision of woke as a soft, sensitive subjectivity and the critique of woke as a self-serving and inauthentic form of activism. Here, woke is considered Instagram activism, associated with superficiality and a purely aesthetic aspect. According to Fraser-Carroll (2021) in

The Independent about the rise of injustice infographics on Instagram, as their dominance grew, so did the criticism (and memes), with some pointing out their tendency to oversimplify complex issues and ridicule their current situation - ubiquitous pastel aesthetics (Sobande, Kanai and Zeng 2022, 11).

From these critiques of wokeness as inauthentic emerge tensions between social media's support for visibility as a primary means of doing politics and visibility as heavily intertwined with judgments of authenticity and sincerity. In other cases, the woke label becomes a badge of honor for brands whose reputations seem to set them apart from less ethical competitors. Indeed, the popularity of wokeness as a cultural shift exploded precisely as advertising and branding professionals became increasingly eager to reassure consumers.

Among the critiques of speech use are observations of moments when so-called white wokeists are perceived as speaking for or for black people about systemic social injustices such as anti-blackness in a possessive and self-aggrandizing manner (for example “I take responsibility” campaign). Indeed, examples of these practices include the popularity of Robin DiAngelo's concept of white fragility, whereby such confessions of whiteness have now become a popular way of accumulating social capital and praise. Particularly at the height of the BLM movement in 2020, anti-racist reading lists and collections of texts, including DiAngelo's book, intended to raise public awareness of the struggles of black people, were widely shared on social media, including as part of efforts to express genuine concern about the fight against racism. Just as some people may view silence as a form of violence, others may interpret unhelpful “white noise” as equally powerful in its potential to, or at least leave social injustice unscathed.

A simplistic description of social media wokeness may in some ways track wokeness as ideas and expressions of activism, resistance, a diagnosis of white complicity, and how social media has largely provided opportunities for connection and voice for marginalized groups but has degenerated largely to self-announcement or awakening performance. The competition for visibility and attention in digital culture means that identity categories themselves can often be simplified, misunderstood, reified and distorted to suit the needs of searchability and perceived mass appeal.

It is important to note that wokeism is not an official term or organization, but rather a concept that has gained recognition. For example, noticing that someone is being

treated unfairly because of the color of their skin, woke up means speaking up and doing something to help that person:

Wokeism has contributed to policy changes such as increased police accountability and the removal of Confederate statues in the United States. In Canada, the government has committed to addressing systemic racism within its institutions. Changes in public opinion: A 2020 Pew Research Center survey found that 69% of Americans now believe that racial and ethnic discrimination is a serious problem in their country, up from 49% in 2015. This shift in public opinion can be partly explained by the influence of the wokeism movement (Toke 2023).

Since its emergence in black grassroots activist spaces and the rise of political consciousness, the term woke has changed its meaning. It is now widely synonymous with statements on social media that are purported to indicate investment in the fight against social injustice, particularly anti-blackness and racial injustice, but has also become the subject of heated criticism. Using key case studies such as the “I take responsibility” and Instagram eclipse campaigns of 2020, this commentary elucidates how cultural practices and the affordances of both social media and celebrity have shaped conceptualizations of wokeness.

The extremely serious and highly stylized “I take responsibility” campaign received widespread circulation and coverage in the blogosphere, social networks, tabloids, and other publications. The campaign initially encouraged viewers to film their own “I take responsibility” video and upload it to social media, which predictably led to widespread spoofing of the original campaign film. “I take responsibility” was almost instantly met with ridicule online, with parodies and jokes galore regarding the aesthetics, tone and perceived self-importance of the celebrities involved. Some of the criticisms that emerged implied that the campaign was a symptom of crude glorification. Others criticized the actors for suggesting they could solve the problem of violence by taking part in the campaign. The “I take responsibility” campaign has become an example of a modern genre of media and marketing that unironically highlights white American celebrities as part of messages about racial justice and activism in general. While the “I take responsibility” slogan certainly gained widespread publicity, the value of such

visibility was highly contested, even as this contestation increased the visibility of the campaign itself. Central to such debates was criticism of the way the campaign appeared to act as a platform for white celebrities, using forms of virtue signaling (such as acknowledging white privilege) rather than pointing out their involvement in actual action to combat with blackness and white supremacy. “This campaign can be seen as illustrative of the contemporary cultural environment, a moment in which judgments of so-called wokeness or performative awakening as it is also called have become synonymous with the assessment of the identity of anti-racist activists” (Sobande, Kanai and Zeng 2022, 6).

“Considering the various ways in which ideas and images of whiteness circulate in wokeness discourse, allusions to white sincerity can be considered to fuel controversial campaigns such as ‘I take responsibility’. By white candor we mean a consistent use of white celebrity imagery and a deadly serious tone when depicting serious investment in anti-racism” (Sobande, Kanai and Zeng 2022, 6). In June 16, 2020 in podcast of celebrity podcaster Rogan mocked the “I take responsibility” video, calling celebrities virtue signalers and desperate for attention. Rogan mocked celebrities, saying they constantly need to be told how great they are and described them as so wrapped up in liberal progressive ideology that they don't realize how stupid it looks. Such critiques of the perceived posturing and performances in “I take responsibility” reflect how racial justice campaigns that appear to convey a sense of white sincerity are interpreted skeptically and sometimes derisively by other white people across the political spectrum: “In the ‘I take responsibility’ campaign, influencers and celebrities who showed themselves in ‘I take responsibility’ became shining examples of white people who got it wrong while trying to do the right thing” (Sobande, Kanai and Zeng 2022, 7).

In the marketing way it can be assumed that wokeness goes beyond the progressive political associations that advertisers try to attach to brands. As the desire for wokeness underpins its visibility and contestation, we explore the affective entanglements of wokeness with whiteness, neoliberal identity culture, social media content genres, and perceived expressions of sincerity. On the other hand, the new narrative of communication with the strengthening of the forces of the awakened, according to a number of researchers, has become one of the reasons for the development of a culture of complaints and the so-called cancel culture. Jonah Engel Bromwich, a *New York Times* writer, described the digital cancel phenomenon as a complete lack of investment in anything:

As I explained to him, canceling is an expression of free will, a choice to divert attention from someone or something whose values, (in)actions, or speech are so offensive that one no longer wishes to grace them with one's presence. time and money. The term has since become a journalistic shorthand used as a tool to silence marginalized people who have adapted earlier strategies of resistance for greater effectiveness in the digital space (Clark 2020, 88).

By examining the broader discursive and affective shifts in media and popular culture regarding activist movements, we can gain insights into the ways in which ideas about wokeness have developed and been disseminated within contemporary society. This understanding is crucial for critically evaluating the role of popular culture in shaping public discourse and influencing social change:

When examining how ideas about wokeness have developed in and through popular and consumer culture, it is worth also understanding a broader discursive and affective shift in media and popular culture in the place accorded to activist movements. If we take seriously such movements as part of shifts in culture, it is necessary to unpack these movements, not simply in terms of binaries of commercial versus grassroots, nor conservative versus progressive. Rather, it is essential to examine the ambivalence at play amid discussions and debates about wokeness. Social media supports visibility as a primary means of doing politics (Banet-Weiser, 2018, 4).

In this context, woke is a response to both the increasing but uneven pressures and rewards of being recognized as woke, heightened by the rhythms and infrastructures of social media. This requires making the self-visible in particular ways to audiences, and to be attributed with enlightened progressive values as a personal and/or brand identity. “The ambivalent status of wokeness is thus evident if we reflect on the conflicting ways in which the actions of people may be simultaneously praised and policed for allegedly being woke” (Sobande, Kanai and Zeng 2022, 5).

2.2. The “Culture of Complaint”

Social networks have become a tool for expressing not only individual opinions, but also the opinions and calls of large social groups. As previously stated, since its origins and rise in political consciousness, the term woke has changed its meaning, especially facilitated by social media, where it has become synonymous with large-scale statements to raise social issues. While mainstream and social media platforms echo the words woke culture, from an unbiased perspective, the term woke appears to be a well-intentioned social appeal that gives a voice to underprivileged groups. It is interesting how, under the influence of the woke culture and its active development in social networks, the narrative and narrative changes, neologisms appear. Focusing on the narrative, it is obvious that it is now more balanced in tone and manner of expression. And if moving on to neologisms, here are some of them. “Bame” is a term that exploded in popularity a few years ago, it means black, Asian and minority ethnic – basically means not white. However, it is better do not use such word, because it considered as common without uniqueness. Other construction is “BoPo”, which is the short for body positivity, a movement that celebrates the human body in all of its forms and rejects the idea that everyone should strive to conform to society’s narrow ideals. “Bropropriate” is when a man takes a woman’s idea and soaks up all the glory from it. Other term is “Cis”, that is derived from the Latin meaning on the side of, which is the opposite of the prefix trans, which means across from. “Clicktivism” is the next one, which basically, the bare minimum that anyone can do to help a cause. It is a click on Twitter, for example. After the murder of George Floyd, millions of people posted a black square on Instagram, which made them feel like they were contributing in some way, even though not all of them were. Clicktivism is less about actually helping the oppressed and more about signaling to the rest of the world that the person doesn’t want to be associated with the oppressors. After such symbol as black square started to be use in different cruel situations, that stress the solidarity against something terrible. Also, such of the terms like “fast fashion”, “flexiaterism”, “gender bionary”, “greenwash”, “misogyny”, “intersectionality”, “canceled” or “cancel culture” and so on:

Have you noticed how our language is changing? At a congressional hearing on Birthing While Black, nearly every politician used the words birthing people

instead of women or mothers. Activists have also changed equality to equity and affirmative action to diversity. Worse, certain speech is now labeled violence. Calling a transgender woman a man is an act of violence, says transgender actress Laverne Cox. Last week, the American Booksellers Association apologized for promoting a book on gender dysphoria after activists called it anti-trans. The book is hardly anti-trans. *The Economist* and the *Times* of London called it one of the best books of the year (Stossel, 2021).

The concept of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) has become central to discussions within many activist circles, including those often associated with the “far-left” or woke movements. DEI initiatives aim to address systemic inequalities and promote fairness, representation, and belonging for marginalized groups. However, perceptions of DEI can vary widely depending on one's ideological perspective and level of skepticism. Some may view DEI efforts as genuine attempts to foster social justice and create more equitable systems, while others may see them as superficial gestures or attempts to appease public opinion without addressing underlying power dynamics. Critics of DEI initiatives, including some who identify as more experienced or less influenced by what they perceive as doublespeak, may raise valid concerns about the implementation and effectiveness of such programs. They may argue that DEI efforts often prioritize surface-level diversity over substantive structural change, or that they inadvertently perpetuate tokenism or performative activism.

Moreover, debates about DEI can become highly politicized, with different groups interpreting the concept through their own ideological lenses. For example, some may view DEI as a necessary component of progressive social movements aimed at challenging systemic oppression, while others may see it as a form of identity politics that undermines individual merit and fosters division. Ultimately, navigating discussions about DEI requires critical thinking, nuance, and a willingness to engage with diverse perspectives. While the concept itself may be embraced by certain activist movements, its implementation and interpretation can vary widely, reflecting broader debates about social justice, power, and identity in contemporary society.

Baker (2023) wrote a paper challenging Systemic Racism Theory (SRT) and was immediately attacked by colleagues despite his findings of causal support for the competing concept of Systemic Poverty, which challenges the biased groupthink of the

far-left. Smith (2021) had a similar experience, writing that he was erased and replaced because his individuality as a Black man “threatens the victim narrative; in arguing for a black identity rooted in self-esteem rather than victimhood, in seeing ourselves as having already achieved such an identity, we challenge the very foundation of Critical Social Justice. The manipulation of language combined with incivility and political correctness has silenced many people in American academia as well as business – perhaps that was the intent” (Velasco 2020, 2).

However, the term has taken on a variety of meanings, found across a wide range of cultures and beliefs, and it is now very common for those who do not subscribe to woke culture and its associated agenda to begin to be canceled:

Undoubtedly, cancel culture has become an integral part of digital culture, oriented primarily against public figures who violate loose norms of social acceptability. Scholarly discussion of cancel culture has been limited, which can perhaps be explained by the fear of being canceled if arguments go against the dominant currents of certain social movements. Cancel culture is a manifestation of wokeism, which is an ideology that views reality as socially constructed and determined by power, oppression, and group identity (Velasco 2020, 2).

Indeed, the term “cancel culture” has gained prominence in the era of new media, particularly through social networks like Twitter. Cancel culture refers to the practice of publicly withdrawing support for individuals or entities whose words or actions are deemed offensive, problematic, or morally objectionable. This can involve boycotting, shaming, or ostracizing individuals, often with the goal of holding them accountable for their behavior. Twitter, with its rapid-fire communication and viral nature, has played a significant role in both fueling and critiquing cancel culture. The platform allows for the swift dissemination of information and opinions, making it easy for controversies to quickly gain traction and for public figures to face consequences for their actions. Moreover, Twitter serves as a battleground for competing ideologies and moral judgments, with users engaging in debates about the legitimacy and effectiveness of cancel culture. Some view it as a necessary tool for challenging harmful behavior and promoting accountability, while others argue that it can lead to mob mentality, censorship, and the suppression of dissenting voices. The term “cancel culture” itself has

become highly politicized, with different groups interpreting it in divergent ways. Conservatives often use it to criticize what they see as excessive political correctness and intolerance of differing viewpoints, while progressives may defend it as a form of social justice activism aimed at challenging systemic oppression. Overall, Twitter's role in the proliferation of cancel culture highlights the complex interplay between digital communication, activism, and accountability in the modern era. While the platform has facilitated important conversations about ethics and accountability, it has also raised concerns about censorship, online harassment, and the power dynamics inherent in online discourse:

The term cancel culture became popular in the era of new media and has actively spread as a phenomenon through and through social networks, especially Twitter. Cancellation used to be used to reject a target, but now cancel culture is about withdrawing the support of community leaders in response to distasteful behavior or opinions. It turns out that in addition to withdrawing support from community leaders, cancel culture is also being used to boycott organizations, including in the digital entertainment industry (Velasco 2020, 3).

Although woke culture and cancel culture have different origins, as well as different meanings and perceptions, the impact they have had on many corporations has been consistent. Back in the early 20th century, corporations around the world began to implement a woke culture in their workplaces. As corporations pave the way for political correctness by addressing both woke culture and cancel culture, many have made a conscious decision to affirm and agree with these social agendas. Cancel culture or also known as call culture is a social and cultural phenomenon that has gained global attention in recent years. Public figures, company brands, or institutions may be criticized or boycotted solely on the basis of disagreement. Cancel culture is a phenomenon that is currently spreading throughout the world and is being discussed on various communication platforms and public spheres. There are so many controversies and questions surrounding this phenomenon, such as whether cancel culture is a form of anti-democracy or whether cancel culture is perhaps a true form of collective freedom. Clearly, cancel culture is a complex phenomenon that involves factors such as power, time, and access to resources. This means that mass mobilization, for example in cancel culture, as

one of its important features, is carried out in an organized and effective manner to achieve its goals. “Cancel used to be used to reject a target, but now cancel culture is about withdrawing support from community leaders in response to distasteful behavior or opinions. It turns out that in addition to withdrawing support from community leaders, cancel culture is also being used to boycott organizations, including digital entertainment” (Waani, Wempi 2021, 3). As media and technology continually evolve, a new, largely virtual, way has emerged to exclude others from public opinion and political debate. This can be called cancel culture or callout culture. It can be broadly defined as the attempt to ostracize someone for violating social norms, and more narrowly as the practice of withdrawing support from public figures and companies after they have done or said something that is considered objectionable or offensive. Groups physically and virtually shame people who have expressed a point of view or opinion on a current social issue that is contrary to the opinion of the majority of the public. This movement can highlight social injustices within communities and allow individuals and groups to take responsibility for their actions.

Cancel culture may reflect a realization that people are unwilling to accept what they have been forced to accept or have been unable to resist in the past. The idea of cancel culture, as the letter implies, is a phenomenon that is uniquely made possible by the demands of capitalism on the part of media production, and on the audience side by our connection to social media:

Social media is a space where journalists, with the ability to amplify otherwise unremarkable conversations, have extracted and decontextualized so many of the rich traditions of Black communication practice to meet the demand for media content that will capture the attention of readers/listeners/viewers, but fails in the process. provide adequate cultural context to explain why these debates are and should be part of mainstream public discourse (Clark 2020, 89).

That being said, there is a perception in academia that cancel culture is not just a trend that can be pursued to gain followers or attention through digital platforms, but rather, it is a powerful tool that can change entire societies if addressed effectively. This influence should not be used to intimidate and harass, rather it is a powerful way to speak out when power and money are aimed at silencing.

Along with the cancel culture of propaganda and accountability created within the community, the movement is also one of the most popular forms of public shaming because it can be anonymous and effective. However, if used with the wrong intention, it denigrates individuals, causes job loss and has a financial impact on businesses and organizations. Callout culture strategy typically operates through social media as a way to post and share information. Whether information is true or not, factual or fake, it spreads quickly, efficiently and easily, which is appreciated by social media users and consumers. Cancellation strategies typically use social media to shame people with the intent of inflicting penalties of varying severity, ranging from restricting access to public platforms, damaging reputations, damaging careers, and provoking prosecution.

One of the latest figures to be canceled is J.K. Rowling. June 6, 2020 J.K. Rowling tweeted: “If sex isn't real, then same-sex attraction isn't real. If sex is not real, then the lived reality of women around the world is erased. I know and love trans people, but the erasure of sex makes it impossible for many to meaningfully discuss their lives. Telling the truth is not hate (Velasco 2020, 4).

It appears to have offended the transgender community, leading to its cancellation. Consequently, Harry Potter fan sites such as Mugglenet and The Leaky Cauldron cut ties with Rowling over her trans-offensive tweet. Her case is not unique: other prominent public figures have been subject to cancel culture. There is a pushback now against the powerful force coming from cancel culture: “The collective response of 150 writers and scholars, including J.K. Rowling, Noam Chomsky and Salman Rushdie wrote an open letter to *Harper's Magazine* (2020) calling attention to the growing climate of intolerance emanating from the political left” (Velasco 2020, 4).

