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BRAND ACTIVISM ON SOCIAL MEDIA
AS PERFORMATIVE:
HOW LIBERAL FEMINISM CAPITALIZES ON SOCIAL
JUSTICE ISSUES.

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Introduction

The reason for exploring the world of brand activism within this dissertation comes from personal experiences and interests. In 2021, I started advocating on Instagram, promoting human rights education in terms of intersectional feminism, LGBTQIA+ rights, and antispeciesism. I wanted to shed light on important issues such as oppressions and privileges: my goal was to inform, rather than perform.

I strongly believed, and still do believe, that the amplification of voices addressing feminist issues, especially those from marginal backgrounds or with an academic education, is essential. However, my exploration of online activism, particularly in the Italian context, showed a disturbing trend. In Italy, various feminist icons advocated a hybrid of liberal feminism and consumerism. These figures, mainly privileged heterosexual white women, embraced a ‘lean in’ ideology that was often at odds with the ideas put forth by radical feminists.

As I gained more followers, the number of requests for collaboration from brands also increased. At first, these partnerships were product-focused, and brands would offer to send me their products for sponsorship on my platform. Although they were not willing to compensate me in monetary terms because of the size of my audience, there were cases where brands inundated me with excessive offerings – such as seven free workout sets made from sustainable materials. I declined these offers after realizing the connection between overconsumption and the brands’ underlying motivations.

When I hit 10,000 followers, Amazon offered me 300 euros to create five promotional stories about a Women’s Month event they were holding in Milan. The corporation, notorious for its labor exploitation and environmental degradation, approached me – a feminist anticapitalist activist and advocate – to support an event that was their attempt at using the label of ‘feminism’ to improve their public image.

This encounter led to a major change in my perspective on performative activism. I previously criticized both individuals and brands for their involvement in performative allyship and liberal feminism on social media. However, after this episode, my attention

was directed mostly towards the analysis of the authenticity of brand activism. I became aware of the size of monetary rewards that influencers were getting and wondered what kind of payment larger players in the feminist advocacy space received for their content. The choice to refuse 300 euros for what seemed like minimal effort was not an easy one on my part, especially as a working student for whom such a sum holds considerable value. Many people, especially women and marginalized identities have indeed found security in the online world to achieve financial independence. While many instances of irresponsible influencing and encouragement by individuals to overconsume do occur, the primary responsibility for such practices lies with the brands and corporations that offer them the collaborations.

My thesis seeks to investigate the complexities of brand activism by using an intersectional feminist and anticapitalistic lens, which I elaborate on in the third chapter. In this concluding chapter, I delve into the critical feminist methodology through which the entire dissertation is written. Here, I explore the intricate relationship between liberal feminism and capitalism, particularly focusing on the liberal feminist techniques that are also employed by brand activism, and especially in the cases analyzed in the second chapter. One such technique is the utilization of emotional messages, tapping into the consumers' desire for connection with brands and an alignment with their values. With today's popularity of feminism – a liberal, 'pop' feminism – feminist messages have increasingly become a subject of advertisements and campaigns, through *femvertising* or feminist washing. Companies often create emotional ads that make us reflect on the experiences of marginalized communities. However, brand activism frequently embraces the concept of 'leaning in' akin to that of liberal feminism. Through their activist campaigns, brands often encourage individuals, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, to aspire for greatness, suggesting that if they believe in it enough, they can achieve anything, especially if they buy and use the right products. They basically urge marginalized individuals to overcome systemic oppressions solely through their willpower. In doing so, brands fail to recognize their complicity in perpetuating oppressions within the capitalist system from which they benefit. Operating within the realm of woke or ethical capitalism, these brands feign being morally concerned about social justice issues.

Within this third chapter, I clarify the critical methodology which serves as an overarching framework in which I wrote the dissertation, as the anticapitalist, intersectional feminist values align with my own beliefs and principles. This methodology informs the analysis of the seven case studies presented in the second chapter and provides a context for the conceptual framework of the first chapter.

In the second chapter, I undertake a comparative analysis of seven case studies of brand activism to substantiate my thesis that brand activism is performative. I select campaigns from Nike, Airbnb, Starbucks, Barilla, Anheuser-Busch, Lush, and Oatly, and utilizing five criteria, I measure the level of the performativity of their campaigns. I first explain what brand activism is, tracing its historical evolution through an examination of the main scholarly literature in the field. Then, I discuss how brands are now increasingly taking public stances on social movements and social justice issues.

I interrogate through the case studies whether brands are genuine in promoting the ideals of social causes or if their involvement in activism is motivated by profit and image enhancement. To do so, I analyze what the seven brands do before and after an activist campaign; what response they give to public backlash, if any; and whether they support the creators they engage in the campaigns and they fulfill their promises. I also assess their overall ethical positioning, if they are transparent in communications, and if there are any public accusations of labor exploitation, employee harassment, and other unethical behaviors inside and outside the company, considering all stakeholders. Through these cases, I aim to demonstrate that activism is performative when a brand fails to uphold ethical standards across all aspects of its operations. Furthermore, I delve into the concept of authenticity, to demonstrate that the difficulty in proving authentic motives complicates the distinction between genuine and not genuine activism. Consequently, I argue that all instances of brand activism may ultimately be performative.

At the beginning of the dissertation, I explore some of the necessary concepts that are required in understanding brand activism. From cyberactivism to the evolution of social media activism, I discuss the benefits and challenges of using social media platforms for advocacy. While social media is used by brands to increase their profits, genuine activism uses social media as a tool for orchestrating meaningful change.

Not all instances of social media activism are performative, some genuinely make a difference. However, in this landscape, performative allyship emerges driven by factors such as cancel culture and peer pressure, mirroring the motives behind brand activism.

As the dissertation unfolds, I adopt a critical intersectional feminist and anticapitalist lens to analyze brand activism, a discourse that has remained understudied in academia. Brand activism rose in the 2010s as an evolution of corporate social responsibility, and it has tremendous power over how people perceive feminism, while also providing corporations with profit through their appropriation of revolutionary language and social justice ideals. This dissertation aims to provide insight into the intricate dynamics of capitalism, feminism, and performativity in brand activism that should prompt a thorough reevaluation of its social effects.

Chapter I

A conceptual framework of social justice movements, social media activism and performative allyship

Introduction

Social media activism can draw social justice issues into the spotlight and, as such, it is becoming indispensable in new forms of social action.

The conceptual framework presented in the first chapter of the thesis lays out the context and follows the path of the development and transformation of social media activism. This started with the first protests such as the Arab Spring and continued with recent movements that were either born online or used social media to boast their engagement. One segment of the chapter looks at the benefits and drawbacks of social media for social change, focusing on the democratizing power of social media, with advantages such as global communications, the sharing of information, and fast mobilization.

On the other hand, it examines the risks of social media, the threat to disadvantaged groups, echo chambers, filter bubbles, and slacktivism.

The following section in the chapter discusses the extension of social media activism into society at large, showing concrete examples of advocates and activists who use their own lives to motivate social change. It also examines the birth and influence of online movements such as BLM, #MeToo, SayHerName, and FridaysForFuture, which raise the voices of marginalized people and promote social dialogue on a massive scale.

Lastly, in the third and concluding section of the chapter, the difficulties of being an authentic ally are unveiled, and the ideas of performance allyship and gestures are explored. This conversation also provides insight into cancel culture, which may be the source of the superficial forms of activism so often exhibited by individuals and by brands, and companies.

1. Understanding cyberactivism

As a driving force in social and political change, activism unites individuals and communities around the common task of pursuing their ideals and ideas. For the last two decades, digital media and the Internet have been employed for social change and political protests. There are many terms to define these forms of activism: digital activism refers to the use of digital technologies, mobile phones, and Internet-enabled devices; social media for social change refers to the use of social media, and e-activism to the use of all electronic devices.¹

Social scientist Philip N. Howard defined cyberactivism as “the act of using the internet to advance a political cause that is difficult to advance offline,” adding that “the goal of such activism is often to create intellectually and emotionally compelling digital artifacts that tell stories of injustice, interpret history, and advocate for particular political outcomes.”²

Activism, in all its various forms, has always existed. Human beings have always advocated for their rights and engaged in efforts to bring about social or political change. Social movements have a long and wide history in Europe, from the peasant uprisings of ancient Greece and Rome to modern times. We are now observing a new wave of global social movements, and these are very closely linked to the era of globalization because they very often become paradigmatic of modernity.³ These movements are largely facilitated by the Internet, making cyberactivism the most prominent and effective means of organizing and advocating for global causes. The ability of the Internet to facilitate the communication and aggregation of individuals and groups at will, anywhere in the world, has led to a new international activism in which the virtual world is used as the medium of choice for promoting various social, political, and environmental causes.

The internet has always revolved around the concept of networking, especially in connecting people. Protests and activism are also concerned with networking, where people with shared interests or concerns come together, either in a physical place, such

¹ M. Joyce (ed) (2010) *Digital Activism Decoded: The New Mechanics of Change*, International Debate Education Association, pp. viii-ix.

² Howard, P. N. (2010). *The Digital Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Information Technology and Political Islam*. United States: Oxford University Press, USA, p. 145.

³ *The History of Social Movements in Global Perspective: A Survey*. (2017). United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan UK, pp. 1-4.

as a square, in the streets of a city, in front of a government building, or through online initiatives.⁴ Apart from providing activists with a global stage that can mobilize people across the world, and transcend geographical boundaries, the arrival of the digital age has revolutionized activism in other forms that will be discussed further in this chapter. The rise of social media and the Internet has made advocacy advance and enabled activists to communicate their messages with incredible speed to a wide audience. This speeds up response and enables individuals to get active immediately on issues they care about. Through email chains and direct messaging, activists can collectively inundate key decision-makers, such as politicians, urging them to institute the necessary changes. In the early 2000s, social media emerged as a dynamic tool for social activism, and its role includes educational purposes, opinionated discussion, organization of action, and offline rallies and marches.⁵

1.1 Historical context and evolution of social media activism

The earliest forms of digital activism can be traced back to the late 1990s when the Internet became within reach of many. One of the earliest movements and prominent examples of how digital networks can drive social change is the Zapatista uprising of 1994. Thousands of indigenous peasants formed the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional to combat extreme poverty and advocate for the rights of indigenous communities in Chiapas, Mexico. This movement used the Internet as a tool for global mobilization⁶: through email chains, Usenet newsgroups, and Internet lists⁷.

A global definite change in the use of the Internet for activism however happened in the early 2000s with the commercialization of the Web, when services were created that provided opportunities for people to get actively involved in social and political causes. These services were not designed for activism, but they could be used and were used by

⁴ Cyberactivism: Online Activism in Theory and Practice. (2013). United States: Taylor & Francis, p. 25.

⁵ Le Compte, D., Klug, D. (2021). "It's Viral!" – A study of the behaviors, practices, and motivations of TikTok Social Activists. In Companion Publication of the 2021 Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing (CSCW '21 Companion), October 23–27, 2021, Virtual Event, USA.

⁶ Garrido, Maria and Alexander Halavais (2003). 'Mapping networks of support for the Zapatista movement', in Cyberactivism: online activism in theory and practice, M. McCaughey and M.D. Ayers (eds.), New York: Routledge, pp. 165-184.

⁷ Gelsomino M. (2010). The Zapatista Effect: Information Communication Technology Activism and Marginalized Communities, Faculty of Information Quarterly, 2(2), pp. 1-9.

activists to connect, organize, and mobilize support for their causes. In 2002, Scott Heiferman, an American community organizer, founded a website called Meetup.com that aimed to revitalize local communities and address social disconnection.⁸ In the first years of the twenty-first century, social networks were born, such as MySpace and Facebook, and their value for activism was quickly noticed. The platforms became more and more popular, and their popularity proved to be both a value and an obstacle to the effectiveness of digital activism. As the platforms were accessed by many, the sheer volume of participants made it complex to distinguish the genuine commitment of every individual, including their willingness to translate their online efforts into tangible real-life actions and long-term dedication to the causes, online and offline. Nevertheless, the popularity of social networks became a significant asset for activism, particularly in confrontations with governments. Large social media companies managed to rapidly develop a wide userbase, and governments in many countries were careful shutting off access, as they feared it would provoke considerable resistance. The fear of backlash from citizens, who viewed social media as essential channels of communication and free expression from the start, served as a protective shield for activists when challenging the authorities.⁹

As social media became widespread and virtually everyone began to use it, by the end of the first decade of the 2000s, what had started as email-list activism employing email chains and online forums, had become social media activism.

The Arab Spring uprisings of 2010-2011, a series of revolutions in the Middle East that began in Tunisia and spread in Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain, usually serve as a significant illustration of the transformative power of social media in shaping historical events. Although these uprisings were not initiated through social media, online platforms were helpful in the spread of the movement across borders. Twitter¹⁰ and Facebook helped organizing the protests, enabled communication among activists and accelerated the dissemination of information to the rest of the world, the West in particular. While

⁸ Sloboda, J. (2017). Enhancing the experience of cultural events through group attendance: a case study of meetup.com.

⁹ Scholz, T. (2010). 'Infrastructure: Its Transformation and Effect on Digital Activism', in *Digital Activism Decoded: The New Mechanics of Change*, M. Joyce (ed), International Debate Education Association, pp. 17-31.

¹⁰ Twitter was renamed 'X' by Elon Musk in July 2023. Despite this renaming, the website is still officially referred to as 'Twitter', and for consistency, it will continue to be referred to as 'Twitter' throughout this dissertation.

some have dubbed the Arab Spring as the ‘Twitter revolution’ it is essential to recognize that these revolutions might have occurred without social media. Professor Nahed Eltantawy emphasizes that while social media is a valuable resource for collective action, one must consider the broader context when analyzing these movements, including social and political factors, historical backgrounds, and resource availability.¹¹ Echoing this sentiment, American Libyan writer Hisham Matar argues that attributing the uprisings solely to the internet is an exaggeration, but since political dictatorships are still dominant, also dominating the narrative, social media was able to forge a new language for change.¹² In 2011, the Occupy movement was born in the United States. Inspired by the Arab Spring, the Occupy Wall Street protests shared a common drive: addressing injustice and inequality, challenging the power held by the top 1%. The emergence and evolution of social movements, like #Occupy, are tied to the dynamics of networking and organizing. Initially, platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter played pivotal roles in mobilizing supporters during the early organization stages, with the use of over one hundred thousand hashtags used to discuss the movement.¹³ However, as physical gathering spots were evicted in late 2011, the focus shifted to less publicly visible forms of organizing and networking, to ensure the survival of the campaign. According to American anthropologist Jeffrey S. Juris, in fact, social networks were used to organize crowds of individuals to come together at specific locations. Since social media may not be the most effective tool for establishing lasting connections, the key to creating sustainable movements is to keep protests going for a long time, physically occupying spaces to gradually make a lasting impact. This process builds a sense of community and solidarity within the movement.¹⁴

Following the Arab Spring and Occupy movements, several significant social and political movements harnessed the power of social media for activism. Black Lives Matter (BLM), started in 2013 and rose to prominence during 2020, when people began

¹¹ Elthanawy N. (2011). ‘Social Media in the Egyptian Revolution: Reconsidering Resource Mobilization Theory’, in *International Journal of Communication* 5 (2011), Feature 1207-1224.

¹² Role of Twitter and Facebook in Arab Spring uprising ‘overstated’. (2011) Irish Independent. <https://www.independent.ie/business/technology/role-of-twitter-and-facebook-in-arab-spring-uprising-overstated/26750643.html>

¹³ Macale S. (2011). Over 100k different hashtags used to discuss Occupy Wall Street on Twitter. The Next Web. <https://thenextweb.com/news/over-100k-different-hashtags-have-been-used-to-discuss-occupy-wall-street>

¹⁴ Juris J. S. (2012). ‘Reflections on #Occupy Everywhere: Social media, public space, and emerging logics of aggregation’ in *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (May 2012), pp. 259-279, p.268.

being more aware of racial injustice and police violence. BLM used platforms like Twitter and Instagram to mobilize supporters and share videos and updates about protests and incidents of brutality, drawing global attention to the issue. The #MeToo movement, which began in 2017, wanted to shed light on sexual harassment and assault in the media industry and in the workplace. It encouraged survivors to share their experiences using the hashtag, creating a safe space for dialogue and solidarity on platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Fridays for Future, initiated by Greta Thunberg in 2018, focuses on climate activism. The movement relied heavily on social media to organize global climate strikes and educate the public on climate change. SayHerName, an offshoot of BLM, emerged to emphasize police violence against black women and focus on the intersectionality of the issues of racism and sexism. Using social media since 2015, it draws attention to the often-overlooked stories of black women who are victims of police brutality.

These movements made use of social media to raise awareness and coordinate protests. Individuals had the opportunity to share their experiences fostering a sense of community and amplifying their messages advocating for social change. The significance of these movements lies in their ability to engage and mobilize a diverse audience sparking discussions and inspiring action on crucial social justice issues. Moreover, they have proven effective in bringing about changes, implementing policies, motivating the active participation of institutions, and influencing political elections.

1.2 Advantages of using social media for activism

Social media has proven to be a powerful tool for social change, facilitating global communication, expanding the reach of information, and enabling rapid mobilization and response to critical issues. Social media connect diverse individuals with varying perspectives; thus, messages reach audiences that might not otherwise have encountered them. This ability to bridge gaps and foster communication among different groups is immensely valuable for advancing social change and promoting justice. Sociologist Zeynep Tufekci delves into this idea when discussing the notion of a 'bridge tie'. The advent of Facebook brought a new dimension to the potential of networked activism. In social connections people have strong ties, close friends and family, and weak ties, acquaintances or colleagues. Traditionally, most individuals maintain strong ties with a

few people, those crucial for their well-being, while the number of weak ties can vary widely. Strong ties are resilient, often formed among those who live or work closely together; weak ties, on the other hand, may not receive the same attention. Social media has enabled individuals to share life events with a broad audience, including weak ties, maintaining relationships that might have faded without digital assistance. In the realm of political and social change, networking among people with weak ties is crucial: strong ties often share similar views, while weak ties can bridge groups with different ideologies. If a person posts about a political event, a colleague may see it from their profile and share it with their family and friends; the first person is called by social scientists the ‘bridge tie’, an individual connecting otherwise distinct social networks. Social media facilitates connections through weak ties, allowing political news and activist campaigns to reach diverse communities.¹⁵

The use of social media for social change also offers a notable advantage for NSMs or New Social Movements that came to prominence in the late 20th century. Differing from traditional movements that often centered on economic and class-related issues, NSMs focus on post-materialist and identity-based concerns encompassing culture, identity, the environment, human rights, and gender. Notable examples include the environmental movement, LGBTQ+ rights movements, feminist movements, and various identity-based movements pushing for social and political transformation.¹⁶ NSMs are crucial in contemporary democracies, since they safeguard the boundaries between established systems and individuals' lives. They generate collective identities, knowledge, and information, functioning as *milieus* where diverse groups and organizations interact. The adaptable structure of the internet enables the development of NSMs through social interactions and networking. As NSMs regard identities, they are products of social encounters: NSMs thrive if their messages are spread through ‘bridge ties’¹⁷. On the other hand, NSMs have often been portrayed negatively by traditional mass media. The misrepresentations of these movements are not solely due to social, political, or economic constraints of these channels, but also technological limitations. Traditional mass media

¹⁵ Tufekci, Z. (2021). *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*. Yale University Press, pp. 20-22.

¹⁶ New Social Movements in Oxford Reference.

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100232130>

¹⁷ Tufekci, Z. (2021). *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*. Yale University Press, pp. 20-22.

does not provide the necessary conditions for reflexive interactions that are needed to accurately represent the goals and activities of NSMs.¹⁸

While social media can offer numerous advantages for NSMs, it is important to acknowledge that it can also be a platform for toxic behaviors. According to Tufekci, early notions of the internet and cyberspace once portrayed it as a realm separate from the physical world, free from differences and inequalities between people. However, this is not the truth. Technology does not create entirely new behaviors but changes the context in which they occur, it is like playing the same game with new rules. While cultures evolve, basic human motivations persist, even in the context of social movements. The internet is not simply a distinct virtual world or a replica of the offline world. To understand protests that occur online we need to take into account different aspects of technology and what it can do.

Another advantage of social media activism is its accessibility. When discussing social movements, it is important to avoid simplistic notions that prioritize offline actions over online ones: street protests and online activism both can hold influence. While, online platforms are commonly used by street protesters to coordinate their activities, the digital space offers a level of accessibility for individuals with disabilities allowing a diverse range of people to participate. Individuals with disabilities, in fact, may face physical barriers that make street protests impractical. For these individuals, participating in physical rallies can pose environmental, physical, and social challenges.¹⁹ Actions such as protesting in crowds, marching, and dealing with noise can be daunting for people who require mobility assistance or have chronic illnesses or fatigue, as well as those with sensory sensitivities, like autistic and neurodivergent individuals. It becomes clear that a more nuanced perspective to understanding the relationship between online and offline activism is needed.²⁰ Finally, aside from being more accessible than offline forms of activism, online activism has empowered marginalized individuals to speak up. While traditional media should represent all members of society, they often prioritize content

¹⁸ Salter L. (2003). 'Democracy, New Social Movements, and the Internet: A Habermasian Analysis', in *Cyberactivism: online activism in theory and practice*, M. McCaughey and M.D. Ayers (eds.), New York: Routledge, pp. 117-145.

¹⁹ Bora D. et al. (2017). *ActVirtual: Making Public Activism Accessible*. Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis.

²⁰ Tufekci, Z. (2021). *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*. Yale University Press, pp. 130-131.

from and for dominant groups, sidelining marginalized voices. Critics have accused power elites of using media to further their interests often at the expense of ignoring or distorting viewpoints that challenge their agenda, especially if these come from marginalized voices.²¹

1.3 Drawbacks of social media activism

The power of social media is remarkably democratic, making it accessible to anyone. While this accessibility is empowering for marginalized voices and social justice movements, it also extends to those with harmful intentions, harm often directed at marginalized people themselves.²² Notably, groups like incels and men's rights activists exploit this digital landscape for negative purposes: men's rights activists or MRAs seek to reestablish male dominance and subjugate women, advocating for a return to a world where women are subordinate to men.²³ This harmful ideology often promotes violence against women, particularly feminists. Incels are usually heterosexual men who identify as involuntary celibates, struggling to engage in relationships with women. Blaming women, often derogatorily referred to as 'it' or 'np' in Italian, which stands for 'non person'²⁴, they find solace in online blogs and communities where they vent their frustrations.

Unfortunately, these online frustrations can sometimes manifest in real-world violence²⁵ due to the open nature of social media, which presents a double-edged sword that can both empower and endanger marginalized communities. The anonymity and accessibility of the internet give individuals a platform to express themselves, but it also makes it easier for hostility and radicalization to fester, ultimately posing a challenge to maintaining a safe online environment.

²¹ Ortiz J. Et al (2018). Giving Voice to the Voiceless: The Use of Digital Technologies by Marginalized Groups. Communications of the Association for Information System, Manuscript 4152.

²² Leidner D. (2018). 'Micro-activism gone awry' in Giving Voice to the Voiceless: The Use of Digital Technologies by Marginalized Groups. Ortiz J. Et al. Communications of the Association for Information System, Manuscript 4152.

²³ Sugiura, L. (2021). The Incel Rebellion: The Rise of the Manosphere and the Virtual War Against Women. Japan: Emerald Publishing Limited.

²⁴ Borriello, A. (2023). Incel: il fenomeno dei "celibi involontari". *Psicologi News*.
<https://psicologinews.it/incel-il-fenomeno-dei-celibi-involontari/>

²⁵ Townsend M. (2022). Experts fear rising global 'incel' culture could provoke terrorism. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/oct/30/global-incel-culture-terrorism-misogyny-violent-action-forums>

While it is important not to underestimate the potential of new communication mediums, it is essential to be cautious about being overly optimistic. Taking national elections as an example, they require convincing and mobilizing a large number of people. But those who follow a political candidate on Twitter are usually already supporters, while those that the political candidates want to convince are either not on Twitter, or they are only following the candidates they are interested in. The same goes for a lot of activist movements. Twitter and similar platforms serve as excellent tools for communication within a networked community of activists: they are useful for organizing events, important news, or significant insights. However, successful political activism is not as simple as communicating with like-minded peers: it is hard and challenging and about connecting with a diverse group of people.²⁶ Therefore, a challenge in the realm of digital activism is the presence of ‘echo chambers’ and ‘filter bubbles’. These phenomena occur when a person is exposed primarily to information that align with their existing beliefs and preferences. This happens because of social media algorithms that are set to show users what they might like and appreciate. There is a growing concern about these phenomena, since people might develop more extreme views, especially political ones, when solely exposed to ‘one side of every story’. Studies about ‘echo chambers’ and ‘filter bubbles’ are however inconclusive. They exist as phenomena online but a study by Bakshy et al. in 2015²⁷ of 10.1 million US Facebook users demonstrated how people tend to interact in real life mainly with others who share their opinions, much like they do online. In this study over 80% of the subjects’ online friends had the same political affiliations as them.²⁸ A 2016 study by Flaxman et al. that analyzed online news consumption through social media versus web search engines revealed that articles found in social media and web-search engines were more associated with ideological segregation than articles individuals searched for themselves. They however also discovered that people who engaged with a wider range of news sources, including social

²⁶ Karpf D. (2010) ‘Measuring the Success of Digital Campaigns’ in *Digital Activism Decoded: The New Mechanics of Change*, M. Joyce (ed), International Debate Education Association.

²⁷ Bakshy E. et al. (2015). Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook. *Science* 348, pp. 1130-1132.

²⁸ Kitchens B. (2020). Understanding Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles: the Impact of Social Media on Diversification and Partisan Shifts in News Consumption. *MIS Quarterly* Vol. 44, no. 4, pp. 1619-1649.

media, were more likely to encounter opposing views. The impact of technology on ideological segregation is complex, with both reinforcing and diversifying effects.²⁹

In academic discussions, there is also a common concern about avoiding ‘techno-determinism’ which defines the oversimplifying idea that platforms like Twitter and Facebook alone caused revolutions. The causes of social movements are indeed not reducible to a simple choice between humans or technology. Instead, activists effectively used new technologies in diverse ways, such as organizing, avoiding censorship, raising awareness, and coordinating action. It is important to recognize that older technologies would not have provided the same opportunities and the impact of the movements might have been different. Technology plays a role in shaping the potential outcomes of revolutions and movements, but it does so in subtle ways, it is neither an all-powerful force nor as a passive tool.³⁰ An important challenge in discussing social media's role in driving social change is the tendency to oversimplify and attribute movements solely to technology, neglecting in-depth analyses of the multifaceted aspects of new social movements and campaigns. This oversimplification very often extends to the content shared on social media platforms: here, complex issues often get reduced to a mere 280-character tweet (a limitation that existed until 2023) or a concise Instagram caption. Furthermore, attention span on social media is diminishing³¹, influenced by algorithms favoring shorter videos, some even shorter than 10 seconds. People often engage with activism topics in a simplistic manner, avoiding the complexities of these issues and sometimes failing to invest time in studying or understanding the subjects, even before they address the topics in their content if they have a profile about advocacy. This phenomenon has led to the coining of terms like ‘slacktivism’ or ‘armchair activism’. The Oxford Dictionary defines slacktivism as “showing token support for social or political causes through online means such as e-petitions and hashtag activism. The term is typically used pejoratively to refer to people who do not want to devote time or money to

²⁹ Flaxman S. et al. (2016). Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online News Consumption. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 80, Special issue: Party Polarization, pp. 298-320.

³⁰ Tufekci, Z. (2021). *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest*. Yale University Press, p. 119.

³¹ Hari J. (2022). Your Attention Didn't Collapse. It was stolen. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/science/2022/jan/02/attention-span-focus-screens-apps-smartphones-social-media>

such causes”³²; while the Urban Dictionary defines it as “the self-deluded idea that by liking, sharing, or retweeting something you are helping out”³³. When individuals encounter a social cause online, they might take symbolic actions, such as changing their profile picture, using trending hashtags, liking, retweeting, or sharing content. While these actions might make individuals feel like they are positively contributing to a cause, research has shown that armchair activism, or slacktivism, can have unintended negative consequences.³⁴ While sharing online content related to social issues or the experiences of marginalized individuals can indeed amplify these topics and increase their visibility, it is crucial not to engage in such actions merely to present oneself as a virtuous individual. True advocacy goes beyond performing acts of support on social media: it involves educating oneself about social issues and actively championing these causes within one's social circles and communities. Performing actions solely for the purpose of appearing virtuous or to portray oneself as a good person falls into the realm of performative activism. This term is used to describe shallow or self-serving displays of support for social justice causes.³⁵ This kind of performance is not challenging to the individual, and the motivation behind performing at all lies in maintaining a certain image or following social trends on Internet. Performative activism lacks substance: what true advocacy means is a genuine concern for the issues being promoted and making oneself well informed on them so as to share perspectives with friends, families and acquaintances.

