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Political Consumerism and Branding: An Analysis of the Exploitation of Political Movements for Brand Equity and Profit

Ashley Simkovitch

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Political Consumerism and Branding: An Analysis of the Exploitation of Political Movements for Brand Equity and Profit

Ashley Simkovitch

Advertising and Integrated Marketing Communications

Advisor's Name: Canan Corus

Advisor's Department: Marketing

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Abstract

This article discusses the ways in which companies and brands project certain political affiliations to consumers. The exploitation or co-option of political or social movements in branding and advertising has been seen for decades, and it is now particularly prevalent since the election of President Trump. In order to be competitive in an era of political consumerism and an age when brands are expected to make a statement or take action regarding political movements, they are facing an increased pressure to integrate values into their brand identities in order to connect to consumers. In this essay, I ask how the commercialization and exploitation of political movements by large corporations prove to be a success for some brands and a failure for some others. Through a case study of the three separate brands—Pepsi, Procter and Gamble, and Nike—and the analysis of their advertisements, owned media, consumer reactions and comments, and previous brand activism/stances, I propose that there are three factors that must be present in order for the co-option of social movements in ads to be successful. These factors are authenticity, a brand's commitment to the issue, and transparency.

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Introduction and Background

The notion of selling social movements has become an increasingly important discussion within marketing and advertising. Many companies and marketers often exploit or co-opt these social movements and use them in campaigns to increase sales and gain new customers, and the purpose of this study is to determine why this tactic has worked for some companies and not for others. After discussing the background and history of this issue, and reviewing the previous literature that has been published regarding this issue, I will conduct a case study of three separate companies. An in-depth case study of PepsiCo, Procter and Gamble, and Nike and the politically charged advertisements they have recently released will allow me to determine how they project their political affiliations to consumers and how it is successful for some of the companies. As Rebecca Jennings of Vox.com says, when it comes to branding in the Trump Era, the number one rule is “you have to actually say something... CEOs also started to seem less afraid — and at times appeared to feel as if they were obligated — to make public statements about political happenings and social issues” (Jennings, 2018). The ramifications are large though; companies must be very careful about what they say, what they tweet, and how they try to brand themselves because this era is so rife with divisive political discussion. They must truly know their target, who is currently buying their products, and what kind of company they want to be in the future. It is more complex than simply “taking a stance” on a popular current issue. Any social media campaign can turn any decision into a larger social statement, so companies and CEOs must be more selective about why and how they address these issues.

This is why this topic is so important to consider at this time. As a marketing and advertising student, I am very interested in discovering the successes and failures of large companies in their branding and advertising tactics. It is imperative that each move and decision made by a company is deliberate and well-thought out. This is especially true in the era of social media when each mistake can be highly scrutinized and more widespread—or, in the case this action proves successful for the company, when the decision can greatly strengthen brand equity.

Throughout this essay, I will be examining and discussing brands' political affiliations and how, through the exploitation of current social and political movements, the brands are able to project these affiliations to their consumers for marketing purposes. Numerous corporations and companies have co-opted issues such as feminism, Black Lives Matter, and nationalism, and used them as a way to brand themselves and reach a certain target audience. Brands displaying or declaring support for a certain issue, movement or group is not new. Feminism, for example, has long been exploited—from women's liberation and suffrage came marketplace feminism: women's freedom meant the freedom to spend money. Cigarettes were among the first product to encourage the "commercial realm to align itself—in market potential, if not political commitment—to emerging women's movements" (Zeisler, 2016, 24). Cigarette companies found an opportunity in women's empowerment, and companies such as American Tobacco Company deftly exploited feminism to get more women smoking, using such tactics as orchestrating a walk for equality, as they did in 1929 down New York's Fifth Avenue, while encouraging female participants to "fight another sex taboo" by holding Lucky Strikes cigarettes as "torches of freedom". And these tactics worked; female cigarette buyers increased from 5 percent in 1923 to more than double that at 12 percent after the march. Another cigarette

company, Virginia Slims, continued this exploitation of feminism 40 years later when they marketed to young, professional women in 1968. Using the slogan “You’ve come a long way, baby”, suggesting that the “luxury” and freedom to inhale the smoke was a feminist choice. Again, this worked; by the 1980s the market share of the parent company Philip Morris had grown from 0.24 percent two decades earlier to 3.16 percent.

Politics in the marketplace is not simply a one-sided issue on the corporation and branding side; consumers are also participating in political consumerism. Political consumerism is intentional buying or abstention from buying specific products for political, social, or ethical purposes (Newman and Bartels, 2011, 803). Similarly to protest behavior, political consumerism is “enhanced by political distrust and general discontent”, so corporations and brands see the opportunity to exploit this discontent and consumers’ desire to actively participate in the political environment. There is much evidence to suggest that “consumer behavior such as the buying or boycotting of products and services for political and ethical reasons can take on political significance” (Stolle, Hooghe, Micheletti, 2005, 252), and it is mainly used by those who are distrustful of political institutions. So, brands use the opportunity of consumers looking to feel as if they have a voice in the political system, encouraging them to support the cause that the brand stands for, or “fight the system”, like Lucky Strikes Cigarettes did. Self-brand connection (SBC), is an important concept for marketplace politics. According to the SBC construct, brand associations are used to construct one's self or to communicate one's self to others (Moore, 2008, 707); consumers often rely on the purchases they make and the material objects they possess to make clear their ideologies. Consumers are becoming more interested in making their opinions known, and they are more interested in doing this through the brands they use and support. In the

increasingly politically charged society that we are in today, consumer and brand relationships are shifting.