Along with famous celebrities, large companies and individuals in high positions are being canceled through social media platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and Facebook. As the public becomes increasingly vocal about social issues, people who speak or act less favorably may be subject to public criticism or shaming. Some believe that culture should be abolished as a form of activism through boycotting and protesting against it. Among the main disagreements about cancel culture is whether it restricts free speech and how unfairly damaging a person's reputation for expressing an unpopular opinion results in less free public debate. Although social media has become a hub for

self-expression and activism, cancellation strategies typically use social media to impose sanctions that some users perceive as necessary, even if and when they are not. On the other hand, the cancel culture movement can benefit society: “Cancel culture is a very complex social movement. On the one hand, this is one of the highest manifestations of the democratization of discourse. On the other hand, it is also the force of censorship and intolerance of ideas that contradict dominant acceptable social norms” (Velasco 2020, 5).

Cancel culture has led to progressive changes in universities and businesses, promoting anti-racism and inclusion, among other things. As companies become aware of the impact of social media, there are noticeable changes in how inclusive corporations and individuals strive to become thanks to this phenomenon. Younger generations are increasingly speaking out on controversial issues, leading to a significant increase in activism in areas such as politics, social issues and values. For these people, cancel culture isn't about creating fear of speaking mind, in fact it is quite the opposite; people stand up against discrimination, racism, injustice and inequality in our country, bringing those responsible to justice. “Recently, audience reception has impacted decisions regarding creative control, which may be due to cancel culture. Ginny Parker Beard (2020) defines cancel culture as an obstacle to civil discourse because it cultivates a mob mentality and demands 100% consensus” (Anderson-Lopez, Lambert and Budaj, 2021, 65). Part of cancel culture may have to do with what is perverted or taboo in society. However, cancel culture goes further than acknowledging perceived taboo words and actions, as it also puts pressure on the cancelation of taboo words or actions. On Twitter, users can encounter an affective flow of outrage, as well as amusement and pleasure at the expense of an evil other who needs to be destroyed, and the pleasure of moral behavior:

In the online space, cancel culture hashtags can go viral, leading to online petitions or movements calling on the entertainment industry to make radical changes. After all, the entertainment industry is also a business and strives to make fans (customers) happy. While this may be confused with cancel culture, it may indicate a business decision and consumer demand (Anderson-Lopez, Lambert and Budaj, 2021, 65).

Cancel culture can also be considered a form of propaganda against those people or institutions that go against the perceived ethical values of today's society. However, one must always remember that the use of social media dramatically increases digital

participation. The digital platforms that society uses on a daily basis, including Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and TikTok, are a central point for activism as much as they are for dark involvement and other negative motives:

The use of broadcast-type social media platforms such as Twitter and YouTube allows marginalized groups to engage in online framing—the process by which the collective experience of the wrongful behavior of the offending party (or its proxies) is discussed, morally evaluated, and prescribed. remedy (e.g., dismissal or decision to resign) through culturally oriented collective reasoning of online crowds (Clark 2020, 89).

Jurgen Habermas's idea of a public sphere creating a space of equal access for people is challenged through the phenomenon of cancel culture. Theoretically, if people are given the opportunity to speak freely in debates and discussions, reprimands for dissenting opinions will not occur or will not matter. Habermas proposed that the public sphere, ideally, provides a space for rational debate and deliberation among citizens, fostering democratic participation and accountability. In this idealized vision, individuals are free to express their opinions, engage in dialogue, and influence public opinion without fear of retribution. While Habermas's idealized vision of the public sphere remains aspirational, cancel culture highlights the challenges and complexities inherent in realizing this vision in practice. Achieving a truly inclusive and deliberative public sphere requires addressing power imbalances, promoting empathy and understanding, and fostering a culture of constructive dialogue and debate, even in the face of disagreement:

The othering and bedevilment of those who fight for social justice is, however, not the only discursive grenade that is being thrown from the right into the metapolitical trenches. There are also persistent attempts to immunize those with racist, sexist or LGBTQ+ phobic views against anyone who dares to contest them, or who chooses not to platform people that espouse such views (Cammaerts 2022, 735).

Within the anti-woke discourse, the pushback against those who voice racist, sexist, or LGBTQ+-phobic views in the public space and the fact that today there are real

consequences if doing so, is referred to as cancel culture. Critics of what they perceive as cancel culture argue that it stifles free speech and debate by creating a climate of fear where individuals are afraid to express controversial opinions or challenge dominant narratives. They argue that it leads to a culture of censorship and intolerance, where dissenting viewpoints are not tolerated and individuals are cancelled for making mistakes or expressing unpopular opinions:

Concurring with the Schmittian friend/enemy distinction discussed above, James Sunderland MP and David Maddox describe the culture war they are waging as a life and death struggle for conservatism faced with the Left's attempts to cancel opposing voices. Without necessarily asserting this explicitly, hate speech, discrimination, and racism are positioned as legitimate opinions as any other, worthy of 'democratic' debate, and therefore the pushback against it is illegitimate and sinister (Cammaerts 2022, 736).

However, some people are warned when they openly share an opinion they disagree with. Online platforms can change how society responds to taboo behavior. Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and others make it easy to quickly share information and then respond quickly with individual opinions. Gwen Bouvier (2020) writes how Twitter encourages users to share short, punchy reviews that reflect "high levels of affect and emotion" and then link emotional communities. This level of emotion can also increase the number of likes for a tweet (called a comment) or a hashtag (called a trend):

The desire for more impact can lead to a cycle of provoking emotional reactions from other users. Some incidents and opinions spread widely, going viral, with users either disagreeing or agreeing. Bird (2020) describes how what appears to be an escalation of the culture war and the decline of civil discourse may, in part, be a symptom of Big Tech's dominance over modes of communication and information dissemination (Anderson-Lopez, Lambert and Budaj, 2021, 66).

The comment section on digital social media platforms can generally be considered a place where hate speech and negative speech predominantly reside. Creating a virtual profile allows people to essentially take on an infinite number of identities. There is a strong sense of comfort that comes from the anonymity of participating in a discussion

online rather than in person. As a result of creating this online persona, a person's fear of the consequences of their actions on their digital profile is reduced. Due to the anonymity of online social platforms, cancel culture and hate speech are on the rise. Anonymity also allows people to feel safe sharing potentially sensitive and vulnerable information. The invisibility shield leads to a potential dilemma in understanding whether it does more harm than good to society as a whole:

In the anti-woke culture war discourse, freedom of speech to be racist and discriminatory is thus coupled with a divine freedom and right to insult and to offend others, which often gets coupled with an older metapolitical discourse from the right of political correctness gone mad. As the argument goes; ‘nowadays you cannot say anything any longer, you’re not allowed to laugh at anything, whereas in the good old days we could be unashamedly racist, sexist, and/or homophobic, how awful. In this regard, columnist Douglas Murray calls the ‘insidious’ woke movement, ‘political correctness on steroids (Cammaerts 2022, 732).

In examining how ideas about wokeness have developed in and through popular and consumer culture, it is also worth understanding the broader discursive and affective shift in media and popular culture in the space given to activist movements: “The cancellation of a person, place, or thing is a socially mediated phenomenon that has its roots in queer communities of color. Black Twitter is a meta network of culturally connected communities in microblogs. site—turned the language of cancel into an internet meme” (Clark 2020, 90). This reference was subsequently picked up by outside observers, especially journalists with a tremendous ability to amplify (their) white gaze:

Politicians, pundits, celebrities, academics and ordinary people alike have turned cancelation narratives into moral panics akin to real-life harm, adding a neological twist to the practice’s origins by linking it to unfounded fears of censorship and silencing. But being cancelled it should be noted that the designation is usually reserved for celebrities, brands and other unattainable figures should be taken as a final call for justice. Initially, the practice of black women tagging was sometimes mistaken for Twitter’s ‘mob mentality’, but it is

qualitatively different: it is often a critique of systemic inequalities rather than an attack on specific, individualistic violations (Clark 2020, 90).

As a venture leadership community, calling out social media platforms such as Twitter is a form of activism, feminized labor in the digital economy undertaken voluntarily to protect particularly vulnerable populations in online spaces. As digital connectivity closes the gaps between the masses and the elites, the demand for new social standards is outpacing the willingness of those comfortable to question what their stated commitment to promoting social equality might actually cost them:

There are far worse things in American society than the continued fashion for politically correct language, both on the left and on the right. But there are few things more absurd and ultimately doomed to failure. Seventy years ago, blacks were politely referred to as colored people by whites. Then they became negroes, after Black, now it is African-American or Kolo people again. But millions of white Americans, from the time of George Wallace to the time of David Duke, remained Negroes, and changing names did not change the facts of racism; moreover, the idea that changing a situation by finding a new and better word for it comes from the old American habit of euphemisms. Man's words are assumed to be gender specific and thus offensive to women: humanity, for example, implies that women are not human. Thus, instead of a chairman, we get a bulky chairman or just a chair, as if the hapless official had four cabriole legs and a pierced sign. But what's all the fuss about the man? Anyone who knows the history of our language knows that in Old English and Anglo-Saxon the suffix -man was gender-neutral: it had and still has the same meaning as the word man today, referring to all people equally. Using man-gives us forms such as chairman, fisherman, craftsman, which simply means a person of either gender who is engaged in a particular job or profession (Hughes 1999, p.35).

The combination of woke culture and cancel culture can indeed create a challenging environment, particularly when taken to extremes. When individuals become overzealous or rigid in their adherence to these ideologies, they may exhibit intolerance of criticism and a tendency to label those who oppose, question, or challenge their narrative as racist, sexist, or otherwise morally deficient. It is important to recognize that while woke and cancel culture may have emerged from legitimate concerns about social

justice and accountability, they can also be co-opted or taken to harmful extremes. Striking a balance between holding individuals accountable for harmful behavior and promoting open dialogue and understanding is essential for fostering a healthy and inclusive social environment.

The manifestation of woke culture in social media storytelling and cancel culture indeed reflects a complex interplay between activism, digital media, and cultural dynamics. While social media has undoubtedly provided a platform for marginalized voices and facilitated accountability for harmful behavior, it has also raised significant questions about the limits of free speech, the power dynamics of online mobs, and the nuances of social justice activism in the digital age. On one hand, social media has democratized storytelling, allowing individuals from marginalized communities to share their experiences and perspectives directly with a global audience. This has led to greater visibility and representation for historically underrepresented groups, challenging dominant narratives and fostering empathy and understanding. However, the rise of cancel culture has sparked debates about the ethics of public shaming, the potential for mob mentality, and the importance of due process. While holding individuals accountable for harmful behavior is essential for promoting social justice, there are concerns that cancel culture can sometimes lead to disproportionate consequences, censorship, and the suppression of dissenting viewpoints. Striking a balance between promoting inclusivity and fostering constructive dialogue while avoiding censorship and mob mentality remains a significant challenge in contemporary discourse. It requires a nuanced understanding of power dynamics, empathy for diverse perspectives, and a commitment to principles of fairness, justice, and free expression. Ultimately, navigating these complexities requires ongoing dialogue, reflection, and engagement from all stakeholders involved.

CHAPTER 3.

THE “WOKE” EFFECT ON DIGITAL MEDIA

3.1. “Wokeism” and Contemporary Art

In recent years, the term woke culture has become a buzzword in the art world. It refers to a growing movement that focuses on promoting social justice and combating systemic injustice in various areas of society, including the arts.³ While the movement has brought about positive change, it has also sparked controversy and criticism from those who see it as excessive or divisive. In the arts, awakened culture has sparked debate on issues such as cultural appropriation, representation, and censorship. On the one hand, there is an understanding that artists should be able to create freely without fear of accusations of cultural appropriation or insensitivity, on the other hand, artists are expected to consider the impact of their work on marginalized communities and avoid perpetuating harmful stereotypes:

Social media plays a role in how knowledge about representation changes because as the communication landscape becomes denser, more complex, and more collaborative, the online population has greater access to information, more opportunities to engage in public speaking, and increased access to information. the ability to take collective action. A combination of communication and spreading sentiment can lead to change, such as a diversity initiative. As Meadow Jones (2014) says: Artists and authors usually aim to bring the viewer or reader into the world created through description or expression (Anderson-Lopez, Lambert and Budaj, 2021, 67).

³ Effect on digital media has still been discussing by various authors from different angles. However, there is not much literature on this topic in the scientific community. Robert Hughes (1993) considers it from the point of view of the culture of complaints, S. Waani and J. A. Wempi (2021) analyze the cancel culture as a new social movement, E. Gibson (2022) considers how woke ideology is taking over American art museums, J. Anderson-Lopez and R.J. Lambert investigate transformation in social media due to woke culture and cancel culture and other.

The debate surrounding woke culture in the arts has extended to issues of representation. Obviously, the Woke Culture movement has also raised questions about censorship in the arts: “Indeed, much of modern politics feels like something of a repeat of the ‘90s: the alt-right culture wars are an even darker reboot of Pat Buchanan’s ‘90s classic; debate over wokeness echoing early 90s panic over political correctness, etc. (Davis, 2022).

Audience demands are helping to influence the market and have opened up diversity initiatives in various media. A diversity initiative can be characterized as an attempt to acknowledge diversity gaps while promoting greater diversity. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, key American museums such as the Metropolitan, Guggenheim and SF MoMA have announced diversity programs:

They are now widely viewed as shameful relics of the era of Western colonialism, whose true social role is to promote a progressive agenda... As a result, they are undergoing the greatest transformation since the 1960s, when the art museum as we know it is a popular, populist and must-see destination appointments, was born. A creation of the Enlightenment... [museums] were built with the belief that cultural property belonged not to an elite but to all citizens and should be available for public edification and enjoyment... a triumph of statehood and democratic culture. Today, the connoisseurs have been replaced by commissars — ideologues for whom aesthetics is less important than ensuring that we view art through progressive lenses... The politicization of art museums is so widespread that there is hardly an institution or aspect of museum practice that is exempt from it... (Gibson, 2022).

The killing of George Floyd in 2020 sparked widespread protests across the United States and renewed conversations about race, representation, and systemic inequality. In response to these events, television executives have taken notice and launched diversity initiatives aimed at addressing longstanding disparities in the entertainment industry. One notable example is the pledge made by Hackman Capital in June 2020 to invest \$2 million in diverse communities and minority media training. This initiative is designed to provide resources and opportunities for Black students and other underrepresented communities to access mentorships, internships, scholarships, and education and training in Los Angeles's largest industry: entertainment. By investing in

local schools, production studios, and content creators, Hackman Capital aims to create pathways for individuals from marginalized backgrounds to secure jobs and pursue careers in the entertainment industry. This initiative not only addresses the need for greater diversity and representation in media but also addresses systemic barriers that have historically limited access to opportunities for certain communities. The pledge by Hackman Capital reflects a broader trend within the entertainment industry of recognizing the importance of diversity and inclusion. Increasingly, companies are committing to initiatives that promote diversity both in front of and behind the camera, as well as throughout all levels of the industry. However, it is important to recognize that diversity initiatives are just one step towards creating a more equitable and inclusive entertainment industry. Meaningful change requires ongoing commitment, investment, and collaboration across the industry to dismantle systemic barriers and create opportunities for all individuals, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender, or background:

Following the killing of George Floyd in 2020, protests across the US have renewed conversations about race and representation. Television executives have taken notice and launched diversity initiatives. To start, in June 2020, Hackman Capital pledged to invest \$2 million in diverse communities and minority media training. The funds will work with local schools, production studios and content creators to offer Black students and other underrepresented communities resources to receive mentorships, internships, scholarships, and needed education and training locally to secure jobs in Los Angeles's largest industry. Likewise, CBS has made it a goal to hire more minority writers. For the 2021-2022 broadcast season. The network hopes to increase its diversity of creators to 40% by the 2022-2023 season – up to 50%. Even actors are making strides in expanding opportunities for underrepresented writers. Working with the organization Color of Change, Michael B. Jordan launched the #ChangeHollywood initiative in July 2020, which outlines a roadmap with concrete ways to invest in anti-racist content and authentic Black stories, invest in Black talent, and reinvest in police funds to support black communities. Even as the push for greater diversity in visual media expands and quantifies, current representation gaps still remain acute (Anderson-Lopez, Lambert and Budaj, 2021, 68).

The word woke has gained popularity in the film world in recent years. Films are increasingly capturing the public consciousness, addressing themes such as injustice, diversity and inequality. While some welcome the change and see it as a step in the right direction, others argue it risks alienating viewers and replacing the narrative with ideology. The term wokeness in cinema refers to a conscious attempt by storytellers to confront and bring attention to social and political issues. The growing need for authenticity and representation in the film business has given rise to this trend. Representation, according to woke film advocates, is important, especially in a field that has traditionally marginalized certain groups of people. Films with diverse casts and stories about underrepresented topics give audiences the opportunity to recognize themselves on the big screen, promoting a sense of acceptance and belonging. Films that address social issues can help audiences develop empathy and understanding. Greater empathy and a desire for constructive change can result from exposing audiences to the struggles and experiences of various groups.

It also remains important that social and cultural norms are heavily influenced by films. Filmmakers can catalyze good change by influencing public opinion and policy by adding social consciousness to their stories. The biggest criticism of woke cinema, however, is that it risks alienating some viewers. When ideology takes precedence over storytelling, films can become preachy and controversial, alienating audiences who prefer entertainment to learning a political or moral lesson.

3.2. The Impact on Aesthetic Artifacts

Filmmaking as a tool for social commentary is nothing new; there seems to be an inordinate amount of cultural programming and social activism disguised under the guise of filmmaking these days. When used effectively, social commentary in films can often highlight and bring attention to divisive and serious issues, sometimes sparking much-needed dialogue about them. However, when films are so evocative, pushing a cultural agenda on viewers can often kill the plots of such films, or at least distract from what could be a compelling narrative:

Netflix, one of the largest streaming platforms in the world, is one of the organizations that is often boycotted by the public. From the public's disappointment with Netflix, which stopped production of some of its series that lasted only one season, to the completely new and shocking release of a film called *Cuties*, directed by Maimane Doucouré (Waani, Wempi 2021, 266).