The disadvantages of social media activism are even more apparent in the case of brand activism as a form of performative activism. Many brands align themselves with social and political causes that they believe might resonate with potential customers, using social justice issues to boost profit. This practice often overshadows serious and genuine activist work. Capitalism influence on activism, particularly through brand activism and liberal feminism is often overlooked. The second chapter of this thesis aims to delve deeper into this phenomenon.

³² Slacktivism, Oxford Reference.

<https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780191803093.001.0001/acref-9780191803093-e-1348>

³³ Slacktivism, The Urban Dictionary. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=slacktivism>

³⁴ Hogben, J., Cownie, F. (2017). Exploring Slacktivism; Does The Social Observability of Online Charity Participation Act as a Mediator of Future Behavioral Intentions? Bournemouth University.

³⁵ Thimsen, A. F. (2022). What is Performative Activism? In *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, Penn State University Press, Vol. 55, No. 1, pp. 83-89.

2. Social media activism and advocacy that makes a difference

Having analyzed the impact of social media activism, it is useful to cite some activists and advocates who use social media and some movements that were either born online or made good use of social media to boost their message and enact concrete change.

2.1 Activists and advocates

The significance of personal narratives and individual experiences in social media activism, especially in NSMs that are based on identity, cannot be overlooked. Activists and advocates usually harness their personal stories to ignite conversations and propel positive change, supporting the rights of systemic minorities or shedding light on injustices. Their narratives serve as examples of how one's voice, when amplified through social media, can become a tool for transformative action.

In 2023, social activists have shown a preference for platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and TikTok as their go-to mediums for activism, to educate, engage in discussions and encourage action. TikTok, in particular, has gained prominence for its algorithmic advantages: this platform has provided activists with an unprecedented reach, allowing their messages to go outside of their circles, especially in the event a video goes viral. TikTok thus offers the potential to bypass echo chambers and filter bubbles, broadening the scope and impact of advocacy efforts.³⁶

On social networking sites, expressing one's personal identity can be more feasible because individuals have control over what they choose to share or keep private. Goffman was saying in the 1950s that our identity is a performance³⁷ and we adjust our behavior to suit the social context we are in. Social media offer a stage for us to curate how we appear to others, allowing us to put on various 'performances'. The ability to control one's

³⁶ Le Compte, D., Klug, D. (2021). "It's Viral!" – A study of the behaviors, practices, and motivations of TikTok Social Activists. In Companion Publication of the 2021 Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing (CSCW '21 Companion), October 23–27, 2021, Virtual Event, USA.

³⁷ Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. University of Edinburgh, Social Sciences Research Centre, pp. 1-10.

identity could be exploited by people to present misleading versions of themselves. However, for minorities and marginalized groups, social media can provide a safer space to share aspects of their identities they may not feel safe sharing in the physical world, so they can express themselves and build a community.³⁸ Additionally, individuals involved in activism can use these platforms to share important content and educate others without necessarily revealing their personal identities, which can be a powerful tool for social change.

“I want you to act as if you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is.”³⁹ Fifteen-year-old Greta Thunberg emerged as a global climate advocate in 2018, marking a seismic shift in addressing climate change. Stemming from Sweden's 2018 wildfires, her protest swiftly became a worldwide phenomenon. With her address at the UN Climate Action summit, Thunberg rose as both a figure and a focal point, initiating the powerful ‘Greta effect’⁴⁰. A 2021 study published in the *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* analyzed the Greta Thunberg effect in the United States and found that there is a significant link between familiarity with Thunberg and intentions for collective action against the climate crisis. While younger adults generally exhibit stronger collective beliefs and intentions for collective actions, familiarity with Thunberg equally impacted individuals of all ages, especially those sharing her liberal political ideology.⁴¹ This effect has reshaped climate activism, sparking inspiration among individuals and creating tangible effects like Austria's Green Party securing an increased electoral support and Coldplay modifying their tour in favor of environmental sustainability. Thunberg's navigation of social media platforms, notably Twitter and Instagram, proved instrumental in disseminating her messages on a global scale.⁴²

³⁸ Alix, A. F., (2021). LGBTQ Youth and Technology: Finding Their Way through Online Communities. *Intersect*, Vol. 14, No. 2.

³⁹ Thunberg, G. (2019). Greta Thunberg: Our House Is On Fire, Forum Insight. World Economic Forum. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U72xkMz6Pxx&t=7s>

⁴⁰ Sabherwal et al. (2021). The Greta Thunberg Effect: Familiarity with Greta Thunberg predicts intentions to engage in climate activism in the United States. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, Vol. 51, Issue 4, pp. 321-333.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² Jung, J. et al (2020). When a Girl Awakened the World: A User and Social Message Analysis of Greta Thunberg. *Sustainability* 2020, Vol. 12, Issue 7.

X González, an American activist, emerged as a recognizable figure advocating for gun control following their survival of the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in 2018. Their passionate speech, denouncing political inaction on gun violence with the iconic phrase ‘We call B.S.’ went viral and motivated a movement⁴³. After their speech became popular on Twitter, they gained more than 1 million followers⁴⁴, they got the attention of celebrities, and became a face and a voice in the fight for gun control⁴⁵. González continued their activism online and offline, leveraging high-profile media engagements and contributing significantly to organizing the March for Our Lives. The culmination of these efforts resulted in the passage of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act by the Florida Legislature⁴⁶. This legislation, signed into law by Governor Rick Scott, enacted several measures, including raising the minimum firearm purchase age to 21, instituting waiting periods and background checks and implementing programs for school policing. It additionally restricted individuals with potential mental health issues or violent histories from possessing firearms. Governor Scott acknowledged the impact of the students' activism, applauding their relentless pursuit of change. Through González's and their classmates' persistent advocacy in squares and through social media, their voices led to tangible legislative action, creating a significant milestone in gun control reform in Florida.⁴⁷

@mattxiv is the social media alias of Matt Bernstein, a social media activist and advocate, who has been using “make-up to generate conversation about sociopolitical issues related to gender, sexuality, public health, and violence”⁴⁸. While some may perceive this approach as minimizing the significance of these topics, it has actually facilitated accessibility and piqued the interest of the social media-engaged younger generations, such as Gen-Z. This unique platform has provided Bernstein with opportunities to host

⁴³ Artists & Trailblazers, #byoc, Bring Your Own Chair. <https://www.bringyourownchair.org/artists/?target=183>

⁴⁴ Bromwich, J. E. (2018). How the Parkland Students Got So Good at Social Media. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/07/us/parkland-students-social-media.html>

⁴⁵ González, X (2023). The Education of X González. The CUT. <https://www.thecut.com/article/x-gonzalez-parkland-shooting-activist-essay.html>

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ Sanchez, R., Yan, H. (2018). Florida Gov. Rick Scott signs gun bill. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2018/03/09/us/florida-gov-scott-gun-bill/index.html>

⁴⁸ Smith, L. (2020). Matt Bernstein’s colourful, confrontational looks spotlight queer issues. Dazed Digital. <https://www.dazeddigital.com/beauty/article/47492/1/matt-bernstein-mattxiv-instagram-queer-make-up-artist-instagram-lgbtq>

conferences addressing LGBTQIA+ issues in schools, including those attended by children from religious backgrounds who might not typically encounter these discussions in their environments.⁴⁹

These examples are a mere fraction of those leveraging social media for activism; numerous others exist. Many individuals, not initially identified as social media activists, use these platforms for wider outreach. For instance, actress Jameela Jamil⁵⁰ advocates for intersectional feminism, mental health, and body neutrality through her social media presence. Similarly, Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai⁵¹ did not start as a social media activist but now utilizes these channels to amplify her activism and reach a larger audience, actively encouraging their use for political motivations.

2.2 Campaigns and social movements

Social movements are defined as “online and offline networks of (in)formal relationships between individuals, groups, and/or organizations, who share mutual interest or collective identities and mobilize various types of resources (e.g., affect, attention, action, material capital) on the issues that they are advocating”⁵².

Policymakers, presidential candidates, journalists, advocacy groups, and celebrities pay attention to the voices of ordinary individuals advocating for social change. As technology has evolved, marginalized groups have adapted their methods to assert their rights and demand justice: online-originated movements were born as counternarratives crucial for societal progress.⁵³

⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁰ Jones, A. (2023). Jameela Jamil calls out Met Gala and everyone who went for 'honoring a known bigot'. Unilad. <https://www.unilad.com/news/jameela-jamil-met-gala-backlash-348370-20230504>

⁵¹ Malala encourages social media usage as political weapon (2017). Business Standard. https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/malala-encourages-social-media-usage-as-political-weapon-117090100489_1.html

⁵² Abidin C., Lee J. (2022). Social justice through social media pop cultures: Case studies and reading resources on influencers and TikTok. TikTok Cultures Research Network (TCRN) & Social Media Pop Cultures Programme, Centre for Culture and Technology (CCAT), Curtin University.

⁵³ Jackson, S. J., Bailey, M., & Foucault Welles, B. (2020). #HashtagActivism: Networks of race and gender justice. MIT Press, p. 200.

In 2006, the phrase ‘Me Too’ emerged thanks to activist Tara Burke, aiming to unite survivors of sexual abuse, particularly young black women from underprivileged backgrounds. In 2017, the words #MeToo, in an hashtag, were used by actress Alyssa Milano and that sparked a global movement where women from diverse background were encouraged to share their stories, because they were not alone.⁵⁴ After Milano’s tweet, social media was full of stories of harassment and assault, with more than 12 million posts in the first 24 hours.⁵⁵ Her tweet however shifted the focus of the campaign from marginalized women to predominantly white women and those in show business. Ms. Burke, despite the lack of intersectionality in the movement, has always acknowledged that the Me Too campaign transcends any single individual. “I think it is selfish for me to try to frame Me Too as something that I own. It is bigger than me and bigger than Alyssa Milano. Neither one of us should be centered in this work. This is about survivors.”⁵⁶

The Me Too movement facilitated numerous accusations against powerful men in media, Hollywood, and tech. The U.S. EEOC noted a 12% rise in workplace harassment complaints in 2017.⁵⁷ The influence of the #MeToo movement is evident beyond news coverage, extending to Europe. After examining anti-harassment policies in 26 EU institutions, the European Ombudsman drafted a document of best practices for sexual harassment.⁵⁸

The genesis of the #BlackLivesMatter movement in 2013, catalyzed by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, marked a pivotal moment in social activism. Triggered by the acquittal of George Zimmerman in Trayvon Martin's death, the movement initially emerged as a heartfelt Facebook post by Garza, quickly evolving into a hashtag thanks to Cullors' addition of #BlackLivesMatter.⁵⁹ The movement gained rapid traction across social media platforms, as it encapsulated the issues of police brutality, racial injustice,

⁵⁴ Botti, F. et al (2019). The #MeToo Social Media Effect and Its Potentials For Social Change In Europe. FEPS, p. 5.

⁵⁵ Garcia, S. (2017). The Woman Who Created #MeToo Long Before Hashtags. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/20/us/me-too-movement-tarana-burke.html>

⁵⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁷ Chiwaya, N. (2018). New data on #MeToo's first year shows 'undeniable' impact. NBC News. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/new-data-metoo-s-first-year-shows-undeniable-impact-n918821>

⁵⁸ Botti, F. et al (2019). The #MeToo Social Media Effect and Its Potentials For Social Change In Europe. FEPS, p. 5.

⁵⁹ Guynn J. Meet the woman who coined #BlackLivesMatter. USA Today. <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/tech/2015/03/04/alicia-garza-black-lives-matter/24341593/>

and social equity into a powerful slogan. This concise yet potent phrase resonated globally, sparking a series of demonstrations and actions in response to tragedies such as Michael Brown's death in Missouri, Eric Garner's in New York, and most notably, George Floyd's homicide in Minneapolis in 2020.⁶⁰ Utilizing the digital landscape, #BlackLivesMatter transcended virtual boundaries, leveraging platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr to connect individuals passionate about social justice. This digital foundation facilitated offline activism, empowering communities to effect change locally, fostering a sense of unity in diversity. The movement appealed to young activists and advocates because it embraces inclusivity, unapologetically embodying a spectrum of identities—queer, black, multiracial, feminist, and more. #BlackLivesMatter's transition from a social media hashtag to tangible street protests exemplifies the fusion of 21st-century technology and grassroots activism, echoing sentiments akin to the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street movements. Its evolution signifies a paradigm shift in activism, as digital tools are used to amplify voices, connect communities, and mobilize for societal change.⁶¹

The #SayHerName movement was initiated in 2014 by AAPF, the African American Policy Forum, to spotlight black women and girls affected by racist police violence.⁶² Violence on women goes often unnoticed in the media, and after criticism within the Black Lives Matter movement on the lack of intersectionality, this campaign was born to integrate women's stories into the movement and address gender-specific impacts of racial injustice. In 2020, the #SayHerName movement experienced a resurgence fueled by the momentum of BLM and the underreported death of Breonna Taylor, overshadowed by media focus on George Floyd. Activists, after Taylor's death, campaigned against surprise police raids, which disproportionately affect women of color. Breonna's Law has since been implemented in several jurisdictions across the United States, requiring officers to announce themselves.⁶³

⁶⁰ A Brief History of Civil Rights in the United States: The Black Lives Matter Movement, Harvard University, School of Law. <https://library.law.harvard.edu/civilrightshistory/BLM>

⁶¹ Guynn J. Meet the woman who coined #BlackLivesMatter. USA Today. <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/tech/2015/03/04/alicia-garza-black-lives-matter/24341593/>

⁶² Say Her Name. AAPF. <https://www.aapf.org/sayhername>

⁶³ Lockhart, P. (2021). After Breonna Taylor's death, activists fought to ban surprise police raids. One year later, they're winning. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/mar/26/breonna-taylor-no-knock-warrant-bans-us-police-experts>

#FridaysForFuture is a movement that advocates for environmental justice and climate action, and it was initiated by Greta Thunberg and fellow young activists in August 2018. It began as protests by Thunberg, who went on strike every Friday outside her school⁶⁴ and evolved into a national Swedish protest in front of the parliament against climate inaction. By posting the movement on Instagram and Twitter, it became viral and many subsidiaries of FFF were born in all continents, in 7,500 cities across the world.⁶⁵

The FFF movement gained global traction, drawing millions in to protests, and influencing political discourse. It altered consumer behavior and shaped environmental policy discussions.⁶⁶

The impact of the movement in various European countries was researched over the years. Among these, in Germany, FFF was found to have boosted the Green Party's vote share by 13%, drawing voters from less climate-focused parties.⁶⁷ In Switzerland, a study demonstrated that the positive evaluation of the climate strike correlated with 48,4% adopting environmental changes in the lives.⁶⁸

Examining the profound influence of social media on movements such as #MeToo, FFF, #SayHerName, and BLM illuminates the unprecedented capacity of these platforms to galvanize social change. Social media has multifaceted roles in social movements, such as disseminating information about the movements, facilitating mobilization and action and fostering dialogue among marginalized groups.⁶⁹

⁶⁴ Crouch, D. (2018). The Swedish 15-year-old who's cutting class to fight the climate crisis. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2018/sep/01/swedish-15-year-old-cutting-class-to-fight-the-climate-crisis>

⁶⁵ What We Do. Fridays For Future. <https://fridaysforfuture.org/>

⁶⁶ Siebler, C. et al (2023). Five years of 'Fridays for Future': what future now?. Social Europe. <https://www.socialeurope.eu/five-years-of-fridays-for-future-what-future-now#:~:text=The%20movement%20became%20internationally%20successful,meat%20and%20take%20fewer%20flights.>

⁶⁷ Fabel, M. et al (2022). The Power of Youth: Did the "Fridays for Future" Climate Movement Trickle-Up to Influence Voters, Politicians, and the Media?. : Munich Society for the Promotion of Economic Research - CESifo GmbH, p. 22.

⁶⁸ Fritz, L. et al (2023). Perceived impacts of the Fridays for Future climate movement on environmental concern and behaviour in Switzerland. *Sustain Sci* Vol. 18, pp. 2219–2244, p. 2236.

⁶⁹ Eren-Erdoğan, I., & Ergun, S. (2017). The impact of social media on social movements: The case of anti-consumption. In *Online Communities as Agents of Change and Social Movements*.

3. Performative allyship: intentions versus impact

In social justice movements, especially online through social media platforms, a significant concern revolves around the authenticity of people and companies in their support for causes. Many individuals and entities often showcase support merely for attention or to improve their public image, without genuinely understanding or believing in the cause. This behavior is exemplified through performative allyship. Performative allyship occurs when individuals from non-marginalized groups simulate support and solidarity with marginalized communities in ways that are either ineffective or even harmful to the cause. It typically involves seeking some form of reward, like social media praise – or, in the case of brands, profit – serving as a symbolic acknowledgment of being ‘good’ or aligning with the ‘right side’.⁷⁰

Performative allyship relies on easy, visible, and low-cost actions, while genuine social change requires dedication and challenging the status quo. In the realm of social change, actions often fall into two categories: normative, aligning with societal norms such as social media posts or voting, and non-normative, disruptive actions like protests that demand higher personal commitment and entail greater costs.⁷¹ These non-normative actions possess a higher potential to disrupt established systems, a notion supported by research on moral courage.⁷² Studies differentiate moral courage from helping behavior by highlighting the expectation of negative social consequences when intervening against something judges as wrong. For instance, instances where individuals risk personal harm to prevent a crime exemplify moral courage, expecting adverse outcomes for themselves despite their altruistic acts. Similarly, engaging in non-normative actions entails accepting potential negative repercussions – social, physical, or resource-related – to oneself or one's group. Consequently, such actions must stem from genuine values and wish to uplift

⁷⁰ Craig, S. E., & Bhatt, E. (2021). A Short Glossary of Inclusive Language. *Oceanography*, Vol. 34, No. 2, pp. 6–9.

⁷¹ Kutlaca, M., & Radke, H. R. M. (2023). Towards an understanding of performative allyship: Definition, antecedents and consequences. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, Vol. 17, no. 2, e12724.

⁷² Baumert, A., Halmburger, A., & Schmitt, M. (2013). Interventions against norm violations: Dispositional determinants of self-reported and real moral courage. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 39, pp. 1053-1068.

disadvantaged groups or uphold personal moral principles.⁷³ This challenges the conventional perspective of the collective action which is solely aimed at reducing inequality. Instead, it suggests that non-normative collective action primarily challenges the moral standing of high-status groups, posing a threat due to this ethical interrogation.⁷⁴ Genuine actions of allyship may cost to the person belonging to the dominant group but are usually the most effective ones for the well-being of the people belonging to systemic minorities. Actions motivated by self-interest, even if not simple or costless, can be perceived as performative by marginalized groups, impacting their well-being and engagement. There are potential negative effects of performative allyship on the mental and physical health of marginalized groups, especially among the most vigilant.⁷⁵

Performative allyship in social media activism can take various forms, one of which is performative hashtag activism. During the height of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, a widely recognized practice of performative activism emerged on social media in the form of the ‘black square’. People were posting black images on their social media profiles with the hashtag #blackouttuesday as a gesture of solidarity with the movement.⁷⁶ While it appeared to symbolize support, it was criticized for its simplicity and lack of substance. Many saw it as a superficial action that did not contribute meaningfully to the cause but rather flooded social media feeds, drowning out essential information and resources related to the movement.⁷⁷ The black squares, together with changing the profile pictures on social media with the BLM hashtag is what can be defined as ‘Hashtag Activism’, which is a form of performative allyship. Some studies suggest that hashtags can be effective in aiding social justice causes, enabling marginalized voices to create

⁷³ Radke, H. R. M., Kutlaca, M., Siem, B., Wright, S. C., & Becker, J. C. (2020). Beyond allyship: Motivations for advantaged group members to engage in action for disadvantaged groups. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, Vol. 24, no. 4, pp. 291–315, p. 305.

⁷⁴ Teixeira, C. P., Spears, R., & Yzerbyt, V. Y. (2020). Is Martin Luther king or Malcom X the more acceptable face of protest? High-status groups’ reactions to low-status groups’ collective action. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 118, no. 5, pp. 919–944.

⁷⁵ Kutlaca, M., & Radke, H. R. M. (2023). Towards an understanding of performative allyship: Definition, antecedents and consequences. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, Vol. 17, no. 2, e12724.

⁷⁶ Wellman, M. (2022). Black Squares for Black Lives? Performative Allyship as Credibility Maintenance for Social Media Influencers on Instagram. *Social Media + Society* 2022, Vol. 8, No. 1.

⁷⁷ Ho, S. (2020). A social media 'blackout' enthralled Instagram. But did it do anything?. NBC News. <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/social-media/social-media-blackout-enthralled-instagram-did-it-do-anything-n1230181>

impactful narratives.⁷⁸ However, other experts critique it as empty activism, through which performative allies do not take action or sacrifice their societal advantages to challenge the status quo.⁷⁹

3.1 Genuine allyship as conscientisation

Differentiating performative from genuine allyship is crucial. A genuine ally actively leverages their privilege as someone from a non-marginalized group to advocate for marginalized communities, channeling the benefits of their position to those lacking such advantages. In contrast, performative allyship involves surface-level gestures that lack substance and may undermine the cause, all while seeking recognition, particularly on social media by a larger crowd.⁸⁰

Authentic allyship can be imagined to be operating at a profound level of conscience, where individuals genuinely feel and internalize the issues affecting marginalized communities. As activism often involves challenging established norms, systems, and power structures, which can lead to various forms of backlash and repercussions, to engage authentically as allies, individuals must have a deep sense of ethical awareness and responsibility. Professor of sociology Nick Crossley⁸¹ applied Bourdieu's theory of practice to activism and has developed the principle of radical habitus.⁸² In Bourdieu's 1977 *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, habitus is defined as "as a subjective but not individual system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group or class constituting the precondition for all objectification and apperception"⁸³. The habitus is also said to contain the 'genetic information' necessary for future generations to reproduce the reality inherited from older

⁷⁸ Jackson, S. J., Bailey, M., & Foucault Welles, B. (2020). *#HashtagActivism: Networks of race and gender justice*. MIT Press, p. 185.

⁷⁹ Wellman, M. (2022). Black Squares for Black Lives? Performative Allyship as Credibility Maintenance for Social Media Influencers on Instagram. *Social Media + Society* 2022, Vol. 8, No. 1.

⁸⁰ Phillips, H. (2020). Performative Allyship Is Deadly (Here's What to Do Instead). Medium. <https://forge.medium.com/performative-allyship-is-deadly-c900645d9f1f>

⁸¹ Nick Crossley. <https://research.manchester.ac.uk/en/persons/nicholas.crossley>

⁸² Crossley, N. (2003). From reproduction to transformation: Social movement fields and the radical habitus. *Theory, Culture & Society* 2003, Vol. 20, No. 6, pp. 43–68.

⁸³ Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge University Press, p. 86.

generations.⁸⁴ Crossley theorizes a specific habitus of activists, a radical habitus. Activism is an acquired disposition, formed through engagement in these practices. This disposition, shaped by past activism, not only defines the activists but also perpetuates their continued involvement, contributing to activism's persistence. This activist habitus, both shaped by and shaping structured movement practices, embodies Bourdieu's notion of a structured and structuring force within activism.⁸⁵ Crossley suggests that radicalism is not confined solely to political actions but permeates various facets of life, impacting individuals' career and lifestyles.⁸⁶ The concept of the personal is political⁸⁷ aligns with these arguments: personal choices, behaviors, and lifestyles are inherently political. Genuine allyship finds its embodiment in a radical habitus: it involves an inherent dedication to challenging systemic inequalities and actively supporting marginalized communities. When individuals develop a radical habitus through activism, it influences their identity and actions, fostering a disposition toward consistent allyship. This alignment signifies that genuine allyship is not just an isolated action but becomes an integral part of an individual's identity, reflecting a commitment to equity and social justice that extends beyond occasional gestures. For a true ally, the personal is political: a genuine ally understands that their everyday actions and beliefs reflect their commitment to social justice. Their personal behaviors, attitudes, and advocacy efforts are seen as integral parts of their political engagement in addressing systemic inequalities. James Cook University Professors Alexander, Petray, and McDowall merge Bourdieu's theory of practice with Freire's conscientisation to explain youth activism and deviations from societal norms.⁸⁸ For Brazilian pedagogue Freire, conscientisation, or *conscientização*, is the process of "learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality"⁸⁹. When people critically engage and act to transform their reality, through non-normative action⁹⁰,

⁸⁴ Crossley, N. (2003). From reproduction to transformation: Social movement fields and the radical habitus. *Theory, Culture & Society* 2003, Vol. 20, No. 6, pp. 43–68, p. 43.

⁸⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 51.

⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 54-55.

⁸⁷ Hanisch, C. (1969). *The Personal is Political*.

⁸⁸ Alexander, N.; Petray, T.; McDowall, A. (2022). Conscientisation and Radical Habitus: Expanding Bourdieu's Theory of Practice in Youth Activism Studies. *Youth* 2022, Vol. 2, pp. 295–308.

⁸⁹ Freire, P. (2017). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Penguin Classics, p. 35, footnote 1.

⁹⁰ Kutlaca, M., & Radke, H. R. M. (2023). Towards an understanding of performative allyship: Definition, antecedents and consequences. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, Vol. 17, no. 2, e12724.

they become active in making changes because they went through the process of conscientization⁹¹. In the context of allyship, this translates to a genuine understanding and internalization of the struggles faced by marginalized groups. Authentic allies go beyond performative gestures; they embody a radical habitus of empathy, shaped by their conscientization—their deep comprehension and awareness of social injustices. Freire's conscientization, centered on critical consciousness and transformative action, further supports the notion of authentic allyship. Genuine allies actively engage in conscientization, seeking to comprehend the root causes of societal issues and then taking meaningful action. This aligns with the idea that authentic allyship is not just about superficial support; it is about a conscientious awakening to social injustices and a commitment to effecting real change. Genuine allies do not just perform support for marginalized communities; they authentically feel and embody the struggle, using their privilege to effect tangible change while advocating for justice and equity.

3.1.1 Genuine allyship in social media

Social media serves as a platform for advocacy and activism, enabling the rapid spread of messages and mobilization of large audiences, but how can genuine allyship exist within social media? Allyship often gets confined within some aspect of an ally's life, allies can switch their allyship on and off like a mask.⁹²

Genuine allyship on social media transcends superficial actions like posting a black square for BLM. It involves utilizing the platform for self-education and actively sharing knowledge without burdening marginalized individuals with the request of being educated.⁹³ The emphasis lies in utilizing newfound information to educate peers and seeking local associations and protests through social media, recognizing it as an informational hub.⁹⁴ Genuine allyship is an ongoing developmental process rather than a static state.⁹⁵ An integral aspect involves amplifying marginalized voices by sharing their

⁹¹ Freire, P. (2017). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Penguin Classics, p. 73.

⁹² Bourke, B. (2020). Leaving behind the rhetoric of allyship, *Whiteness and Education*, 5:2, 179-194, p. 186.

⁹³ *Ibidem*, p. 187.

⁹⁴ Jost, J. et al. (2018). (2018). How Social Media Facilitates Political Protest: Information, Motivation, and Social Networks: *Social Media and Political Protest*. *Political Psychology*. 39. 85-118.

⁹⁵ Bourke, B. (2020). Leaving behind the rhetoric of allyship, *Whiteness and Education*, 5:2, 179-194, p. 188.

messages and ensuring the accuracy of information being circulated. Individuals who voice allyship without actively participating in dismantling oppressive systems might be in the initial stages of their allyship journey.⁹⁶ Building and nurturing relationships is crucial for allies, focusing on meaningful connections and trust-building over time, creating relationships with both marginalized groups and fellow allies. Mutual accountability among allies is also vital, although it might lead to uncomfortable discussions.⁹⁷ This includes addressing problematic behavior whether witnessed on social media or in real-life interactions. Reflecting on phenomena like #BlackoutTuesday, some argue that the real power laid in the subsequent critique it sparked. Those who had participated were prompted to question their contributions beyond the gesture: it raised questions about possible additional actions, whether donating, engaging in offline discussions, or actively supporting the cause.⁹⁸

In essence, genuine allyship on social media entails proactive education, responsible sharing, and active engagement beyond performative acts. It involves nurturing authentic relationships, fostering trust, amplifying marginalized voices,⁹⁹ and holding oneself and others accountable for meaningful contributions. Critiquing actions and examining their depth beyond surface-level gestures are fundamental for genuine allyship in the digital realm.