According to Variety, the film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, where Doucouré won the World Filmmaking Award. Prior to its screening at Sundance, Netflix acquired worldwide rights to the film excluding France. Being a digital platform, Netflix uses social media as one of its marketing tools to promote its new products. Similar to what Netflix did when promoting the movie *Cuties*. It is just that the material used to promote the movie *Cuties* was criticized by the public. A month before its release, Netflix uploaded promotional materials for *Cuties* to Twitter. The upload immediately drew criticism as it was deemed inappropriate. According to *Vanity Fair*, the trailer for *Cuties* has this description: 11-year-old Amy was shocked by a twerking dance crew. Hoping to join them, she begins to explore her femininity while challenging her family traditions. Meanwhile, the film's poster depicts the actors as children, posing seductively with their midriffs exposed in shorts and a crop top. Netflix is facing a backlash from audiences. The Netflix download has turned *Cuties* into a controversy, especially on Twitter. Audiences began canceling Netflix, using the hashtag #CancelNetflix as a form of disappointment. Netflix issued an apology tweet in response to the controversy:

Not satisfied with the apology, audiences continued to use the hashtag #CancelNetflix to ask Netflix not to release *Cuties*, which was scheduled to release on September 9, 2020, on the grounds that Netflix was exploiting the sexuality of girls through *Cuties*, which catered to child pornography and had the potential to incite pedophilia. because this problem itself is a serious problem all over the world (Waani, Wempi 2021, 267).

The hashtag #CancelNetflix emerged as a form of protest and disappointment among audiences, signaling dissatisfaction with content or decisions made by the streaming platform. In response to the controversy surrounding the hashtag, Netflix issued an apology tweet, likely as a means of addressing concerns and attempting to mitigate negative sentiment. This incident reflects the power of social media as a platform

for public discourse and activism. Hashtags like #CancelNetflix can quickly gain traction and draw attention to perceived issues or controversies, prompting companies to respond and take action to address public concerns. Netflix's apology tweet likely aimed to acknowledge the concerns raised by audiences and demonstrate a commitment to addressing them. It is common for companies to issue apologies or statements in response to public outcry, particularly when faced with significant backlash or criticism. Moving forward, Netflix may take steps to address the underlying reasons for the controversy and work to rebuild trust and confidence among its audience base. This could involve reassessing content decisions, engaging with stakeholders to understand their perspectives, and implementing changes to prevent similar incidents in the future:

There is no doubt that Justin Simien's film *Dear White People* and its subsequent Netflix show of the same name were intended to highlight a pressing issue. However, by calling attention to both the subtle and overt racism that black students face at a prestigious, predominantly white school, the film and its other incarnations ended up causing just as much controversy as it was seemingly trying to combat (Naidoo 2023).

It faced a huge backlash from many people claiming that the film was anti-white and therefore racist in itself:

While purporting to speak for entire sections of society, the film also falls short of being an allegory and falls more into the realm of outright denigration of anything it disagrees with. As a result, despite almost universal acceptance, it tended to silence anyone who might feel differently, regardless of their race or ethnicity, and lacked audience support (Naidoo 2023).

In June 2020, HBO Max removed the popular 1939 film "Gone with the Wind", long criticized for glorifying slavery in the American South, from its catalog, promising to return it along with a discussion of its historical context and condemnation of its racist depictions. The decision follows the publication of an article in the *Los Angeles Times* by John Ridley, the screenwriter of *12 Years a Slave* (2013), which called for the film to be pulled from theatrical release or reintroduced at a later date, along with more realistic cinematic depictions or in conjunction with conversations that would post this film into

context. The film returned to HBO Max on June 24 with additional videos explaining the historical context of *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Jacqueline Stewart, professor in the Department of Film and Media Studies at the University of Chicago and host of *Quiet Sunday Nights* on Turner Classic Movies, talks in an introductory video about how *Gone with the Wind* became one of the most popular films of all time despite its controversial history.

In the Netflix documentary *Queen Cleopatra* (2023), the iconic Egyptian queen was played by a black actress, which caused long and heated discussions both in Egypt and in the world. Historically, Cleopatra, as a real person, was born in the Egyptian city of Alexandria in 69 BC and belonged to the Greek-speaking dynasty founded by Alexander's general Ptolemy, was of European descent, and was light-skinned, not black. Netflix has created a film starring British black actress Adele James: "The story of Cleopatra, told by Western experts on behalf of Egypt, is an act of separating a culture from its people. It not only exploits the cultural knowledge of indigenous peoples, but also undermines the cultural meanings specific to the indigenous people of Egypt" (Makkar 2023). There was a wave of public outrage in Egypt over the series' narrative. Following the trailer's release, prominent Egyptian figures, including comedian and political activist Bassem Youssef, criticized the misrepresentation and appropriation of Egyptian culture:

The outrage has nothing to do with Cleopatra's skin shown in the documentary series' trailer. Skin color did not matter either to the ancient Egyptians or to modern Egypt. It is Cleopatra's extraordinary achievements and strong reputation that make her a target for various groups claiming her as their own, for example Cleopatra is called the "African Queen" rather than the Egyptian Queen (Makkar 2023).

The promotional material used by Netflix to promote the film *Cuties* (2020) sparked significant controversy and criticism from the public. The film itself explores themes of female empowerment and the sexualization of young girls, but the promotional materials, including the trailer and poster, were seen by many as inappropriate and overly sexualized. The description of the film in the trailer, which mentions an 11-year-old girl exploring her femininity and defying family traditions through twerking, raised concerns

about the sexualization of minors and the appropriateness of the subject matter. Additionally, the movie poster, featuring young girls posing seductively with exposed stomachs, was widely criticized for its suggestive imagery. The controversy surrounding the promotional materials led to widespread condemnation on social media, with many users accusing Netflix of promoting the sexualization of children. The hashtag #CancelNetflix gained traction as a form of protest, and Netflix faced calls to remove the film from its platform. In response to the backlash, Netflix issued an apology and updated the promotional materials for the film. The streaming platform acknowledged the concerns raised by the public and stated that the original promotional materials did not accurately represent the film's intended message. The updated materials provided a more nuanced and sensitive portrayal of the film's themes, emphasizing its exploration of the challenges faced by young girls growing up in a hypersexualized society. The controversy surrounding *Cuties* (2020) highlights the challenges faced by companies when marketing sensitive or controversial content, particularly when it involves themes related to children and sexuality. It also underscores the importance of listening to audience feedback and being responsive to public concerns when addressing issues of representation and appropriateness in media promotion:

As a platform that is both digital-based, Netflix uses social media as one of its marketing tools to promote its new products. Likewise, what was done by Netflix in promoting the film *Cuties*. It is just that the material used to promote the *Cuties* film has been criticized by the public. One month before its release, Netflix uploaded *Cuties* promotional material on Twitter. The upload immediately drew criticism because it was deemed inappropriate. According to Vanity Fair, *Cuties'* trailer is given this description: Amy, 11, got blown away by the twerking dance crew. Hoping to join them, she begins to explore her femininity, defying her family traditions. Meanwhile, the movie poster shows the cast as children posing seductively with their stomachs exposed while wearing shorts and a crop top (Waani, Wempi 2021, 269).

Netflix faced backlash from the audience. The upload from Netflix has turned *Cuties* into controversy, especially on Twitter. The audience began to cancel Netflix using the hashtag #CancelNetflix as a form of disappointment. Netflix posted an apology tweet in response of the controversy. Not satisfied with the apology, the audience continued to

use the hashtag #CancelNetflix to ask Netflix not to release *Cuties* which was scheduled to be released on 9 September 2020, on the grounds that Netflix exploited the sexuality of girls through *Cuties* which served child pornography and had the potential to trigger pedophilia as the issue itself has been a major problem worldwide: “The cancel culture phenomenon as a social movement as in this case has a big impact on Netflix as an organization. After the release of *Cuties* on September 9, 2020, the hashtag #CancelNetflix has become worldwide trending on Twitter. This has an impact on the decrease in the number of Netflix subscribers which has increased drastically” (Waani, Wempi 2021, 270).

While the 2022 film *She Said* told the triumphant true story of the journalists who broke the Harvey Weinstein case and launched the #MeToo movement, the film was a box office flop. Despite critical acclaim for its message, the film never seemed to attract crowds as much as one might have expected. After years of prominence of the #MeToo movement in film, television, and social media, the film’s insistence on seizing every opportunity to infiltrate this cultural agenda in all its aspects seemed all too familiar to me. By veering away from a sort of straightforward factual journalistic biopic towards a social commentary that overtly conveyed its messages against toxic masculinity and sexual aggression, the film likely felt echoes of the inertia of audiences constantly watching the same tropes play out year after year before how the film came out.

One of the most recent striking examples is the film *Barbie*, the heroine of which was the most famous doll in the world, which for many years won the hearts of children and adults:

Barbie, directed by Greta Gerwig and starring Margot Robbie and Ryan Gosling as Barbie and Ken, released on July 21 after months of internet excitement and an extensive marketing campaign. Many of the film’s positive reviews point to its feminist angle as a highlight. CNN’s review praised Barbie’s overt feminist message and desire to put Barbie in a broader sociological context. Indie Wire wrote the film is able to contain a genuine message of feminism while maintaining a sense of joy throughout, even when tackling these heavy topics. Entertainment Weekly praised the film as a fierce, funny, and deeply feminist adventure that dares to laugh and cry, which can pair insightful criticisms of the wage gap with goofy gags about Kens threatening to beach each other off (Murray 2023).

The movie *Barbie* (2023) of course keeping in mind the socio-cultural environment had to have a modern twist to address the various stereotypes and issues faced by women and hence ultimately make women feel more empowered. Although Barbie's film attempts to reflect on the issues of women's roles and positions, it can be said that no new perspective was presented to highlight ways of disrupting the generally accepted ideas, habits and actions that contribute to the oppression of women. The ending is designed to divert the audience's attention to the real problem - the discrepancy between the equality of both sexes in Barbie land and in the real world.

The ending plunges the viewer into an existential dread that makes one think about life in a question that seems so profound. *Barbie* (2023) is largely reflexive in the issues they choose to present and the controversies they mention to give the impression that since they know what the problem is, one would think they are working to solve the problem. Instead, *Barbie* (2023) is committed to keeping women's empowerment within the framework and in the minds of children and young girls rather than challenging the current masculine orientation in modern times. That such empowerment is only allowed if it sells well, but not so much that it threatens the position people have already carved out for themselves. The film begins with a problem and ends with one gender still dominating the other. *Barbie* (2023) is reflexive in many ways in the problems they choose to present and the controversies they mentioned to make it seem that because they are aware of what the problem is, one may think they are outworking on the resolution for this, but they aren't. Instead, *Barbie* (2023) sticks to having women's empowerment only stay within boxes and in the minds of children and young girls rather than challenging the current male-centeredness in our present times;

That this empowerment is only allowed if it sells well, but not too much to threaten the position men have already made for themselves. The movie starts with a problem and ends with still having one gender dominating over the other. To make matters worse, the subtle diversion of attention turns from gender inequality to self-acceptance of having emotions and appreciating life in a way that makes one feel unappreciative and a 'hater' when contradicting such a woke film (Reyes 2024, 27).

The Little Mermaid is Hans Kristen Anderson's story about a love-struck mermaid who gives her life underwater to be with the human prince who never loved her. She turns into sea foam and is sentenced to 300 years of good deeds to earn her soul and go to heaven. When the Disney remake was released, a lot of controversy arose not because of the addition or deletion of the plot, but because of the race of actress Halle Bailey, who is black. The trailer for Disney's *The Little Mermaid* received nearly a million and a half dislikes due to fans' outrage and disappointment over the differences in the racial identity of the actress who played Ariel compared to the original version, where the main character was a red-haired white girl, thus once again drawing attention to the categorization of wokeness:

An example of a film that received a lot of backlash was the updated version of *The Little Mermaid*, released in May 2023, starring Halle Bailey. Many were happy to see that Disney had inclusive casting, especially in the star role where Bailey, who is biracial, played Ariel. Not everyone felt the same, as some people saw it as Disney's attempt to promote woke standards, which they felt were unnecessary in a children's film (Regnier 2023).

One consequence is that the Woke films caused the culture to gradually lose its political relevance. Instead of using the term and its associated rhetoric to establish specific policies towards marginalized groups, companies like Hollywood today create films that seek to idealize the values favored by the woke society in which we live. In the arts, the dominance of woke culture has largely hampered freedom of artistic expression and creativity. Ideally, any story gains artistic value when the narrative challenges the audience's imagination and inspires thoughtful discussion without violating anyone's trust. However, the reality is that creators are no longer creating stories from an artistic point of view, but are constrained by caution in depicting potentially controversial topics:

As a result, from Chavez's unexpected Spanish lines in "Doctor Strange" to Superman's bisexuality, these 'forced' characterization modifications simply lump established, unique works into a category rather than promoting diversity. As a result, films have become increasingly forgettable and unoriginal in the last decade. Therefore, as more artists adopt a propaganda approach to production, our future society, led by younger generations, will begin to normalize and will

eventually show a tendency towards propaganda over art, leading to a monoculture (Zhang 2022).

While a film may freely depict politics, its purpose should not be to impose subjective ideas of political correctness on viewers at the expense of artistic expression. Otherwise, the incompatibility of the two worlds may prevent the progress of each of their individual stages of evolution:

When it comes to the arts, creativity is stifled by the industrial dominance of political propaganda, which ultimately leads to a loss of artistic diversity. However, woke art is still the norm today, despite its central controversy. It is critical to reconsider whether art is worth sacrificing for political popularity and to challenge the appeal of woke culture (Zhang 2022).

The debate surrounding the evolving nature of cinema is indeed multifaceted, reflecting the dynamic interplay between artistic expression and societal consciousness. At its core lies a tension between the imperative for greater inclusivity and the risk of oversimplification or tokenism. While there is a clear call for diverse representation and authentic storytelling, there is also a caution against sacrificing narrative depth for the sake of political correctness. Achieving a harmonious balance between these objectives is pivotal. Woke cinema, if executed thoughtfully, can serve as a powerful vehicle for social change while still delivering captivating narratives that resonate with audiences across diverse backgrounds. It is about weaving social commentary into storytelling seamlessly, allowing it to enhance rather than overshadow the narrative. Moreover, the film industry must remain receptive to evolving audience preferences and societal norms. As viewers become increasingly discerning and socially aware, there is a growing demand for films that not only entertain but also provoke thought and reflection on pertinent social issues. Ultimately, the success of woke cinema hinges on creators' ability to navigate this delicate balance with nuance and authenticity. By fostering intelligent conversations and remaining responsive to audience feedback, the industry can pave the way for a more inclusive and culturally resonant cinematic landscape.

It is a complex and varied debate about whether films are becoming too evocative for audiences. While forced representation and oversimplification are serious concerns,

there is a clear need for more diversity and real storytelling in films. Ultimately, the success of woke cinema will depend on how well creators can balance telling compelling stories and addressing social issues. The film industry must adapt to changing audiences and have intelligent conversations about how it impacts culture and society. Finding this balance, where social awareness enhances the narrative rather than overshadowing it, is critical to the future of cinema.

The controversy surrounding the movie industry and woke culture reflects broader societal debates about representation, social justice, and artistic freedom. On one hand, there is a push for greater diversity and inclusivity in films, with audiences demanding more authentic portrayals of underrepresented groups and narratives that address pressing social issues. This movement towards woke cinema is seen as a positive step towards challenging traditional stereotypes and promoting empathy and understanding. However, this shift is not without its critics. Some argue that the push for diversity and inclusion has led to tokenism or forced representation, where characters or storylines are included solely for the sake of meeting diversity quotas rather than enriching the narrative. Others contend that the emphasis on social justice issues has stifled creative freedom, leading to a homogenization of content and the exclusion of certain viewpoints. Furthermore, there are concerns about cancel culture within the industry, where individuals or projects deemed problematic are swiftly condemned and ostracized, sometimes without due process or consideration for context. Navigating these complexities requires a nuanced approach. While there is a clear need for greater diversity and representation in films, it is essential to ensure that these efforts are genuine and respectful, rather than tokenistic or exploitative. Moreover, fostering open dialogue and encouraging diverse perspectives within the industry can help mitigate the risks of censorship and ensure that a variety of voices are heard. Ultimately, finding common ground between artistic integrity, social responsibility, and audience expectations is key to addressing the controversy surrounding the movie industry and woke culture. It is a delicate balancing act that requires ongoing reflection, collaboration, and a commitment to fostering a more inclusive and equitable cinematic landscape.

CHAPTER 4. AUTHENTICITY IN BRAND CULTURE

4.1. Minority-inclusive Brand Campaigns

the history of the advertising market, the integration of minorities and, in particular, of people of different ethnic groups has been almost non-existent till recent years.⁴ This is especially important to note in the example of the United States of America, where blacks are not just a minority, but are one of the significant groups in American society. However, given the long history of oppression of this group of people, there is also an almost complete absence of black representation in advertising campaigns. In the 1940s and 1950s, these critical years of sociocultural and demographic change, the portrayal of African-Americans in advertising began to change: “Social changes and values influenced how the advertiser portrayed black people. In 1948, seven years after the very first television commercial, Jax Bear aired its first commercial starring African-American actors” (McDonald, R. E., Laverie, D. A., & Manis, K. T., 2021, p. 585). A television commercial for Wisk laundry detergent produced by Lever Brothers in 1963 was the first integrated commercial featuring two boys playing baseball. This was followed by an advertisement for another Lever Brothers detergent, All, in which famous television personality Art Linkletter interviewed an African-American housewife about her problems with laundry. However, for several years, African-American actors were rarely used in advertising. One of the first African-American celebrities to become a brand ambassador was comedian Bill Cosby in the mid-1960s, thanks to his fame from appearing on the TV show *I Spy*, first for White Owl Cigars and then for Coca Cola:

⁴There are a lot of authors who analyze the woke impact on brand authenticity and brand communication. McDonald (2020) in his article gives an historical analysis between advertising and society, Vredenburg and Kapitan (2020) examines how correlate authentic brand activism and “woke-washing”, here they try to differentiate real brand activism and “woke-washing” campaigns. Miguel and Miranda (2022) considers the role of social media in the proliferation and promotion of brand activism.

In the 1970s, he became Jell-O's spokesman for this long and successful campaign. Aside from celebrities, it was years before African-American actors began appearing frequently in American television commercials. Many early commercials used exclusively African-American actors rather than integrated actors, presumably because the advertisements were aimed at this segment of the market. This can be seen, for example, in some fast-food restaurant advertisements in the late 1990s. One notable exception is Coca Cola's 1971 Hilltop commercial ("*I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke*"), famous in part for its unique cast of actors from around the world (McDonald, R. E., Laverie, D. A., & Manis, K. T., 2021, 586).

Coca-Cola is no stranger to using diversity in its advertising. In the 1980s, the company's famous commercial *I'd like to buy the world a Coca-Cola* was released. During the filming of a Coca-Cola commercial, young people from all over the world sing the song *I wish I could buy the whole world a Coca-Cola*. The ad was considered innovative because it united people of all ethnic groups and nationalities around the common interests of Coca-Cola and world peace. In short, his goal was to show that although people may come from different backgrounds, they all have something in common. Since then, Coca-Cola has continued to create campaigns that unite all kinds of people through a simple bottle of Coca-Cola.

The Coca Cola Hilltop commercial was one such advertisement and may be an early example of an advertiser trying to influence the values of a society. In 1984, Pepsi introduced *Thriller*, starring Michael Jackson, which featured the next generation of Pepsi lovers. The advertisements featured white and black children, reflecting changes in social values and norms. Perhaps parallel to the integration of advertising was the integration of television itself. *Amos and Andy*, a television comedy adaptation of a popular radio show performed by white actors, appeared on CBS in 1951 with a predominantly black cast but in caricatured performances, prompting protests from the NAACP. *I Spy* was the first television drama to star African-American actor Bill Cosby in 1965. In 1968, Dye-Hann Carroll starred as a nurse in the television sitcom *Julia*:

A year later, *Room 222*, a drama set in a multiracial high school, featured a single cast. During this time, there were several television shows that regularly featured African-American actors in supporting roles, including *Hogan's Heroes* (1965),

Star Trek (1966), and *Mission: Impossible* (1966). Despite the show's integration into television, the actors in advertisements supporting the show tended to be predominantly white (McDonald, R. E., Laverie, D. A., & Manis, K. T. 2021, 587).

Returning to the 1980s narrative of consumerism, it is important to understand how mobilizations occur regarding the market and consumers, since it is the latter who buy products and therefore brands. Thus, consumerism began to gain some relevance in parallel with the birth of new social movements that expanded their activities using markets as their political arena, using consumer practices to effect change.

Consumer choice has been an important vehicle for activism. It is believed that various problems, such as those related to climate change or deforestation, can be solved if consumers begin to mobilize globally to put some pressure on corporations and other institutions, which takes the form of political activism. There are four different forms of consumer-oriented political activism: boycott, buyout, discursive consumer strategies and lifestyle politics. A boycott, in this case, is the refusal or abandonment of a product that may jeopardize a company's profits, affect its value in the market, damage its reputation, or increase public awareness of that particular product and its associated practices. Boycott, on the other hand, simply consists of choosing one product over another by expressing a more or less explicit opinion. This opinion may also be accompanied by discursive consumerism intended to confirm or explain the choices made. In this case, the behavior practiced by consumer-oriented social movements to communicate their intentions is cultural suppression or subversion. This activity consists of changing the meaning of advertising, changing the logo or slogan of a brand, as happened with Nike, Coca-Cola and McDonalds. Finally, lifestyle commitments involve taking responsibility and being aware of consumption, reducing it or changing it, such as veganism and vegetarianism. Accordingly, citizen movements are proving important in stimulating greater awareness and a sense of greater responsibility in the process of production and consumption. This influences consumer culture, political development and social change. Consequently, consumer choices can lead to positive changes in today's globalized world, affecting, for example, civil rights or environmental issues, to the point of requiring fundamental changes in all sectors.

4.2. Woke Culture and Corporate Storytelling

As woke culture continues to evolve, especially in the digital realm, brands find themselves without any means of escape. Today's consumers are very curious and seek information about various aspects, such as the ethical practices used in sourcing ingredients, the environmental impact of specific industries, and even a company's stance on gender representation. Brand activism becomes powerful when it involves a brand attempting to align itself with a social or political cause in a way where the brand's involvement in the cause appears more like a marketing strategy to capitalize on current trends than a genuine desire to make a positive impact. Activism aimed at fitting a brand into a socio-political context often results in negative reactions from consumers and the general public, as it can be seen as exploitative and opportunistic. This can be especially obvious when the goal being championed is not naturally aligned with the brand's identity, products or services, and may seem contrived and insincere. Brands that engage in superficial or one-off campaigns without demonstrating a deeper, more sustained commitment to a cause may be perceived as using activism as a mere marketing tactic, such as temporarily changing logos or using trending hashtags, without taking meaningful action or committing resources to support the cause. If a brand's internal practices and policies conflict with the values it promotes externally, this can lead to accusations of hypocrisy and attempts at forced brand activism. Failure to understand or respect the cultural nuances and sensitivities surrounding a particular issue can result in a brand appearing insensitive and out of touch. Brand activism can be seen as an evolution of corporate social responsibility, which emphasizes that organizations have a broader responsibility to society that goes beyond business profitability and wealth creation: "CSIs are generally considered voluntary corporate activities that are aimed at improving or addressing a social or environmental issue" (Miguel A., Miranda S., 3). They typically entail a commitment of resources (products, services, volunteer time, cash) over a period of time. Often the initiatives involve a combination of resources:

For example, Warby Parker's CSI entails the donation of eyeglasses to someone in need for every purchase of eyeglasses and requires not only the donation of a good but also coordination and distribution systems for donations. These

initiatives are more involved than one-time cash contributions. Even if the initiative centers on cash, the funding reflects a long-term commitment tied to a specific program (e.g., development of a university center focused on social justice), not a general donation to an organization (Warren 2022, 169).

However, while corporate social responsibility programs are marketing or corporate oriented and have a high degree of alignment between corporate activities and a chosen social issue, brand activism is driven by social values that address the biggest and most pressing issues. problems facing society, even if they are often not directly related to the organization's core activities. Thus, the areas that fall under the umbrella of brand activism can include a wide range of political, social, economic, legal, environmental and labor causes. The key difference between brand activism and corporate social responsibility campaigns or corporate charity-focused marketing is that the latter usually deal with common, non-controversial social issues and are unlikely to cause negative reactions from stakeholders, while topics that issues addressed by brand activist campaigns, such as deforestation, racism, sexism or voting rights, are often controversial and polarizing, causing strong positive and negative reactions:

Christian Teut (2016) argues that companies are increasingly taking proactive stances on social issues, reflecting their values as brands, even at the risk of disaffecting some segments of their stakeholders. In fact, by addressing controversial and highly scrutinized topics that can impact a brand's image and reputation, brand activism involves greater uncertainty and risk than CSR or charity-related marketing campaigns, resulting in the need for brands to demonstrate a high degree of messaging practices. alignment. This also comes as stakeholders are increasingly questioning brand's true motivations for engaging in social issues, accusing brands of being inauthentic if they believe brand's involvement in social issues is primarily aimed at improving their performance (Miguel, Miranda, 2022).

Advertising campaigns that express corporate social culture are generally considered voluntary corporate activities aimed at improving or solving social or environmental problems and usually requiring the commitment of resources for a specified period of time:

D'Abrera, in his 2019 article *Get woke, go broke*, describes woke capitalism as a desire for radical and aggressive new standards, principles and strategies that completely undermine the purpose of their core business. Andrew Abela (2020), dean of the Busch School of Business at The Catholic University of America, explains: "In practice, woke capital does little more than pay tribute to progressive ideas through marketing and posturing". The problem for companies that play along is that supporters of many progressive causes are hostile to free enterprise itself. These critics may accuse firms of addressing social issues that are outside the scope of, or even contrary to, the firm's goals. For example, D'Abrera discusses misguided gender equality initiatives by companies, such as Target's push to create inclusive bathrooms in 2016, which are seen as going beyond business goals or objectives and demonstrating woke capitalism. Critics argue that by pursuing profits rather than social goals, firms will be able to improve social welfare. As Olivastro points out, success, not corporate awakening, improves the human condition (Warren 2022, 170).

In 2015, following the US Supreme Court's confirmation that LGBT plus couples could form official unions, many brands also took to social media in addition to advertising campaigns, publishing their own supportive or opposing interpretation of the decision in carefully crafted corporate messages. Companies such as Budweiser, Gap, Hilton Hotels and Coca-Cola have expressed their support for the LGBT community in general and legalized marriage rights in posts on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Tumblr:

In 2015, there were numerous commercials featuring gay couples, including Kohl's, Campbell's Soup and Tylenol. At this point, marketers began featuring same-sex couples to show that they understood gay pride and to recognize the need for inclusivity in the LGTBQ community. That same year, a Supreme Court decision legalized same-sex marriage anywhere in the country. Chobani's commercial featuring two women in bed was both sensual and sweet, but received negative response from a "Million Moms" (McDonald, R. E., Laverie, D. A., & Manis, K. T., 2021, 590).

It is unclear whether these messages were genuine signs of support or elaborate marketing, or perhaps a combination of both. The public reaction to the rainbow-themed posts from brands highlights a complex dynamic between corporate activism, consumer skepticism, and genuine social change. While many consumers appreciate and support brands that stand up for LGBTQ rights, there is also a growing awareness of corporate motives and the potential for “rainbow washing” – using LGBTQ symbols and messaging for marketing purposes without genuine commitment to the cause. In the case of Facebook’s rainbow profile picture tool, users’ suspicions reflect broader concerns about data privacy and the commodification of social justice movements. Some questioned whether the platform’s support for LGBTQ rights was sincere or simply a way to gather data on user sentiment. This skepticism underscores the importance of authenticity and transparency in corporate activism – consumers are increasingly wary of companies that prioritize optics over meaningful action. The backlash faced by these brands suggests that consumers are becoming more discerning and critical of corporate social responsibility efforts. To effectively engage with socially conscious consumers, brands need to demonstrate a genuine commitment to the causes they support, engage in meaningful dialogue with stakeholders, and prioritize tangible actions over superficial gestures. Building trust and credibility in this space requires ongoing effort and accountability, but the potential rewards – both in terms of brand loyalty and social impact – can be significant:

The rainbow-themed posts quickly sparked reactions from the brand's followers on almost every social media platform, leading to user debate and criticism of these pro-LGBTQ posts. Users questioned the authenticity and possibly ulterior motives of the companies suddenly showing support. For example, when Facebook released a new tool that added a rainbow shine to users’ profile pictures, some users questioned its motives and suspected it was a thinly disguised strategy by the platform to track user support or dissent. In short, the public responded, but perhaps not in the way the brand managers expected (Vilceanu M. O., Novak A.N., 2017, 146).

While social media allows brands to respond almost instantly to real-world events and incidents, it also allows consumers to respond to such campaigns in an honest, if not

always friendly, way. When the purpose of advertising is to promote a brand as well as advocate for social issues, the task becomes even more challenging. Political communication on social media is highly susceptible to minority and majority perceptions, even as consumers interpret and post their reflections and reactions to various public relations campaigns, social media discourse, and LGBTQ corporate messaging.

Some brands may decouple their communications from the brand's purpose, values and corporate practices when engaging in socio-political movements out of a sense of urgency and responsiveness to the market, which can lead to an awakening. For example, Nike continued to sponsor NFL teams that rejected Colin Kaepernick after he knelt to protest Black Lives Matter, despite counting Kaepernick as a supporter. In this example, firms and brands may mislead consumers about the firm's sociopolitical performance or the social benefits of a product. Thus, tactics may not reflect the brand's sustainable purpose, values, and prosocial corporate practices and lead to an emerging divide between the marketing message and supporting practices. Consumers may also perceive brands using social issues as a marketing ploy to sell more of their product, thereby questioning the motives as well as the social impact of brand activism that is not aligned with goals and values and is inconsistent with corporate practices. It is important to note that firms that have awakened minds may compromise the impact of genuine brand activity:

If consumers do not trust a brand's activism as a genuine way to drive social change to address sociopolitical issues, then the strategy becomes less effective in achieving social good. Activist marketing messages that contain unsubstantiated content or statements that are important to a customer's purchasing decision can cause irreparable damage to consumer trust (Vredenburg, J., Kapitan, S., Spry, A., & Kemper, J.A., 2020, 445).

Even world-famous brands such as Kraft Heinz could benefit from creating more explicit marketing messages about their prosocial practices. For example, when the US government experienced its longest shutdown on record in 2018–2019 and workers went without pay for more than a month, Kraft launched the *Kraft Now, Pay Later* initiative to provide food to those affected by the shutdown and also asked consumers donate to charity instead of paying Kraft. However, the campaign moved away from marketing

messages and focused on practice. Since Kraft was driven by intentional prosocial practices, it could benefit from promoting its actions through marketing messages, creating positive brand equity:

Brands in the authentic brand activism category are perceived as authentic because their purpose and brand values, activist marketing messages and pro-social corporate practices are aligned, for example, buy one, give one to shoemaker TOMS, ice cream maker Ben & Jerry's and clothing brand for outdoor activities Patagonia, whose values-based messages and practices are in sync with progressive social change (i.e. sustainability, equity, transparency). Ben & Jerry's has been committed to economic, social and product values since the 1980s (Vredenburg, J., Kapitan, S., Spry, A., & Kemper, J.A., 2020, 446).

Authentic brand activism is superior to other forms of brand activism for two reasons. First, it involves truthfully aligning activist marketing messages with pro-social, purpose- and values-driven corporate practices to serve as the necessary catalyst for social change. Secondly, it provides the best results for brand equity. When a brand is perceived as acting ethically and true to its values, these positive associations also become associated with the brand as part of the knowledge structure that consumers have about a particular brand. This can subsequently lead to positive reactions, which will also increase brand equity. In this way, authentic brand activists build brand equity for the current campaign and also increase the likelihood that future (authentic) campaigns will further contribute to brand equity. While many examples of genuine brand activism involve liberal, progressive positions on current issues, conservative brand activism can, by our definition (taking a non-neutral position on a controversial issue), also be authentic if the messaging and pro-social corporate practices are consistent with the expressed activity companies. purpose and values:

For example, the fast-food chicken restaurant Chick-Fil-A is well known for espousing conservative Christian values and embodying those values in practices ranging from closing on Sundays to donating to organizations that oppose gay marriage. Chick-Fil-A's messages of opposition to same-sex marriage and financial support of like-minded organizations are consistent with the firm's values, goals, and prosocial corporate practices necessary to classify them as

genuine brand activism (Vredenburg, J., Kapitan, S., Spry, A., & Kemper, J.A., 2020, 449).

Authentic brand activists have begun to rapidly shift their positions, in some cases adopting ideas and messages that are less consistent with their established reputations:

In an effort to reach younger audiences, Pepsi reached out to reality TV star Kendall Jenner and the Black Lives Matter cause in 2017. The ad featured images of a peaceful protester standing up to armed troops and highlighted the movement as Jenner delivered a can of Pepsi to the police and the protest turned into a party. Pepsi did not have a brand purpose, values, or associated history of pro-social corporate practices in support of Black Lives Matter, nor did it have a history of disseminating activist brand messages for other social causes. Online, the brand was almost unanimously criticized for its inauthentic approach. In this case, Kendall Jenner's Pepsi ad could be considered a wash: it had a strong activist message and a large platform and audience for its message; however, the brand did not have pro-social, values-based corporate practices that could support such a bold message (Vredenburg, J., Kapitan, S., Spry, A., & Kemper, J.A., 2020, 450).

Indeed, the cases reviewed here, from global operations such as Gillette, suggest that brand activism is steadily increasing and is likely to become ubiquitous. When viewing brand activism strategy through the lens of branding theory, which portrays brands and their attributes as networks of cognitively linked associations, brands strive to possess points of equality and points of difference to create equity. Consumer trends point to this trajectory of brand activity as people demand more accountability and responsibility from brands.

Examples of the observed disconnect between brand and cause come not only from inauthentic brand activists, such as razor maker Gillette, fighting toxic masculinity, but also from authentic brand activists, such as Ben & Jerry's, the ice cream brand, calling for an investigation into systemic racism. The theory points out why a brand can gain more brand equity from brand activity when it chooses a sociopolitical cause that is moderately and optimally incompatible. A moderate discrepancy between a brand's reputation through its explicit purpose and values and a socio-political issue such as men's razor manufacturer Gillette, coupled with toxic masculinity as a cause, creates an

opportunity for consumers to actively develop their understanding and expectations of the brand. Thus, a moderate mismatch between brand and purpose may be optimal for brands in terms of their brand activism outcomes. Whether moderate incongruence between a brand activist cause will ultimately generate a positive or negative reaction depends in part on whether the brand's position on the contested cause threatens or affirms the consumer's value:

For the mismatch between brand reputation and activism to be optimal for delivering consumer delight, three things are necessary: (1) the brand activist message represents a deviation from standard norms and/or the brand's past reputation, (2) the viewer perceives a deviation from non-threatening, and (3) the brand deviates from the social norm in a limited but not extreme way (Vredenburg, J., Kapitan, S., Spry, A., & Kemper, J.A., 2020, 452).

In general, the goals, objectives and end states of brand activism remain unclear and uncontrolled, as do traditional institutions that also include social benefit as a core guiding principle, such as governments, schools and religious organizations. Brands that take a position should not emphasize small or unimportant benefits; rather, they should focus on substantive efforts in the activist arena. Misleading and irrelevant statements on packaging and/or promotional materials can also create confusion: "To alleviate this confusion, brands could follow shoe brand All Bird's strategy: the firm has added carbon footprint metrics to its shoes, indicating a specific amount of carbon emissions (i.e. 7.1 kg of carbon per shoe)" (Vredenburg, J., Kapitan, S., Spry, A., & Kemper, J.A., 2020, 453). Likewise, brands can indicate what percentage of profits from a product or service goes toward refugee resettlement, criminal justice funding, or lobbying efforts by anti-political action committees. If a brand seeks to demonstrate its sincere investment and commitment to social change through its activist stance, establishing and articulating specific benchmarks will promote consumer trust in the process.