3.2 Fear of being ‘canceled’ as a drive for performative activism

To cancel someone means to withdraw support to that person, such as boycotting an actor’s movie or no longer promoting someone’s work, due to some problematic opinions or behaviors.¹⁰⁰ From the act of canceling, the notion of cancel culture was born in the mid-2010s on Twitter.¹⁰¹ Cancel culture can be defined as a “climate that

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁸ Jenkins, J. (2020). The blurred lines between genuine allyship and performative activism. Yale Daily News. <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2020/11/12/the-blurred-lines-between-genuine-allyship-and-performative-activism/>

⁹⁹ How to be a genuine ally (2020). Amnesty International Australia, p. 7.

¹⁰⁰ What It Means to Get ‘Canceled’ (2021). Merriam-Webster Dictionary. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/wordplay/cancel-culture-words-were-watching>

¹⁰¹ Cancel culture. (2020) <https://www.dictionary.com/e/pop-culture/cancel-culture/>

encourages disproportionate social and/or work-related punishment for speech”¹⁰². Many argue that cancel culture is a threat to free speech, such as writers JK Rowling and Margaret Atwood who signed an open letter to condemn “a new set of moral attitudes and political commitments that tend to weaken our norms of open debate and toleration of differences in favor of ideological conformity”.¹⁰³ Others believe that cancel culture does not exist, at least in terms of excessive censorship.¹⁰⁴ They perceive cancel culture as mere accountability for problematic statements. This view argues that individuals, especially those in power like J.K. Rowling, ‘canceled’ after her statements on transgender women¹⁰⁵, face repercussions without lasting harm, suggesting cancel culture's insignificance.¹⁰⁶ They believe cancel culture is not a tangible concept; rather, it is a term used to delegitimize consequences or criticism faced by influential figures. It becomes a catch-all phrase shielding those unaccustomed to scrutiny or facing repercussions for their behavior.¹⁰⁷ Cancel culture may be a consequence of social media activism: because of social media, marginalized voices are empowered and can hold people accountable for previously tolerated racist, sexist, and bigoted behavior.¹⁰⁸

The debate over the existence and severity of cancel culture aside, a noticeable cultural transformation, largely influenced by social media, holds individuals accountable for their actions, both online and offline. Examples abound: people losing jobs due to videos circulating of their racist behavior¹⁰⁹, actors facing terminations over past controversial

¹⁰² Pollitt, K. (2022). Cancel Culture Exists. The Nation.

<https://www.thenation.com/article/society/cancel-culture-exists/>

¹⁰³ Flood, A. (2020). Rowling, Rushdie and Atwood warn against ‘intolerance’ in open letter. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jul/08/jk-rowling-rushdie-and-atwood-warn-against-intolerance-in-open-letter#:~:text=JK%20Rowling%2C%20Salman%20Rushdie%20and,for%20public%20shaming%20and%20ostracism%E2%80%9D>.

¹⁰⁴ Hagi, S. (2019). Cancel Culture Is Not Real—At Least Not in the Way People Think. TIME. <https://time.com/5735403/cancel-culture-is-not-real/>

¹⁰⁵ Shaffi, S. (2023). JK Rowling says she knew her views on transgender issues would make ‘many folks deeply unhappy’. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2023/mar/15/jk-rowling-views-transgender-issues-many-folks-deeply-unhappy>

¹⁰⁶ Pollitt, K. (2022). Cancel Culture Exists. The Nation. <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/cancel-culture-exists/>

¹⁰⁷ Hagi, S. (2019). Cancel Culture Is Not Real—At Least Not in the Way People Think. TIME. <https://time.com/5735403/cancel-culture-is-not-real/>

¹⁰⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁹ Hurley, B. (2023). ‘Central Park Karen’ loses appeal over firing from job. Independent. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/central-park-karen-amy-cooper-appeal-b2354202.html>

tweets¹¹⁰, and cases where loss of online respect or credibility ensued. This cultural shift challenges the impunity once enjoyed, forcing individuals, regardless of status, to face repercussions for behavior once deemed acceptable by most but now met with some forms of consequences. Whether perceived as necessary accountability or excessive censorship, the undeniable shift in cultural norms signals a broader change wherein behavior that was once tolerated faces newfound scrutiny and consequences, altering the dynamics of public discourse and accountability.

People have become cognizant of this cultural change and tend to be more mindful of their online behaviors due to the increased presence and empowerment of marginalized voices, capable of holding them accountable. A study highlighted that individuals' behaviors on social media are significantly influenced by a fear of social rejection associated with cancel culture.¹¹¹ In particular, they concealed their true beliefs on a social justice issue to avoid being called out. Some people might pull back from being active on social media because they are afraid of facing backlash or being 'canceled' for not participating in certain social causes. However, interestingly, this fear can also push some individuals to engage more online. For instance, if someone does not show support for social causes by sharing information or posts, they might worry about being criticized or excluded from certain groups. The paradox lies here, while some people say they are engaging in activism for the right reasons, they might be doing it just as a performative act.¹¹²

3.2.1 The impact of cancel culture on brands

The fear of being canceled can drive individuals to engage in performative activism on social media. However, it is not just individuals facing cancellation; brands and companies also grapple with this risk. Brands, much like individuals, might engage in performative allyship online because they seek public support and are wary about potential cancellations. A brand is usually 'canceled' when their actions or statements

¹¹⁰ Brown, L. (2021). See Gina Carano's tweets and posts that got her fired from 'The Mandalorian'. New York Post. <https://nypost.com/2021/02/11/see-gina-caranos-tweets-and-posts-that-got-her-fired/>

¹¹¹ Abdalla, A. et al (2022). Social Media as a Stage: A Behind the Scenes Analysis of Performative Activism, "Cancel Culture," and Effective Allyship. *McMaster Undergraduate Journal of Social Psychology* (2022), 3(1), pp. 83-122, pp. 114.115.

¹¹² *Ibidem*.

conflict with societal values or offend a particular group, prompting significant public backlash. For instance, companies may face cancellation due to insensitive advertising¹¹³, controversial statements by company executives¹¹⁴, or unethical business practices¹¹⁵. Examples include brands being called out for cultural appropriation¹¹⁶ in their marketing campaigns or facing consumer boycotts for not addressing social issues appropriately¹¹⁷. The fear of this backlash and potential cancellation often pushes brands and companies to engage in performative allyship as a protective measure. They aim to align themselves publicly with social causes to avoid negative judgments or the loss of consumer trust. The performative allyship of brands manifests as brand activism, a concept that will be dissected in the second chapter of this dissertation.

Conclusion

In this chapter, cyberactivism was defined, and distinctions were drawn with social media activism. The historical evolution of social media activism, dating back to the early instances of digital activism in the late 1990s, was explored to illustrate the diverse movements using social media for activism purposes. Social media platforms have emerged as crucial facilitators, enabling connections between individuals and generating new social movements (NSMs) through online encounters. Accessibility benefits of social media extend to various communities, including individuals with disabilities and those who are neurodivergent. However, social media also presents challenges, allowing misuse by groups such as incels and men's rights activists, and creating echo chambers and filter bubbles that limit exposure to diverse perspectives.

¹¹³ Fadulu, L. (2023). Zara Removes Campaign After Critics Call It Insensitive to Israel-Hamas War. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/12/business/zara-campaign-israel-gaza-war.html>

¹¹⁴ Strada, M. (2013). Barilla: «Mai uno spot con famiglie gay, se a qualcuno non va, mangi un'altra pasta». Corriere Della Sera. https://www.corriere.it/cronache/13_settembre_26/barilla-no-spot-omosessuali-famiglia-sacrale_f9506e70-268f-11e3-a1ee-487182bf93b6.shtml

¹¹⁵ Hunt, T. (2023). Five unethical companies. <https://www.ethicalconsumer.org/retailers/five-unethical-companies>

¹¹⁶ Kong, J. (2019). 7 fashion brands that have been accused of cultural appropriation, and how they responded. <https://www.buro247.my/fashion/style/fashion-brands-cultural-appropriation-response.html>

¹¹⁷ Ritschel, C. (2020). Pretty Little Thing sparks backlash with 'inappropriate' illustration of 'jet black hand'. Independent. <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/pretty-little-thing-hand-twitter-racism-skin-colour-minneapolis-protests-a9539456.html>

Furthermore, this chapter delved into performative allyship, where many individuals and entities display support primarily for attention-seeking or image cleaning. Distinguishing normative from non-normative actions highlighted the importance of non-normative actions, which demand moral courage and possess greater potential to disrupt established systems. Examples like #BlackoutTuesday offered insights into comprehending performative activism. Genuine allyship, drawing parallels to Freire's conscientization theory, emphasized critical engagement to identify and act against societal contradictions, fostering active participation in all aspects of someone's life.

Finally, cancel culture was analyzed revealing a noticeable cultural shift largely propelled by social media. This shift now holds individuals accountable for both online and offline conduct. Empowerment of marginalized voices has fostered a culture where individuals are more mindful due to heightened fear of social rejection and critiques. This fear often prompts individuals and brands to engage in performative activism, seeking public support while cautiously avoiding potential cancellations.

The following chapter will explore brand activism, focusing on the use of social media in product advertising and the establishment of brand identities.

Chapter II

Brand activism on social media: how to measure performativity

Introduction

This second chapter of the dissertation focuses on the complex relationship between brands and social justice issues that give rise to the phenomenon known as brand activism. The purpose of the exploration is to comprehend the intricacies embedded within this ever-changing environment revealing the balance between genuine social interaction and carefully planned marketing campaigns.

In the first subchapter, the nature of brand activism is revealed. Brand activism is confronted with activist brands and a critical analysis is performed on the purposeful incorporation of social issues into a brand narrative, especially as displayed on social media platforms. This raises questions about the authenticity of a brand's commitment to social causes, bringing into question whether it truly signals genuine commitment to societal improvement or an intention to use the visibility associated to social issues.

The second subchapter navigates the dominance of social media in driving brand activism. Different brand activist campaigns on social media are discussed, shedding light on cases such as Nike, Airbnb, Starbucks, Barilla, Anheuser-Busch, Lush and Oatly. A comparative study examines the ethical implications of these brands and whether these case studies hold significance in understanding the performativity of brand activism.

The third and final part of this chapter focuses on authenticity in brand activism. Unauthentic strategic maneuvers are often referred to as 'woke washing' and critiqued as reinforcing the consumerist attitude. The analysis, drawing parallels with campaigns like Pepsi, often criticized as 'woke washing,' questions the very idea of authenticity in brand activism. Consequently, if authenticity distinguishes brand activism from 'woke washing,' it becomes critical to unpack the nuances that make up authenticity in brand activism on social media and in a capitalist society.

1. Brand activism and activist brands

“Brand Activism consists of business efforts to promote, impede or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to promote or impede improvements in society.”¹¹⁸

Brand activism is a relatively new concept, that was first defined by Sarkar and Kotler. According to the two authors, brand activism is an evolution of corporate marketing and corporate philanthropy: while the first two were respectively marketing driven and corporate drive, brand activism is society driven.¹¹⁹

In the realm of marketing, brands have historically been competing to ‘position’ themselves in the market¹²⁰, by emphasizing their product or service as better than the competitors for different reasons. However, this is no longer enough, and contemporary consumers expect brands to take a stance on issues they care about and problems they face everyday. While brands may not necessarily influence people’s opinions on social issues, consumers are appreciative and may praise companies or support them economically if these take a stand on important issues.¹²¹

The younger generations of Millennials and Gen-Z are increasingly politically engaged and, as consumers, are changing what is expected of companies: this shift in consumer behavior is a reason why brand activism is becoming more popular today.

Discovering how brand activism developed over time is not simple since the definition is recent and academics have only just started exploring the subject¹²². The term has also varied over time: earlier discussions mentioned how society was affected by corporations and what companies did in response to some issues. Cammarota et al. acknowledge the complexity of overlapping terms used over decades to define what today is brand activism and attempt a reconstruction of its historical development. Traditionally, businesses preferred not to get involved in social and political issues since they wanted to protect their interests and profits.¹²³ In 1982, Professor S. Prakash Sethi identified the necessity

¹¹⁸ Sarkar, C., Kotler, P. (2020). Brand Activism: From Purpose To Action, p. 37.

¹¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 39.

¹²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 33.

¹²¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 101-102.

¹²² Cammarota, A. (2023). BRAND ACTIVISM: A Literature Review and Future Research Agenda. *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 2023, 47, pp. 1669-1691, p. 1669.

¹²³ *Ibidem*, p. 1680.

of defining corporate political activism, since he observed a shift in the Western perspective in the 80s about political participations and corporations. He noticed more people were starting to accept the power of market forces in shaping social decisions and addressing political issues. According to Sethi, this decade presented the business world a new opportunity, to share their opinions on current social, political and economic issues and be a part in shaping national agendas.¹²⁴ Brands are now, contrary to the past, diving into controversy through brand activism, taking a public stand on polarizing socio-political issues, even when these are not related to their products or operations.¹²⁵ In the interest of business growth, companies need to support the public good: this can be done by marketing and taking positions that are perceived as positive by the public, but also thinking about how their products and services can help people. Sethi defines corporate political activism because it could benefit brands in terms of profits and to further their interests, therefore he states that brands, to avoid risky behaviors, should always align themselves with beliefs held by the majority of the population.¹²⁶ This is confirmed by the Consumer-Company identification theory, that states that when consumers have a strong connection with a company it is because they see it as fulfilling important aspect of their identities and values: the brand's identity aligns with the consumers'.¹²⁷

It is possible to trace the beginnings of brand activism to discussions on how companies got involved in politics and handled groups of protesters. In the 1970s and 1980s, businesses became dominant in society, while activist groups simultaneously got stronger too. The latter started pressuring companies either directly or indirectly and influenced brands in making changes for good, through boycotting and media campaigns. During these decades there was an evolution in the field of brand activism, from companies being resistant to change to actively being involved seeking solutions for societal issues and endorsing political campaigns.¹²⁸

¹²⁴ Prakash Sethi, S. (1982). Corporate political activism. *California Management Review*, 24(3), pp. 32–42, p. 32.

¹²⁵ Korschun, D. (2021). Brand Activism Is Here to Stay: Here's Why. *NIM Marketing Intelligence Review*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2021, pp. 10-17, p. 11.

¹²⁶ Prakash Sethi, S. (1982). Corporate political activism. *California Management Review*, 24(3), pp. 32–42, p. 34.

¹²⁷ Bhattacharya, C. B., Sen, S. (2003). Consumer-Company Identification: A Framework for Understanding Consumers' Relationships with Companies. *Journal of Marketing* Vol. 67, pp. 76–88, p. 77.

¹²⁸ Cammarota, A. (2023). BRAND ACTIVISM: A Literature Review and Future Research Agenda. *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 2023, 47, pp. 1669-1691, p. 1680.

Today, brands employ rhetoric strategies to influence public opinion on moral issues, “thereby shaping what is considered right/wrong, good/bad, or worthy/unworthy in the industries in which they operate”¹²⁹. While all brands can engage in corporate activism in different forms, only some brands are recognized and labeled as activists. Some literature sources differentiate brand activists from brands who simply adhere to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which can be defined as the integration of social and environmental concerns within a company’s operations and engagements with stakeholders.¹³⁰ Sarkar and Kotler view brand activism as an evolution of CSR, where brands are “driven by a fundamental concern for the *biggest* and most urgent *problems facing society*.”¹³¹ Sibai et al. identify three characteristics of an activist brand: it is perceived and recognized by the public for its values; it has the role of moral entrepreneur when it takes a stance on contentious issues¹³²; and it fosters justice, freedom, and happiness within various realms. The distinctive features are the moral motivations and cultural ideologies behind the work: activist brands are more radical than brands who follow CSR norms.¹³³ For activist brands, activism is a core part of their identity.

Brand-cause fit is also important: how well a brand fits with a cause affects how genuine it results to its consumers. If a brand states it cares about a cause and makes internal changes in its organization to align itself to its beliefs, this positively contributes to its authenticity. The fit between the brand and the cause shows customers the brand is genuine and will commit to the sociopolitical issues it advocates for.¹³⁴ Vredenburg et al. define Authentic Brand Activism as “a purpose- and values-driven strategy in which a brand adopts a non-neutral stance on institutionally-contested sociopolitical issues, to create social change and marketing success”.¹³⁵

¹²⁹ Wieser, V. et al. (2019). Protest rhetoric's appeal: how brands as moral entrepreneurs recruit the media into moral struggles. In ed. M. Lounsbury (Ed.), *The contested moralities of markets*, Research in the Sociology of Organization, Vol. 63, pp. 151–166.

¹³⁰ Corporate Social Responsibility. United Nations Industrial Development Organization. <https://www.unido.org/our-focus/advancing-economic-competitiveness/competitive-trade-capacities-and-corporate-responsibility/corporate-social-responsibility-market-integration/what-csr>

¹³¹ Sarkar, C., Kotler, P. (2020). Brand Activism: From Purpose To Action, p. 38.

¹³² Murkherjee, S., Althuizen, N. (2020). Brand activism: does courting controversy help or hurt a brand?. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 37(4), p. 4.

¹³³ Sibai et al. (2021). Authenticating Brand Activism: Negotiating the Boundaries of Free Speech to Make a Change. *Psychology & Marketing* 38 (10), pp. 1651–1669, p. 1652-1653.

¹³⁴ Ahmad, F. et al. (2020). Brands Taking a Stand: Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing?. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, Vol. 39, Issue 4, pp. 12-13.

¹³⁵ Vredenburg, J. et al. (2020). Brands Taking a Stand: Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing? *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, Vol. 39, Issue 4, pp. 444-460.

Whether a company performs brand activism or is labeled as an activist brand, the outcome of it can be that of consumer identification with the company, which leads to brand loyalty prompting consumers to support the company's products. If the brand's values align with the consumers, they are more likely to overlook negative information about the brand and support it, not only economically.¹³⁶ If a consumer disagrees with the brand, which is usually due to a difference in moral values,¹³⁷ it results in a lower consumer-company identification. This will lead to negative effects on how customers feel and act towards the brand, influencing their attitudes and spending habits.¹³⁸ In the case of consumer-brand disagreement, a brand's activist stance can adversely affect the brand.¹³⁹ However, getting involved in activist roles usually causes controversies, and this helps a brand positioning in the market.¹⁴⁰ What is important, according to Korschun, is that brands consider all diverse groups of people – the brands' stakeholders –, to understand how their relationships would change when engaging or not in brand activism. Customers want to know if a brand is silent about an issue or if it takes a stance; potential employees may be attracted to a company if they feel free to express themselves; and shareholders also care about how brand activism affects the brand's success.¹⁴¹

In conclusion, the dynamics of brand activism and its impact on consumer behavior underscore the importance of values alignment between the company and its customers. When there is harmony, a strong sense of consumer identification is cultivated. Therefore, brands need to carefully align their values with those of their clients and make sure their activist messages arrive to the right demographics, something that is possible to do on social media: the preferred outlet for brand activism campaigns.

¹³⁶ Bhattacharya, C. B., Sen, S. (2003). Consumer-Company Identification: A Framework for Understanding Consumers' Relationships with Companies. *Journal of Marketing* Vol. 67, pp. 76–88, pp. 83-84.

¹³⁷ Murkherjee, S., Althuisen, N. (2020). Brand activism: does courting controversy help or hurt a brand?. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 37(4), p. 6.

¹³⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 34.

¹⁴⁰ Sibai et al. (2021). Authenticating Brand Activism: Negotiating the Boundaries of Free Speech to Make a Change. *Psychology & Marketing* 38 (10), pp. 1651–1669, p. 1663.

¹⁴¹ Korschun, D. (2021). Brand Activism Is Here to Stay: Here's Why. *NIM Marketing Intelligence Review*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2021, pp. 10-17, p. 15.

1.1 Social media's role in brand activism and peer pressure

Brand movements and campaigns emerged on social media to engage with controversial socio-political issues, using the platforms for immediate consumer feedback.¹⁴² Brands leverage the digital space to amplify their voice, and cater their message especially to millennials and Gen Z, who are more politically engaged and responsive to brand activism.¹⁴³ The younger demographic's presence on social media enhances the reach and impact of these messages on critical issues.

While millennials have initiated this trend, according to the 'father of modern marketing'¹⁴⁴ Philip Kotler, most consumers today expect brands to prioritize more than just profits. More people are understanding that what they buy matters, and they prefer to support companies that demonstrate they care about a cause. The use of social media enhances the possibility of a brand to show evidence that they care and be rewarded: it creates instant activism.¹⁴⁵

According to a 2017 survey by the Sprout Social, while most brands tend to avoid difficult conversations on social media, they usually have a plan for addressing controversial issues of political and social nature. Consumers are respondent to that: around two thirds of people interviewed in the survey believe it is crucial for brands to publicly express their view on topics such as immigration, human rights, and racism. They also believe that social media is the perfect channel for brands to communicate their values: 61% are more responsive to messages by brands on social media.¹⁴⁶

The previous chapter discussed the impact of cancel culture on driving activism and brand activism; but peer pressure may also play a key part in how and why brands engage in activism. A study conducted in 2023 analyzed tweets from 177 brands over five years on sociopolitical issues and found that companies are generally more likely to talk about important issues on social media if other companies have already done it. This happened

¹⁴² Miguel, A., & Miranda, S. (2021). How social networks promote brand activism and the importance of authenticity in achieving results. M. C. Tornay-Márquez, I. Sánchez-López & D. Jaramillo-Dent, pp. 355-378, p. 364.

¹⁴³ Sarkar, C., Kotler, P. (2020). Brand Activism: From Purpose To Action, p. 34.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 364.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁶ Sprout Social (2017). #BrandsGetReal: Championing Change in the Age of Social Media. <https://sproutsocial.com/insights/data/championing-change-in-the-age-of-social-media/#brands-have-found-a-voice-on-social-media>

especially with more controversial topics such as #BLM and the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community, while it did not have the same impact with other topics such as the Covid-19 crisis.¹⁴⁷ The influence of peer pressure on brand activism suggests that brands might be hesitant to discuss specific topics, especially more divisive ones, waiting to observe the consumers' reactions to their peer's posts or campaigns. This observation echoes this dissertation's argument that brand activism, often perceived as altruistic, is predominantly motivated by profit and consumer reactions, contrary to Sarkar and Kotler's position that the driving force of brand activism is society and its betterment. Brands strategically position themselves in response to consumer desires and using what is now defined as brand or corporate activism as a means to enhance their positioning in the market and emerge as a moral, ethical company.

1.1.1 Brand identity, brand personality and brand safety

On social media, brands and companies can advertise their products to a large audience and, at the same time, better communicate their values, shaping what are known as brand identity and brand personality.

According to Wheeler, a brand identity is characterized by various aspects: notably differentiation, helping consumers distinguish brands from one another¹⁴⁸ and authenticity, being genuine in sharing one's values¹⁴⁹. Among the other aspects, the notion of value¹⁵⁰ particularly stands out in the discourse of brand activism.

“Creating value is the indisputable goal of most organizations. The quest for sustainability has expanded the value conversation with consumers. Being socially responsible, environmentally conscious, and profitable is the new business model for all brands. A brand is an intangible asset—brand identity, which includes all tangible expression from packaging to websites, upholds that value.”¹⁵¹ For Wheeler, by engaging in what, almost a decade later, Kotler defined as brand activism, a brand fulfills its responsibility to

¹⁴⁷ Guha, M., Korschun, D. (2023). Peer effects on brand activism: evidence from brand and user chatter on Twitter. *J Brand Manag* 2023 21.

¹⁴⁸ Wheeler, A. (2012). *Designing Brand Identity: an essential guide for the whole branding team*. 3rd edition. John Wiley & Sons, Inc, p. 38.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 36.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 48.

¹⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

positively contribute to societal progress while pursuing profits. Brand activism allows a brand to align with societal values, differentiating itself from competitors and creating a distinct identity that resonates with consumers. Brand activism is a tool to shape a virtuous brand identity and creating a unique brand personality centered on positive values and the participation in social justice fights.

Brand personality, on the other hand, refers to a set of human-like characteristics attributed to brands: it is indeed important for brands to have a personality since consumers are more likely to support a brand they identify through human characters.¹⁵² Brands tailor their personalities to resonate with worldwide issues and aspects: the objective is to seek social approval and international recognition. For a brand's personality to be perceived as sincere, a brand decides to engage in ethical branding, especially on social media, where they can share emotional content and storytelling to enhance the consumers' trust.¹⁵³

Social media has positive effects on brand perception: it serves as a strong tool for consumer advocacy, it nurtures positive brand and product awareness, through which brands can stand out by ensuring the presence of genuine information. Brands have seen positive results with social media marketing, especially when advertising to younger generations, for which social networks are the most rewarding advertising avenues.¹⁵⁴

Social media is also useful for brands to gain market insight and monitor what other competitors are doing and how consumers are reacting. This proves effective for peer observation before brands engage in activities that could be defined as brand activism. By analyzing these insights, they can effectively manage brand safety and mitigate risks. A significant objective of marketing is in fact to ensure brand safety, to safeguard a brand's reputation and its perception by the consumers. Media company Integral Ad Science identifies controversial topics among the brand risks that a company should avoid in digital advertising. Risky areas for brands may include topics around new social movements, as mentioned in the previous subchapter.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² Oraklan, A., Celikkol, S. (2017). Advertising And Social Media Strategies in Development of Brand Personality. International Congress of Management Economy and Policy, pp. 547-555, p. 547-548.

¹⁵³ *Ibidem*, pp. 549-550.

¹⁵⁴ Hussain, R. B. M. (2019). Influence Of Social Media On Brand And Branding: A Sociological Review. JLD, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2019, pp. 89-101, p.

¹⁵⁵ Integral Ad Science (2017). Brand safety: the essentials, pp. 3-5.

Brand activism is also facilitated by social media through sponsored posts. This is mainly due to the fact that companies have the ability to specifically choose the demographics that they wish to reach¹⁵⁶ and this provides a twofold advantage. On the one hand, brands can target their content towards a younger audience or someone who shows interest in activism. They can choose to target those profiles who follow a certain page, such as that of an activist, or an organization or social movement. This guarantees that brand activist posts reach an audience that is passionate in a company's values. On the other hand, this targeted approach works as a shield and a tool for brand safety. Through targeting advertisements to certain demographics, companies can reduce the possibility of their posts reaching audiences who are not in line with the activist campaign. This precise targeting, thus, acts as a buffer, which protects the brand from potential repercussions and controversies. In other words, the capacity to select the audience for brand activist content on social media sites enables companies not only to communicate with those who share their values but also to prevent potential risks. This is a tactical approach to brand activism as it utilizes the precision of social media advertising to generate engagement among like-minded audiences while minimizing the likelihood of harming the brand's identity. For brand safety, it is beneficial for a brand to operate within a 'filter bubble', often created on social media particularly in regard to topics of social justice.

By strategically positioning themselves in a social media 'echo chamber' or 'filter bubble', brands can connect with the socially conscious and younger audience. On social media platforms there is usually more acceptance of diversity, with studies finding that greater social media use is correlated with elevated acceptance of all diversities¹⁵⁷. Understanding that Generation Y exhibits higher acceptance levels of diversity¹⁵⁸ can motivate brands to align their activism campaigns with the younger generations' inclusive mindsets, targeting the campaign specifically to them.

Social media advertising, compared to traditional marketing, is also the most cost-effective¹⁵⁹ way to reach customers. While this affordability is advantageous for small

¹⁵⁶ Meta. Trasforma i post di Instagram in inserzioni eccezionali. <https://business.instagram.com/boost-instagram-posts/get-started>

¹⁵⁷ Unal, A. (2021). Social Media Generations' Levels of Acceptance of Diversity. Turkish Online Journal of Education, Vol. 20, No. 2, pp. 155-168.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵⁹ Utama, S. Y. L.; Ruslim, T. S. (2021). The Use of Social Media to Enhance the Performance of Small and Medium Scale-Businesses. Advances in Economics, Business and Management Research, vol. 216, pp. 443-447, p. 443.

and medium companies that want to expand their business¹⁶⁰, it is also a relevant aspect for all brands' potentially controversial campaigns, such as those of activist nature. If a campaign fails, it does not constitute a significant financial setback for the company. The flexibility of social media platforms allows brands to see public reactions to controversial activist campaign in real time and possibly adjust or cancel the campaign according to the feedbacks. This for example happened in December 2023 with the fashion brand Zara, which received backlash after a campaign with insensitive imagery, such as mannequins wrapped in white cloth. The public quickly responded that the campaign was out of touch since it resembled the ongoing casualties in Gaza from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Zara quickly pulled the campaign and issued an apology.¹⁶¹

2. Brands' activist campaigns on social media

2.1 Case studies of brand activism: are brands genuine?

The next sections will discuss a series of case studies on brand activism and analyse whether brands genuinely promote the ideals of social causes or if they do so for profit and improving their public image. These case studies are different: in some, brands employ activists and influencers belonging to systemic minorities, in others they mention new social movements or pledge their fight for the rights of minority groups. Sometimes, these campaigns are not connected to the promotion of a product or a service but are centered on advocating social justice causes, with the brand serving as a vehicle to amplify the messages.

In dissecting various brand activism cases, the dissertation aims to uncover the true motives behind these initiatives: are they real catalysts for social transformation or calculated moves to strengthen the profitability and reputation of corporations? This research entails either investigating the actions before and after a brand's campaign is launched or measuring the depth of authenticity in assessing brands' general ethical

¹⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶¹ Thompson, S. (2023). Zara's Apology Is A Perfect Example Of How Not To Respond To Backlash. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/soniathompson/2023/12/13/zaras-apology-is-a-perfect-example-of-how-not-to-respond-to-backlash/?sh=70c400536e78>

stance – workers’ conditions, past acts of ethics and concrete actions taken towards supporting the declared values of the campaign. The purpose is measuring the correlation between rhetoric and reality; thus, through the analysis of five assessment criteria, determining if brand activism is performative in nature.

2.2 Case studies analysis: methodology

2.2.1 Data collection: brand selection

The selection of brands for the case studies was an intentional process that sought to capture a variety of experiences in the field of brand activism. Two primary criteria guided the selection: recognition as leading activist brands and involvement in controversies surrounding their activism campaigns.

1. Recognition as activist brands by scholars: to provide a holistic analysis of brand activism, brands that are widely known for their activist initiatives were part of the study. Lists of activist brands compiled from scholars and industry publications were used. Based on brands repeatedly mentioned on different platforms and articles talking about brand activism, a representative sample was developed.
2. Involvement in controversies regarding ‘woke’ campaigns: besides identifying well-known activist brands, brands that were involved in controversies before or after their activist campaigns were intentionally chosen. Controversies are crucial points of analysis, showing the challenges and intricacies in the intersection of brand activism and public perception. Literature reviews and news reports have revealed brands that were known for their controversial engagements.
3. Google search for activist brands: a complementary Google search for “activist brands lists” was undertaken. Brands that appeared on multiple lists and received a lot of citations were selected for inclusion in the case studies. This method

sought to document the dominant narrative concerning activist brands in both scholarly and popular context.

2.2.2 Data collection: assessment criteria for each brand

The data collection relating to the activist campaigns and ethical positioning of each brand employed multiple methods to determine the actions, intentions, and ethics of the brand under consideration.

The process encompassed the following key elements:

1. Literature review: the process of data collection was an analysis of scholarly articles and reliable news sources. To evaluate the backstories of the activist campaigns, academic databases and publications were consulted to analyze the brand's actions, reasons, and public perception. This phase sought to analyze the context and evolution of activism initiatives for each brand.
2. Google search for campaign narratives: to supplement the literature review, a particular Google search was performed to find stories about the activist campaigns of each brand. This method helped to gather a wide range of opinions, including media reports, social media consumer reactions, and expert views. The aim was to create a comprehensive profile of the brand's public image and response to their activism initiatives.
3. Assessment of pre- and post- campaign actions: a crucial part of the assessment was a description of what each brand did before and after its activist campaign. The temporal element analysis made it possible to determine the continuity and timeliness of the campaign.
4. Accusations of discriminations: measuring the ethical image of brands, the analysis focused on accusations of discrimination, not respecting workers' rights, and general ethics. This entailed searching for allegations, lawsuits, and scandals concerning any brand.

5. Industry reputation: additional data was gathered from the industry reputation indices and ethical rankings if available, providing an external evaluation of the ethical performances of the brands. This involved the use of credible indices, such as those focusing on corporate responsibility and sustainability, which either validated or invalidated the findings of the literature review and online stories.

2.2.3 Brands selected

In an extensive search focusing on the most cited brands in brand activism papers, as well as consulting the book *Brand Activism: from Purpose to Action* by Sarkar and Kotler that helped define the term, this study carefully chose seven brands for comparison. These brands were chosen based on the goal of capturing unique brand activism approaches and variations in the duration of the respective campaigns.

The selected brands for analysis are Nike, Airbnb, Starbucks, Barilla, Anheuser-Busch, Lush, and Oatly. Nike stands out as a relevant case since it is consistently mentioned in literature on brand activism, especially due to its Black Lives Matter positions. Airbnb is interesting because ethical issues relating to the platform are viewed as a collateral impact rather than being a direct result of the company's presence. Starbucks and Barilla provide insightful cases, with Starbucks launching an activism campaign supporting Black Lives Matter, while Barilla reacted to LGBTQIA+ community issues, presenting examples of campaigns developed in reaction to public backlash. The campaign by Anheuser-Busch is a unique case of brand activism that has an influencer-activist as the spokesperson for the campaigns yet it also includes the noteworthy aspect of the company distancing itself from an activist when faced with transphobic comments.

Lush is an activist company, not associated with time-limited campaigns but characterized by a permanent commitment to activism. On the other hand, ethical concerns are raised in other areas of its operations. Lastly, Oatly is a brand that seems ethical in many ways through its long-standing activist position, ethical products, and values. However, Oatly's ethical positioning is also worth discussing.

It is essential to underline that the choice of these brands was intentional and not arbitrary. The brands were selected to represent various cases and capture different aspects of brand activism, allowing for a broader understanding of the subject.

2.2.4 Data analysis: criteria for assessing brand activism authenticity

The data analysis stage aimed to assess the genuineness of brand activism through a thorough framework. The analysis focused on five essential criteria – consistency in actions, transparency and communication, inclusivity and diversity in brand practices, timeliness of the campaigns, and internal practices and workplace culture – to provide nuanced insights into the ethical positioning of the brands.

Table 1: study assessment criteria to determine whether brand activism is performative

No.	Criteria	Evaluation
1	Consistency in Actions	Assess whether the brand's actions outside of the activism campaigns are consistent with the messages communicated in the campaigns. Search for cases where the actions of the brand can be inconsistent with the values promoted in the campaigns.
2	Transparency and Communication	Analyze the efficiency and authenticity of communication, both internal and external, about the brand's social agenda.
3	Inclusivity and Diversity in Brand Practices	Investigate the brand's policies on inclusion and diversity, internally and externally.
4	Timeliness of the Campaigns	Evaluate whether the brand activist campaigns are responses to criticism and public backlash.
5	Internal Practices and Workplace Culture	Research the internal practices of the brand, especially in the areas of worker rights, gender equality, and discrimination. Evaluate the workplace culture as a whole and whether it aligns with the brand's external activism messages.

Taking into account the close interrelations between various ethical positions, an intersectional approach was used. The analysis looked at what the brands did beyond the headline-grabbing campaigns, highlighting possible incoherencies or incompatibilities. This intersectional approach enabled a comprehensive assessment of the situation, considering the interdependence of several factors.

The thesis argued that one criterion that supported doubts about authenticity called for particular attention, while two or more indicated performative activism. This approach recognized that a brand's morality is complex and cannot be reduced to certain positions. If there were issues of transparency or the inclusivity efforts were only symbolic, and if all seven case studies were deemed to be instances of performative activism, this created doubts about the credibility of the entire narrative behind brand activism.

The application of the five criteria together sought a comprehensive assessment of the ethical performance of each brand. The objective was not just to criticize individual cases but to portray a full picture of how brands behave within the intricate field of brand activism.

2.3 Case studies

2.3.1 Nike

Athletic footwear and apparel brand Nike is frequently found in literature on brand activism, cited as an activist brand, particularly because of two campaigns related to the Black Lives Matter movement: the first in 2018 and the second in 2020 after the BLM movement became more visible following George Floyd's tragic death.

Nike's choice of Colin Kaepernick as the face for their 'Dream Crazy' 30th-anniversary campaign is mentioned by Sarkar and Kotler as a powerful representation of brand activism, which initiated an entire nationwide conversation about rights, social justice, and politics in sport.¹⁶²

¹⁶² Sarkar, C., Kotler, P. (2020). *Brand Activism: From Purpose To Action*, p. 61.



Figure 1: Nike's 'Dream Crazy' campaign.

In 2016, NFL quarterback Kaepernick had started to kneel during the national anthem before the football games to protest racism in the United States and started a movement where other players either knelt or raised a fist in support of black rights. This sparked great reactions, even from the former US President Donald Trump, who invited players to stand during the anthem. In 2017, Kaepernick's contract with his team, the San Francisco 49ers, was not renewed and his career in the NFL ended¹⁶⁴, the league censoring his unpatriotic behavior.¹⁶⁵

This context laid the groundwork for Nike's 2018 campaign, where they stood in support of Kaepernick. The campaign's powerful message "Believe in something. Even it means sacrificing everything," echoed with his activism against racial oppression and his sacrifice of his career. In so doing, Nike positioned Kaepernick as an ambassador of inspiration instead of a disrespectful individual and one that was changing social norms within the sports business sector.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Guardian sport (2019). Nike's 'Dream Crazy' advert starring Colin Kaepernick wins Emmy. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2019/sep/16/nikes-dream-crazy-advert-starring-colin-kaepernick-wins-emmy>

¹⁶⁴ Boren, C. (2020). A timeline of Colin Kaepernick's protests against police brutality, four years after they began. The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/sports/2020/06/01/colin-kaepernick-kneeling-history/>

¹⁶⁵ Sibai et al. (2021). Authenticating Brand Activism: Negotiating the Boundaries of Free Speech to Make a Change. *Psychology & Marketing* 38 (10), pp. 1651–1669, p. 1657.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibidem*.

Despite a wave of backlash, including calls for boycotts by former President Trump and public demonstrations such as Republican supporters starting the “Burn your Nikes” movement¹⁶⁷, the media value arising from this campaign after Kaepernick revealed the advert on Twitter was reported at \$43 million worth of media exposure within a day.¹⁶⁸ Interestingly, despite the controversies and opposition incurred from this campaign launch, online sales by Nike dramatically surged to record 31% growth within a span of just four days after.¹⁶⁹ The Kaepernick-Nike partnership also gained more prominence as it won an Emmy award for best commercial.¹⁷⁰

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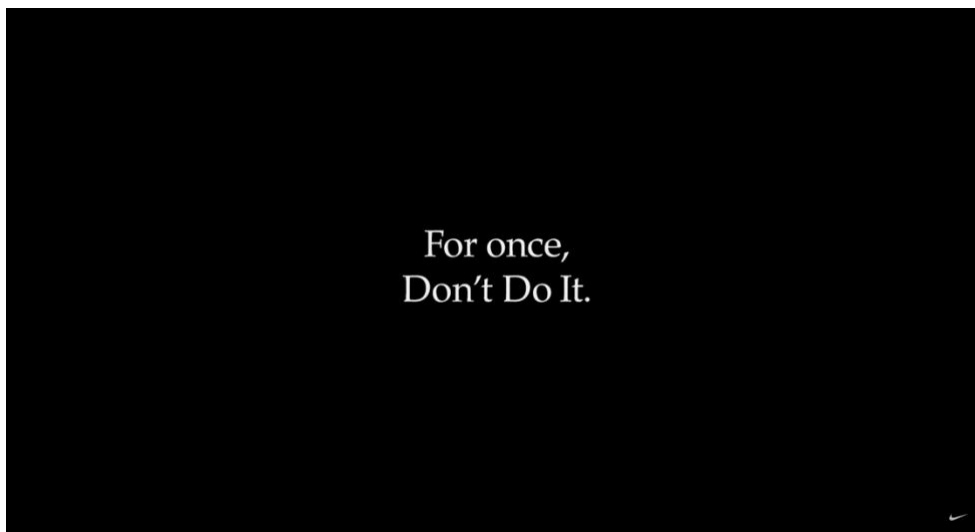


Figure 2: a screenshot from Nike's video campaign 'For once, Don't do It'.

In 2020, Nike once again stepped into the spotlight with another activist campaign titled 'For Once, Don't Do It' following the death of George Floyd and the growth in popularity of the BLM movement worldwide. The video shared on social media featured a series of messages: “For once, Don't Do It. Don't pretend there's not a problem in America. Don't turn your back on racism. Don't accept innocent lives being taken from us. Don't make any more excuses. Don't think this doesn't affect you. Don't sit back and be silent. Don't

¹⁶⁷ Miguel, A., & Miranda, S. (2021). How social networks promote brand activism and the importance of authenticity in achieving results. M. C. Tornay-Márquez, I. Sánchez-López & D. Jaramillo-Dent, pp. 355-378, p. 372.

¹⁶⁸ Sarkar, C., Kotler, P. (2020). Brand Activism: From Purpose To Action, p. 61.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷⁰ Nike's 'Dream Crazy' advert starring Colin Kaepernick wins Emmy (2019). The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2019/sep/16/nikes-dream-crazy-advert-starring-colin-kaepernick-wins-emmy>

¹⁷¹ Nike (2020). For once, Don't Do It. Nike. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=drcO2V2m7lw>

think you can't be part of the change. Let's all be part of the change.”¹⁷² Unlike the ‘Dream Crazy’ campaign, where the protagonists of the video are sports personalities in Nike gear, this video presents a black background with white text, playing on Nike’s slogan ‘Just Do It’ by flipping it to ‘Don’t Do it’ referred to being racist and being indifferent to police brutality.¹⁷³ In this case, the campaign does not show the products or aim to directly sell them: its primary goal is to exhibit the brand’s core values.

Considering these two campaigns among others, scholars such as Sarkar, Kotler and Sibai regard Nike as an activist brand, championing social causes. However, it is necessary to investigate if these campaigns are consistent with the brand’s practices.

Firstly, Nike continued their support of the NFL, the same league that ostracized Colin Kaepernick when he protested against racial injustice¹⁷⁴. In 2018, the same year of the ‘Dream Crazy’ campaign, Nike extended its contract with the NFL, pledging to supply their uniforms until 2028.¹⁷⁵

Secondly, Nike frequently launches its advertising campaign during times of crisis, including allegations made by nonprofits for the rights of workers and against sweatshops. In 2015, Nike prohibited the Worker Rights Consortium from conducting investigations in their factories. The WRC urged Nike to reconsider its position, noting that requests for access to factories are rare but important to investigate alleged violations of labor rights and take the necessary steps to rectify them.¹⁷⁶ In 2023, Canada’s ethics agency investigated Nike over alleged ties to Uyghur forced labor in China, following a report citing potential human rights abuses against Uyghurs.¹⁷⁷ Moreover, twenty garment sector unions, Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA) and Global Labor Justice – International Labor Rights Forum (GLJ-ILRF) filed a suit against Nike claiming violations of OECD Guidelines. This submission mentions severe human rights violations faced by garment workers in Nike’s supply chain during the COVID-19 pandemic, such

¹⁷² *Ibidem*.

¹⁷³ Eyada, B. (2020). Brand Activism, the Relation and Impact on Consumer Perception: A Case Study on Nike Advertising. *International Journal of Marketing Studies*; Vol. 12, No. 4, pp. 30-42, p. 38.

¹⁷⁴ Vredenburg, J. et al. (2020). Brands Taking a Stand: Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing? *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, Vol. 39, Issue 4, pp. 444-460.

¹⁷⁵ Bell, D. (2018). Nike Will Be NFL’s Uniform And Apparel Supplier For Forseeable Future After Long-Term Extension. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/demetriusbell/2018/03/27/nike-will-be-nfls-uniform-and-apparel-supplier-for-foreseeable-future-after-long-term-extension/?sh=619148cf50ad>

¹⁷⁶ Worker Rights Consortium (2015). Nike, the WRC and University Labor Codes. <https://www.workersrights.org/communications-to-affiliates/nike-the-wrc-and-university-labor-codes/>

¹⁷⁷ Kim, C. (2023). Canada probes Nike, Dynasty Gold over alleged use of Uyghur forced labour. *BBC News*. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-66171702>

as layoffs, pay cuts, and gender discrimination. It alleges that Nike did not deal with such grievances as stipulated in the OECD Guidelines and did not interact with relevant unions representing the workers. They ask for remedies including fair compensation and decent working conditions.¹⁷⁸

Thirdly, Nike has faced numerous accusations of gender inequality and discriminations among its workers. In 2018, 5,000 pages of records containing allegations of sexism, bullying, and fears of retaliation within the company surfaced during a lawsuit. Surveys showed that female employees were worried that management often did not consider their complaints. The cases involved male co-workers instructing employees to ‘dress sexier’ and reports of executives carrying out inappropriate behavior towards juniors.¹⁷⁹ Despite the company’s attempt to keep such information classified, in September 2022, the court made public the need to divulge statistical evidence as well as particulars about alleged gender bias within Nike.¹⁸⁰ “The way Nike marginalizes women at its headquarters is completely contrary to how it portrays itself to its customers as valuing women in sports and the importance of providing equal opportunity to play”¹⁸¹ said GBDH attorney Byron Goldstein.

Applying the assessment criteria of this study to analyze Nike’s brand activism, there are some issues to consider. With regards to Consistency in Action (criterion 1), Nike’s continued support for the NFL, even after it fired Colin Kaepernick, is questionable. In terms of Transparency and Communication (criterion 2), the cases related to charges of labor rights violations and gender inequality seem to indicate possible issues. The allegations of gender inequality within the company and how the company responded to worker rights concerns suggest possible issues with criteria 3 and 5, Internal Practices and Workplace Culture and Inclusivity and Diversity in Brand Practices.

The analysis defines Nike’s brand activism as performative since four out of five criteria of the study are met.

¹⁷⁸ OECD Specific Instance: Twenty garment sector unions, Asia Floor Wage Alliance (AFWA) and Global Labor Justice - International Labor Rights Forum (GLJ-ILRF) vs. Nike (2023)

¹⁷⁹ Helmore, E. (2022). Nike lawsuit records allege culture of sexism, bullying and fear of retaliation. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/dec/20/nike-lawsuit-records-sexual-abuse-toxic-workplace-claim>

¹⁸⁰ Goldstein, Borgen, Dardaian & Ho. (2022). Cahill et al. v. Nike, Inc. <https://gbdhlegal.com/cases/cahill-et-al-v-nike-inc/>

¹⁸¹ *Ibidem*.

2.3.2 Airbnb

Airbnb, a platform that facilitates short-term rentals among private hosts and clients, is another brand known for its involvement in social justice campaigns and activism.

In 2017, Airbnb got involved in brand activism out of support for restrictive immigration measures proposed by Donald Trump in the United States.

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Figure 3: a screenshot from Airbnb's #weaccept campaign video

They featured their #weaccept campaign in their online platforms and social media encouraging individuals to open their doors to people who could no longer enter the USA and donate to organizations aiding refugees. The company itself pledged to accommodate refugees and those who were banned from the country and agreed to accommodate 100,000 people over a period of five years. The campaign was very successful on social media, their Facebook and Instagram posts received close to 500 thousand likes and were shared widely, even by users regarded as conservative. Moreover, more than 15,400 people registered to house the displaced individuals.¹⁸³

¹⁸² Airbnb (2017). #weaccept. Airbnb. <https://www.airbnb.com/weaccept>

¹⁸³ Miguel, A., & Miranda, S. (2021). How social networks promote brand activism and the importance of authenticity in achieving results. M. C. Tornay-Márquez, I. Sánchez-López & D. Jaramillo-Dent, pp. 355-378, p. 365-366.

Despite this activist campaign, it can be argued that Airbnb's ethical stance is questionable, with some even considering its very existence problematic.

Firstly, the platform has been struggling with racial and discrimination problems. Studies have shown biases, where potential renters prefer homes listed by white hosts compared to those by people of color. Data from a 2014 study by Harvard Business School shows significant difference in the earnings of non-black and black hosts. Rents from black hosts are consistently lower than those from non-black hosts for the same type of listing. The study factored in control variables such as property characteristics, guest ratings, and location. The analysis reveals that non-black hosts tend to earn approximately 12% more than black hosts for similar listings with similar ratings and photos on Airbnb.¹⁸⁴

Additionally, there have been several cases of hosts that rejected rentals to people of color. A 2016 study from Harvard Business School found that guests with white-sounding names are accepted about 50% of the time on Airbnb while those with African American-sounding names are accepted around 42% of the time.¹⁸⁵ While the hosts or guests implicit bias may not seem to be the responsibility of the platform, Airbnb must intervene to address the situation. In fact, comparative scenarios with top hotel-booking platforms such as Expedia or Priceline, where discrimination based on the guest's names is forbidden and the guests do not need to reveal photos and personal information until the booking is finalized, demonstrate the companies' responsibility for the presence of discrimination on the platform.¹⁸⁶ To combat discrimination there are strategies such as hiding guest names, highlighting the 'Instant Book' option to diminish host surveillance, or adopting the kinds of communication protocols used by eBay of pseudonyms and automated salutations.¹⁸⁷

The company has mentioned in their #weaccept campaign that they are aware that 'guests on Airbnb have experienced discrimination'¹⁸⁸ – they did not factor in hosts – and that they 'are dedicated to achieving greater acceptance in our community'¹⁸⁹. Nevertheless, there has been no concrete evidence of actual changes in policies.

¹⁸⁴ Edelman B., Luca, M. (2014). Digital Discrimination: The Case of Airbnb.com. Harvard Business School, pp. 10-12.

¹⁸⁵ Edelman, B., Luca, M., Svirsky, D. (2016). Racial Discrimination in the Sharing Economy: Evidence from a Field Experiment. Harvard Business School, p. 11.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

¹⁸⁸ Airbnb (2017). #weaccept. Airbnb. <https://www.airbnb.com/weaccept>

¹⁸⁹ *Ibidem*.

Secondly, Airbnb, as one of the biggest short-term rental platforms, has significantly influenced homelessness in urban centers. The emergence of Airbnb in 2008 from a small startup to a \$30 billion firm listing over six million accommodations worldwide created financial opportunities for hosts. Many saw the platform a way of getting additional revenue by appealing to business travelers with a homey atmosphere. However, this success is not without drawbacks. Critics discuss the impact of Airbnb's growth on urban life, causing increased rents, lack of long-term housing, and disturbances to neighborhoods.¹⁹⁰

The advent of short-term rental platforms such as Airbnb posed many issues to the housing environment in different cities, as represented by Florence and New York City. The presence of Airbnb in Florence is unsustainable due to the city already being over capacity: this contributes to increased rent burdens for locals, homelessness, and strains on the welfare system.¹⁹¹ Restrictions either preventing homeowners from listing their entire home for rental or limiting each host to one listing would help recover long-term housing, which would benefit residents and students.¹⁹² Other cities worldwide have promoted similar intentions as the city in addressing over-tourism and housing shortages. In New York City, the population growth, engendered by immigration and the city's attractions in various spheres, has had a dramatic increase over the years.¹⁹³ In January 2022, New York City passed Local Law 18 which required short-term rental hosts to register with the Mayor's Office of Special Enforcement (OSE). This legislation does not allow booking platforms such as Airbnb and Booking.com to conduct transactions for unregistered rentals.¹⁹⁴

The availability of short-term rental services such as Airbnb creates additional rent pressures by transforming permanent housing into temporary accommodations. These dynamics paint the picture of a housing market that is stretched to its limits due to a range

¹⁹⁰ Sherwood, H. (2019). How Airbnb took over the world. *The Guardian*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2019/may/05/airbnb-homelessness-renting-housing-accommodation-social-policy-cities-travel-leisure>

¹⁹¹ Higgins, T., Martellozzo, F., Randelli, F. (2023). *Airbnb and the City: Comparative Analysis of Short-Term Rentals policies in Florence (Italy)*, p. 15.

¹⁹² *Ibidem*, p. 13.

¹⁹³ Schwartz, A. (2019). New York City's Affordable Housing Plans and the Limits of Local Initiative. *Cityscape*, Vol. 21, No. 3, *Small Area Fair Market Rents (2019)*, pp. 355-388, p. 357.

¹⁹⁴ NYC Office of Special Enforcement (2022). *Short-Term Rental Registration and Verification by Booking Services*. <https://www.nyc.gov/site/specialeenforcement/registration-law/registration.page>

of factors, such as population growth, motivations of investors, and the disruptive impact of some short-term rental platforms.

Applying the study's criteria to analyze Airbnb's brand activism provides diverse findings. The #weaccept campaign linked to the company's values indicates a level of Consistency in Actions (criterion 1). Nevertheless, the racial biases and instances of discrimination on the platform raise questions about the consistency in promoting inclusivity. The commitment to Inclusivity and Diversity in Brand Practices (criterion 3) is in doubt since the company, aware of the discrimination on its website, has not implemented robust measures to counteract that, unlike other companies in its field. The issues related to rent pressures and housing shortages, while considered indirect consequences of Airbnb's presence, could suggest deficiencies in Transparency and Communication (criterion 2) as the company has not adequately tackled these issues. Additionally, concerns about Inclusivity in Brand Practices (criterion 3) arise. According to this study, the Airbnb case aligns with three out of the five criteria, implying that its activism might be viewed as performative.

2.3.3 Starbucks

Sibai et al. consider Starbucks as a generalist activist brand, this role exemplified by the company's reaction to the 2017 US refugee crisis. Following the controversy caused by President Trump's executive order that severely restricted entry for citizens from several Muslim countries, the CEO of Starbucks, Howard Schultz, quickly provided comments on the issue in the form of a public letter on social media. Schultz declared that Starbucks would help immigrants, showing solidarity for the children in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program. He condemned the separationist dialogue; he criticized the hate speech directed towards immigrants and Muslims and branded Starbucks as an advocate for inclusivity.¹⁹⁵

Starbucks also engaged in brand activism in 2020, publicly supporting the Black Lives Matter movement, committing to donate 1 million US dollars to organizations chosen by employees promoting racial equity and inclusion. They also announced the production of

¹⁹⁵ Sibai et al. (2021). Authenticating Brand Activism: Negotiating the Boundaries of Free Speech to Make a Change. *Psychology & Marketing* 38 (10), pp. 1651–1669, pp. 1657-1658.

t-shirts with the Starbucks logo and a BLM design for employees who wanted to wear them that would be sent to more than 250,000 store partners.

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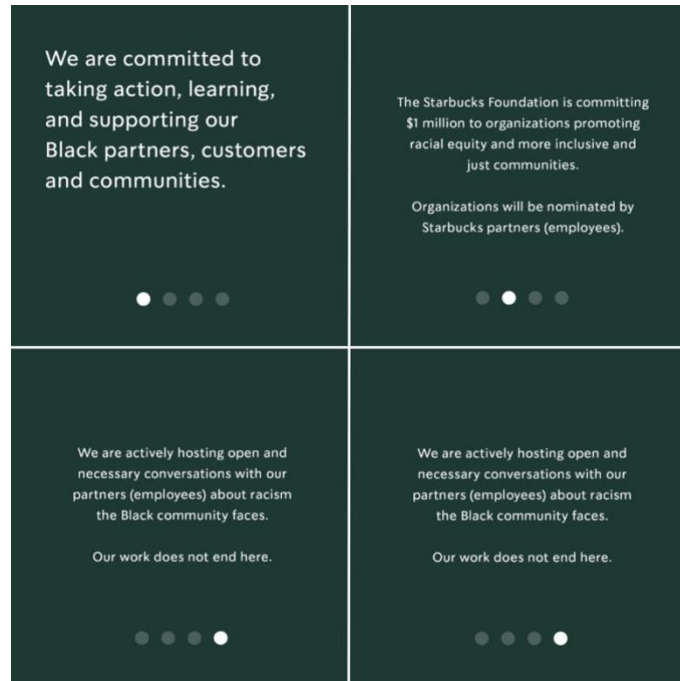


Figure 4: Starbucks posts on social media in support of Black Lives Matter.

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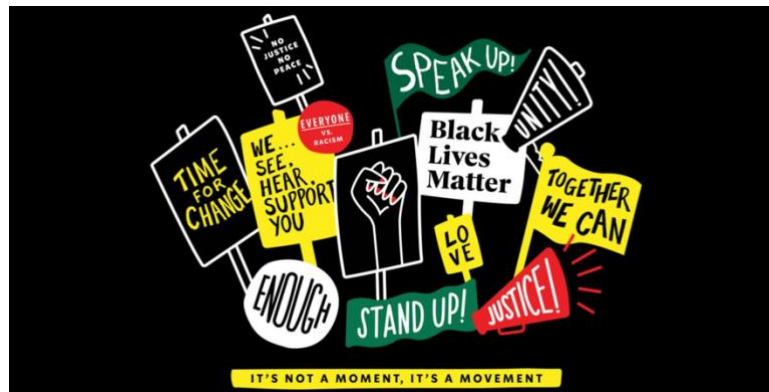


Figure 5: Starbucks' BLM t-shirt design.