Woke culture and corporate social responsibility (CSR) culture intersect in several ways, reflecting broader societal shifts towards increased social consciousness and accountability in both consumer behavior and corporate practices. Woke culture emphasizes awareness and activism around social justice issues such as racial equality, LGBTQ+ rights, environmental sustainability, and economic equity. Similarly, CSR

culture focuses on businesses taking responsibility for their impact on society and the environment. Companies that embrace both cultures seek to align their values and actions with these broader social and environmental concerns. In today's marketplace, consumers increasingly expect companies to not only deliver quality products and services but also demonstrate a commitment to social and environmental causes. Woke consumers, in particular, are vocal about supporting brands that align with their values and are quick to criticize those that engage in practices perceived as harmful or exploitative. As a result, companies often integrate woke principles into their CSR strategies to meet consumer expectations and enhance their brand reputation. Woke culture and CSR culture also influence internal company dynamics, particularly in terms of employee engagement and workplace culture. Employees, especially younger generations, are more likely to seek out employers that demonstrate a commitment to social responsibility and inclusivity. Companies that prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives as part of their CSR efforts can attract and retain top talent while fostering a more inclusive and supportive work environment. However, there are critiques and challenges associated with the intersection of woke culture and CSR culture. Some skeptics argue that companies engage in “woke-washing” or “greenwashing”, where they use superficial gestures of social or environmental responsibility to mask deeper issues or distract from harmful practices. Additionally, there is debate over the role of corporations in addressing systemic social and environmental problems, with some advocating for more substantial structural changes rather than relying solely on corporate philanthropy or PR campaigns. The convergence of woke culture and CSR culture reflects a broader trend towards corporate activism and social responsibility in response to changing consumer expectations and societal pressures. While there are inherent challenges and complexities in navigating this intersection, companies that authentically embrace these values can not only enhance their brand reputation but also contribute to positive social and environmental change.

CHAPTER 5. “WOKEISM” AND BRAND STORYTELLING

5.1. Going “Woke”: Brand Storytelling in Social Media

Currently, the most powerful tool for a brand’s communication with its target audience is social networks, where storytelling can be defined as the exchange of knowledge and meaning through digital resources. As a source of interaction, social networks have changed traditional methods of marketing communication, including the way brand followers interact and communicate, transforming their role from passive to active senders of brand messages:

In the context of the growing use of the Internet by mass audiences, the Internet has come to be seen as an indispensable means of communication between brands and their stakeholders. Currently, one of the main platforms on which these relationships are established is social networks. Whereas previously brand messages were communicated using traditional tactics such as public relations, advertising, marketing and sales promotion, with very limited opportunities for feedback, the features of social media have allowed companies to establish closer relationships with their stakeholders (Miguel, Miranda 2022, 3).

Brands have begun to use the Internet as an open forum to obtain information and transform possible negative influences into opportunities to improve their behavior and communication, especially on socio-political issues. With the help of social networks, brands can reach the widest possible audience, making it easier to distribute necessary messages on behalf of the company.

Digital media is a broader platform that allows to tell the story to potential consumers in the form of episodes or narratives. Stories can be educational, easy to remember, and allow a company to form deeper emotional relationships with its consumers. The brand narrative should drive favorable customer behavior and shape the

brand's perspective. Stories are essential to customer engagement. Bloggers are one type of online content creator; they write and/or upload content that reflects their thoughts, feelings and experiences. Marketers are trying to establish the social role of brands in digital media by affecting consumer's interests and determining their path to purchasing behavior.

Consumers are no longer simply recipients of communication messages, but instead are now constant participants in redefining the meaning of brands, constantly on the lookout for brands that elude core commercial intent and through which they can develop a personal identification. To meet consumer needs, brands need to show they are real and combat ambivalence by championing what they care about beyond commercial intent. In an industry where human rights and social justice issues are constantly under scrutiny, brands are emphasizing their socio-political voice by taking a stance to show that they are woke. Wokeness in the context of brand marketing communications will be understood as awareness and active attention to important facts and issues, especially issues of racial and social justice. This open-minded view of social issues can be part of a brand's integrated and consistent social activism efforts.

The ability of brands to communicate in new and innovative ways has been made possible by the power of digital technology and social media. We can definitely say that in modern marketing the main focus of attention is transferred not so much to the product or service itself, but to the experience and value that brands create. Storytelling is becoming one of the key areas in implementing marketing and communication strategies and reflecting the brand philosophy. When we talk about storytelling, it is not only about the message and its form, but also about brand promotion, product placement, customer-brand relationships and brand storytelling, integrating different narratives into the communication channels of the brand and its audience. Some researchers, such as Hughes, Bandoni and Pehlivan, argue that storytelling, or the art of storytelling, is an important tool for businesses to convey symbolic meaning, distinctive heritage and emotional responses. Storytelling can help communicate emotions, and communicating these brand traits influences customers. Therefore, storytelling is an important component of some branding techniques: "Brand storytelling is the communication of brands through stories, which Herskovitz and Crystal believe is critical for companies to educate consumers about their brand" (Gupta S. (2022), 183). According to Herskovitz and Crystal, brand storytelling includes all business communications and techniques aimed at

making customers aware of and remember a brand: “Delgado and Fernandez-Sabiote E. identified distinct groups of stories on websites using scores obtained on four aspects of successful brand storytelling, namely authenticity, brevity, reversal and humor, and a combination of these attributes” (Gupta S. (2022) 183). The brand narrative can be presented as a structure that integrates the brand’s image, origin, mission, goals and values, which will create an emotional connection with its audience. Brand storytelling can create emotional connections that enable stimulation, and can also be used to create mental connections in the customer's mind. Thus, all this, combined with other tools, helps increase brand loyalty, strengthens trust in the brand, and allows for personalized experiences, which leads to interaction between the storyteller and customers.

The use of social media strategies by brands through storytelling allows users to interact with the brand, which significantly increases their engagement. A second approach to the analysis of advertising campaigns and their connection with issues of social justice and minorities, issues of oppression was given by Sobande:

Analysis led to the identification of four subject positions related to issues of race and gender. They play a role in how marketers use ideas related to intersectional understandings of feminism, black social justice activism, and equality as part of the branding of woke courage: (1) White Savior, (2) Black Excellence, (3) Black Strong woman (and mother), (4) Woke agent of change. The white savior narrative position has been widely represented in film, and in advertising it foregrounds the point of view of the white man, who is traditionally presented as a selfless and authoritative person helping supposedly disenfranchised black people and/or non-black people of color (Sobande 2019, 2724).

This subject position implies hierarchical colonial relations without challenging the associated issues of racism, colonialism, and white supremacy. The white savior in modern marketing can be found in Pepsi’s first global campaign, *Live for Now* (2017), which illustrates how brands are trying to tap into public discourse around the concept of wokeness. The Pepsi Live for Now campaign features model and TV personality Kendall Jenner; a member of the famous Kardashian family, who constantly documents their lives on reality television. Jenner’s self-brand is shaped by her family’s collective public image, which is punctuated by criticism of their emulation of black culture, as well as their embrace of hypersexual and hyperfeminine gender performances. Jenner’s celebrity

status and what it stands for cannot be separated from what her presence in Live Now symbolizes:

In the second half of the Pepsi ad, Jenner decides to join the racially mixed protest crowd seen in her photo shoot. At the same time, without any explanation, she abruptly removes her blonde wig and abruptly hands it to the black woman helping her. Such a move immediately portrays the black woman as passive, subservient and unimportant, in contrast to the portrayal of Jenner as active and authoritative. When Jenner loses her wig, the ad cuts to a close-up shot of her face (faceism). This further highlights Jenner's central role in such marketing, as does the way she is photographed by a white photographer on set and by a hijab-wearing photographer who also joined the protest. Jenner has a standard white gaze through which this ad primarily examines scenes of protest. She is also what is idealized and looked upon; famous slim cisgender white woman. Pepsi's Live Now makes a strong reference, unintentionally or not, to the subject position of the "white savior" (Sobande 2019, 2725).

The subject position that Jenner symbolizes (the "white savior") implies that people can overcome race, racial differences, and issues related to racism simply by choosing to do so, or as Pepsi would have us believe by offering others a branded drink:

Negative reaction on "Live Now" fueled by social media and online black voices was so significant that Pepsi withdrew the ad, with multiple headlines highlighting the oxymoronic nature of such corporate activism: «When Wokeness Goes Wrong: Pepsi, Black Lives Matter and Conscious Branding» and Pepsi Removes Ads Accused of Downplaying Black Lives Matter (Sobande 2019, 2725).

In this regard, Pepsi's marketing approach can be seen as a bit of a misnomer, as it demonstrates the risks associated with brands attempting to position themselves as woke, especially by using images of black people that merely serve as a backdrop to portray a well-known white celebrity as brave:

The concept of black excellence contrasts with the subject position of the white savior, the latter of which depends on notions of the need for white people to help

and even save supposedly subordinated and disenfranchised blacks and people of color. Black excellence is often attributed to black people, who are seen as particularly self-reliant and exceptional when faced with adversity. This concept contrasts with media and market portrayals of blackness as deviance. Instead, it is more in line with ambitious ideas regarding black respectability politics and perceived socioeconomic success (Sobande 2019, 2726).

The term black excellence includes the experiences of black people whose personal and professional status are seen as challenging stereotypical and racist ideas about their incompetence and inferiority. Thus, while the concept of “black excellence” may be used to uplift black people and recognize their achievements, it often reinforces individualistic and classist ideas about what constitutes excellence and the value of black lives; academic qualifications, financial benefits, institutional awards and publicly presented awards:

It is for this reason that the implementation of the concept of black excellence can actually contrast significantly with liberationist politics, which argues that black people do not have to prove the value of their lives to white people and through structures rooted in institutional whiteness in the pursuit of achieving their goals. Liberty. After all, the road to black liberation is not paved with attractiveness and respectability. Discussions about Black excellence are far from limited to Black communities, as they have sparked the interest of contemporary marketing and media practitioners: From Pulitzer Kendrick to Beychella: How the Mainstream Awakened to Black Excellence (Sobande 2019, 2727).

Unmatched (2015) Gatorade is a prime example of coded messages of “black excellence” in the service of brands:

The one-minute commercial opens with footage of world-class professional tennis players Venus and Serena Williams pausing to smile between training sessions with their father (Richard Williams) when they were children. Portions of such videos are used in several commercials, including Nike “Just Do It” and “Voice of Faith” (2018). The constant reuse of this footage shows how Serena Williams's iconicity and the story of her rise have become a mythologized resource that marketers often turn to Nike “Just Do It” and “Voice of Faith”: The

Serena Williams ad stands out and is similar to Gatorade's *Unmatched*, with one of the few major differences being that the former does not feature Serena's spoken words, personifying the power of Serena's visible talent and fame (Sobande 2019, 2727).

In *Unmatched*, black excellence is mobilized in a way that symbolizes the challenges associated with adversity, openly addressing intersecting issues related to racism, sexism. The advertising campaign demonstrates the difficulties overcome, glorifies strong character traits, and practically glorifies them. Unlike Pepsi's *Live Now* approach, Gatorade's *Unmatched* does not appear to be trying to tap into the concerns of black social justice activists to present the brand as woke. Rather, *Unmatched* can be interpreted as existing on a spectrum of woke marketing efforts, including those that are more akin to images of blackness stemming from a corporate black aesthetic, as part of the construction of brand narratives based on neoliberal and aspirational ideas rather than anti-racist.

The third type (the strong black woman mother) is also well represented in Nike's 2018 *Until We All Conquer* advert, where tennis great Serena Williams is depicted in a way that directly addresses issues of race and gender, where she reflects on how she has never been the right woman large and self-confident, not that kind of mother. The rather bland focus on Serena Williams as a mother and athlete in *Sisters in Sweat* results in a portrayal of her that can be interpreted as a re-imagining of the stereotypical strong black woman position, portraying Serena as a strong black woman and mother without defining or limiting her. Her image is only a reference to this. While *Sisters in a Sweat* focuses on Serena's strong words of encouragement to her daughter regarding girl power and championship aspirations, it also foregrounds messages about the strength of the bonds between women as mother and daughter, as friends, as teammates:

Such advertisements shy away from promoting overtly political messages; the fact that they do so, but in ways that signal awareness of the issues involved and wokeness, reflects the vastness of the modern economy of visibility; cultures in which profit-oriented logic almost always trumps potentially resistant and activist ideas (Sobande 2019, 2728).

The subject position of the “woke change agent” is relatively ambiguous and involves brands attempting to signal that they are committed to helping shape social change, often without specifying how this will be achieved or what kind of social change it will be.

Nike’s 2018 Dream Crazy ad campaign, compared to Equality, features numerous athletes. Narrated by professional American football player and activist Colin Kaepernick, *Dream Crazy* may mark a continuation of Nike’s efforts to establish itself as a woke company. A brand that offers products they call “authentic cultural assets” due to their connection to blackness and the “coolness” that is often attributed to it. Kaepernick’s Dream Crazy narrative includes statements such as if being a refugee, don’t let that stopping from playing football for the national team at 16, accompanied by footage of Canadian professional football player Alphonso Boyle Davis, who formerly lived in a refugee camp in Ghana. Paying tribute to the successes of black athletes like LeBron James, referring to Serena Williams, Kaepernick says that to be a girl from Compton, is not being a tennis player, be the greatest athlete of all time. This commentary is another example of how brands are using implicit messages related to black excellence, exclusivity, and the iconicity of black celebrities as part of woke marketing efforts that demonstrate how brands are promoting the idea of the marketplace as a place of racial equality embodied in black actors playing high-status roles in multiracial ensembles:

Brands’ use of disembodied expressions of blackness relates to marketing content that emphasizes the narratives of black people without paying much attention to their visual representation. The disembodied and somewhat excluded presence of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Ram Trucks’ “Built to Serve” is a key example of this marketing approach, as its narrative is based on King’s sermon. The commercial, which aired during the 2018 Super Bowl, begins with a black screen with white text reading Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., February 4, 1968 and then spoke 50 years ago (Sobande 2019, 2730).

Brand activism has become an important topic in marketing. It can take many forms, but essentially this phenomenon occurs when a brand embraces a cause and, based on its core values, addresses social, cultural or environmental issues through its marketing and advertising channels.

Woke bravery marketing, in which brands use images and ideas that may at first seem associated with social justice sentiments, is a complex and relatively recent topic of media coverage and academic research. Brands and celebrities who are seen as having appropriated rhetoric and ideas about social justice in the pursuit of profit have come under fire: How businesses and common bitches killed got woke: Whose slang is it anyway? The problem with 'bait for Wokeness and Social Justice Advocacy and Justin Timberlake's Fake Wokeness and Lack of Accountability Won't Succeed in 2018. In contrast, some commercial organizations, including US magazine Teen Vogue, have been praised and benefited from the perception of their active efforts to raise awareness of systemic and intersecting inequalities (Sobande 2019, 2731).

Given today's paradigm, in which the act of consumption carries the same weight as voting, the space for neutrality appears to be narrowed as consumer's demand brands act as civic activists and be part of the dialogue in social debates and movements. To match this, some brands are using woke advertising as their new strategy to break with the conservative corporate veneer and respond to the growing demand for wokeness, authenticity and realism.

However, these approaches can often backfire. Woke-washing advertising is the result of an obsession or desire to wake up in which there is a certain inconsistency between the brand's message and what it actually does in business. From high-profile corporations to underground fashion brands, brands are often subject to fierce accusations that they are tackling gender inequality, racism, mental health stigma, LGBTQ+ discrimination and other social issues. In 2019, Gillette decided to reframe the old slogan "*the best a man can get*" to "*the best a man can be*" in an effort to address the issue of toxic masculinity. The message went in the wrong direction, with consumers accusing the brand of hypocrisy by pretending to be part of the #MeToo movement while benefiting from the so-called pink tax. One would think that Nike's campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick or Pepsi's call for protests against racism would be isolated examples, but over the past few years, many woke-washing cases have prompted resolution of the battle between being and pretending:

In the popular press, we see firms being called hypocrites when they adopt CSIs that are inconsistent with the firms' practices or values. For example, Apple, Nike,

Adidas, Spotify and L'Oreal have been accused of hypocrisy for adopting pro-BLM initiatives while having no Black members on their corporate boards. Similarly, accusations of hypocrisy have been aimed at Amazon's support of BLM when it resisted disclosing pay gap data, which was important information for identifying racial pay disparities, and at firms that use advertising to promote gender equality, while firms' activities do not match messaging. Thus, inconsistencies between companies' corporate social responsibility and a firm's goals, values, or practices that are labeled woke or woke-washing generate claims of hypocrisy from organizational audiences (Warren 2022, 180).

Advertising communication researchers Beverland, Lindgreen, and Vink found that advertising can effectively reinforce and communicate authenticity if it contains cues of authenticity. While consumers may recognize the authenticity of some brand activism ads, they recognize that more and more brands are now using social issues as a marketing gimmick for sales purposes:

In an industry where brands strive to convey brand authenticity through various forms of advertising and claim to be woke by showing their support for certain social issues, it still remains to be explored how consumers identify woke lingerie advertisements and how this influences the perception of authentic brands when their message is conveyed not this way. It seems logical that when brands express their social activist positions and promote activist messages, they should do so with sincerity. However, the recent emergence of the term woke-up washing advertising in society has proven the relevance of understanding the authenticity of a brand's social activism advertising, or lack thereof, in a new light. Specifically, woke-washing is defined as brands that have a vague or vague message about the practice of social causes but try to position themselves as concerned with issues of inequality and social issues (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry 2020, 447).

Although trail washing is associated with several different definitions in the academic literature, in general its use is intended to convey that a firm is presenting itself as being involved or concerned with social issues when some or all of its practices are inconsistent with this presentation. Because of this discrepancy, critics argue that the firm's efforts are superficial or inauthentic:

The social justice aspect of the woke-washing label goes beyond racial issues like those highlighted by the BLM movement to include a wide range of inequalities related to gender, sexual preference, civil rights, immigration and economic need. For COVID-19-related social initiatives, social justice criticisms focus on mistreatment of workers, failure to share resources with the community, dissemination of inaccurate information, and unequal access to health initiatives (Warren 2022, 181).

Understanding authenticity seems relatively simple, but its definition has been subject to varying interpretations throughout history due to different philosophical perspectives, contexts, and significance to people. The philosophers Heidegger and Sartre first approached authenticity as closely related to moral behavior, where people are considered authentic if they are sincere, accept responsibility for their actions, and make explicit choices based on values. Authenticity is now a complex conundrum, to the point that, according to Potter, when it comes to the modern search for authenticity, the irony is that the only way to find what we really need is to stop looking. Authenticity is commonly associated with the words reality, truthfulness and authenticity. However, this basic understanding requires much more explanation and does not fully capture the concept of authenticity. The definition of authenticity is still contested and debated among scholars, but based on the interaction of the above-mentioned perspectives, authenticity can be characterized as being authentic, transparent, and true to oneself and others. Given the social constructivist stance of this thesis, it remains relevant to reinforce the assumption that authenticity is subjective and socially constructed. Thus, brand authenticity arises from consumers' subjective perceptions and perceptions of the brand and is shaped by the brand's marketing efforts and communications:

Along with the call for authenticity, the branding and advertising industry is seeing a rise in activist messaging and brands becoming civic activists. Pressing social issues related to inequality, social justice and discrimination caused reactions from individuals and gradually the term woke gained its weight in society. Because brands are expected to meet consumers' needs and reflect their thoughts, consumers have begun to see brands taking a stand on controversial socio-political issues and leaning towards forms of brand social activism.

Consequently, in the interplay of socio-politics, brands and activism, a variety of marketing practices and communication strategies have emerged. In today's marketplace, consumers want brands to take a stand on socio-political issues. When brands align activist messages, goals and values with pro-social corporate practices, they exhibit true brand activism, creating the greatest potential for social change and the greatest gains in brand equity. In contrast, brands that separate their activist messages from their goals, values and practices are implementing inauthentic brand activism through the practice of woke-washing, potentially misleading consumers with their claims, damaging both their brand reputation and the potential for social change (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry 2020, 449).

To be woke is to engage with the social causes that are considered imperative and challenging in our time. In this sense, the concept of woke citizenship means compassion and an ethic of care, faith in democracy, an equal society and social institutions that keep the extremes of poverty and wealth under control. This is embedded in the idea that people are constantly creating their identity projects and, as consumers, hope that organizations can understand people's values, helping them to be true to themselves and what they believe. Reflexively woke consumers make purchases based on their beliefs, praise and champion brands that align with their values, and vouch for brands that care about the social and controversial issues they care about.

Brands cannot exist separately from their consumers, so if there are woke consumers, then woke brands are needed. Based on the definition of wokeness, woke brands can be defined as those that take a stance on social issues and align activist messages, causes and values with pro-social corporate practices. Thus, the concept of woke brands relates to the social activism of brands. Woke's advertising follows some of the principles of public service advertising and brand activism advertising; however, it focuses on controversial current controversies in society related to awakened issues and is more straightforward. The ongoing crisis of social issues and the leading public outbreak of activism have prompted brands to demonstrate what they stand for on these issues, at least in terms of verbal promises.

Through a woke advertising strategy, brands take responsibility for creating a lasting positive impact and meaningful contribution to society. However, instead of

serving the desired purpose, some of these advertisements may backfire and cause negative reactions:

Researchers have conceptualized two concepts of consumers, namely passive woke consumers and active woke consumers, to further determine what type of consumers they are evolving into. Moreover, the researchers conducted an experimental study to determine changes in consumer behavior before and after exposure to wake-up ads. Three hundred eighty-five (385) participants from the metropolitan area were randomly selected based on criteria developed by the researchers. In addition, paired t-test and descriptive analysis were used in data analysis. This study found that awakening advertising improves overall consumer attitudes and brand perception among Filipino consumers. However, they are not the main contributor to increased purchase intentions (Cristobal, Del Prado, Cagampan 2022, 2).

The existence of woke advertising is not entirely new. This is a type of advertising strategy that gives brands the opportunity to connect with consumers on a more personal level, raising awareness about issues that matter to them: “Brands that take public positions on divisive socio-political issues are engaging in the act of brand activism. But when these brands include their position in their advertising campaigns, it is now called woke advertising. Because most consumers, especially millennials and Gen Z, are interested in social movements, there has been a shift in how brands conduct their advertising, leading to the birth of a symbolic approach to branding called woke advertising” (Cristobal, Del Prado, Cagampan 2022, 2). Thus, brand activity can be conveyed through awakening advertising. Examples of woke advertising include public statements about political events, promotions related to socio-political topics, or commercials addressing key issues:

From boycotting Gillette razors and burning Nike sneakers to canceling Costco memberships, consumers are reacting loudly to brands taking a stand. Procter & Gamble-owned razor brand Gillette addressed the issue of toxic masculinity in a 2019 viral video campaign. However, with 901,000 dislikes on YouTube and only 468,000 likes in the first few weeks of the campaign alone (Al-Muslim 2019), many expressed alienation and criticism of the activist. Following Colin

Kaepernick's iconic 2018 “Crazy Dream” campaign during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests around the world, brands including Nike stepped up advocacy in support of racial justice, but consumers and critics pointed out a woeful lack of supportive values, goals and practices. such as having black council members. However, even clear transparency about a brand's practices and values in support of socio-political issues does not protect brand activists from controversy. Brands that support specific public health efforts (such as Costco encouraging shoppers to wear masks in stores) during the Covid-19 pandemic have faced resistance, membership cancellations, and boycotts from consumers who find the issue controversial. Brands now seem comfortable alienating some consumers to address controversial and polarizing socio-political issues (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry 2020, 453).

Brand perception is not how a company perceives itself, but how consumers feel about the brand. Customer usage, experience, availability, reliability, and word-of-mouth recommendations all contribute to brand perception. Consumers are more likely to choose a brand over a competitor if they have a positive perception of the brand. Responsible consumption is becoming a dominant theme in developed markets. Although consumers place the most importance on a product's value, most consider the company's values. Thus, in recent years, more and more companies and brands are engaging in public discussion of socio-political issues such as racism, gender equality, healthcare reform and the like. When a company joins the public debate on these issues, the difference between the company's position and consumer opinion will influence how consumers respond to the company. Consumers are the backbone of any business. What consumers see, think, prefer and buy is essential for marketers to fine-tune their marketing offers and achieve high levels of consumer acceptance and satisfaction. Many factors, features and characteristics influence a person's decision-making process and purchasing habits. Consumer behavior is the result of each of these factors. These factors include functional, cultural, social, personal and psychological factors. By identifying and understanding the factors that influence consumers, brands are able to develop strategy, marketing messages and advertising campaigns more effectively and more in line with the needs and mindset of their target consumers:

Consumers around the world, especially Gen Z and Millennials, are using youth's moral authority and social media savvy to protest climate change. A 2016 study of 1,860 adults in the United Kingdom found that 61% would pay up to £20 (\$25) per month to avoid climate-related deaths in 2050, 2080 and. Respondents to a 2017 study in Lisbon and Adelaide, Australia, indicated that they would be willing to pay as much money to avoid negative climate impacts on future generations as to protect themselves Everuss (Cristobal, Del Prado, Cagampan 2022, 3).

However, as brands become social and political activists, their underlying motivations come under increasing scrutiny, and negative attribution can hinder business profitability and equity. In other words, consumers may not trust brands when they engage in activism:

Marketing academics and practitioners have highlighted the importance of authenticity in brand activity and the danger of brands not 'keeping up with the times', with 56% of consumers indicating that too many brands are now using social as primarily a marketing ploy to sell more of your products. At the same time, consumers increasingly expect big brands to get involved in the social and political sphere: 65% of people want companies and CEOs to take a stance on social issues (Cristobal, Del Prado, Cagampan 2022, 4).

In the interface between marketing and society, brands have struggled to keep up with rapid social changes while simultaneously promoting their products to minority and mainstream consumers:

With regard to wokeness labeling, firms face a significant group that rejects the underlying activity because it does not align with the purpose of the business (it is woke). Unlike greenwashing or sweatshops labeling, the woke label is used by two opposing camps, and firms will suffer if they go too far in either direction if they are seen as too committed to social issues (awakened) or insufficiently accomplished (awakened by washing). When using wake-up labeling, companies must carefully strike a balance between two groups of critics (Warren 2022, 170).

As brands increasingly engage in social and political activism, consumers are indeed scrutinizing their motivations more closely. Consumers are becoming more discerning about whether brands' activism aligns with their core values and business practices. If there is a perception that a brand's activism is merely a marketing tactic or a form of “woke-washing”, consumers are likely to distrust the brand and view its efforts as insincere. There is a prevailing skepticism among consumers regarding corporate motives for engaging in activism. Many consumers are wary of brands that appear to prioritize profit over genuine social or environmental change. This cynicism can erode trust and lead consumers to question the authenticity of a brand's activism. In an era of social media and heightened public awareness, brands are under pressure to demonstrate their commitment to social and political causes. However, consumers are increasingly able to discern between genuine activism and performative activism as superficial gestures that lack substance or impact. Brands that engage in performative activism risk being seen as insincere and opportunistic. In today’s polarized climate, brands that take a stance on controversial social or political issues risk alienating segments of their customer base. Consumers may distrust brands that align with a particular ideology or agenda, leading to boycotts or negative sentiment. These factors collectively contribute to a growing consumer skepticism towards brands' activism. While some consumers may appreciate and support brands that take a stand on important issues, others may view such actions with suspicion. As a result, brands must tread carefully when engaging in activism, ensuring that their efforts are genuine, consistent, and aligned with their values and business practices. Building and maintaining consumer trust is essential for long-term profitability and equity, and brands that prioritize authenticity and transparency in their activism are more likely to succeed in the eyes of consumers. Ultimately, while engaging in activism can be fraught with risks, brands that approach it with authenticity, transparency, and a genuine commitment to positive change can build stronger relationships with consumers and contribute to meaningful social and political progress.

5.2. “Woke-washing” advertisements

When a company uses awakening strategies for its advertising campaigns, it focuses on important facts and issues to take a specific point of view. Such evocative

strategies can influence how future consumers evaluate not only the campaign itself, but also the brand and its attitude. The purpose of advertising is to change this attitude, and it is important to detect the changes that advertising makes in the consumer's attitude towards the brand through his internal evaluation. Therefore, this attitude is focused or directed towards the brand, it is evaluative in nature and it can be assumed that the attitude reflects a stable internal state. Attitude towards a brand can be considered as a result of positive or negative evaluations of the brand. These evaluations may directly lead to changes in attitude toward the brand, and these attitudes may indirectly influence attitude toward the brand through attitude toward the advertisement. Attitude towards advertising can be characterized as an evaluation of advertising. Thus, attitude towards advertising influences attitude towards the brand. The woke-washing poses a particular risk to the ability of genuine brand activism to lead to social change. Woke-washing that misrepresents a brand's activism message without any aligned pro-social goals, values, and practices risks diverting attention and revenue from legitimate nonprofits or organizations from consumers who vote for or against a cause by spending their dollars on brand. Such inauthentic brand activism may also generate messages that have the potential to mislead or mislead about the true practices and underlying meanings of sociopolitical participation, further reinforcing the importance of the aforementioned implications.

The success of authentic brand activism depends on the extent to which brands protect perceptions of authenticity. If consumers don't trust a brand's activism—for example, because of washing, unclear and vague language in marketing or business activities, or unclear relationships with nonprofits—then brand activation efforts are less likely to lead to real social change. Trust in authenticity is fundamental to brand activity. Flipping the M in the brand's logo to resemble a “W” in honor of International Women’s Day is a cute and eye-catching move. But this is just empty symbolism unless the brand can describe how it practices celebrating and empowering women the rest of the time. Posting a black square on Instagram during Blackout Tuesday is also a colorful decision, but it is also just symbolic without substance, which could end up being a costly mistake. For example, after launching the Race Together campaign, Starbucks soon learned the hard way how important it is to back up your easy, wake-up messages with action. Being an active advocate can effectively fight injustice, but propaganda without practice and not only a declaration, but also specific consistent actions will definitely lead to unpleasant

consequences and can even lead to a boycott of a particular brand. So a brand makes a promise, creates expectations, and then doesn't deliver at all or doesn't deliver:

M&M's has rebranded its beloved talking M&M characters with a cute makeover with a 'woke' message, symbolically repositioning the brand as inclusive. Specifically, green and brown M&Ms, both women, traded in their go-go boots and high heels, respectively, for athletic shoes and low heels. According to CNN, Mars President Anton Vincent called the changes a subtle hint suggesting a more representative female character. However, people had mixed feelings. Some ridiculed the move and questioned whether people were still allowed to eat the characters (Mirzaei 2022).

The Pepsi ad featuring Kendall Jenner serves as a prime example of the potential pitfalls of joining woke culture without fully understanding its complexities. The advertisement, which was intended to show a message of unity and peace, sparked controversy and backlash. It was seen as Pepsi's shallow attempt to capitalize on social justice movements, leading to accusations of insensitivity and exploitation. This incident highlights the importance of genuine understanding and representation when interacting with woke genuine culture. Superficial attempts to appeal to social justice ideals without a deeper commitment to the cause can easily backfire, leading to public relations disasters and exacerbating social divisions:

Posting comments, tagging friends, or using hashtags to connect with liked authors enable sharing and connections between users and brands. Bataineh and Al-Smadi proposed that user comments on specific posts represent the highest level of engagement, as a culmination of the process requiring that users follow the account, view the post, and decide to invest their attention and energy into expressing their reaction in active forms of brand participation that help account managers remain current with the views of their most engaged publics by monitoring various expressions of support, dissent, and non-commitment elicited by their brand communication. Comments on Instagram posts often include actual words, visuals, and links to further augment user engagement, resulting in a type of feedback to the brand which, if properly analyzed, can yield insights into public reaction to the brand's communication strategy. Beyond brand

management techniques, studying user comments is also a good way to look at the type of engagement users exhibit to politicized messages such as brands' support of same-sex civil rights. Brands need the feedback such analysis can yield, in order to determine what changes are necessary at various steps during a campaign (Vilceanu 2017, 150).

#StopTheBeautyTest by Dove is a classic example of a woke-washing campaign. Dove's "Stop The Beauty Test" initiative aimed to challenge society's traditional beauty norms. However, critics argue that the campaign may have strategically exploited the growing body positivity and self-love movement without making significant steps toward real change:

Experts believe Dove's parent company, Unilever, continues to support other brands such as Glow & Lovely that promote unrealistic beauty ideals, raising doubts about the sincerity of their commitment. Some argue that this campaign inadvertently reinforces the idea that women need validation from external sources, such as the corporation, rather than nurturing genuine self-acceptance and love (Rakshit 2023).

This campaign is a classic example of the delicate balance between genuine advocacy for social change and the potential exploitation of social issues for commercial gain. Over time, as brands collaborate with socio-political causes that may be more or less aligned with the brand and build their reputation, different results of brand activity can be observed:

Take Nike for example: when the company launched the now iconic Colin Kaepernick Black Lives Matter campaign, consumers reacted extremely positively in balance (i.e., with excitement) to what was a moderately inappropriate combination of brand and purpose coupled with Nike's lack of proven pro-social corporate practices, messages, goals and values. However, Nike's recent developments, such as declaring June 19 an annual paid corporate holiday, have been met with positive but noticeably milder consumer reactions (i.e., satisfaction). As our theoretical model shows, this muted response is because Nike has been steadily building a reputation for anti-racist corporate practices,

messages, goals, and values since it first vocally joined Black Live Matters in 2018 (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry 2020, 453).

Thus, the understanding of brand activism is changing as brand activism becomes more widespread, consumer understanding of such strategies will become more complex, and the implementation of brand activism will need to evolve similarly: “Another Edelman study states that globally, 64% of consumers will either buy or boycott a brand based solely on its stance on a social or political issue” (Rakshit, 2023). Social good is becoming mainstream. In an increasingly polarized society, controversial issues such as the climate crisis, Black Lives Matter and the #MeToo movement are serving as catalysts for mainstream brands to identify issues of social interest and refocus on delivering social good:

Any inclusion and diversity program is now considered a wake-up call, regardless of whether it relates to African Americans. In fact, any progressive step, regardless of context and concept, is now called awakened. From Minnie Mouse's new trouser suit to M&M's rebranding and even the neo-green socialists in Downing Street, woke has moved into contexts other than African-Americans. But part of this migration of the word woke was caused by anti-woke people. Opponents who ridicule and ridicule the concept refer to any progressive move as woke, which contributes to the increased use of the word in various situations (Mirzaei, 2022).

To prevent brand activism from becoming violent, brands must ensure that their communication efforts are deeply rooted in their values, consistent with their products and services, and involve real, ongoing action rather than just symbolic and temporary gestures. When a brand takes a position on a divisive social or political issue, it provides consumers with a unique opportunity to evaluate whether its moral foundations align with their own—that is, to evaluate the level of similarity of their own brand in the areas of moral values and judgments.

To name a few examples, in 2018, Nike launched an ad campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick in support of the Black Lives Matter movement, and in 2018, Airbnb ran an ad featuring their political stance to highlight stereotypes surrounding women and girls. An example of a successful brand activation campaign is when Starbucks took a stand on behalf of refugees by participating in the United Nations #WithRefugees Campaign and

committing to employ 10,000 refugees in opposition to the immigration ban. Consumers embraced this as a genuine way to raise awareness while taking significant action to make a positive impact.

5.3. Some Case-Studies

Femvertising, anti-racism initiatives, and LGBTQ+ education are important consequences of woke culture that reflect a growing awareness and commitment to social justice, equality, and inclusion. By challenging stereotypes, advocating for marginalized communities, and promoting greater understanding and acceptance, these initiatives contribute to positive social change and help build a more equitable and inclusive world:

There are many definitions of feminism because feminist politics contains many perspectives and experiences. Since its inception, feminism has been repeatedly criticized for its universalizing concept of womanhood, which actually centers white privileged women. Much of the public discourse surrounding feminism is primarily based on the views of cisgender women, whose gender identity conforms to societal expectations of self-identification for people assigned a female sex at birth. The experiences of trans and non-binary people have often been sidelined and even actively excluded from various strands of supposed feminist thought. Explanations of feminism often emphasize efforts to advance women's rights, strive to dismantle patriarchy and structural oppression, and ensure equal treatment of all people, regardless of their sex or gender identity (Sobande 2019, 2730).