¹⁹⁶ Starbucks [@Starbucks] (June 4, 2020). Black lives matter. We are committed to being a part of change. You can find educational resources at <http://sbux.co/learn>. X. <https://twitter.com/Starbucks/status/1268513794172411905?lang=en>

¹⁹⁷ Starbucks [@Starbucks] (June 12, 2020). Black Lives Matter. We continue to listen to our partners and communities and their desire to stand for justice together. The Starbucks Black Partner Network co-designed t-shirts with this graphic that will soon be sent to 250,000+ store partners. X. <https://twitter.com/Starbucks/status/1271440942591913986>

Although these initiatives seem genuine and seem to have a positive effect on both refugees and the Black community, there is still room for doubt regarding whether these are genuine corporate brand activism efforts.

Firstly, little was said about Starbucks' resolution of hiring refugees. As a matter of fact, the company pledged to employ 10,000 refugees by 2022, and its website does not have any information related to the progress made¹⁹⁸ or recent developments on the issue, raising questions about whether this commitment was to be fulfilled.

Secondly, as the Black Lives Matter movement grew in popularity, Starbucks made a public declaration of support on social media. However, at the same time, they banned staff members from wearing Black Lives Matter outfits or pins due to dress code regulations, because the message is political or could incite violence. In an internal bulletin obtained by BuzzFeed News, Starbucks' vice president of Inclusion and Diversity Zing Shaw stated that "there are agitators who misconstrue the fundamental principles of the Black Lives Matter movement – and in certain circumstances, intentionally repurpose them to amplify divisiveness."¹⁹⁹ After a huge social media backlash that followed the reveal of this internal communication, Starbucks pledged the donation and declared it would provide 250,000 BLM shirts for employees.²⁰⁰ These conflicting stances raise skepticism about the authenticity of Starbucks' social activism.

Thirdly, the company has been seriously accused of sexual harassment and discrimination. Employees have filed many lawsuit cases against the company due to proofs of inappropriate behavior like supervisors asking for sexual relationships, harassment by management and co-workers, and firing employees after complaints. Such reported incidents cast a shadow over Starbucks' workplace culture and individuals begin questioning the issues deep rooted in the company.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁸ Starbucks (2017). Hiring Refugees. Starbucks Archive. <https://archive.starbucks.com/record/hiring-refugees>

¹⁹⁹ Sacks, B., Samaha, A. (2020). Starbucks Won't Let Employees Wear Gear That Supports Black Lives Matter Because It Is Political Or Could Incite Violence. BuzzFeed News. <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/briannasacks/starbucks-is-now-very-pro-black-lives-matter-but-it-wont>

²⁰⁰ Murphy, H. (2020). Starbucks Will Allow Employees to Wear Black Lives Matter Apparel. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/12/business/starbucks-blm-ban-reversed.html> These conflicting stances raised skepticism about the authenticity of Starbucks' social activism.

²⁰¹ Featherstone, L. (2019). Howard Schultz's #MeToo Problem at Starbucks. Jacobin. <https://jacobin.com/2019/02/howard-schultz-bernie-sanders-sexual-harassment-me-too>

Ultimately, Starbucks faced incidents of racial bias, notably in 2018 when two black men, Nelson and Robinson were wrongfully arrested in a Philadelphia store. This was one of the highly publicized events that affected Starbucks' reputation. Starbucks responded with a sincere apology and a move similar to Chipotle to close over 8,000 stores for a day to re-train its employees. The intent of this effort was to help the company restore its image and to show that it is a responsible member of society that cares about the concerns of its stakeholders. Starbucks' move demonstrated crisis management, admitting fault, and taking real action. This effort was not just a hollow apology but part of a strategic move to start rebuilding trust with stakeholders, highlighting a renewed commitment to inclusivity and social accountability.²⁰²

When analyzing the brand activism of Starbucks under the framework of the established criteria, several dimensions arise which may indicate performative and unauthentic activism. First, as regards to Consistency in Actions (criterion 1) and Transparency and Communication issues (criterion 2), Starbucks' commitment to hiring 10,000 refugees appears to lack transparency as there is limited information regarding progress. The Timeliness of Campaigns (criterion 4) is strategic, and it is apparent in how Starbucks responded to the Black Lives Matter movement after being criticized for not allowing badges, with the creation of BLM t-shirts as a reactive approach. Concerning Inclusivity and Diversity of Brand Practices (criterion 3), the arrest of two black men in a Philadelphia store poses questions about Starbucks' dedication to cultivating an inclusive environment, as do the allegations of sexual harassment and discrimination occurring within the company. The performative element of Starbucks's strategic response to crises like the racial bias incident may be seen from the fact that the company uses campaigns for crisis management rather than long-term activism (criterion 4). Looking at Internal Practices and Workplace Culture (criterion 5), the series of issues, from workplace discrimination to internal conflicts, cumulatively raise questions about the genuineness of Starbucks' social activism. The intersectional assessment of these criteria reveals a complex picture, implying gaps in the ethical positioning of Starbucks. The company's brand activism may be publicly aligned with social causes, but it is questioned in terms of consistency, transparency, timeliness, inclusivity, and internal practices, as all five

²⁰² Avila, M. et al. (2019). \$16.7 Million To Save One Reputation: How Starbucks Responded Amidst a Racial Sensitivity Crisis. *Pepperdine Journal of Communication Research*, Vol. 7, Article 4.

criteria of the study are met, which poses significant questions regarding the authenticity of its engagement with wider social issues.

2.3.4 Barilla

The famous Italian pasta company Barilla has in the last few years aligned itself with the LGBTQIA+ community, through campaigns, diversity training, and partnerships with LGBTQIA+ rights groups.

In 2018, at the Pasta World Championship in Milan, the brand showed new art design on pasta boxes, created by the Italian artist Olimpia Zagnoli. One of the boxes depicted two women eating pasta together, sharing a spaghetti strand, such as in the iconic scene of the Lady and the Tramp. Barilla Chief Diversity Officer Kristen Anderson declared that the box is a symbol of love and inclusion and reiterated that DEI is one of the key values of Barilla's business model.²⁰³

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Figure 6: Olimpia Zagnoli's spaghetti box for Barilla Pasta World Championship

²⁰³ Barilla (2018). "Cooking is an Art" Una collaborazione tra Barilla e Olimpia Zagnoli. <https://www.barillagroup.com/it/sala-stampa/comunicati-stampa/collaborazione-tra-barilla-e-olimpia-zagnoli/>

²⁰⁴ Zagnoli, O. (2018). Barilla: Spaghetti box for Barilla Pasta World Championship. <https://www.olimpiazagnoli.com/work/barilla-2/>

In 2019, Barilla collaborates with the fashion streetwear brand GCDS for a campaign called ‘Dinner’s Ready’, through a short movie directed by Nadia Lee Cohen. Many stars are present in the video, Italian actress Sophia Loren is cooking pasta for a diverse group that includes American drag queen Violet Chachki, American influencer and trans woman Nikita Dragun and other queer, racialized or older models. The idea is that of a family, or better a chosen family – ‘nonbiological kinship bonds’ important in the LGBTQIA+ community²⁰⁵ – that reunites to eat pasta at Loren’s house.²⁰⁶

The inclusive ad featuring LGBTQIA+ personalities and the queer design on the box of pasta, together with Openly, a digital platform developed by Barilla for reporting issues affecting the LGBTQIA+ community, give the impression of an inclusive activist brand.

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Figure 7: *Dinner's Ready* starring Sophia Loren, directed by Nadia Lee Cohen for Barilla and GCDS

However, all these actions were taken in response to a controversy, in a strategic plan designed by Barilla’s CEO, Claudio Colzani, to clean Barilla’s image after facing a boycott from the LGBTQIA+ community.

²⁰⁵ Blum, D. (2022). The Joy in Finding Your Chosen Family. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/25/well/lgbtq-chosen-families.html>

²⁰⁶ Abad, M. (2019). Violet Chachki, Nikita Dragun and Aweng Star in GCDS Campaign. PAPER. <https://www.papermag.com/gcgs-barilla-campaign-aweng#rebelltitem3>

²⁰⁷ GCDS (2019). "Dinner's Ready" by Nadia Lee Cohen | GCDS x BARILLA. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fdHLN6G9Hc&t=63s>

In 2013, in fact, the company's chairman Guido Barilla was interviewed during the Italian radio program *La Zanzara*. During the interview he was asked why women always serve pasta in Barilla's campaigns and in his answer, he mentioned the LGBTQIA+ community. Barilla spoke on behalf of the company; he said: 'for us the concept of family is sacred; it remains one of the fundamental values of the company. Health, the concept of family. We will not create a gay advertisement because ours is a traditional family.'²⁰⁸ Probably anticipating a backlash, he also stated that 'if they like our pasta, our communication, they'll eat it. If they don't like what we say, they'll do without it and eat another [brand of pasta]. But one cannot please everyone all the time.'²⁰⁹ The responses to this interview were harsh worldwide because Barilla also took a stance against gay adoptions. Some representatives of the Italian LGBTQIA+ community and activists started the hashtag *#boicottabarilla* – boycott Barilla in Italian – that went viral on Twitter²¹⁰.

Although its shareholders were concerned about losing their market share, Barilla only suffered minor loss of sales in 2013, and its revenue was larger than the previous year. However, the case had a serious effect on the corporate image, demonstrated by its drop in the Reputation Institute's list of companies. The CEO Claudio Colzani rapidly responded to the crisis and made an essential contribution in neutralizing it.²¹¹ The Human Rights Campaign noted that Barilla moved positively towards the LGBTQIA+ community, for instance, when it provided health benefits for transgender workers, contributed to gay rights causes, and used a lesbian couple in its advertisements. Guido Barilla boasted of the efforts that the firm had made to redefine family and learn from his past misstatements.²¹²

The proactive responses made by Colzani included a public apology, an immediate response to the chairman's comments, and pledging to put things right. Colzani pledged about 5 million dollars yearly to a plan targeted on ameliorating Barilla's reputation as

²⁰⁸ Strada, M. (2013). Barilla: «Mai uno spot con famiglie gay, se a qualcuno non va, mangi un'altra pasta». Corriere della Sera. https://www.corriere.it/cronache/13_settembre_26/barilla-no-spot-omosessuali-famiglia-sacrale_f9506e70-268f-11e3-a1ee-487182bf93b6.shtml

²⁰⁹ *Ibidem*.

²¹⁰ Porta, F. (2013). Caso Barilla, le reazioni degli altri pastifici. Vanity Fair Italia. <https://www.vanityfair.it/news/italia/13/09/27/barilla-mai-spot-gay-reazioni-web-pasta>

²¹¹ Buckley, T. (2019). Barilla Pasta's Turnaround From Homophobia to National Pride. Bloomberg. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2019-05-07/barilla-pasta-s-turnaround-from-homophobia-to-national-pride?embedded-checkout=true>

²¹² Wolf, R. S., Gonzales-Perez, M. A. (2019). Pride and Prejudice: The case of Barilla S.p.A. in Diversity within Diversity Management: Types of Diversity in Organizations Advanced Series in Management, Volume 22, p. 26.

well as modifying its organizational culture. A critical aspect of Barilla's transformation included the appointment of Kristen Anderson as the chief diversity and inclusion. Anderson now leads an internal committee, which convenes periodically to evaluate the level of implementation of initiatives, such as the co-creation of packaging together with disabled customers and promoting women to leadership roles.²¹³ Anderson also organized the collaboration with artist Olimpia Zagnoli on the inclusive box design in 2018.²¹⁴ The artist had been among the ones to boycott Barilla after the chairman's homophobic comments, but later concluded a partnership with them after being surprised that the brand had accepted her design.

In conclusion, Barilla faced minimal financial setbacks in terms of revenue after the controversy in 2013, but the incident negatively impacted the company's reputation. The following attempts to incorporate inclusion, especially within the LGBTQIA+ realm, indicate a strategic shift in focus. Despite the constant representation of the traditional family unit in most advertisements, this emphasis on the inclusion of especially queer people and couples is more of a crisis response rather than genuine brand activism.

Barilla recognized the LGBTQIA+ community as an influential stakeholder group and understood the importance of engaging with the community and engaging in brand activism.²¹⁵

The analysis of the Barilla case based on the criteria of the study reveals some elements that indicate the performative brand activism, especially considering the Timeliness of the Campaigns (criterion 4) and Consistency in Actions (criterion 1). The strategic addition of LGBTQIA+ inclusive initiatives after the 2013 controversy corresponds to criterion 4, suggesting a responsive action to address negative outcomes quickly rather than a genuine pre-existing commitment to inclusivity. Looking at criterion 1, Barilla's actions lack consistency. The first declaration by the chairman of the traditional as a core value is in contradiction with the later statement by the Chief Diversity Officer that DEI

²¹³ Buckley, T. (2019). Barilla Pasta's Turnaround From Homophobia to National Pride. Bloomberg. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2019-05-07/barilla-pasta-s-turnaround-from-homophobia-to-national-pride?embedded-checkout=true>

²¹⁴ Barilla (2018). "Cooking is an Art" Una collaborazione tra Barilla e Olimpia Zagnoli. <https://www.barillagroup.com/it/sala-stampa/comunicati-stampa/collaborazione-tra-barilla-e-olimpia-zagnoli/>

²¹⁵ Wolf, R. S., Gonzales-Perez, M. A. (2019). Pride and Prejudice: The case of Barilla S.p.A. in Diversity within Diversity Management: Types of Diversity in Organizations Advanced Series in Management, Volume 22, pp. 17-36.

are fundamental values. This discrepancy implies a change in messaging due to external forces and the need for image control. In addition, Inclusivity and Diversity in Brand Practices (criterion 3) is not intersectional: one of the aspects of Barilla's activism is that it focuses on the LGBTQIA+ community. As the 2013 scandal was about the LGBTQIA+ community and all instances of activism regarded the LGBTQIA+ community it is clear what the intent was. Moreover, traditional family ads where the mother/woman serves pasta to the whole table are still present, showing that Barilla was interested in improving its public image concerning the queer community rather than dismantling all prejudices, including those of gender roles.

Finally, as three out of five criteria are met in this case study, the intersection of the indicators clearly indicates that Barilla's brand activism, especially in the LGBTQIA+ space, is performative. The timeliness of the campaigns, inconsistencies in the expressed values, and the selective focus of initiatives on specific groups suggest a calculated response to external circumstances rather than an ingrained commitment to inclusive brand practices.

2.3.5 Anheuser-Busch

Dylan Mulvaney is a social media influencer and LGBTQIA+ activist. In March 2022, she came out as a transgender woman online and began documenting her transition in a series of daily videos she titled 'Days of Girlhood', through which she gained 10 million followers. This series helped her rise to fame and become a recognizable figure in the trans community.²¹⁶

In April 2023, the American brewing company Anheuser-Busch partnered with Mulvaney to sponsor their Easy Carry Contest, for which they announced \$15,000 for anyone who created entertaining videos of people carrying beer cans. Mulvaney posted a sponsored video dressed as Audrey Hepburn, showing cans of Bud Light and a personalized can with her face and the message 'Cheers to 365 Days of Being a Woman', that was sent to her by the company to celebrate the anniversary of her 'Days of Girlhood'

²¹⁶ Jones CT (2023). Backstage With TikTok Star Dylan Mulvaney, One Year Into Girlhood. Rolling Stone. <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/trans-tiktok-dylan-mulvaney-365-days-girlhood-1234695627/>

series. At the same time, the company introduced Pride-themed cans with different pronouns.²¹⁷

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Figure 8: two screenshots from Dylan Mulvaney's ad video for Bud Light

This campaign sparked criticisms, with conservatives and republicans in the United States opposing the influencer's collaboration with Budweiser. The reaction included boycotts of Bud Light, but it was even violent: country musician Kid Rock filmed himself shooting at Bud Light cans.²¹⁹ Mulvaney spoke out about the issue revealing that since the video she was berated, stalked, and assaulted: she described an overwhelming level of bullying and transphobic behavior that surpassed her expectations. Mulvaney shared she felt followed and experienced a profound sense of isolation.²²⁰

An Anheuser-Busch spokesperson told Fox News that 'Anheuser-Busch works with hundreds of influencers across [their] brands as one of many ways to authentically connect with audiences across various demographics. From time to time [they] produce unique commemorative cans for fans and for brand influencers, like Dylan Mulvaney.

²¹⁷ Riedel, S. et al. (2023). Everything You Need to Know About the Bud Light and Dylan Mulvaney Fiasco. Them. <https://www.them.us/story/dylan-mulvaney-bud-light-drama-explained#did-Anheuser-Busch-respond>

²¹⁸ Springer, J. (2023). Lgbtq+ Group Slams Bud Light For Not Defending Transgender Rights. Ad Age. <https://adage.com/article/marketing-news-strategy/bud-light-dylan-mulvaney-human-rights-campaign-criticizes-brewer-response/2491841>

²¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²²⁰ Holpuch, A. (2023). Behind the Backlash Against Bud Light. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/article/bud-light-boycott.html>

This commemorative can was a gift to celebrate a personal milestone and [was] not for sale to the general public”²²¹. This reaction, together with CEO Whitworth’s statement that emphasized the company’s focus not to be divisive and bring people together over beer²²², portrays a brand attempting to engage in social issues but distancing itself once faced with public backlash.

Mulvaney declared that, amongst the hate and bullying, the company had left her alone: “For a company to hire a trans person and then not publicly stand by them is worse, in my opinion, than not hiring a trans person at all”.²²³ She stated that the lack of response allowed Bud Light customers and boycotters to display transphobia and hate, but the consequences do not only apply to her, rather to the entire LGBTQIA+ community, who are also potential consumers.²²⁴

In a private letter to USA TODAY, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) informed Anheuser-Busch that the company’s Corporate Equality Index score had been suspended. The HRC accuses the beer company of succumbing to political pressure and mismanaging the response to the backlash received by Mulvaney. It criticized the company for putting two of its executives on leave after the backlash, showing they did not support their employees and did not authentically showcase their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.²²⁵

The involvement of Anheuser-Busch with social media influencer Dylan Mulvaney suggests that the company’s brand activism may not be sincere and satisfies several of the criteria of assessment of performativity from the study. To begin with, from the standpoint of Consistency in Actions (criterion 1), the firm’s reaction to the public

²²¹ Flood, B., Kornick, L. (2023). Bud Light says pact with trans activist Dylan Mulvaney helps ‘authentically connect with audiences’. Fox News. <https://www.foxnews.com/media/bud-light-pact-trans-activist-dylan-mulvaney-helps-authentically-connect-with-audiences>

²²² Riedel, S. et al. (2023). Everything You Need to Know About the Bud Light and Dylan Mulvaney Fiasco. Them. <https://www.them.us/story/dylan-mulvaney-bud-light-drama-explained#did-Anheuser-Busch-respond>

²²³ Vargas, R. A. (2023). Dylan Mulvaney says woman-of-the-year award ‘means so much more’ after Bud Light backlash. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/13/us-tiktok-trans-activist-woman-of-the-year-award-bud-light-boycott#:~:text=%E2%80%9CFor%20a%20company%20to%20hire,people%20like%20beer%2C%20too.%E2%80%9D>

²²⁴ Guynn, J. (2023). Trans activist Dylan Mulvaney says Bud Light ghosted her after conservative boycott. USA Today. <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/money/2023/06/29/bud-light-ghosted-dylan-mulvaney-after-boycott/70370583007/>

²²⁵ Guynn, J. (2023). Bud Light maker stripped of LGBTQ+ rating for caving to Dylan Mulvaney backlash. USA Today. <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/money/2023/05/18/bud-light-loses-lgbtq-score-after-dylan-mulvaney-transgender-campaign/70229893007/>

criticism shows a lack of coherence with its first collaboration with Mulvaney. The move to put two executives on leave shows that the company does not take a consistent position on this issue. Secondly, regarding Transparency and Communication (criterion 2), Anheuser-Busch's actions in response to the controversy seem to be directed more at managing public relations than addressing concerns in a transparent manner. The statement of the CEO Whitworth and the spokesperson's comments to Fox News show an effort to distance the brand from the controversy without a clear and sincere plan of communication. Third, in terms of Inclusivity and Diversity in Brand Practices (criterion 3), the first partnership with Mulvaney and the launch of Pride-themed cans indicate a performative step towards inclusivity. Moreover, the subsequent distancing from Mulvaney and the controversy calls into question the company's genuine inclusivity, especially in the face of opposition. Finally, under Internal Practices and Workplace Culture (criterion 5), the suspension of Anheuser-Busch's Corporate Equality Index score by the Human Rights Campaign means that it failed in internal practices in terms of diversity, equity, and inclusion. The fact that the executives were put on leave in the wake of the backlash only adds to the confusion about how far the company is willing to go in supporting its employees.

The analysis of Anheuser-Busch's response to the Dylan Mulvaney controversy according to the criteria of the study shows that the brand's activism is performative, as four out of five criteria are met. Such inconsistencies, lack of transparency in communication, and unanswered questions regarding internal practices indicate the gap between the company's public image and its real inclusivity and diversity values.

Dylan Mulvaney's case falls within the realm of influencer activism. "An influencer activist is an activist who is very active on social media, not an affiliated member of any political party nor work for any conventional mass-media in an exclusive manner, bases the major part of her activism on social media, is highly conscientious and very vocal about her political views and ideas and performs campaigns individually or collectively to push certain topics into the political agenda by using a variety of tools and strategies both online, offline or in a hybrid manner."²²⁶

²²⁶ Munoz, P. (2021). The birth of the influencer-activist, a case study from Spain, p. 4.

While influencers and activists seem to be complete opposites, with influencers being motivated by profit and activists by political causes and social change, a 2023 study found that for some online feminist activists, the line among the two can be finer. Digital feminist activism in a neoliberal economy may be related to monetization, thus breaking the dichotomy between activism, and influencing: some feminist activists interviewed were indeed able to convert activism into a source of income.²²⁷

The line between advocacy and financial sustainability in the world of digital activism is blurred, and many individuals find themselves sponsoring brands to fund their activism. Strategically, digital activists may choose to connect with ethical brands, as *greenfluencers* or climate change activists do when they endorse sustainable and environment-friendly products.²²⁸ The sponsorship of ethical brands has twofold aspects. On one hand, it helps the activists to secure their financial means to continue their advocacy work and allows them the privilege of dedicating time to social and environmental causes. Activists who choose to encourage ethical goods are not just able to maintain their socio-political campaign but are also getting involved in a wider narrative of how we can consume responsibly. At the same time, brands understand the importance of partnering with ethical influencers or activist influencers to improve their public image. Relying on the trustfulness and transparency of these influencers, brands try to arrange sponsorship agreements in order to benefit from the influencers' support. The role of influencers or celebrities is central in what can be defined as commodity activism or neoliberal activism, a strategy that uses politics for profits. Celebrities and influencers become models of environmental activism and people try to present themselves as activists via active consumption and imitating those they admire.²²⁹

In the sphere of influencer activism, when influencers are members of minority groups, such as transgender woman Dylan Mulvaney, they are also often used by companies as tokens, in an action called tokenism. Tokenism happens when an individual or an organization gives an impression of being in support or advocating for a minority or

²²⁷ Scharff, C. (2023). Are we all influencers now? Feminist activists discuss the distinction between being an activist and an influencer. *Feminist Theory*, Vol. 0, pp. 6-8b

²²⁸ Kapoor, P. et al. (2023). Greenfluencers as agents of social change: the effectiveness of sponsored messages in driving sustainable consumption. *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. 57, No. 2, pp. 533-561, p. 536.

²²⁹ Hearn, A. (2012). Brand Me "Activist" in *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times*.

oppressed group by appointing a member of the group to a prominent or public role. Yet, this act rarely involves a sincere concern to bring about serious, lasting changes that would actually benefit the disadvantaged group.²³⁰ In essence, it involves using people as symbols of diversity without a genuine commitment to addressing the fundamental issues of inequality or achieving long-term benefits for the marginalized group. This is Anheuser-Busch did with Mulvaney, they used her as a token to show support in the trans community but did not step forward when their support was needed after she received transphobic violence in response to the campaign.

2.3.6 Lush

Sibai et al. define British cosmetics company Lush a specialized activist brand, one that focuses on moral order to gain credibility.²³¹ Lush has been committed to ethical, fair, and sustainable practices for a long time, and it is also engaged in political causes. The company collaborates with grassroots charities and campaign groups, addressing important issues such as animal rights, human rights, and climate change. Lush presents these campaigns enthusiastically in its stores, on social media and on its website, where there are pages dedicated to all the activist campaigns Lush has been involved in since 2006. The company prides itself in a long and successful history of campaigns that have contributed greatly to positive results. Lush has carried out a number of initiatives and its campaigns cover a wide variety of topics, including environmental protection and animal rights as well as human rights and climate activism. Lush's commitment to activism is not limited to its products but manifests itself in creative and effective activities. The company takes things a step further than conventional means by organizing events, designing thought-provoking window displays or coming up with products to support various causes. This commitment remains an intrinsic part of Lush's ethos, reflected in the company's campaigns, partnerships, and long-term efforts to effect change on a global scale.²³²

²³⁰ Tokenism. Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/tokenism>

²³¹ Sibai et al. (2021). Authenticating Brand Activism: Negotiating the Boundaries of Free Speech to Make a Change. *Psychology & Marketing* 38 (10), pp. 1651–1669, p. 1663.

²³² Lush (2022). We Are Campaigns. Lush, <https://weare.lush.com/lush-life/our-campaigns/we-are-campaigns/>

Among the dozens of campaigns detailed on their website, some are more symbolic and performative, such as the 2015 #gayisok campaign: through a soap bar with the hashtag engrained on it, the brand wanted to show support for the LGBTQIA+ community.²³³

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Figure 9: LUSH's #gayisok soap bar

Other campaigns are more proactive: in 2007 Lush staff protested in the streets to spotlight the environmental crisis triggered by excessive product packaging, in a campaign called 'Go Naked Now'. In 2023, Lush collaborated with Animal Aid in a campaign against lethal dose animal tests in the campaign 'Time for better science' which aims to replace outdated and cruel lethal dose tests with more reliable modern testing methods. Lush endorsed a petition by Animal Aid, featuring the campaign in the windows of all Lush UK and Ireland to bring the issues to the attention of the public.²³⁵

Another important part of Lush's activism is the Charity Pot, a hand and body lotion introduced in 2007 which supports small grassroots charities, campaigns, and non-profits in the field of animal protection, human rights, and the environment. The Charity Pot has made over 13,000 donations worldwide, amounting to £65 million raised.²³⁶

Since 2021, Lush also left social media, in particular Meta platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, but also TikTok and Snapchat, until these platforms improve user

²³³ *Ibidem.*

²³⁴ *Ibidem.*

²³⁵ Lush (2023). Collaboration for better science Lush & Animal Aid call for an end to lethal dose animal tests. Lush. <https://weare.lush.com/press-releases/collaboration-for-better-science/>

²³⁶ Lush (2022). Charity Pot : The Essential Guide. <https://weare.lush.com/lush-life/our-giving/charity-pot-the-essential-guide-2/#:~:text=Charity%20Pot%20is%20a%20special,human%20rights%2C%20and%20the%20environment>

protection from harmful content. The decision arrived after allegations from Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen, who accused the firm of putting profit before the public good. The Chief Digital Officer of Lush, Jack Constantine, voiced concerns about the social media platforms turning out to be toxic for the users, which is contrary to the company's purpose of promoting self-care. This is the second time Lush has declared that it would quit social media, and the company has blamed 'FOMO' – fear of missing out or anxiety for being left out of something enjoyable – for the previous 'relapse' in 2019.²³⁷ Lush, however, has never left Youtube and Twitter and has not fully removed its profiles from the other socials; instead, the company remains active online with nine posts explaining the reasons for quitting. In a sense, they are still utilizing social media to advocate against it.