Common sources of awakening advertising campaigns among brands have been the #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter and #Pride movements, highlighting injustice when it comes to gender, race or sexual orientation. The market for most brands today tends to be global and highly impacted by the social structural injustices rocking the world. One aspect of woke advertising campaigns is that they live on social media to generate online discussions about trending topics, and that the ultimate goal of brands is to increase sales by cultivating a brand identity rather than actually initiating social transformation. To begin with, inequality and gender stereotypes have been one of the hottest topics in

marketing for over 50 years, and companies are now increasingly being recognized for advertising that promotes gender equality. The advertising industry often portrays gender roles to promote products, and therefore researchers have demonstrated great interest in the portrayal of gender. Throughout history, firms have contributed to stereotypes about women's appearance and traditional roles in society by showing women as subordinates in advertisements more often than men.

Historically, the rise of the feminist movement in the 1960s challenged the concept of equal opportunity for men and women and initiated changes in professional opportunities and household structures, which in turn led to significant differences in men's and women's roles and, therefore, in how they are distributed. reflected in advertising. In terms of the most common stereotypes observed in advertising, women are most likely to be portrayed in a domestic setting or in a subordinate role, while men are most likely to be portrayed in an autonomous role or in an environment outside the home. Additionally, male stereotypes appear to be more common in humorous advertisements, whereas female stereotypes appear to be more common in non-humorous advertisements. Advertising that specifically promotes women's empowerment and gender inequality in scientific literature is called femvertisements. The term “femvertising” initially gained recognition in 2014 and was commonly attributed to an Advertising Week panel on the topic in October 2014, where it was used as a label for contemporary advertising campaigns that question traditional female gender stereotypes used in advertising:

The Me Too movement gained global attention after #MeToo went viral on Twitter as a result of online messages highlighting incidents of sexual harassment and assault, and in response to published allegations of sexual assault against film producer Harvey Weinstein. As the media covered #MeToo, it became apparent that, although the press often credited its origins to famous white women (actor Alyssa Milano and former actress Rose McGowan), #MeToo was in fact the result of the evolution of a black woman (Tarana Burke), an overlooked labor and activist effort (Sobande 2019, 2731).

Fem advertising includes images and cues designed to demonstrate a brand's support for gender equality and women's empowerment on a neoliberal and representational level:

Media and marketing, often seen as femme advertising, includes images and cues designed to signal a brand's support for equality and women's empowerment on a neoliberal and representational level. A striking example of how feminist ideas have been decontextualized and recontextualized through consumer culture is the use of the concept of "self-care" and its radical potential by black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde. Lorde's political position, underpinned by a critique of anti-black capitalism, is often reduced to marketing messages that imply that self-care begins and ends solely with consumerism (Sobande 2019, 2732).

Drake argues that femme advertising is widely known for its inclusion of female empowerment messages that inspire women to take control and responsibility for their identities and life choices. An important driving force behind the rise of femvertising has been the #MeToo movement, which has increased the number of women working in advertising and marketing, and has also contributed to the further development of successful femvertising campaigns, such as the Dove Real Beauty campaign in the US in 2004, which has led to a huge increase in advertising dedicated to women's issues. Like all woke marketing, femvertising has also been criticized for being inauthentic and femvertising. The advertising campaigns chosen for analysis are those published after 2017, as this was the beginning of the #MeToo movement and the beginning of a wider discussion around the image of women. Hashtag feminism is hashtag activism that is dedicated to furthering the feminist cause, and within the feminist movement, hashtag feminism is the name given to feminist activism organized through social media. In the feminist and gender justice movements, activists have used hashtags such as #MeToo, #HeForShe, and #HowIWillChange to document their tweets and Facebook posts as part of a larger feminist movement:

Feminist positions include those grounded in an explicitly black feminist and intersectional understanding of oppression that highlight how anti-black racism intersects with classism, sexism, experiences of migration, disability/ability, sexuality, and other power relations. Among feminist stances are ones based on decidedly Black feminist and intersectional understandings of oppression, which

stress how anti-Black racism overlaps with classism, sexism, experiences of migration, dis/ability, sexuality and other power relations. The word *misogynoir*, coined by Moya Bailey, and further developed by both Bailey and Trudy refers to Black women's experiences of interconnected anti-Black racism, misogyny, heteronormative sexism, and other interrelated forms of systemic oppression. *Misogynoir* was referenced in a viral 2016 Twitter post by white American singer-songwriter Katy Perry, and the term has moved through consumer culture in ways that rarely credit the term to the Black women who developed this crucial concept. Black women's experiences of oppression, and articulations of them, have commonly been (mis)used by mainstream popular culture, which does little, if anything, to address structural inequalities that Black women face. Relatedly, feminist advertising (often dubbed *femvertising*) has been the subject of analysis of how women are represented in marketing imagery, as well as how brands attempt to appeal to them (Sobande 2019, 2735).

#BlackLivesMatter on Twitter has also contributed significantly to the global movement based on the work of black queer women, founded and led by Patrisse Khan Cullors, Opal Tometi and Alicia Garza. Consequently, brands are overcoming pressure to present themselves as concerned with racism, sexism and interdependent oppression. As a result, BLM and various iterations of Black activism for social justice and racial politics have attracted the interest of celebrities and brands, as has the associated digital activism of Black people who participate in the online phenomenon known as "Black Twitter":

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) social justice movement was established in response to anti-Black structural oppression, violence and police brutality, resulting in the killing of Black people (adults and children), including Tanisha Anderson, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, and Trayvon Martin, to name but a few. The associated Twitter hashtag #BlackLivesMatter has contributed to a global movement underpinned by the work of Black queer women, founded and steered by Patrisse Khan Cullors, Opal Tometi and Alicia Garza (Sobande 2019, 2736).

Nike can be considered one of the most notable brands that has created a thematic brand image focusing on anti-racism and women's empowerment, launching dozens of

campaigns focused on woke advertising. One of the most talked about ads in the woke advertising space is Colin Kaepernick's iconic Nike Black Live Matters campaign in 2018. Although Nike is widely known for its themed advertising, this does not mean that these advertisements were received only positively. Like many other brands, Nike has been widely accused of being a washout, with arguments often centered around third world production conditions, non-existent pro-social corporate change and hypocrisy. Nike One Day's International Women's Day ad celebrates the women who have pushed the sports industry forward so that one day there will be no need to designate a special day for women's empowerment. The ad specifically glorifies female athletes who have spent years fighting and training to show the world incredible athletic achievements that portray them as strong, fast and skilled, including in comparison to male athletes. Among famous and decorated athletes such as Serena Williams, Alex Morgan and Naomi Osaka, the short film also features numerous unrecognized children and amateur athletes. The advertisement does not feature male characters, while diversity is well represented in the female characters' cultural background, skin color, age and appearance. The majestic classical music used in the ad complements the visuals, which show women marching at political events, crying with relief after winning, or running furiously to cross the finish line. The way the women are portrayed is very inspiring: the camera often shoots them from a low angle, their eyes full of determination and strength and looking straight into the camera. The sports featured in the advertisements also violate conventional standards of sports that are often associated with successful female athletes, as the advertisements feature videos of women boxing, skating, and playing American football, and sports often associated with successful male athletes.

Another Nike ad, *"The Strongest Athletes"*, showcases pregnant women and mothers as the strongest athletes. Over dramatic orchestral music, the narrator explains that the description of an athlete should not exclude mothers and pregnant women. In addition to this softer message, the ad's images show pregnant women and mothers participating in sports, including extreme or professional sports such as surfing, boxing, track running or weight lifting, while heavily pregnant. Women in the advertisement are also shown as resilient and strong people, as the painfulness of pregnancy and childbirth, the demanding role of childcare, and the willingness to expand gender roles are mentioned. Women in advertising are diverse: they include famous professional athletes such as Serena Williams and Fraser Price, but also unknown everyday women. The

narrator's overall message is that motherhood is not a factor preventing women from becoming professional athletes or participating in extreme sports. However, Nike also had problems when the opinion leaders they chose did not fully or incompletely share the declared values. Nike's "*Dream Crazy*" campaign. Nike's campaign, featuring Colin Kaepernick, a former NFL player known for his peaceful protests against racial injustice, was a clear endorsement of social activism and inclusion. The campaign slogan, "Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything", encouraged people to stand up for their beliefs. The Kaepernick video is meant to motivate people to try to be the best at anything, regardless of public opinion, skin color or injury. One of the slogans is "*Don't think that you are doing something crazy*". Kaepernick has been known in the United States since 2016, when he refused to stand for the US anthem before matches in protest against police violence against African-Americans - instead he knelt or sat. Some fans considered this disrespectful to American traditions. After the release of the Nike ad, social media users called for a boycott of the company, launched the #NikeBoycott tag, and also began publishing videos on YouTube in which the company's sneakers were burned.

One of Coca-Cola's "*Love is Love*" campaigns included LGBTQ+ themes and sought to support LGBTQ+ communities. However, despite this important step, the campaign was negatively received in some countries, such as Hungary. These examples show how international brands are incorporating the values associated with wokeism into their strategies, from tackling social issues and promoting inclusivity to supporting sustainability and celebrating diversity. However, perceptions of these initiatives may vary. Nike is one of the most recognizable brands on the planet, boasting an iconic swoosh logo and a famous three-word slogan. Founded in 1964 by Phil Knight and Bill Bowerman, the company was originally called Blue-Ribbon Sports before changing its name to Nike in 1978. Currently, no company spends more money on sports sponsorships than Nike. They include athletes Tiger Woods, Serena Williams and, of course, Michael Jordan, for whom they created the legendary sneakers that became known as Air Jordans. Sports stars such as Cristiano Ronaldo (soccer) and LeBron James (basketball) have signed lifetime contracts with Nike, meaning their partnership will continue even after they retire from the sport. Sportswear giant Nike was one of the first brands to speak out against the killing of George Floyd, twisting its famous slogan to tell viewers: Don't do it this time.

On May 29, 4 days after the death of George Floyd was captured on video, Nike released an ad that featured only white text on a black background. In the video, the brand urged viewers: Don't pretend there aren't problems in America. Don't turn back on racism. Don't put up with innocent lives being taken from us. Don't make any more excuses. Don't think this doesn't affect you. Don't sit and be silent. Don't think you can't be part of the change. Let's all be part of the change.

More brands have followed suit, releasing statements about how they stand against racism and support the Black Lives Matter movement. Some have been accused of empty virtue signaling or even exploiting protest movements for their own commercial gain. However, the Nike ad was generally well received. How has this brand managed to establish itself as a credible political voice? How Nike woke up and how this position fits into their broader marketing. Nike advertisements often feature the athletes they work with. However, the 2018 “Dream Crazy” campaign, released to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the “Just Do It” slogan, took a more political approach. The campaign featured former San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who gained attention in 2016 after he began “taking a knee” at football games during the national anthem. Kaepernick used the rally as a protest against police brutality against African Americans, but many conservatives (including the US President) accused him of disrespecting the flag. Kaepernick is suing the NFL for allegedly conspiring to keep him out of the league due to controversy surrounding his political protest. The Nike ad featured a close-up of Kaepernick's face in black and white with the words: Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything:

The backlash was immediate: #BurnYourNikes began to gain traction as conservatives took to social media to protest the brand's political stance. However, although Nike risked alienating some of its customers, the gamble paid off. After the release of Kaepernick's ad, Nike sales increased by 31% and the brand's value increased by \$6 billion” (Eilon 2023).

Clearly, Nike has a very precise understanding of who their core consumers are and what messages will resonate with that group. More importantly, by partnering with Kaepernick, Nike has gained significant credibility as a brand that cares about social justice issues. The “*Dream Crazy*” campaign isn't the first time Nike has used advertising

to promote its woke brand image. In 2017, they launched the “*Believe in More*” campaign, which features women from around the world who experience discrimination in sports. The advert, targeting the Middle East, was entitled “*What They Will Say About You*”. It featured parkour coach Amal Murad, figure skater Zahra Lari, pop singer Balkees Fathi, fencer Ines Boubakri and boxer Arifa Bseiso:

Other observers say Nike’s shift from advertising to politics could be troubling. Michael Serazio worries that this is just another elaborate trick by a major corporation: making us think we’re making a statement by buying Nike is an age-old scam that advertising has played, and played well. Brands are increasingly succumbing to the recent demand for politicization, causing consumers to question the political involvement of various corporations. Some argue that Nike is using the popular movement to boost its own sales while enjoying the prestige and celebrity status of its minority athletes. Another concern is that it takes attention away from how Nike products are made, often by workers in harsh working conditions in developing countries. According to Serazio, the new campaign risks shifting our attention away from the marginalized people who make things rather than the posturing it gives to those privileged enough to own them (Smith, Stroud 2018).

Gillette is a brand of men’s and women’s safety razors and other personal care products, including shaving accessories, owned by the multinational corporation Procter & Gamble. Gillette positions itself as a brand that offers the best shaving experience using cutting-edge technology. The company’s value lies in providing consumers with a high-quality shaving experience that is both affordable and convenient. By emphasizing this USP, Gillette has successfully differentiated itself from other brands and created a strong consumer preference for its products. In January 2019, razor brand Gillette launched one of the most talked about advertising campaigns called We Believe, where Gillette, an old school brand with the iconic slogan “*The best a man can get*”. The two-minute Gillette commercial features men and boys speaking out against stereotypes of masculinity such as bullying and sexual harassment. Consequently, Gillette took part in the debate surrounding the #Metoo movement and the idea of “boys will be boys” by changing its slogan from “*The Best a Man Can Get*” to “*The Best Men Can Be*”. However, the commercial received over 30 million views on Youtube, with more than double the

number of downvotes than the upvotes. Because the slogan was closely related to, but still distinctly different from, Gillette's 30-year-old slogan, many felt Gillette had no right to address the topic. While there were some positive reviews, the overall result of the campaign was overwhelmingly negative, as a much larger group disliked it, saying the advert was offensive to men and full of stereotypes.

Gillette themselves explain on their website that they want to acknowledge the fact that they play an important role in influencing culture and state that they want to promote positive, achievable, inclusive and healthy versions of what it means to be a man to demonstrate commitment, Gillette describes on their website how they are donating \$1 million annually for three years to a non-profit organization for the same purpose. The case of Gillette putting up a controversial online ad on Youtube, knowing in advance it would get both positive and negative reaction is illustrative of the need to put the 'Theorem' forward. The ad, references the controversial term 'toxic masculinity' and in its first half depicts men ignoring a wide variety of terrible behaviours. These actions include grown men watching two boys fighting and simply saying 'boys will be boys' interrupting a woman making a point in a meeting; and a man making an inappropriate advance at a woman. The ad then turns its attention to encouraging men to discourage such behaviors and indicates that Gillette aims to help lead the effort by changing its slogan to '*The Best a Man Can Be*': "The Gillette ad promptly landed a spot as one of the 25 most disliked video in Youtube's entire history and the company received many complaints from male users of the product. Yet, Gillette's parent company, Procter and Gamble, defended the ad, citing its appeal to many millennials and positive response to questions about the brand's commitment to social responsibility" (Taylor 2019, 1). In spite of these defenses, a deeper look at some research on reaction to the Gillette ad suggests that the brand took a significant hit in terms of brand sentiment and purchase intention among the target audience. While skepticism is often expressed about the effectiveness of boycotts in the long run, there can be little doubt based on the depth of reaction that many customers will never return to being Gillette users:

What I find unfortunate about this situation is that Gillette unnecessarily alienated a large number of loyal customers, some of whom had been buying its product for decades. In the following days in the media, Gillette did not express any regret towards those offended by the ad. I see a significant ethical issue with this in that

if one is to believe a company cares about society as a whole, one would think that that company would care about people who had spent large sums of money on their product over long periods of time. Those viewers who defend alienating customers because the message may conform to their beliefs should be cognizant of the fact that a day may come when a brand they are loyal to for many makes a political statement they find problematic (Taylor 2019, 1).

H&M is a Swedish retailer and global leader in fast fashion, and they, like many, talk about inclusivity and diversity in their communications statements. In it, they say they want to pave the way for a more inclusive world, and tell us they value diversity in people and ideas, as well as personal style. If this is their mission, why hasn't their commitment to creating a diverse and inclusive work environment been translated into their marketing? The event occurred in January 2018, shortly after H&M's sales plummeted in the first quarter, leaving the company with \$4.3 billion worth of unsold inventory. In 2018, H&M was accused of racism and condemned by thousands of people around the world both on and off social media. Given that H&M says it values diversity and inclusion, why has their marketing failed to reflect these stated values. In 2018, H&M faced major backlash when it released an ad featuring a black boy (5-year-old Liam Mungo) wearing a green sweatshirt. The green hoodie said in capital letters, Coolest Monkey in the Jungle. The inappropriateness of the image was reinforced by another ad that featured a white child with the words mangrove jungle survival expert written on his sweatshirt. This problem was hard to ignore. The word monkey has long been used as a racial slur against black people. Monkey slurs were used not only to denigrate black people, but also to justify oppression and slavery. Today in 2021, black people are still dehumanized and attacked with the word monkey. Why was a monkey chosen for this ad? Parents have been known to use the epitaph little monkey or sassy monkey with their children. If this was the original and intended meaning, it is lost. Social media users and public figures around the world criticized the H&M ad, spawning the hashtag #BoycottHM.