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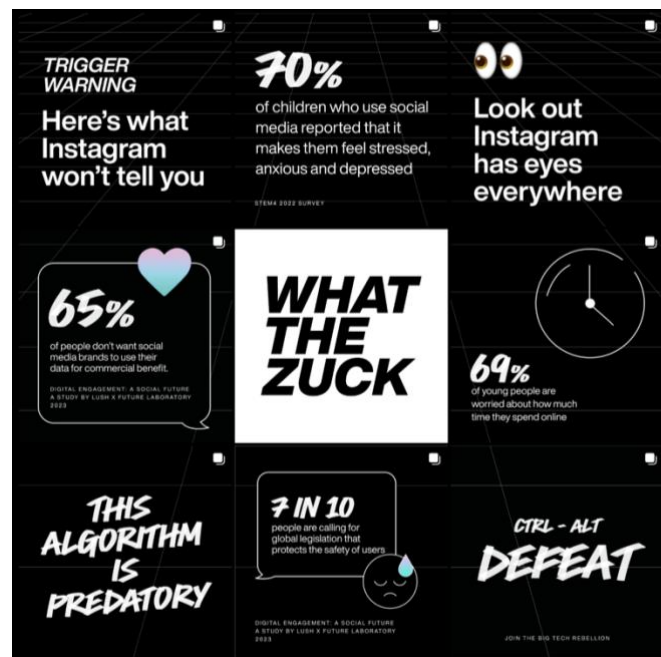


Figure 10: LUSH's Instagram page

As caption to all the posts, written in 2023, they describe why they left Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and Snapchat on Black Friday 2021. They declare that recent evaluations show that Meta, the parent company, has not sufficiently addressed issues

²³⁷ Wood, Z. (2021). Lush quits Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Snapchat over safety concerns. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/nov/23/lush-quits-facebook-instagram-tiktok-snapchat-social-media>

²³⁸ Lush Cosmetics North America. @lushcosmetics, <https://www.instagram.com/lushcosmetics/>

such as addictive algorithms and harmful content. Lush is fighting for legislative change together with People vs Big Tech, a decentralized movement that strives to undermine major tech firms. They have released The Cloud bath bomb, and they are donating 100% of the sales price to support People vs Big Tech's critical campaigns. Lush's initiative targets a safer online world and urges the customers to join the #BigTechRebellion.

Lush is proud of its lasting activism, covering a wide range of topics over a long time. The company's consistent devotion to social and environmental causes shows its willingness to promote positive change and awarded the brand with a recognition as an activist by scholars. However, Lush's withdrawal from some digital platforms may be an approach to dealing with the challenges and criticism of the online world, as the brand is not exempt from controversies surrounding its ethical position.

The unethical practices that Lush has been accused of include the way they treat their employees. Reports show that there have been cases of poor working conditions in Lush's Sydney factory, which include instances of bullying and sexual harassment. Lush claims to uphold ethical values, but the Sydney factory employees revealed a toxic culture that is contrary to this statement.²³⁹ In Toronto, the unionization efforts by warehouse workers were met with hostile anti-union strategies such as forced attendance of anti-union meetings and distribution of misleading leaflets. Employees argue that the management responded by cutting their hours and segregating them from the rest.²⁴⁰ In addition, Lush has been accused of underpaying Australian staff \$4.4 million.²⁴¹

While Lush is considered an ethical company, ethical consumer evaluations show some concerns. Lush was rated by Ethical Consumer as the worst in its approach to environmental reporting and toxic chemicals.²⁴² The company's supply chain management, especially in human rights issues, got a low rating as well.²⁴³

Although Lush promotes cruelty-free practices, rumors of mistreating its employees question its ethical credentials. Lush's ethical position is under great strain with issues such as labor exploitation, dubious ethical claims, and reduced quality of the products

²³⁹ Di Trolio, G. (2021). "Ethical" Brand Lush Cosmetics Is Actually a Terrible Place to Work. Jacobin. <https://jacobin.com/2021/06/lush-cosmetics-toronto-union-busting-progressive-image-hypocrisy>

²⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

²⁴¹ Kilikita, J. (2023). Whatever Happened To Lush?. Refinery29. <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/what-happened-to-lush>

²⁴² Ethical consumer. Lush Cosmetics Ltd. <https://www.ethicalconsumer.org/company-profile/lush-cosmetics-ltd>

²⁴³ *Ibidem*.

being highlighted. The convergence of these issues threatens the carefully constructed image of Lush as a socially and environmentally responsible brand.

Applying this study's assessment criteria reveals that Lush may not be an ethical brand. Regarding Consistency in Actions (criterion 1), although Lush has an impressive track record of commitment to ethical practices, the reports of bad working conditions in the Sydney factory and the accusations of mistreatment in Toronto indicate that the company's actions do not align with the values it promotes. With respect to Internal Practices and Workplace Culture (criterion 4), allegations of poor working conditions and anti-union strategies cast doubt on Lush's ethical values. Lush also declared in 2017 that they were no longer using palm oil in all their products, however Ethical Consumer found they were still using it in 2019, due to difficulty of finding substitutes²⁴⁴, and this shows lack of Transparency in Communications (criterion 2) and lack of consistency as in criterion 1. To conclude, the application of these criteria shows possible inconsistencies and ethical issues in Lush's brand activism, as three out of five criteria are met.

2.3.7 Oatly

The Swedish oat milk company Oatly has been recognized as a prominent activist brand in many scholarly articles. In contrast to the other brands discussed in the case studies, Oatly's activist branding did not emerge from a single campaign but is part of a larger marketing strategy for the company.

First founded in the 1990s in reaction to the lactose intolerance problem in Sweden²⁴⁵, Oatly started to position itself as an ethical and activist brand in 2012. Dissatisfied with its growth trajectory and appreciating the value of its product for both individual and environmental health, the founding team embarked on a major repositioning. Thus, Oatly was changed into a lifestyle brand by capitalizing on the growth and popularity of veganism and the emergence of a language of sustainability in marketing.²⁴⁶

This strategic change, through which Oatly is politicizing sustainability in food production and consumption, is consistent with the global approach to climate-friendly

²⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁴⁵ Koch, C. H. (2020). Brands as activists: The Oatly case, in *Journal of Brand Management* (2020), Vol. 27, pp. 593–606, p. 597.

²⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 598.

practices in the food sector. Oatly's Policy Director highlights the need for transformational changes in food systems to address environmental and health issues, making Oatly a brand that is not afraid to make a strong stand and strive for change. The brand engages in activities like labelling packaging with greenhouse gas emissions data, filing petitions for CO2 labelling in Germany and forming public affairs and sustainability teams to educate on climate change and food impact.²⁴⁷

The political activities of Oatly are not limited to consumer awareness and legislative influence, it also involves marketing and social media campaigns. Oatly's social media campaigns and advertisements clearly target vegans and boldly promote veganism. One of the most notable campaigns, which was launched in 2017 and advertised during the 2021 Super Bowl in the United States, portrayed oat milk as a humane substitute for traditional milk. In the video ad, the CEO Tony Petersson sang a catchy slogan "wow, no cow," which is also written on all Oatly packaging. Oatly's vegan-centric slogans and messaging, unlike other brands of plant-based milk, demonstrate an allegiance to animal rights and anti-speciesism. It is however relevant to note that the company's origins lie in addressing the needs of lactose-intolerant individuals rather than focusing on the well-being of cows.

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Figure 11: a screenshot from the video 'Wow No Cow', Oatly's 2021 Super Bowl Commercial

²⁴⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 600.

²⁴⁸ Oatly (2017). Wow No Cow | Toni TV | Oatly, @OatlyTV. Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_HQU0MB0D5A

This tagline ‘it’s like milk but made for humans’ has transformed into a universal slogan for Oatly and can be seen both online and on billboards in many cities around the world.

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Figure 12: Oatly's campaign 'It's like milk but made for humans'.

This slogan has been used by Oatly since 2014 in Sweden and for it, the brand has been sued by the Swedish Dairy Association. The court found that Oatly was misleading people and charged the brand with instilling fear by suggesting that cow’s milk is dangerous.²⁵⁰ This slogan not only acts as a brand identifier but also supports the activism of Oatly. It is consistent with anti-speciesist ideas because it indicates the similarity between the reasons why cows and humans produce milk: to feed their children.²⁵¹

Oatly stands out as an ethical company, with several long-standing campaigns that go beyond the temporal boundaries of typical activist projects. Surprisingly, the brand’s positioning has remained constant since 2012, which is an incredible achievement. Oatly’s commitment to ethical practices and a consistent brand identity is a distinguishing feature that separates it from the other companies of this study, indicated by a long-term commitment to its values over a prolonged period. However, the brand is not exempt from controversies, and it satisfies some of the criteria mentioned in this study, indicating that

²⁴⁹ Chiorando, M. (2020). Oatly Denied Trademark For ‘It’s Like Milk But Made For Humans’ Logline Because ‘Consumers Know Cow’s Milk Is For Calves’. Plant Based News. <https://plantbasednews.org/culture/media/oatly-denied-trademark-like-milk-but-for-humans/>

²⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

²⁵¹ Peta. Cow’s Milk: A Cruel and Unhealthy Product. <https://www.peta.org/issues/animals-used-for-food/animals-used-food-factsheets/cows-milk-cruel-unhealthy-product/>

brand activism can be performative. In reality, Oatly's actions are not always in line with the values that are promoted by its marketing campaigns.

In recent years, Oatly was at the center of a controversy related to environmental issues and political affiliations. The brand got criticized when, in 2020, it sold 10% of its shares for \$200 million to an investment group led by private-equity firm Blackstone Group.²⁵² The sustainable and ethical image of Oatly is at odds with Blackstone's controversial associations, especially with environmentally doubtful projects in Brazil. Blackstone is infamous for its investments in Hidrovias do Brasil, a Brazilian company which was blamed for contributing to the destruction of the Amazon rainforest. In addition, Blackstone's chairman Stephen A. Schwarzman donated large sums of money to the former US President Donald Trump, who is famous for openly mocking the climate crisis.²⁵³

Oatly responded to the critiques it received because of Blackstone's investment on its website²⁵⁴ and online platforms. Although Oatly justifies its engagement with Blackstone as a strategic move to create a sustainable funding source for growth, there are significant issues in its response. The brand justifies the partnership by linking it to its original decision to enter supermarkets, claiming that working together with the biggest private equity firms such as Blackstone will bring about a shift toward sustainable investment by all private investors. The brand puts more emphasis on potential profitability than a commitment to green investments, thus undermining its activist character.

'Blackstone is like the biggest supermarket of the private equity sector. We thought that if we could convince them that it's as profitable (and in the long-term even more profitable) to invest in a sustainability company like Oatly, then all the other private equity firms of the world would look, listen, and start to steer their collective worth of 4 trillion US dollars into green investments.'²⁵⁵ This simplification may not wholly factor in Blackstone's wider investment portfolio and its congruity with Oatly's sustainability objectives. Oatly's reply implies that cooperation with Blackstone is a mandatory move in terms of influencing the capital markets and they are making a sacrifice for the greater environmental good. On the other hand, it likely makes consumers wonder if the brand is

²⁵² Harrison, O. (2020). Is There No Ethical Oat Milk Consumption Under Capitalism?. Refinery29. <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/oatly-boycott-blackstone-investor>

²⁵³ *Ibidem*.

²⁵⁴ Oatly (2022). Change Isn't Easy. <https://community.oatly.com/conversations/news-and-views/change-isnt-easy/62f2f4c91b4bf47dd15fb249>

²⁵⁵ *Ibidem*.

authentic and whether the decision is beneficial to the long-term interests of sustainability or whether Oatly is selling out on its founding principles and values for quick financial gains.

Based on the criteria discussed in this study, to determine whether brand activism is performative, Oatly's activist campaigns seem to be part of a long-term marketing strategy rather than immediate responses to criticism or public outrage. The sustained message consistency since 2012 shows the proactive activism. Nevertheless, the reaction to the Blackstone controversy, although giving some information on the strategic decision, can be considered not entirely transparent about potential ethical issues and the reasoning behind the partnership (criterion 2). The partnership with Blackstone also raises questions about the brand's Consistency in Actions (criterion 1). This study concludes that Oatly's brand activism, especially because of the cooperation with Blackstone and the response to critiques, exhibits performative aspects due to criteria 1 and 2, Consistency in Actions and Transparency and Communication.

2.4 Case studies: findings for each brand organized by criteria

The examination of the seven cases of brand activism, as illustrated in Table 2, reveals a common thread that characterizes them as performative. The analysis of each case against the five criteria of the study demonstrates a pattern of strategic actions undertaken by these brands, suggesting that their activist campaigns are very often symbolic gestures.

The thesis argued a clear framework: a singular criterion found in a case study would raise doubt about the authenticity of brand activism, while the presence of two or more criteria would signal performative activism. The subsequent analysis, as per Table 2, indicates that all seven case studies of the dissertation are aligned with two or more assessment criteria. Thus, all seven brands – Nike, Airbnb, Starbucks, Barilla, Anheuser-Busch, Lush and Oatly – are engaging in performative activism.

This collective attribution of performative activism calls for a critical examination of the authenticity of brand activism in general. The following subchapter will examine the concept of authenticity, which is defined as a factor that serves to distinguish genuine brand activism from performativity.

Table 2: study findings

		<i>Criteria for performative activism</i>				
		1. Consistency in actions	2. Transparency and communication	3. Inclusivity and diversity in brand practices	4. Timeliness of the campaigns	5. Internal practices and workplace culture
Brands	Nike	Signing a contract with the NFL, the same year of the campaign with Kaepernick	Charges of labor rights violation: in 2015, Worker Rights Consortium was prohibited from conducting investigations	Allegations of gender inequality within the company and how the company responded to worker's rights concerns		5,000 pages of records of allegations of sexism and bullying towards employees
	Airbnb	Not solving racial biases issues after mentioning them in the 2017 campaign	Rent pressures and housing shortages	Not implementing measures to tackle discrimination on the platform or the issues of rent pressures and housing shortages		
	Starbucks	Commitment to hire 10,000 refugees in 2017 not carried out	No updates on the 2017 commitment to hire 10,000 refugees	Arrest of two black men in Philadelphia store	Creation of BLM t-shirts after being criticised for not allowing employees to wear badges in support	Sexual harassment and discriminations in the workplace
	Barilla	Declaration of traditional family as core value vs. declaration of DEI as core values		Brand practices not intersectional; activism focused on the LGBTQIA+ community because of the scandal	Strategic addition of LGBTQIA+ inclusive initiatives after the 2013 controversy	
	Anheuser-Busch	Reaction to the public criticism after the collaboration on Mulvaney	Actions in response to controversy are directed at managing public relations and distancing from its values	Distancing from Mulvaney in the face of opposition		Executives were put on leave in the wake of the backlash
	Lush	Report of bad working conditions in the Sydney factory and accusation of mistreatment in Toronto	Use of palm oil in products after declaring they would not use it again			Report of bad working conditions in the Sydney factory and accusation of mistreatment in Toronto
	Oatly	Partnership with Blackstone corporation	Reaction to Blackstone controversy			

3. Authenticity of brand activism

In examining different cases studies of brand activism, it becomes apparent that certain brands, whether they are self-proclaimed activists or recognized as such by scholars, exhibit ethical shortcomings. Some brands may use brand activism to hide unethical behaviors or shift the focus from controversies and enhance their public image. It is therefore imperative to assess all the aspects of a brand in a comprehensive manner in order to be able to declare it ethical, a process undertaken in the comparative study.

Good On You²⁵⁶ is a website that performs evaluations of sustainability on fashion brands through three categories: ‘People,’ ‘Planet,’ and ‘Animals’. The Planet rating assesses the environmental policies, carbon emissions, wastewater management, business operations, and product circularity. The People rating focuses on workers’ rights, including policies regarding child labor, living wages, gender equity, etc. The Animals rating revolves around brands’ animal welfare policies and their use of animal-derived products.²⁵⁷

Similar to the comprehensive evaluation required for a brand’s sustainability rating, its ethical rating must also encompass various dimensions. Evaluating a brand as an activist should not consist of prioritizing marketing campaigns disregarding the oppressions faced by marginalized groups. A brand cannot claim to be an activist for its campaigns for some marginalized groups such as black people and at the same time mistreat workers – who very often come from racialized backgrounds – through low wages, poor working conditions and prohibit access to its factories.

To build ethical brand perception, companies should focus on ‘getting their house in order’, that is, eliminating any harmful behaviors. What should take precedence over philanthropy – or brand activism – is the correction of sources of negative consumer perceptions of ethics because the impact of transgressions on brand equity is long term. For brands positioning themselves as ethical, it is important that they maintain a positive ethical augmentation and have a brand identity based on ethical values. Taking the moral high ground is dangerous for a brand if expectations are not met, and this causes a greater

²⁵⁶ Goodonyou.eco

²⁵⁷ Goodonyou. How We Rate Fashion Brands. <https://goodonyou.eco/how-we-rate/>

level of scrutiny of the public. Establishing an ethical corporate culture is endemic and requires real, proactive adoption of responsible behavior at all levels of an organization.²⁵⁸ The study in this dissertation aimed to assess whether brand activism is performative and the seven case studies were analyzed through five criteria. This approach was employed to see if a brand ‘got their house in order’, since only a thorough analysis using intersectional criteria could reveal the authenticity of activism. This study in fact recognized that instances of performativity can vary in visibility, with some being more subtle and other more apparent.

An example of an overt campaign aimed at improving public perception is a July 2023 campaign by the Chinese fast fashion brand SHEIN. SHEIN is known for being unethical, through its threats to the environment and poor working conditions in its factories. However, in the cited campaign, the brand invited several Western influencers to visit its factories in China, as an effort to showcase the ethical and positive working conditions of the employees, having the influencers report on them on social media. It is worth noting that the website Good On You gives SHEIN the lowest rating possible, because of severe environmental impacts, including hazardous chemicals, carbon emissions and microplastics.²⁵⁹ Mainly, there is no evidence the company pays living wages to its workers²⁶⁰, and it has faced allegations of worker exploitation and forced labor of the Uyghurs in the Xinjiang region, where SHEIN’s cotton comes from.²⁶¹

All this considered, it came as a surprise when American influencer Destene Sudduth, among others, shared a video to her 4 million TikTok followers after visiting SHEIN factories in China stating that she interviewed workers and they were surprised of the accusations of child labor and exploitation; she said ‘They weren’t even sweating. We were the ones sweating!’.²⁶² It is clear that this move by SHEIN was a strategic one to improve its image among American customers who are concerned about worker conditions. The company might have set up a fake factory for the influencers to visit or

²⁵⁸ Brunk, K. H. (2016). Towards a better understanding of the ethical brand and its management in *The Routledge Companion to Brand Management*, Ed. 1, pp. 280- 293, pp. 289-290.

²⁵⁹ Good on you. SHEIN. SHEIN creates short-lived, fast fashion products.
<https://directory.goodonyou.eco/brand/shein>

²⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

²⁶¹ Prasso, S. (2022). Shein’s Cotton Tied to Chinese Region Accused of Forced Labor. *Bloomberg*.
<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2022-11-21/shein-s-cotton-clothes-tied-to-xinjiang-china-region-accused-of-forced-labor?leadSource=verify%20wall>

²⁶² Singh-Kurtz, S. (2023). Shein Takes Influencers on Factory ‘Tour’. *The Cut*.
<https://www.thecut.com/article/shein-influencer-factory-tour.html>

have a façade factory that conceals the true working conditions behind closed doors. Given Shein's output of 10,000 new designs per day²⁶³, it is impractical for such a volume of production to occur inside the factory showcased in the influencers' videos.

Shein is not known for activism and is very often criticized online, so there is clear skepticism regarding the authenticity of this campaign. This move is perceived as performative and insincere, and the influencers were criticized for their support to the brand. However, for brands that promote their ethical stance or are recognized for genuine activist campaigns, identifying performativity may be more challenging without a deeper intersectional analysis, which is what this study intended to do. In fact, after a more thorough analysis, this study found the seven brands of the case studies were engaging in performative activism.

3.1 Woke-washing and the pursuit of profit

Vredenburg et al. believe actions of diversity and inclusion by brands can be divided between authentic brand activism and woke-washing, as the latter is an insincere form of brand activism where marketing messages on socio-political issues do not correspond to a brand's purpose, ideals, and corporate practices.²⁶⁴

As this study found performative activism even among brands that are known for their ethical positioning, it is worth analyzing what makes a campaign 'woke washing'.

The term 'woke' originated from African American communities and signifies awareness of societal injustices like racism and sexism. Alongside it, the new term 'woke washing' was born, which can be used to identify the behavior of brands that appropriate progressive values to market their products and conceal any unethical behaviors.²⁶⁵ The concept of 'wokeness' has however increasingly been misappropriated as a sometimes racially insensitive substitute for anything outside whiteness by non-Black individuals and organizations. The modern derogatory meaning of 'wokeness' represents the racial power where whiteness is a sign of knowledge and credibility. This has become

²⁶³ Rajvanshi, A. (2023). Shein Is the World's Most Popular Fashion Brand—at a Huge Cost to Us All. TIME. <https://time.com/6247732/shein-climate-change-labor-fashion/>

²⁶⁴ Vredenburg, J. et al. (2020). Brands Taking a Stand: Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing? *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, Vol. 39, Issue 4, pp. 444-460.

²⁶⁵ Herbert, N. (2020). "Woke-Washing" a Brand: Socially Progressive Marketing by Nike on Twitter and the User Response to it, in *Tidskrift för ABM*, Vol. 5. No. 1, 2020, pp. 54-70.

commodified, resulting in the formation of a ‘woke marketing’ industry associated with white sincerity since the term is frequently used in the corporate language.²⁶⁶ It is essential to cautiously use the term woke washing, since it may support a simplified view of the market and social awareness. What is defined woke washing are actually actions related to neoliberal racial capitalism²⁶⁷, liberal feminism and ethical capitalism. The forthcoming chapter of this dissertation will explore these connections.

According to Sobande et al., woke has a threefold meaning: it is used a critique by right-wing representatives who target Millennials and Gen-Z; it is linked to inauthenticity when discussing woke washing; and finally, it is portrayed in marketing as a desirable brand identity that aligns with social justice values.²⁶⁸ The attribute of being woke, associated to a brand, can be fulfilling to both a brand’s identity and personality, concepts that were explored in Section 1.2 of this chapter. Brands strategically tailor their personality to align with global issues and being perceived as woke can award them with social approval and recognition. On social media, being politically engaged involves making oneself visible, and being woke is the response to these pressures. Brands present themselves as aligned to some woke values²⁶⁹, to make themselves visible online and create their social media brand identity.

Woke washing situates itself among many deceptive corporate practices, specifically in the realm of brand activism. The emergence of greenwashing, social washing and pink washing is a response to relentless calls for eco and socially responsible business practices. Born in the 1980s, greenwashing conceals actual environmental damage through the act of pretending that eco-friendly initiatives have been implemented. Social washing is similar to greenwashing as it regards corporations that pretend to be socially responsible instead of genuinely showing this responsibility, in such industries as mining. Pinkwashing is the use of LGBTQIA+ rights as a tool where companies promote LGBTQIA+ rights but fail to promote the welfare of their employees.²⁷⁰ These actions

²⁶⁶ Sobande, F. (2024). *Big brands are watching you: Marketing social justice and digital culture*. University of California Press.

²⁶⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁶⁸ Sobande, F. et al. (2022). The hypervisibility and discourses of ‘wokeness’ in digital culture, in *Media, Culture & Society* 2022, Vol. 44, No. 8, pp. 1576–1587.

²⁶⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁷⁰ Rajan, Q. (2022). *Green, Blue, Pink and Social Corporate Washing*. ESG Analytics. <https://www.esganalytics.io/insights/social-green-blue-pink-washing>

embody the contradiction between corporate profitability and social ethical responsibility since firms are exploiting social and environmental issues for advertising benefits.

An example Vredenburg et al. provide on woke washing is the infamous Pepsi's 2017 ad with Kendall Jenner. The aim of the ad was to appeal to a younger audience by using the imagery of a Black Lives Matter protest, where Jenner gives the Pepsi to the police, which stops the violence and transforms the protest into a celebration around the soda. This ad was woke washing because Pepsi was not a true brand with purpose, values, nor had it a history of supporting social causes such as Black Lives Matter.²⁷¹ The failure of Pepsi's marketing strategy outlined the risks associated with brands trying to sell themselves as 'woke' brands, particularly for those that use Blackness merely as a backdrop to feature a famous white celebrity as brave.²⁷²

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Figure 13: a screenshot from 2017 Pepsi's campaign starring Kendall Jenner

Woke washing originated in the 2010s due to the advent of social media, allowing consumers to point out insincere advertising.²⁷⁴ Social media gave voice to marginalized communities who could also call out brands for their disingenuous 'wokeness'.

²⁷¹ Vredenburg, J. et al. (2020). Brands Taking a Stand: Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing? *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, Vol. 39, Issue 4, pp. 444-460.

²⁷² Sobande, F. (2019). Woke-washing: "Intersectional" femvertising and branding "woke" bravery, in *European Journal of Marketing*, December 2019.

²⁷³ Victor, D. (2017). Pepsi Pulls Ad Accused of Trivializing Black Lives Matter. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/business/kendall-jenner-pepsi-ad.html>

²⁷⁴ Sobande, F. (2020). The Revolution Will Not Be Branded, in *The Quarterly Journal of Design* #27. <https://disegnojournal.com/newsfeed/the-revolution-will-not-be-branded>

According to the scholars, woke washing poses a danger to the effectiveness of brand activism in social change. Inauthentic brand activism may draw the attention and resources that rightfully belong to real brand activists. The authenticity of the brand activism influences how effective it will be. However, if consumers do not have faith in brand activism because of woke washing and ambiguous communications, then these efforts are less likely to materialize in real changes.²⁷⁵

Although some scholars differentiate between brand activism and woke washing, others believe the gap between the two is minimal. An argument can be made regarding how much Pepsi's controversial advertisement and campaigns by Nike and other brands on the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement are alike and about why the former is generally considered woke washing, while the latter is deemed to be a form of brand activism. Pepsi's advertisement may be deemed as woke washing due to its evident failure and lack of aspirational messages, especially as the product sponsorship was blatant and insensitively inserted into a protest. In contrast, Nike's ad featuring Kaepernick, while also incorporating a social justice theme, managed to subtly insert the sponsorship. Nike also shared emotional content, to shape its brand personality, and more effectively connect with the audience. However, both ads use social movements as a backdrop and deliver messages related to the fight for social justice and both companies have demonstrated inauthenticity in their motivations. The Nike-Kaepernick collaboration is also deemed problematic as it can be perceived as both reinforcing and altering a personal media story about Kaepernick. The cycle is maintained by continually focusing on Kaepernick himself as opposed to the systemic problems he was protesting against. Meanwhile, Kaepernick's cause and his identity as an African American man are commodified, benefitting financially and woke-washing Nike's brand image. Nike's woke washing was engaging with an athlete who is socially progressive and outspoken to improve the perception of the brand.²⁷⁶

Questions arise about the sincerity of the commitment of all brands' adoption of social justice perspective and how to prove authenticity. Donations to associations and marginalized communities are often used to showcase the genuine values underlying

²⁷⁵ Vredenburg, J. et al. (2020). Brands Taking a Stand: Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing? *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, Vol. 39, Issue 4, pp. 444-460.

²⁷⁶ Herbert, N. (2020). "Woke-Washing" a Brand: Socially Progressive Marketing by Nike on Twitter and the User Response to it, in *Tidskrift för ABM*, Vol. 5. No. 1, 2020, pp. 54-70.

brand activist campaigns²⁷⁷ but these could also be performative acts, strategically implemented to differentiate one's brand from 'non authentic' ones.

Some argue that authenticity of brand activism may be increased through the creation of specific internal messages and setting clear actions for change inside a company and by refraining from opportunistic behavior.²⁷⁸ In a capitalist society, however, it is challenging to credibly demonstrate the authenticity behind ethical practices, and this leads to skepticism about the extent to which companies can effectively prioritize social issues over profit. American philosopher Edward Freeman argues that companies are now trying to align capitalism and ethics, with business experts trying to bring ethics into the story of capitalism, challenging the idea that capitalism is only about competition and profit.²⁷⁹ A company who is challenging the norms about companies and profit is Patagonia that in 2018 changed their corporate purpose, stating they are in business to save the planet. The total of the non-voting shares goes to Holdfast Collective, a non-profit committed to fighting the climate crisis.²⁸⁰ The company will continue to be a private, for-profit corporation, but the Chouinards will no longer own it.²⁸¹ However, the decision to assign ownership to a trust and nonprofit, specializing in environmental and charitable activities, may not have seemed viable at the early stages of Yvon Chouinard's career or the beginning of Patagonia. In the first phase of company building, especially in a competitive market, entrepreneurs need to focus on profit for business's growth and expansion.²⁸²

It is worth considering the idea that a brand's authentic concern for social issues is no longer real as long as profit is the company's main goal and this concern is mainly expressed publicly on social media, as the case studies analyzed. According to Sarkar and Kotler, progressive brand activism is propelled by firms that have missions beyond the

²⁷⁷ Sobande, F. (2019). Woke-washing: "Intersectional" femvertising and branding "woke" bravery, in *European Journal of Marketing*, December 2019.

²⁷⁸ Ahmad, F. et al. (2024). Brand activism and the consequence of woke washing, in *Journal of Business Research* Volume 170, January 2024

²⁷⁹ Freeman, R. E. et al. (2006). Ethics and Capitalism, in M. Epstein and K. Hanson (eds.) *The Accountable Corporation*, Vol. 2: business Ethics, pp. 193-208.

²⁸⁰ Chouinard, Y. (2018). Il nostro unico azionista ora è il pianeta. Patagonia. <https://eu.patagonia.com/ch/it/ownership/>

²⁸¹ Gelles, D. (2022). Billionaire No More: Patagonia Founder Gives Away the Company. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/14/climate/patagonia-climate-philanthropy-chouinard.html>

²⁸² Rakhsitha, S. et al. (2023). Profit maximization principles for business growth in the modern world, in *International Journal of Development Research*, Vol. 13, Issue 04, pp. 62511-62514.

desire to generate profits and thus positioning themselves as industry leaders.²⁸³ However, an underlying contradiction arises when one tries to understand how a for-profit company can avoid the pursuit of profit as its ultimate end. The rationale implies that if the objective of a firm is not profit-seeking, it would be regarded as a non-profit entity.²⁸⁴

3.2 Authenticity and performative activism

Navigating the landscape of brand activism presents a significant challenge when it comes to demonstrating authentic concern for societal issues. The interconnection between corporate actions and image projection raises doubts about whether what is commonly termed as brand activism is, in reality, more of a performance.

If authenticity is what discerns brand activism from woke washing, it is worth noting that in the era of branding and commodity activism, it is difficult to grasp the concept of authenticity. Corporate marketing in contemporary capitalism aims at establishing emotional connections with consumers, relating to emotions, memories, personal stories, and expectations.²⁸⁵

On social media, influencers personify the paradox that is authenticity. Influencers, especially on Instagram, are portrayed as perfectly representing the optimal form of brand authenticity, constructing their self-brand through the discourses of familiarity, intimacy, and vulnerability. The commercial element of social media adds a layer of complexity to this dynamic, influencers strive to achieve a balance between authenticity as performance and their online identities as profit-driven.²⁸⁶ Influencers must bring uniqueness and relatability while being bound by strict adherence to the dominating white, cis-gender norms²⁸⁷, and by the constraints of profits. And it is precisely the request of adherence to these norms that characterizes our capitalist patriarchal society. In capitalism, authenticity is an illusion and it is hard to personify, by individuals²⁸⁸ but especially by brands.

²⁸³ Sarkar, C., Kotler, P. (2020). Brand Activism: From Purpose To Action, p. 37.

²⁸⁴ Du Bois, C. et al. (2004). Objectives of Non-Profit Organisations: A "Managerial Economics" Perspective, in Journal for Public and Nonprofit Services, 2004, Bd. 27, H. 3 (2004), pp. 288-302

²⁸⁵ Banet-Weiser, S. (2021). Gender, Social Media, and the Labor of Authenticity, in American Quarterly, Johns Hopkins University Press, Volume 73, Number 1, March 2021 pp. 141-144.

²⁸⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁸⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸⁸ Murtola, A. (2011). The business of truth: Authenticity, capitalism and the crisis of everyday life, in Ephemera Theory & Politics In Organization, Vol. 11, No. 1.

Our current age is in many ways defined by a deep desire for sincerity, a yearning that reverberates within different aspects of our lives. However, this desire is coupled with a feeling of apprehension, a feeling that our world is being overtaken by inauthenticity and shallowness. This broader cultural trend speaks to a profound anxiety: a world saturated with brands, where even cultural expressions and activism are branded, and the very notion of authenticity seems to be commercialized and trademarked.²⁸⁹

Brand activism is the new reality, and it has become a part of today's brand culture in which brands shape social causes and political issues. It is growing in prominence in the neoliberal era by combining politics with marketing. While it claims to herald social change, commodity activism mostly promotes individual empowerment over collective action.²⁹⁰ Brand activism is deceptive: through it, consumption is represented as a form of activism or resistance. Brands position themselves as moral authorities and activists, they use social media trends, the words of revolutions and hashtags to show their interest in social justice issues.²⁹¹ Brands usually demonstrate authenticity by implementing internal actions or collaborating with associations when getting involved in brand activism. From a broader perspective, authenticity has transformed into an instrument of strategy in social media and contemporary politics which has been historically associated with virtuous living and political engagement.²⁹² The correlation of authenticity and strategy is not simply a function of the social media era; it can be traced to advertising tactics.²⁹³ But this crossing becomes particularly important in social media initiatives, especially in the context of brand activism. In dealing with the essentials of authenticity, social media becomes the type of environment where the distinction between genuine self and orchestrated manipulation becomes less distinct, where genuine expression and calculated marketing efforts are fused. In the field of brand activism, the relationship between authenticity and strategy becomes more complex. Companies need to navigate the world of social causes, consumer engagement and profitability. They strive to align with genuine social concerns while avoiding the risks of being labeled as engaging in

²⁸⁹ Banet-Weiser, S. (2012). *Authentic™ the Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture*.

²⁹⁰ *Ibidem*.

²⁹¹ Sobande, F. (2024). *Big brands are watching you: Marketing social justice and digital culture*. University of California Press.

²⁹² Hund, E. (2023). *The Influencer Industry, The Quest for Authenticity on Social Media*. Princeton University Press.

²⁹³ *Ibidem*.

woke washing or being canceled and boycotted due to perceived insincerity. The challenge lies in the paradox of authentically championing social causes in a capitalist reality where the word authentic no longer has meaning. At the same time, companies need to avoid controversies, satisfy stakeholders, maintain profitability, and convey a genuine interest in social causes.

This dissertation, through the findings of the study, argues that all brand activism is performative activism since it operates within these paradoxes and within the spheres of liberal feminism and ethical capitalism. The inherent difficulty in discerning genuine intentions leads to the assertion that brands may engage in activism primarily for favorable public relations and marketability, all within the confines of profits and consumerism.

As individuals deal with fear of social repercussions when it comes to performative allyship, brands, too, grapple with these concerns. Brand activism is a form of performative allyship with the incorporation of profit as an objective and cancel culture and peer pressure are driving forces of this form of performativity.

Conclusion

Brand activism has developed to be a modern version of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in the era of social media. This trend indicates a brand's new approach in addressing social issues, particularly to younger audiences on social media. Social media has become a strong channel for communication for brands to articulate their messages relevant to new social movements, creating their images and becoming associated with emerging values. At the same time, this tactical move protects brands from possible controversies since social media enables consumers to rapidly react to activist campaigns.

Many brands are actively involved with brand activism as a means to help build a socially responsible brand image. Yet, it is very important to distinguish between mere brand activism and a brand being genuinely ethical across all dimensions.

A close analysis of case studies involving seven well-known brands demonstrates that brand activism is frequently a defensive move in response to public boycott, an attempt to avoid current controversies, or a means to restore damaged reputation. Moreover, those

same brands struggle with lawsuits because of harassment in the workplace, absence of support for the LGBTQIA+ community and the activists employed in the campaigns and use of sweatshops.

The case studies of the brands Nike, Airbnb, Starbucks, Barilla, Anheuser-Busch, Lush and Oatly were all defined as instances of performative activism, as the intersectional analysis of their ethical positioning showed shortcomings for all. As all these cases of brand activism were performative, it is important to discern between performative and non-performative activism. Woke washing emerges as a categorization for brand activism campaigns that are not genuine as authenticity is considered to be the distinguishing feature of legitimate and inauthentic brand activism. However, this dissertation argues that the performative character of brand activism is intrinsic, making it impossible to determine and prove authenticity with certainty. Even brands that attempt to make a name for themselves by using activism can still resort to actions influenced largely by public opinion. As authenticity is impossible to prove and as profit is the objective of all for-profit corporations, brand activism is merely another tactic to improve public image and be more profitable. Thus, brand activism is inherently performative.

Chapter III

An intersectional feminist and anti-capitalist critique of brand activism

Introduction

Brand activism has emerged in recent years in the landscape of feminist discourse and activism. Born as a result liberal feminism and woke capitalism, brand activism is a popular channel through which social issues are addressed by corporations.

This chapter delves into the connections between liberal feminism, ethical or woke capitalism, and commodification of activism by brands.

The first part will expose liberal feminism's symbiotic partnership with capitalism, and how it operates to be a smokescreen for the capitalist patriarchy. Liberal feminism is also defined as a capitalist feminism. It has flourished within the limits of capitalism, where it pretends to care for social issues, while pursuing the interests of the capital. The first section of this chapter highlights the essential ties between liberal feminism and capitalism that are hidden behind their façade of progressiveness and demonstrate how this movement maintains the capitalist patriarchy.

With liberal feminism becoming popular, it influenced the developing of brand activism. The second part of this chapter analyzes the trend of brand activism in the light of liberal feminism. Brands understand that social justice issues are profitable and therefore commodify feminism. Brand activism, however, does not simply change products, marketing campaigns and corporate narratives with feminist messages but rather utilizes feminist ideals as a marketing tool.

Analyzing the chosen methods in brand activism, one can notice a special tendency of emotional messaging which uses consumers' need for connection and social transformation. Advocates of the brand activism heavily rely on messages such as

‘leaning in’ or the statement that anything is possible if one has enough determination, ignoring the role of the sociopolitical system in oppressing marginalized individuals.

The final subchapter discusses other feminisms that have arisen as a response to liberal feminism. All these feminisms are radical anticapitalist feminisms that would refuse brand activism, which cannot be defined activism.

1. Liberal feminism and woke capitalism

To understand the dynamics of liberal feminism and the ethical, or woke, capitalism, it is vital to note that these terms do not define separate worlds but are rather deeply intertwined. Liberal feminism is a feminism that operates within the context of capitalism and as such can be defined as a capitalist feminism. This challenges the radical feminist notion that feminism should be anti-capitalist as the capitalist patriarchal society is the cause of oppression of marginalized groups.

In the modern world, capitalism mutated into new forms of itself, aligning with neoliberal values as a way to thrive and be more effective. In this changing capitalist world, feminism, in its liberal form, is being transformed in a way that suits the interest of the capital.

Woke capitalism is a capitalism that incorporates socially conscious elements. Companies and brands, within woke capitalism, resort to activism, largely in favor of liberal feminist causes, to portray themselves as morally conscious agents of society. This fusion enables capitalism to grow and thrive by appealing to evolving social values and concerns. In a broader sense, the connection between capitalism and feminism, specifically in its liberal form, is an indication of the flexibility of the current social, economic, and political system to accommodate and co-opt social movements for its own gain.

1.1 Understanding liberal feminism

“The mainstream media continues to equate *feminism*, as such, with *liberal feminism*. But far from providing the solution, liberal feminism is part of the problem.”²⁹⁴

²⁹⁴ Arruzza, C., Bhattacharya, T., & Fraser, N. (2019). *Feminism for the 99 percent: a manifesto*. London; Brooklyn, NY, Verso, pp. 10-11.

Liberal feminism is what the public thinks about when thinking about feminism: it is the fight to break the glass ceiling, the fight to increase the percentage of women CEOs and women in parliament. It also the fight against sexual harassment, particularly in the working place and for women in media and in managerial working positions. Feminism's popularity has been on the rise since the #MeToo movement in 2017, with more and more people looking for the meaning of feminism on Google.²⁹⁵

Liberal or neoliberal feminism is associated with a resurgence and popularization of the feminist discourse. Through it, the word feminist, which was previously deemed uncomfortable, has been reclaimed, especially by celebrities and corporations that align feminist goals with individualistic market logics.²⁹⁶ Liberal feminism is inherently individualistic, as is the capitalist framework in which it positions itself. It does not challenge the status quo, it does not ask for systemic changes, it believes that discriminations and inequality can be challenged through personal ambitions²⁹⁷ and marketing. Feminism associated with liberalism is centered around the most privileged of the marginalized individuals, such as white, heterosexual and very often rich and famous women, who do not question the root of their oppression but are focused on reaching equality within the capitalist and patriarchal system they find themselves in.

Liberal feminism is also associated with consumption, and its popularity can be demonstrated by the rise of 'feminist' clothing items, particularly graphic t-shirts.²⁹⁸

Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser identify the sole beneficiaries of the apparently meritocratic system of liberal feminism as those women who already come from an advantaged background²⁹⁹. They ask themselves: is this what feminism stands or should stand for? Among feminist theorists, many believe liberalism and feminism are oxymorons and that "real" feminism must include the overturning of the current capitalist sociopolitical order that makes freedom impossible for the majority of women.

Political liberalism is centered around two principles: the division between the public and private sphere and the concept of choice that calibrates state regulation of the private

²⁹⁵ Feminism meaning, Google Trends. Available at <https://trends.google.com/trends>.

²⁹⁶ Repo, J. (2020). Feminist Commodity Activism: The New Political Economy of Feminist Protest, in *International Political Sociology*, Vol. 14, pp- 215-232, p. 220.

²⁹⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁹⁸ Yu, Z. (2023). Just How Feminist is Your "Girl Power" T-Shirt?. *Harvard Political Review*. <https://harvardpolitics.com/feminism-and-fast-fashion/>

²⁹⁹ Arruzza, C., Bhattacharya, T., & Fraser, N. (2019). *Feminism for the 99 percent: a manifesto*. London; Brooklyn, NY, Verso, p. 11.

sphere.³⁰⁰ According to this first pillar of liberalism, in a liberal state, the government cannot intervene in the private sectors and legislate over its citizens private lives. For women's oppression the division among public and private lives has always been an issue since the home is the place where most women spend much of their time.³⁰¹ In the liberal state, laws have become a symbol and a means of male's domination over women: women have been progressively excluded from the legal discourse and public life and they have been relegated to the private realm. According to professor of legal studies Janet Rifkin, with the rise of capitalism more and more women could stay home from work and could not participate in the market life; because of liberal principles, their subordination in the home could not be challenged³⁰². Many injustices that women suffer happen in their everyday lives, happen in their homes, from their partners: these could be rapes, sexual harassments, assaults, and domestic violence.

Catharine MacKinnon, American lawyer, and professor of law, believes liberalism applied to women has helped maintain women's subordination. Liberal law applies to abstract individuals, identified with cis-hetero white men, and not collective groups with their different experiences and needs. Liberalism reduces the social differences of women and men to nature and does not challenge women's lack of power; feminism should on the contrary aim for an equality that annihilates the current gendered social power structures³⁰³.

To challenge liberal feminism, radical feminists adopted the slogan 'the personal is political': for women and systemic minorities what happens in their private lives *should* be regulated by politics and institutions *must* address systemic oppressions in the private sphere.³⁰⁴ But political liberty has a more relevant position among the interests of the liberal state, protecting the citizens' freedom is more important than guaranteeing them rights.

³⁰⁰ Higgins, T. E. (2004). Gender, Why Feminists Can't (or Shouldn't) Be Liberals, 72 Fordham Law Review, pp. 1629-1641.

³⁰¹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰² Rifkin, J. (1980). Toward a Theory of Law and Patriarchy, Harvard Women's Law Journal, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1980, pp. 83-95.

³⁰³ MacKinnon, C. A. (2005). Liberalism and the Death of Feminism, in C. A. MacKinnon, Women's Lives, Men's Laws, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge (MA), pp. 259-268.

³⁰⁴ Hanisch, C. (1970). The Personal is Political, in Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation, Major Writings of the Radical Feminists.

Liberalism values objectivity, but its objective standpoint is not neutral. The individual that liberal laws protect is a heterosexual, white and non-disabled man, such is the standard and neutral. Therefore, when liberalism values the choices of individuals, it only considers their choices and ignores how other individuals' choices could be influenced by systems of oppressions. Assuming that choice is always free means ignoring that marginalized groups are socially constructed to have less agency than 'the standard individual': choice is free for those who are free.

This fallacy is reflected in John Rawls work: he believes that women's role in their homes and the gendered division of labor in families is acceptable within political liberalism, if "it is voluntary and does not result from or lead to injustice"³⁰⁵. The state cannot however analyze each family to see if the woman by her own free will decided to take care of her family and home; it just assumes it is the woman's free choice to do so. Liberalism does not doubt that the capitalist patriarchal system may limit the choices of systematically minoritized people; liberalism helps with its survival by not intervening in the private sphere and using the excuse of people's free choices.

One might question whether feminism can coexist with liberalism, as the basic neoliberal ideals seem inconsistent with those of feminism.

1.2 Ethical or woke capitalism

Liberal feminism and brand activism both operate within a system that can be defined as ethical or, more recently, woke capitalism.

Ethical capitalism is the phenomenon that is created by businesses that focus on the ethical practices as well as corporate social responsibility: companies and brands are transformed into ethical enterprises. As opposed to the traditional view that relegated ethical dilemmas outside the market, ethical capitalism does not contemplate such external remedies as legal regulations but presupposes those businesses themselves address issues of ethics. This however does not entail a moral change inside the capital,

³⁰⁵ Rawls, J. (1997). *The Idea of Public Reason Revisited*, p. 791.

rather a change in perspective with companies being perceived as ethical, because they care about issues.³⁰⁶

Within ethical capitalism, there is the problem of proving whether an action or project is ethically right, particularly on a global level. Very often, companies make their ethical practices visible, and cover unethical practices, such as human rights violations.³⁰⁷ This is made visible within brand activism, which helps brands portray themselves as ethical to the public, while shifting the focus from their unethical practices behind closed doors. Through brand activism, companies change the narrative surrounding their image by emphasizing their support for social and environmental causes. This underlying theme can be observed in the seven case studies discussed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation: regardless of how brands were positioned, whether overtly marketed as activist or not, they all demonstrated unethical behaviors.

Despite the concerns raised in chapter 2 about the appropriation of the term woke from black culture and its derogatory usage, there is relevance in employing the concept of woke capitalism in this dissertation. This term has in fact gained prominence in recent discussions as a means to critique brand activism.

Woke capitalism came into prominence in the year 2018 when columnist Ross Douthat of the New York Times wrote about the changed corporate behavior after the election of Donald Trump in the United States.³⁰⁸ According to him, a woke capitalism could have developed for two reasons: a real corporate consciousness because of evolving public sentiment, or, more likely, a mere tactic to improve public image.³⁰⁹ Brand activism in social issues thus is a strategic move to divert attention from economic issues that directly link to the interests of mega corporations. Brand activism can be regarded as a version of virtue-signaling, whereby corporations publicly support progressive social causes, in order to gain support from cultural influencers and liberal groups.³¹⁰ Through such acts, the corporations try to evade the possibility of regulation or taxation, while maintaining a socially responsible character. Woke capitalism, according to Douthat, is strictly

³⁰⁶ Barry, A. (2004). Ethical Capitalism, in W. Larner and W. Walters (eds) *Global Governmentality*, pp. 195–211.

³⁰⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁰⁸ Douthat, R. (2018). The Rise of Woke Capital. *The New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/28/opinion/corporate-america-activism.html>

³⁰⁹ *Ibidem*.

³¹⁰ Berthon, P. R. et al. (2023). The virtuous brand: The perils and promises of brand virtue signaling, in *Business Horizons* Volume 66, Issue 1, January–February 2023, pp. 27-36.

connected to brand activism, as both are about self-preservation rather than making substantive change to the social sphere.³¹¹

Douthat also created a term called ‘performative wokeness’, which means that corporations adopt progressive causes, display interest in liberal issues, to discourage potential government regulations or tax increases. They portray themselves as socially responsible to deflect attention or criticism that might lead to stricter control.³¹²

Connecting capitalism with social justice has not always been accepted or required, as by Sarkar and Kotler in their book about brand activism.³¹³ In 1962, Friedman strongly opposed the notion that businesses should have social obligations that go beyond profits. According to him, the sole purpose of a business is to generate profit and be competitive.³¹⁴ Also today, some economists see corporate social responsibility, or brand activism, as a means to secure corporate power, others see it as a divergence from the fundamental principles of capitalist corporations,³¹⁵ still others advocate for brand activism as enlightened self-interest to maintain their power.³¹⁶

According to Rhodes, woke capitalism goes beyond the traditional concerns of shareholders. It is now a global trend which has developed among the rising of global inequalities, with the objective of being a moral cover for extreme wealth.³¹⁷

1.3 Capitalist feminism

In the book *Feminism for the 99 Percent*, liberal feminism is a capitalist feminism: liberal feminism is a result of woke capitalism. A vision of this movement is the equal opportunity domination, that “asks ordinary people, in the name of feminism, to be grateful that it is a woman, not a man, who busts their union, orders a drone to kill their

³¹¹ Douthat, R. (2018). The Rise of Woke Capital. The New York Times.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/28/opinion/corporate-america-activism.html>

³¹² Rhodes, C. (2021). *Woke Capitalism: How Corporate Morality is Sabotaging Democracy*. Bristol University Press.

³¹³ Sarkar, C., Kotler, P. (2020). *Brand Activism: From Purpose To Action*.

³¹⁴ Friedman, M. (1962). *Capitalism and freedom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

³¹⁵ Rhodes, C. (2021). *Woke Capitalism: How Corporate Morality is Sabotaging Democracy*. Bristol University Press.

³¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

³¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

parents, or locks their child in a cage at the border.”³¹⁸ In capitalist feminism the sole presence of a limited group of privileged women in managerial positions is considered gender justice. But gender equality ought to be anticapitalist and, as professor of philosophy Nancy Fraser theorized, we need to deal with our current crisis of care.

“The gendered separation of social reproduction from economic production constitutes the principal institutional basis for women’s subordination in capitalist societies. So for feminism, there can be no more central issue than this.”³¹⁹

The neoliberal capitalist system, through liberal feminism, has empowered women to enter the workforce and has transformed one-wage families to two-earner families. This hides the fact that a family now needs two wages to support itself, since the cost of living is rising, and people are working more hours. The idea of women joining the workforce has been literally sold to individuals as an empowering and life changing goal for them, while at the current state, women are taking on more work for less money. Poor working women are still taking care of their homes and working two full time jobs for the price of one, while those who can afford it are employing these poorer women, usually immigrants and racialized, to do the domestic work in their houses.³²⁰ Women joining the workforce and having more agency in their lives and freedom with money is not to be rejected, but in this capitalist society, the subordination of most women is accepted because of the apparent freedom of some. This perspective calls for a more intersectional understanding of social issues, within liberal feminism, as various systems of oppression intersect, there is a gender, class, and racial dimension to this issue, but also one of sexual orientation and disability.

Liberal feminism is a smokescreen for the capitalist patriarchy, and it serves the interests of the capital, not of marginalized groups, especially those who are collateral damage for the survival of the neoliberal capitalist financial system. In *Capitalist Realism*, English author Mark Fisher argues that the survival of capitalism is dependent on the absence of any alternative economic and social systems. Capitalism survives because it also creates its rivals, thus giving people the appearance of dissent. Fisher defines liberal communists, such as Bill Gates, as capitalist moguls with some progressive ideals that want to

³¹⁸ Arruzza, C., Bhattacharya, T., & Fraser, N. (2019). *Feminism for the 99 percent: a manifesto*. London; Brooklyn, NY, Verso, p. 2.

³¹⁹ Fraser, N. *Capitalism’s Crisis of Care*, Dissent Interview, available at dissentmagazine.org.

³²⁰ *Ibidem*.

modernize jobs without radically changing the economic system that gave them their status. For liberal communists the excesses and immorality of capitalism can be accepted if they are counterbalanced by charity and some environment related commitments.³²¹ The same idea can be applied to liberal feminists: without deconstructing the patriarchal system, they push for the economic and social success of lesser marginalized individuals. As liberal communism is the reason why capitalism doesn't fail, liberal feminism is the reason why the capitalist patriarchy is still present in our lives.

According to Fisher, “far from constituting any kind of progressive corrective to official capitalist ideology, liberal communism constitutes the dominant ideology of capitalism now”³²². Similarly, liberal feminism represents the dominant ideology of the capitalist patriarchal system. The entire theory in Mark Fisher's book can be translated to the relation between liberal feminism and the patriarchy. Fisher argues that in neoliberal politics citizens are brought to believe that if better people are in governments and managerial positions their lives would improve.³²³ This is exactly what Sheryl Sandberg believes and argues about in her book *Lean In*, a symbol of liberal feminism, where she motivates women to take positions of power.³²⁴

However, change would not happen if better people, or in Sandberg's case women, rose to the top. The flaws and biases of the system are structural and are only reproduced through the people in charge. The system survives because it blames its faults on some greedy and immoral people who exploit it, and its structural flaws are never questioned. Capitalism and the patriarchy survive because through apparent opposing ideologies, such as liberal feminism or liberal communism, and through blaming its vices on some selected people, the success of the systems is never doubted. People do not believe there is any alternative to capitalism as they do not believe there is any alternative to the patriarchy: liberal feminism is a smokescreen for the capitalist patriarchy.

The concept of liberalism and feminism cannot coexist. A liberal feminism is a feminism that protects the interests of the capital, and the liberation of marginalized individuals can never happen within capitalism. According to Marxist and feminist political activist and philosopher Angela Davis, it is capitalism that plays a significant role in the oppression

³²¹ Fisher, M. (2009). *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*.

³²² *Ibidem*, p. 28.

³²³ *Ibidem*.

³²⁴ Sandberg S. (2013), *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*.

of women, and all marginalized groups. Through their oppression, the efficiency of domination within the capitalist framework is maximized.³²⁵ Overthrowing capitalism and the political and legal structures that sustain it is the only way to liberate systematically minoritized individuals.³²⁶

Thus, a liberal feminism is not feminism: feminism needs a more radical approach that challenges the entire capitalist system to achieve liberation for all.

2. Critiquing brand activism

2.1 Brand activism as a neoliberal feminist practice

Liberal feminism is sometimes referred to as popular feminism because it has become a widespread aspect of social media culture and has been popularized also through its integration into commodities, such as clothing items and jewelry. This kind of feminism can also be identified by its commercialization and association with neoliberal capitalism.³²⁷ Researchers claim that the intersection between neoliberal capitalism and feminism has resulted in the appropriation of feminist ideals by the market.³²⁸ Consequently, there has been a surge in brand activism, as corporations increasingly leverage feminist ideals to promote their products and engage with social issues.

Feminism, through the neoliberal capitalism and brand activism, has been depoliticized. Under neoliberalism, in fact, feminist goals that were initially for social equality have become part of market mechanisms and self-help initiatives. According to Fraser, some streams of feminist activism and criticism have been neutralized in the neoliberal period, and they have become a tool for the legitimization of neoliberal capitalism.³²⁹

Brand activism is a form of commodified and de-politicized feminism, and it is considered undesirable because it marginalizes feminist critique and ignores the need to

³²⁵ Davis, A. Y. (1977). Women and Capitalism: Dialectics of Oppression and Liberation, in *Marxism, Revolution, and Peace*, ed. Howard Parsons and John Sommerville.

³²⁶ *Ibidem*.

³²⁷ Lauri, J., Lauri, M. (2023). Selling feminist stories: Popular feminism, authenticity and happiness, in *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, pp. 1–17.

³²⁸ *Ibidem*.

³²⁹ Fraser, N. (2013). *Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History*, in *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis*. London: Verso Books.

change the structure.³³⁰ Within brand activism, in which feminist messages are inscribed on products and marketing plans, such as those of anti-racism, LGBTQIA+ rights and anti-sexism, the political and transforming nature of feminism is watered down or overshadowed by market-driven concerns. This form of activism highlights branding and consumerism, driving attention away from institutional failings and a collective focus on revolutionary social change to narcissistic and market-led form of feminism: liberal feminism. The ways in which feminism is applied to branding and consumer culture must be critically analyzed, as feminism could become just a symbolic gesture instead of the agent of change for the society and structure at large.