The terms H&M's coolest monkey and H&M is racist trended on Google throughout January, showing the level of interest and outrage. Even influencers, from politicians to singers, took to social media to express their disappointment with the brand. The Weekend, a Black Canadian singer, tweeted: Woke up this morning shocked and

embarrassed by this photo. I am deeply offended and will not work with him again. He appeared in H&M advertisements, but after his statement he severed ties with the brand. Protests also occurred offline. In South Africa, activists and protesters vandalized H&M stores, prompting police intervention:

Due to these protests, H&M had to temporarily close its stores in South Africa. Thus, H&M faced a serious backlash. H&M apologized after the incident. Their initial apology was not well received, with people complaining that H&M was sorry for the offence, not necessarily for running the ad. The updated apology quickly spread in the public sphere. It said: We understand that many people are upset by this image. We at H&M can only agree. We deeply regret that the photograph was taken and we also regret the print itself. Therefore, we have removed not only the image from our channels, but also the clothing from our offer. We will thoroughly investigate why this happened to prevent the same mistake from happening again (Arima&Co 2023).

In its statement, H&M tells us that racism was unintentional, while acknowledging its equally problematic status. Whether intentional or not, this incident happened because H&M didn't think about its black audience. Dove Beauty launched the Real Beauty campaign in 2004, becoming one of the first brands to base its identity on “female advertising” campaign and led the Dove Self-Esteem Project as part of the Real Beauty campaign. The Real Beauty campaign sparked a national conversation about beauty ideals and started a trend of using socially conscious issues in marketing. He has also faced criticism ranging from performative activism to racism in marketing. The Real Beauty campaign set a precedent for a new era of corporate social responsibility and made Dove Beauty one of the most socially and financially successful beauty brands in the world.

The Dove Real Beauty campaign is a self-proclaimed agent of change designed to educate and inspire girls to have a broader understanding of beauty and help them feel more confident in themselves. To prepare for the campaign, Dove sponsored the book “The Real Truths About Beauty: A Global Study” to understand how women define beauty; how satisfied they are with their beauty; how they feel about the portrayal of female beauty in society; and how beauty affects their well-being.

The Real Beauty campaign was based on three promises: “*We always feature real women, not models. We portray women as they are in real life. We help girls gain*

confidence and improve self-esteem” (Dove 2021). The promise of showcasing everyday women, not models, became the centerpiece of the campaign as the beauty and fashion industries rely on the cycle of thinness to perpetuate unattainable beauty.

Dove Real Beauty Campaigns feature real women by name and reflect the diversity of the population, without misrepresenting women, and the women featured endorse those images. The first phase of the campaign was a series of billboards showing photographs of ordinary women instead of professional models. The idea was to challenge society's standards of beauty and showcase the beauty rather than the insecurities of women. The contrast between the sincerity of the brand's message and its ultimate goal of making a profit is a major criticism of the Dove Real Beauty campaign.

Dove was one of the first companies to base its brand on women's advertising. Since the launch of the Real Beauty campaign, other brands have followed suit to capitalize on feminism. Cover Girl used this technique in her #GirlsCan campaign, launched in February 2014. The campaign was about identifying and rewarding everything that makes a girl take on a challenge; break down these barriers and turn “you can't” into “you can”. The intended consequence was an increase in cosmetics purchases. In June 2014, Pantene launched #ShineStrong with the short film Sorry Not Sorry, which shows how women constantly apologize. The goal was to start a national conversation and help women stop apologizing for their existence through shiny hair. Rounding out 2014 is Always, which sells pads and other menstrual products. Their #LikeAGirl campaign began with a video that debuted at the Super Bowl. It asked women, men, boys and girls who had not yet reached puberty to demonstrate what it meant to run and illustrate how being a girl was associated with weakness. All of the above brands based their marketing plans on women's advertising rather than their product in hopes of attracting consumers.

Over the years, Dove has also conducted a series of racist marketing campaigns. In 2011, Dove printed an ad featuring a black woman next to a Latina woman next to a white woman. The words “Before” and “After” are placed above women, “Before” is above women of color, and “After” is above a white woman, implying that black women need improvement and white women are desirable. Then, in 2014, Dove found itself in hot water again after it labeled a product “for normal to dark skin”, implying that dark skin was abnormal. Both times, Dove issued a statement reiterating its commitment to real beauty but denying any intentional wrongdoing. The resolution of both errors

culminated on October 6, 2017, when Dove published an ad that showed a black woman taking off her T-shirt to reveal a white woman, who then took off her T-shirt to reveal an Asian woman. Although unintentional, Dove depicted a black woman turning into a white woman as a result of using its product, playing into the harmful, racist narrative that white women are clean and black women are dirty. The ad featured a black woman removing her top to reveal a white woman underneath, presumably after using Dove body lotion. The white woman then takes off her top and turns into a Middle Eastern woman. The ad was criticized on social media for its racist overtones and was removed. On October 7, Dove released a statement on Twitter:

The image we recently posted on Facebook is not a thoughtful representation of women of color. We deeply regret the offense caused. On October 9, Dove released a statement outlining its apology. After the ad was removed, Dove, which is owned by Unilever, tweeted: “The image we recently posted on Facebook is inappropriate for its thoughtful portrayal of women of color. We deeply regret the offense this has caused (Slawson 2017).

A further statement from Dove said: “As part of the Dove body wash campaign, a three-second video clip was posted on the US Facebook page. “It didn’t reflect the diversity of true beauty that Dove is passionate about and that is at the core of our beliefs, and it shouldn’t have happened:

We have removed the post and have not published any other related content. We deeply and sincerely apologize for any offense caused. However, the damage was done, and the nearly 3,000 comments on the tweet were almost exclusively negative. Many social media users called for a boycott of Dove products (Slawson 2017).

The Dove Real Beauty campaign changed modern marketing and started a trend of companies basing their brands on corporate social responsibility. With the help of Jess Weiner, Dove has proven its commitment to boosting the self-confidence of young girls with the launch of the Dove Self-Esteem Project. Although the Real Beauty campaign was controversial due to the capitalist incentive to promote feminism and acts of racism committed by Dove, the brand reaffirmed its commitment to its cause and took part in

real change, such as CROWN and donations to organizations fighting for systemic change. equality. The result was Dove's huge financial success, and Dove is still promoting the idea today:

Despite women occupying top positions, the fight for women's rights is still ongoing. The Me Too movement has focused its attention on combating sexual harassment and assault. This movement started online in 2006 and has gained momentum over the years. Mistreatment of women by individuals and companies has been exposed. The case of the powerful Harvey Weinstein showed how powerful men can exploit women. In Weinstein's case, he was accused of using his position to sexually assault and rape women. Weinstein's conviction has been described as a watershed moment for the Me Too movement. Victoria's Secret has been accused of humiliating its employees and treating women like commodities (McDonald, Laverie, Manis 2021, 595).

Victoria's Secret has indeed had a significant influence on popular perceptions of femininity, particularly in the realm of lingerie and beauty standards. Through its iconic fashion shows, catalogs, and marketing campaigns, Victoria's Secret became synonymous with a certain idealized image of femininity characterized by glamour, confidence, and sensuality. For many years, Victoria's Secret set the standard for what was considered desirable and attractive in terms of lingerie, with its models, known as "Angels", embodying a specific aesthetic of beauty and femininity. The brand's emphasis on fantasy, luxury, and aspiration contributed to its appeal and cultural impact, making it a global phenomenon and a touchstone for women seeking to emulate its image of femininity. However, it is important to acknowledge that Victoria's Secret narrow portrayal of femininity has also faced criticism for its lack of diversity and inclusivity. The brand has been accused of promoting unrealistic beauty standards, objectifying women, and perpetuating harmful stereotypes about body image and sexuality. In recent years, Victoria's Secret has faced increased scrutiny and backlash over its failure to evolve with changing societal norms and consumer expectations. Criticism of its lack of diversity, its treatment of models and employees, and its failure to adapt to shifting attitudes towards inclusivity and body positivity has prompted calls for the brand to reconsider its approach to marketing and representation. Among other things, the brand had very high-profile

scandals and revelations directly related to their outdated culture format within the company that did not correspond to the current reality:

Victoria's Secret has defined femininity for millions of women. His catalog and fashion shows were popular touchstones. For models, achieving Angel status almost guaranteed international fame. But inside the company, the two powerful men presided over an entrenched culture of misogyny, bullying and harassment, according to interviews with more than 30 current and former executives and employees, contractors and models, as well as court filings and other documents. Ed Razek, a longtime executive at L Brands, the parent company of Victoria's Secret, has been the subject of multiple complaints of inappropriate behavior. He tried to kiss models (Silver-Greenberg, Rosman, Maheshwari 2020).

Advertising and the media are key sites of cultural production that shape and are shaped by issues relating to race and black life, as capitalism and racism are inextricably intertwined. Given the influential role of advertising in reflecting and promoting cultural phenomena, including through its persuasive and political power, it is important to analyze (mis-)conceptions in its content. This includes the role of celebrity images and identity myths, as well as marketing negotiations around contemporary social justice movements.

These analyzes show how demographic and sociocultural changes, changes in social values, and legal/political issues are ways in which society influences advertising. On the other hand, the advertiser's reaction can affect society. Advertisers may act in such a way as to avoid alienating consumers, or they may be enlightened and align themselves with progressive issues (woke advertising). By examining the interaction between marketing and society, this study provides voice to important issues and how they have influenced images portrayed in advertising and the media, and it shows how marketers are monitoring social changes, as well as changes in the preferences of their consumers and the behavior of competitors:

Many consumers expect companies to take a stand on socio-political issues. This is evidenced by a study based on the opinions of 1,000 British consumers, which found that up to 80% of consumers will stop using a product or service provided by a company if they do not agree with the company's response to a particular issue. The same research points to consumer wariness about how brands

capitalize on socio-political issues as part of their marketing campaigns. Consequently, brands continue to face increasing pressure to position themselves as socially just, but in a way that feels authentic and is backed by real actions rather than their superficial image (Sobande 2019, 2740).

As a catalyst for brand activism, social media has also become one of the most important places for brands to express their support for activist initiatives. Social platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are now being used by a wide variety of leading brands to address controversial issues such as the climate crisis, #MeToo or the Black Lives Matter movement to identify issues of public interest and focus on giving back to the social benefits. However, while these campaigns may be well received by most stakeholders, they can also cause huge backlash from others. This is because most of the topics addressed by brand activism are controversial and polarized, and therefore cause very strong reactions from the public, and this effect is also amplified by social networks. Thus, brands should use social media as a way to listen to society, understand what social issues their core audiences, such as consumers and the community at large, care most about, in order to align their moral frameworks with those of their stakeholders. As brand activation campaigns and corporate activities are increasingly scrutinized in the digital world, companies must commit to a consistent message across all of their social media platforms, maintaining integrated communications across all of their platforms. Likewise, companies should combine activist advertising with concrete actions in support of advocated causes, both internally (for example, changing production or hiring practices) and externally (for example, donating or lobbying for those causes). In addition, companies must constantly monitor what is being said online about their behavior or their activism campaigns to ensure a quick and effective response to the event of negatively assessed activity.

CONCLUSION

The expansion of the scale of wokeism in the social and political spheres means its evolution as a comprehensive basis for solving systemic problems. While acknowledging its contribution, this thesis highlights some limitations and implications that deserve consideration.

One of the important aspects of this research relies on the study of the history of the term awakening, whose development can have different interpretations, as there are several points of view about its role and influence on modernity. Most importantly, it should be noted that the movement and its definition continue to evolve and acquire new meanings, supported by digital tools and bringing the fight for social justice and equality to a new level. The debate around the woke culture is really multifaceted and does not subside to this day, and such a discussion reflects deeper social tensions around issues of social justice, freedom of speech and the balance between promoting inclusivity and respect for individual rights and freedoms. Finding a common point of view and constructive dialogue among these polarized points of view remains a serious challenge.

Analyzing the impact of the manifestations of the woke culture in storytelling on social media demonstrates an increased awareness of social justice issues, increased representation of diverse voices and experiences on platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and others. As a result, the proliferation of narratives that challenge customary norms and highlight the struggles of underrepresented communities is increasing. However, along with this positive shift, there is also the phenomenon of cancel culture, which involves publicly condemning individuals or organizations for behaviors that are considered unacceptable by the standards of woke culture, which often manifests itself on social media, where campaigns to boycott or ostracize individuals or brands are rapidly gaining momentum. The study of woke culture highlights the contradiction between the desire for greater inclusivity and the need to respect individual rights and freedoms, proving the complexities and challenges associated with addressing these issues in an increasingly interconnected and digital world.

Considering the impact of woke culture on digital media and, above all, cinematography, as one of the key tools of inclusive mass culture, demonstrates, on the one hand, the ability to strengthen and increase representation and diversity by including diverse characters, narratives and points of view, as well as to break down stereotypes that have traditionally dominated. On the other hand, woke culture has been criticized for some potential negative consequences, in particular symbolical appropriations, when various characters are included superficially, without meaningful development or significance to the story. Secondly, the simplification of complex social problems for integration into fashionable storytelling, which leads to a lack of depth and possible reduction of them to easily digestible moral lessons. At the same time, censorship and self-censorship have become one of the significant problems due to the emphasis of the woke culture on political correctness and sensitivity to marginalized communities. As a result, as in general in digital communication, there is a contradiction in the field of cinematography and the risk of getting away from what one aspires to – the lack of diversity by limiting the range of points of view and free creativity, as examples of manipulation of historical facts or the cancellation of films, for example, *Gone with the Wind* and others. While the woke culture has undoubtedly generated important discussions and led to positive changes in cinema, it is important to remain critical and mindful of its potential pitfalls in order to promote a more inclusive and socially responsible film industry, which is one of the key tools of mass culture capable of reflecting and shaping public attitudes and values.

The study of the “woke” effect and its impact on the brand narrative is crucial in the modern socio-cultural landscape. Identity politics and the woke movement are deeply rooted in cultural shifts and social discussions about race, gender, sexuality and other markers of identity. By studying these dynamics, brands can better understand the context in which they operate and adapt their narrative accordingly. Consumers increasingly expect brands to take a stand on social issues and demonstrate a commitment to diversity, equity and inclusivity. Understanding the nuances of identity politics helps brands navigate this landscape reliably and effectively, avoiding accusations of symbolic or performative activism. Effective brand storytelling is based on building authentic connections with consumers. By engaging in critical debates about identity politics, brands can ensure that their narratives resonate with a diverse audience and reflect a genuine understanding of their values and experiences. Ignoring or incorrectly solving

problems related to identity politics can have serious consequences for brands, including negative reactions, boycotts and damage to reputation, such examples were given in the case analysis section of Gillette and H&M.

Studying the “woke” effect gives brands the knowledge and understanding to actively navigate potential risks and mitigate negative consequences. Among other things, the idea of inclusivity is not just a moral imperative; it is also a source of innovation and creativity. Brands that are meaningfully involved in identity politics can use new perspectives and cultural ideas to drive innovation in product development, marketing strategies, and more. Thus, exploring the “woke” effect and its impact on brand storytelling is essential for brands seeking to interact with today’s socially conscious consumers in an authentic, responsible and innovative way.

Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and social media platforms have revolutionized the way the brand communicates with consumers. The Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements have brought issues of racial and gender inequality to the forefront of public consciousness, in response to which some brands have expressed solidarity and taken concrete actions to address issues of diversity, equality and inclusivity in their organizations. Despite the growing trend towards awakened authenticity, brands are facing backlash and criticism for the way they address social justice issues. Critics claim that some brands are engaged in woke-washing, using social justice messages as a marketing tool, without making meaningful internal changes or solving systemic problems in their industries. The awakened authenticity in brand culture continues to evolve as social, political and cultural dynamics change.

The change in brand storytelling is demonstrated in cases of brands such as Nike, Dove, Reebok, Gillette and others. The impact of the woke culture on the brand narrative is significant: it has changed the way companies communicate their values, communicate with consumers and position themselves in the market. Brands are increasingly using diverse characters and narratives in their stories to reflect the realities of a diverse consumer base and promote inclusivity, and incorporate messages of social justice into their narratives to align with progressive values and ideas. Woke brands use user-generated content and community engagement as part of their storytelling strategies. This involves strengthening the voice of their clients and engaging in dialogue with them on social issues. The woke culture has had a profound impact on brand storytelling, spurring a shift towards more diverse, inclusive, and focused storytelling. Brands that adhere to

the principles of wokeism in their stories not only help to connect with socially conscious consumers, but also contribute to broader social and cultural change. At the same time, increased digitalization has made an additional contribution and increased the possibility of accelerating consumer reactions and expressing their attitude to brand campaigns, including negative experiences of brand cancellations, boycotts, etc. Thus, being controversial in the socio-cultural discourse, the topic of woke culture, making serious transformational changes in the communication of brands and consumers, remains very controversial in this area.

This thesis, aiming to analyze the main aspects of the relationship between the discourses of woke culture in digital media, as well as in brand storytelling, demonstrates the controversial and volatile nature of the woke concept, as well as the need to introduce caution and clarity into the ways in which woke is implemented in the communication sphere. In general, it was possible to show a variety of points of view on the problems of awakening culture and the role it plays in the development or change of communication tools, reflecting a broader shift in society towards greater awareness, activism and social change. The woke culture represents a significant shift in social norms, values and attitudes, especially with regard to social justice, equality and activism and their representation in communication. The analysis of its manifestations in modern communication helps to understand the main driving forces of this cultural shift and its consequences for various aspects of society, as it has a direct impact on the media, advertising and messaging, determining how brands and organizations communicate with their audience.

This analysis allows us to assess the impact of identity politics on digital communication tools and on brand storytelling. In addition, it helps to resolve contradictions and open a dialogue between different perspectives, which is an important step in solving complex social problems. In general, studying the woke culture helps to form a more authentic and inclusive society where everyone has the opportunity to express their views and feelings.

The influence of the woke culture and the political discourse around it can indeed cause contradictory reactions and perceptions, especially in the communication environment. This is because cultural changes and discussions of social issues can trigger emotional and intellectual reactions in people, especially if they relate to topics that are often considered sensitive or controversial. Some may see cultural shifts and discussions

around them as positive steps towards greater inclusivity, equality and diversity, while others may react to them with resistance due to fear of change or loss of the usual order of things. In addition, the political discourse around the woke culture can be a particularly acute point of contention, as various political groups may try to use these issues for their own purposes or present them in a certain light in order to achieve their goals. Thus, it is important to be aware of the contradictory perceptions and reactions to cultural changes and the political discourse around them and to strive for dialogue and mutual understanding in order to create a more constructive and inclusive society.

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