Feminist messages are more and more often part of ads and campaigns, especially with today's popular feminism. Companies regularly create emotional ads to encourage us to think about the experiences of people in marginalized communities. These ads aim to evoke empathy for many individuals, including women, racialized people, queer, and transgender people. However, they always offer a solution to overcome their struggles: the right product.³³¹ Emotional messages are consistently conveyed through brand activist campaigns, because they help consumers connect with the brand and the ad. Brands need to create their own personality to better reach an audience that is more likely to trust a personified entity, rather than a distant corporation. Sharing touching stories is a way to enhance a brand's personality and foster a stronger connection with the audience.³³² Emotional messages were for example successfully communicated in Nike's 2019 Dream Crazy campaign. The video includes the voiceover of Kaepernick, who says, "If people say your dreams are crazy, if they laugh at what you think you can do, good. Stay that way."³³³ He adds that thinking a dream is crazy is not an insult, but a compliment, as non-believers do not see its potential. At the same time, the video features many athletes and sport celebrities trying and failing in their respective fields, including children and disabled people. The campaign features examples of various marginalized groups, non-binary people, racialized people, refugees, and women, all wearing Nike sportswear. The

³³⁰ Lauri, J., Lauri, M. (2023). Selling feminist stories: Popular feminism, authenticity and happiness, in *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 1–17.

³³¹ Banet-Weiser, S. (2018). *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny*. Duke University Press.

³³² Oraklan, A., Celikkol, S. (2017). Advertising And Social Media Strategies in Development of Brand Personality. *International Congress of Management Economy and Policy*, pp. 547-555, p. 549-550.

³³³ Nike (2018). Nike / Dream Crazy (United States). @adtv240. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WW2yKSt2C_A

emotional impact is intensified by a moving soundtrack, thus establishing an inspiring atmosphere that is felt by the audience. Dream Crazy by Nike highlights the encouraging message of hope while also acknowledging and speaking to minorities who are frequently discouraged. The video deliberately shows a group of people who are struggling and are trying to realize their dreams. Significantly, the campaign portrays all athletes wearing in Nike sportswear, thus emphasizing the idea that success is linked to the brand. The campaign is an example of a brand activist campaign that integrates empowerment, diversity, and the brand's products with realizing uplifting, emotional messages.

These ads must be uplifting as they are a symbol of liberal feminism and liberal, or corporate, feminism aims not to offend consumers. This feminism is a repudiation of the portrait of angry and rebellious feminists presented in the history of feminism. Liberal feminism, as depicted in media and marketing, approaches discussions about social justice in a non-confrontational and positive way, without expressing anger. Liberal feminism thus adopts a corporate-friendly image, which would not offend many as negativity is counterproductive for profits.³³⁴

2.1.1 Marginalized individuals need to 'lean in'

Historically, marketing has been deeply rooted in sexist ideologies as brands perpetuated narrow and restrictive expectations for women, while other systemic minorities have hardly been represented. Messages in ads dictated that women should conform to societal norms, there was a need to shave, caring for others and the home and a general duty to family. The marketing strategies not only reinforced traditional gender patterns but also offered a narrow and old-fashioned view of women's identities and abilities.

In recent years, there has been a discernible change towards more inclusive and empowering marketing stories. Nowadays, messages are seeking to empower not only women but also other systemic minorities – racialized people, the LGBTQIA+ community, people with disabilities, religious minorities and more – aiming to free marketing from stereotypes and to promote a diverse representation. However, it is also important to note that, even though these campaigns are aimed at promoting some form

³³⁴ *Ibidem*.

of individual empowerment, the ultimate goal is consumerism, with the objective of selling a product or service. Often, such messages are delivered in the form of inspirational slogans that encourage people to think that they can indeed conquer the odds and succeed, if they really believe in themselves, if they dare to ‘dream crazy’. Yet, there is a critique that such stories can fail to recognize systemic oppressions in society, they do not actively undermine or tear down the structures of oppression that cause obstacles to people belonging to minorities. Rather, the emphasis is on encouraging minorities to work exceptionally hard, focusing on personal effort and motivation while downplaying systemic challenges.

This narrative is a narrative of liberal feminism, the doctrine that embraces the idea of individual’s ability to overcome challenges and enjoy success. Although it seems empowering, there is a drawback: people will only blame themselves for their ‘failures’. Such is the narrative of brand activism, such is the narrative of liberal feminism, a feminism that has been co-opted by capitalism, serving to create an illusion of support for human rights without addressing deeper structural issues. Liberal feminism is seen as more compatible with capitalist ideologies, focusing on individual empowerment and equal opportunities within existing systems. There are many definitions for this type of feminism, including ‘lean in’ feminism or civilizational feminism.

Sheryl Sandberg personifies lean in feminism and explains her theories in her bestselling book *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*.³³⁵ She explains how women leaders are the ultimate solution to women’s oppression, it is sufficient for more women to take on leading roles in the workplace for all women to be equal to men. Women must literally *lean into* male power structures, believe in themselves, and rise to the top.

Sandberg embodies privileged liberal feminism; she does not deconstruct her privilege and seems to be blinded by it. She urges women to lean in and not give in to their fears, to dream of being successful at work and not be satisfied with underpaid jobs. She knows there are external obstacles that women must face in their everyday lives but believes these can be easily overcome once women eliminate their internal barriers, such as their self-doubt.³³⁶

³³⁵ Sandberg S. (2013), *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*.

³³⁶ *Ibidem*.

Civilizational feminism, as French political scientist and activist Francois Verges calls liberal feminism, is a feminism at the service of the capital and does not support social justice and equality. It plays right into patriarchal hands, it focuses on the differences between men and women, without analyzing how racism, imperialism and colonialism could have influenced the gender division. White women have embraced civilizational feminism because it allows them not to deconstruct their privileges or even think about how being white may be the only reason they can ‘lean in’. According to Verges, liberal feminists embrace a liberal patriarchy, a modern system of oppression that allows some women a certain freedom as long as they can be integrated in the neoliberal capitalist economy.³³⁷ In the meantime, racialized and poor women are left with domestic work and cleaning jobs: as they are consumed by the capital, their white and privileged ‘sisters’ are becoming their managers.

“Liberal feminism outsources oppression”³³⁸: Sandberg can ask women to spend more time at work because they can outsource their domestic labor, and employ underpaid, lower class, often racialized women. As American author and social activist bell hooks has stated in her commentary on Sandberg’s book, the latter never identified which group of women she is referring to and instead pretends to give life lessons to *all* women³³⁹.

Liberal feminism believes in the principle “if you want, you can”: if women want to be successful, they will be successful; if they believe in it enough, more women will be at the top, and gender-based discriminations will cease to exist. Sandberg calls it a problem of the chicken and the egg; some feminists think removing institutional obstacles and systemic discriminations is the first step to women’s emancipation, she believes external obstacles are dependent on women’s lack of confidence.³⁴⁰

Liberal feminism is often discussed by scholars, focusing mostly on women rights. However, it diverges from intersectional feminism that tends to promote the freedom of all marginalized groups. Liberal feminism is a broad category that includes traditional liberal stances in anti-racism, anti-homobisobitansphobia, and anti-ableism. Its focus lies in individual efforts and marketing is used as an effective tool to communicate that

³³⁷ Vergès F. (2019). *Pour un féminisme décolonial* [For a decolonial feminism], Paris, La Fabrique.

³³⁸ Arruzza, C., Bhattacharya, T., & Fraser, N. (2019). *Feminism for the 99 percent: a manifesto*. London; Brooklyn, NY, Verso, p. 11.

³³⁹ hooks b. (2011), *Dig Deep: Beyond Lean In*.

³⁴⁰ Sandberg S. (2013), *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*.

message. It is evident with the example of Nike's 'Dream Crazy' campaign, where one is prompted to dream big, to ignore the naysayers and to be as great as world champion athletes are in Nike gear. Marginalized people also need to lean into the existent system and pursue their goals and equal opportunities in the society they live in, ignoring those who do not believe in them.

The lean in narrative in marketing is part of the confidence culture, which is also catered towards women and other systemic minorities. Confidence has developed into a widespread and widely accepted notion that leaves its mark on Western culture. According to Gill, confidence is one of the manifestations of neoliberal and postfeminist culture, another tool to blame oppressed and marginalized people rather than dealing with the system.³⁴¹ It shifts the blame to women and systemic minorities, who need to be more confident, ignoring how social, political, economic, and corporate structures are responsible. Ignoring especially how capitalism is responsible, because these brands probably would not exist if the interests of the capital were not protected.

Thus, brand activism promotes the neoliberal feminism and fits into patriarchal capitalism rather than challenging it.³⁴²

Brand activism, through the confident culture and the lean in narrative is therefore a form of liberal activism: companies are not addressing the root causes of the social justice issues they appear to support. Brand activism instead transfers the challenge of social change to the consumers, without tackling the systemic problems. Liberal feminism, through brand activism, has commercialized feminism and has turned human rights and social justice issues into a business.

2.2 Brand activism is not activism

Activism is an act or efforts, be it on the social, political, economic, or even environmental front, that seeks to bring change. It entails advocacy, seeking to affect

³⁴¹ Gill, R. and Orgad, S. (2016) The confidence cult(ure). *Australian Feminist Studies*, 30 (86). pp. 324-344

³⁴² *Ibidem*.

change, promoting a cause, create awareness, and effect reforms or improvements in society.³⁴³

On the other hand, this dissertation explained brand activism as ‘activism’ that commodifies social causes. Thus, brand activism is an oxymoron, as what brands are doing is not and cannot be defined as activism. Since brands are profit-oriented entities, they are more interested in social or political issues when it improves their image or shapes their message to some consumer sentiments rather than promoting the change itself. In other words, the brands’ profit motive competes with the authentic and altruistic intent that is connected to activism.

The case studies of chapter 2 of this dissertation demonstrated instances where companies engaging in brand activism are still involved in unethical practices, such as exploiting labor, harassing employees or having financial ties with companies that harm the environment. These inconsistencies raise questions about the sincerity of their commitment to the causes they claim to support. Real, genuine activism, such as genuine allyship discussed in chapter 1, is characterized by a real commitment to principles. This commitment is not influenced by public opinion, while brand activism, through peer pressure and cancel culture is a result of the need to maintain a positive public image. If brand activism were real activism, brand activist campaigns would not be a reaction to public pressure or backlash for not speaking up. If brand activism were real activism, when brand activist campaigns were not perceived positively by many, such as with Anheuser-Busch and Dylan Mulvaney collaboration, the brand would keep standing for what they believe in and continue their efforts regardless of the public’s reaction. Yet, the nature of brand activism often involves a strategic alignment with popular sentiments and trends to maintain a positive public image.³⁴⁴

Brand activism is a form of depoliticization and has the potential to hinder broader feminist political mobilization.³⁴⁵ The capitalist system tends to absorb acts of resistance through the commodification of social responsibility. This absorption makes it challenging to address critical issues such as labor exploitation and environmental harm

³⁴³ Moyer, B. (2001). The Four Roles of Social Activism, in *Doing Democracy: The MAP Model for Organizing Social Movements*, pp 21-29.

³⁴⁴ Prakash Sethi, S. (1982). Corporate political activism. *California Management Review*, 24(3), pp. 32–42, p. 34.

³⁴⁵ Repo, J. (2020). Feminist Commodity Activism: The New Political Economy of Feminist Protest, in *International Political Sociology* 14(2), pp. 221-222.

resulting from production. Douthat highlighted that companies use brand activism to resist investigations into their business practices, further complicating efforts to bring attention to these issues.³⁴⁶ Brand activism is not real activism because it does not fundamentally challenge the rule of the capitalist exploitation. Organizations and corporations connect philanthropy and social action to their sales techniques, market incentives and profit, as well.³⁴⁷ They commodify charity, by linking donations to sales and giving people the appearance of making some good; this is exemplified by Lush's Charity Pot.

Although corporations appear like they are promoting empowerment and social justice, they are only empowering the customers willing to spend money, while they are at the same time oppressing and exploiting people. Through brand activism, feminism is commodified, feminist ideas are converted into marketable and consumer-centered pieces of idea, which are detached from the socio-political context.³⁴⁸ This commodification poses a grave risk to genuine undertakings aimed at overturning both patriarchal cultural norms and the dominance of capitalist systems: they threaten genuine activism by being the main inflated popular discourse.

Moreover, the brands' focus on individual empowerment through consumer choices upholds already existing power disparities rather than addressing or undermining them. This dissertation emphasizes the importance of a feminism that keeps their focus on destroying oppressive systems rather than to be turned into products and catchphrases of market.³⁴⁹

Capitalism uses brand activism to hide the truth about capitalist exploitation. The language of social justice issues is absorbed within a capitalist framework that detaches the original feminist political context from the language, through shallow slogans. For instance, the "Girl Power" slogan, which is a popular tagline in femvertising, promotes the power and independence of women through buying certain goods, but this statement may overshadow the exploitation of female workers, in the same factories where these

³⁴⁶ Douthat, R. (2018). The Rise of Woke Capital. The New York Times.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/28/opinion/corporate-america-activism.html>

³⁴⁷ Repo, J. (2020). Feminist Commodity Activism: The New Political Economy of Feminist Protest, in *International Political Sociology* 14(2), pp. 221-222.

³⁴⁸ Soer, E. (2020). Powerful in Pink: The corporatisation and commodification of 'women's empowerment'. *Gender Justice*. <https://www.justgender.org/powerful-in-pink-the-corporatisation-and-commodification-of-womens-empowerment/>

³⁴⁹ *Ibidem*.

goods are produced.³⁵⁰ The global garment industry is an analogy to show how the humble faces of poverty-stricken female garment workers are hidden behind the faces of ‘feminist’ icons who dictate the fashion trends of the day.³⁵¹

Over the years, various types of feminism have emerged and evolved, serving as contrasts to liberal feminism.

- Intersectional feminism, defined by Kimberlé Crenshaw. Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality from which derives a feminism that considers overlapping identities and oppressions. Intersectional feminism fights for the liberation of all people belonging to all marginalized groups with particular attention to how people belonging to more minority groups may be in an even more subordinated position in society. People with overlapping marginalized identities experience more discrimination and oppression than others and feminism must take this into consideration.³⁵²
- Transfeminism, defined by Emi Koyama, for trans women who view their liberation to be intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women and beyond. Transfeminism is particularly relevant because trans women are usually excluded from radical waves of feminism that may even be anti-capitalist or anti-racist but only fight for the liberation of what they define as natural women, cisgender ones. Koyama believes that everyone who identifies as a woman or belongs to a gender minority experiences a gendered oppression and that feminism must argue for their liberation just as much.³⁵³
- Decolonial feminism defined by Francoise Verges, which draws from feminisms of the South. Decolonial feminism is not an accomplice of capitalism, racism,

³⁵⁰ Lin, J., Wang, Y. (2023). Back to Marx: reflections on the feminist crisis at the crossroads of neoliberalism and neoconservatism. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* volume 10, No. 954.

³⁵¹ *Ibidem*.

³⁵² Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color, in *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 43, No. 6 (July 1991), pp. 1241-1299.

³⁵³ Koyama, E. (2000). *The Transfeminist Manifesto*.

colonialism, and imperialism, but understands that the privileges of white and western women today are the consequences of the atrocities experienced by southern and racialized women. Decolonial feminism urges white feminists to make way for their racialized sisters and deconstruct their white privilege. They must recognize the consequences of colonialism and imperialism through which the capitalist patriarchal order has blossomed.³⁵⁴

- Visionary feminism, defined by bell hooks, which is one that commits to dismantle the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Visionary feminism is a commitment to end the domination of some people over others and eliminate positions of power altogether. Hooks realized that the oppression of some minority groups may be justified through the emancipation of others: according to her, if their white supremacy is not threatened, white men may accept the empowerment of white women, at the expense of racialized men and women. Visionary feminism is a feminism for all: it liberates women, men, and all gender minorities, from all racial backgrounds.³⁵⁵

- Anticapitalist feminism for the 99% as Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser call it in their book. Feminism for the 99 percent is a feminism that reunites all radical political movements, it is peaceful, democratic, eco-socialist, anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and sex positive.

“Our Manifesto identifies liberal feminism as a major obstacle to this emancipatory project. That current achieved its present dominance by outlasting, indeed reversing, the feminist radicalism of the previous period. The latter had arisen in the 1970s on the crest of a powerful wave of anti-colonial struggles against war, racism, and capitalism. Sharing in their revolutionary ethos, it questioned the entire structural basis of the existing order. But when the radicalism of that era subsided, what emerged as hegemonic was a feminism shorn

³⁵⁴ Vergès F. (2019). *Pour un féminisme décolonial* [For a decolonial feminism], Paris, La Fabrique.

³⁵⁵ hooks, b. (2000). *Feminism is for everybody: passionate politics*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

of utopian, revolutionary aspirations – a feminism that reflected, and accommodated, mainstream liberal political culture.”³⁵⁶

What these feminisms have in common is the refusal of capitalist, colonial and oppressive values that are accepted with liberal feminism.

All these feminisms would refuse brand activism because it aligns with or perpetuates the systems of oppression they seek to dismantle, because brand activism is a product of capitalism. All the forms of feminism mentioned — intersectional feminism, transfeminism, decolonial feminism, visionary feminism, and anticapitalist feminism for the 99% — reject the capitalist, colonizing, and oppressive values that may be readily adopted or at least tolerated by liberal feminism.

These counter-feminist perspectives highlight the need to address intersectional identities and oppressions, recognizing the inherent link between the liberation of all and the deconstruction of the capitalist system. These feminisms serve as a stark contrast to brand activism, which focuses on shallow gestures instead of challenging systemic problems and, thus, require a more encompassing and transformative approach.

Brands are taking advantage of social justice activism as marketing strategies. Such strategies are continued by brands despite the backlash and may be driven either by a belief that there is no such thing as bad publicity or by the societal expectation for taking a stand and contributing to the socio-political discourse.³⁵⁷

Chapter 2 touched on the difficulty of proving authenticity, even though brands really wanted to make a difference with their activism, marketing efforts are a weak tool for changing the system itself. One cannot fight white supremacist capitalism by buying products, and brand activism is only the symptom of more structural problems that require more than mere ‘branding.’³⁵⁸

³⁵⁶ Arruzza, C., Bhattacharya, T., & Fraser, N. (2019). *Feminism for the 99 percent: a manifesto*. London; Brooklyn, NY, Verso, p. 81.

³⁵⁷ Sobande, F. (2020). *The Revolution Will Not Be Branded*, in *The Quarterly Journal of Design* #27. <https://disegnojournal.com/newsfeed/the-revolution-will-not-be-branded>

³⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

Conclusion

Liberal feminism operates within the framework of capitalism and has given rise to brand activism. This chapter serves as a tool to comprehend the socio-political and activist landscape surrounding brand activism.

One such context is woke capitalism, a system that exploits social justice issues for profit. Capitalism can thrive by feigning concern for social problems, and brand activism enables brands to divert attention from the exploitation occurring behind closed doors.

Just as the concepts of liberalism and feminism are incompatible, so too are brand and activism. Activism and feminism must inherently be anticapitalist because capitalism oppresses marginalized individuals to maximize production and the efficiency of domination. The sole path to liberating all marginalized individuals is through overthrowing the capitalist system.

Brand activism appropriates the language of revolutions for profits, utilizing social justice concepts to promote products and enhance the brand's public image. At the same time, it adopts ideas from liberal feminism, such as encouraging marginalized groups to conform to the current system, by leaning in, or embracing the notion of 'if you want, you can'. Through these ideas, brands shift the blame for 'perceived' oppression onto marginalized individuals themselves.

Brands cannot genuinely be activists because capitalism is essential for their survival, brands are entities that must operate within the capitalist system and rely on the principles of capitalism. They also cannot be feminist since true feminism is anticapitalist because it challenges systemic oppression. Feminist values are at odds with the profit-driven motives of capitalism. Brands, by encouraging overconsumption, embody the flaws of capitalism. Exploiting employees for profit, through low wages, poor working conditions and the use of sweatshops, brands represent the core of capitalism and cannot genuinely care about the environmental issues they contribute to or the very people they exploit for their gain. Hence, brand activism is an oxymoron, and brand activism can never be considered real activism.

Conclusion

At the age of 20, while pursuing my bachelor's degree in International Studies, I decided to find a part-time job to finance both my studies and my summer travels. I secured a position at LUSH in Milan, a store that sold ethical body care products. I was genuinely excited to work in a reality that shared my values: I was vegetarian and loved how the brand had always fought for the rights of animals and people, that they cared about the environment, recycling, and that the products were cruelty-free. I was a feminist, believed in queer rights, and my values aligned with those of the company.

Only two months later, I discovered to my surprise the harsh reality of a harassing and overpowering manager who did not respect the rights of her employees: she berated us and yelled at us in a closet if we did not sell enough. The working hours they promised me when I got hired were not respected, and I found myself working even 50 hours per week, even though some days they would send some of us home earlier because there were too many sales assistants. I was personally forced to wear red lipstick and encouraged to flirt with customers to sell more or to do it outside the door to entice more customers to come in. After talking with colleagues who had been working there longer than me, I discovered this was the reality in all four stores in Milan.

I found that even though the brand pretended that being ethical was its core value, the main concern was profits, such as at any other company. Every day we were given selling targets and challenges, forced to compete with one another, and those who did not sell enough would be shamed in front of everyone. Even the environmental concerns were a façade; we used cleaning products with harsh chemicals to clean the store but never in front of the customers and had to pretend we used green products if someone asked. While customers were encouraged to bring back the products containers so that they could be recycled and used again – a global publicized campaign –, the harsh reality was that these containers ended up in the unsorted waste every night after the store closed.

This experience burst my bubble. As someone who already identified as a feminist, I had initially believed that supporting larger brands, if they were ethical, was a positive

contribution to societal change. I appreciated activism from big brands and celebrities as I thought they genuinely cared in making a difference. Then I started reading into anticapitalist feminism, exploring the works of Silvia Federici, bell hooks, Angela Davis, and Nancy Fraser. I found that I could not authentically advocate for freedom for all while turning a blind eye to the intersectionality of oppressions and how capitalism was playing a part in those. My belief in activist brands and an ethical form of capitalism contradicted my commitment to social justice for all marginalized individuals. I could not believe in feminism, anti-racism, anti-ableism, anti-homobisexualtransphobia, anti-speciesism, and anti-classism if I did not strive for an alternative to the existing economic and sociopolitical order.

Through my dissertation, I aimed at bursting someone else's bubble, proving that what is defined as brand activism is merely a marketing tactic. My thesis was that brand activism is performative, not only that, but brand activism is also not a genuine type of activism, and those actions cannot be defined as such.

Social media activism and brand activism are interrelated, especially since brand activism is primarily conducted on social media platforms. Activist brands operate in the same environment as new social justice movements, they often use the words of NSMs for their campaigns, use their hashtags and show their support when these movements gain the most traction, as in every June for LGBTQIA+ rights and 2020 for BLM.

Defining the words of social media activism, such as echo chambers, slacktivism, cancel culture and performative allyship is useful to understand brand activism. Social media sites tend to create echo chambers where people are exposed to information and opinions that support their pre-existing beliefs. Brands that engage in brand activism use echo chambers and the tools of social media promotions to get their message to those who would be interested in the activist campaign, but to shield themselves from possible opposition. Brand activism can be defined as a form of slacktivism and performative allyship since a genuine allyship goes beyond shooting a campaign or donating some proceeds from a product sale. Genuine allyship is a process of conscientisation and real activism involves an awakening to social injustices, it involves challenging norms, systems, and power structures, not operating or benefiting within it, as brands do.

As the latest trend, corporations and brands try to position themselves as advisors on where to spend our money productively and morally. Through brand activism, brands want to establish themselves as leaders of societal evolution, as those who create revolutions. We live in the age where causes are not only championed but monetized, where marketing tactics are cleverly converted into social and ethical fights.

Companies are increasingly striving to project a moral image, but a critical analysis of the effect of their actions and lines of productions is usually left behind. Rather than undergoing significant changes in their production processes, corporations found a simpler solution to appear virtuous and ethical: brand activism. This activism is mainly done on social media through activist campaigns, but sometimes also consists of a line of products that are ‘more ethical’, adorned with a pink, green or rainbow packaging. Meanwhile, these corporations keep making money from different types of exploitation. In the second chapter of my dissertation, I undertook a comparative study involving seven different brands to highlight the performativity aspect of brand activism. At the center of my thesis is a belief that an activist brand’s ethicality claims are based on its ability to maintain ethical relations with all stakeholders. To support this claim, I outlined five criteria that can be considered the signs of unethical behavior in a brand’s operations. These criteria include situations when a brand is not transparent in its communication with customers, when it is accused of unethical conduct toward the employees or engages in labor exploitation or creates activist marketing campaigns as a reaction to public backlash for its previous silence.

In my opinion, all types of brand activism are performative acts rather than true cases of activism. However, with the abundance of scholarly literature praising brand activism as an ethical alternative to capitalism, I decided that it was necessary for me to objectively analyze several case studies in order to support my view. The selection process for my research was deliberately designed to incorporate seven different brands, each of which had a specific connotation in terms of their perception as an ethical brand and commitment towards justice. In the brands under study, I selected brands with singular activist campaigns and those where a brand consistently positioned itself as an activist entity. Some notable instances include companies like Lush and Oatly, which have gained a reputation for their alleged ethical business practices and activism.

This multi-dimensional analysis is aimed at demonstrating the performative nature of brand activism, deconstructing dominant narratives that praise its transformational potential within capitalist paradigms.

In the analysis of all seven case studies, the brands met a minimum of two out of five criteria for performative activism. It is important to note that there may be additional unethical practices being performed by these brands, which could remain hidden from the public or are difficult to obtain. For instance, while working at Lush I gained access to many and other unethical practices that were not publicly known information, that only an employee or a manager could know, which I decided against including in my dissertation as they are about my personal experience. These insights highlight the challenges of evaluating a brand's ethical position in its entirety.

Since all analyzed companies fulfilled at least two criteria, the study concluded that they practiced performative activism. The underlying theory argued that meeting one criterion raised suspicion, while two or more criteria pointed to performative behavior. As each of the seven cases demonstrates performative activism, I reaffirm my position that all brand activism is fundamentally performative. While seven cases may not be a sufficient basis for such an all-encompassing statement, this skepticism reinforces the necessity to delve further into this topic.

That is why, in addition, I explored the concept of authenticity which is a key factor in assessing brand activism. While some argue that authentic activism can be proven by material actions like donations or sincere desire to change, I asserted that the concept of 'authenticity' is rather elusive, especially in our capitalist neoliberal society. The difficulty is in separating genuine initiatives from different types of 'washing'—whether it be wokewashing, green washing, social washing or pinkwashing. This skepticism creates a sense of doubt about whether companies can really put social issues above profit. Even when brands claim their actions are based on ethical motives, there is often uncertainty about the actual intentions. Actions that appear to be carried out for ethical reasons can act as mere strategies of building a positive public relations or gaining profits. Brand activism, apart from aiming to placate critics, is successful in opening the wallets of more conscious customers, who want to support ethical initiatives and avoid contributing to systemic abuses. By the virtue of their activities, corporations ensure on a

daily basis that systems of exploitation are maintained, their profits grow, and their public image is preserved.

For one to imagine a world that does not use life for profit-making, it is necessary to deconstruct and subvert the current power structure. I believe brands and corporations trump human rights, as their interests lie in profit making, thus taking precedent over the protection and promotion of human rights. I also believe no brand activism campaign can hide this. Corporations are motivated by their insatiable desire for growth and thus are become reluctant to enact significant changes. Even a brand known for its ethical positioning such as Oatly, disregards its principles when it comes to selling its shares.

From my perspective, corporate interests and motivations always conflict with any ethical considerations. The nature of capitalist production is profit-driven, which leaves little room for human, animal, and environmental welfare; therefore, the systemic inequalities perpetuate. Brand activism situates itself in ethical capitalism, which claims to promote equality and freedom within the already established system. These are all contradictions similar to that of a liberal feminism.

Activism and feminism, by their definitions must be anticapitalist because capitalism is based on oppression of the marginalized in pursuit for efficiency and domination. The appropriation of the revolutionary language for profit-driven ends is brand activism, which uses social justice concepts to sell products and build a positive image. At the same time, it appropriates ideas from liberal feminism and makes marginalized groups conform to what is normal—whether by ‘leaning in’ or adopting a discourse of if you want, then you can. Brands use the words of revolutions for profit, while taking on liberal feminism concept of ‘if you want, you can’ thus deflecting responsibility for systemic oppression onto those affected most severely.

Brands’ capitalist nature makes activism impossible. The answer to brand activism is found in intersectional and anticapitalist feminism, rooted in the understanding that capitalism perpetuates not only economic but also social oppression. This calls for a collective effort to dismantle the structures of capitalism and reorganize society based on principles of equality.

Our collective goal should be to envision and work toward an alternative economic order: one that rejects extraction, exploitation of any individual, and environmental degradation.

In this imagined world, corporations are worthless and powerless, and the intrinsic value of every person is absolute. Let us work towards a world where empowerment thrives, a world that is free from economic exploitation and one in which everyone's dignity and agency are respected.

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