Corporations have generally avoided linking their brands to political positions, yet recently brands have become more politically active. We see this with brands like Chevrolet supporting marriage equality, Ben and Jerry's supporting Black Lives Matter and environmental protection, Aerie and Dove using feminism and body positivity, and Nike taking a stance on race and what it means to be patriotic. The brands' strategic alliance with certain issues and movements is important, and it's important for the brands to understand how exactly to brand and position themselves in order to fully reach and connect with their target audience and current consumers. According to Matos, Vinuales, and Sheinin, "SBC mediates the relationship among brand/consumer political orientation, and brand attitude and purchase intention" (2017, 125), overall increasing brand loyalty and ultimately driving sales for the corporations. Recently, brands have increased their co-option of political issues for marketing purposes because of the changing political landscape in the Trump Era; "since the 2016 US presidential election, brands — once terrified of controversy — are more and more likely to enter the realm of politics. There's never been a more popular time to be a brand with an opinion," (Jennings, 2018). The incredible increase in the use of social media over the past decade has increased the pressure on CEOs of companies to make statements about social issues.

Problem Statement/Research Question

Political branding, political consumerism, and marketplace exploitation have been occurring for decades, and the buying and selling of a political movement have been seen since

brand communication existed. However, companies have been more and more inclined to take some stance and declare support on some issue, branding themselves as a company that has a larger purpose than simply selling a product or service. It is more complex than simply “taking a stance” on a popular current issue, though. As Kevin Draper with the New York Times writes, “rabid social media campaigns can cast any decision into a larger social statement” (2018), so companies and CEOs must be more selective about why and how they address these social justice issues. And the ramifications are large; companies must be very careful about what they say, what they tweet, and how they try to brand themselves because this era is so rife with divisive political discussion. My specific question for this work will be: How do brands project certain political affiliations to consumers, and why do the commercialization and exploitation of political movements by large corporations prove to be a success for some brands and a failure for some others.

Literature Review

When examining branding efforts by corporations in relation to politics, and how these affect brand equity and sales, much research has been published related to consumer psychology and ideology and how these affect the choices that consumers make in the marketplace. A lot of research that has been done in political psychology suggests that there is a clear divergence between liberals and conservatives in things such as personality, interests, concerns, and even cognitive processing styles. There is also evidence to suggest that there is an implication of political psychology on persuasion, marketing, and advertising. There are differences in “consumer choice, judgment, decision-making, and behavior; and customer satisfaction/

dissatisfaction and politically motivated boycotts” (Jost, 2017, 503). According to Hoewe and Hatemi, brand loyalty is indeed influenced by the activation of political orientations. In their study, the results indicate that “an advertisement’s activation of one’s political orientation can either change or reinforce brand loyalty. The most important take-away from this is that if a brand’s values align with the consumer’s values, consumer loyalty will greatly increase. Specifically, more conservative individuals responded to the presence of Muslim and Arab individuals in a Coca-Cola advertisement by selecting Pepsi products despite their initial preference for Coca-Cola; whereas, more liberal individuals maintained their initial brand loyalty to Coca-Cola” (Hatemi, Hoewe, 2017, 428).

Consumers are often politically motivated in the marketplace, whether it be as a way to boycott certain governmental regulations/laws, support a company that reflects their ideologies, or support a brand’s corporate social responsibility initiatives. However, the consumer of the brand is often not the only individual marketplace participant that acts from political motivations. The CEOs of corporations and brands are also frequently allowing their ideologies to shape the brands’ image. A study published in 2013 found that the ideologies of CEOs and the executives’ values do have an effect on the image of the company (Chin, Hambrick, Trevino, 197). The study suggests that CEOs’ political ideologies, specifically political conservatism vs. liberalism, will influence their firms’ corporate social responsibility. As mentioned previously, CEOs are beginning to feel more pressure and often even feel obligated to make public statements about social issues. Companies as a whole are increasingly incorporating support for social causes in advertising to improve brand image and increase sales, but according to Huertas-Garcia and Consolación-Segura, it is unclear how these behaviors influence purchase intentions. According

to their study, when examining the co-branding strategy in cause-related advertising, this tactic will work when there is a fit between the brand and the cause. The co-branding must create a synergy between the organizations, and consumers must perceive the partnership as strategic rather than tactical.

Many studies have been published examining ethicality in corporate branding, and according to the “The Ethical Backlash of Corporate Branding” there has been an increase in the success of branding as a corporate activity in the past few decades (Palazzo, Basu, 2007). They argue that as we move into a more globalized economy and society, there is an “increasing demand on corporations with regard to a broader envelop of socially responsible behavior”, which is why it is so crucial to understand that brand success in the future is likely to demand more than simply a superior product or service. Since this is an increasingly important topic in our globalized society, many studies have looked at the connection between selling products with selling brand purpose. Chung-Kue Hsu, in his discussion of selling products through selling brand purpose, argues that when utilizing purpose-driven marketing, “brands need to connect their purpose to consumer values and human needs” (2016).

As ethical consumerism sees an increase in the marketplace, brands are facing increasing pressure to respond to these changes. Consumers are increasingly expecting companies to not only sell superior products but display ethicality in their corporate identity and brand; so, in order to be competitive in this era, brands need to “integrate ethical values into their identities and to display their ethical commitment at a corporate level” (Iglesias, Markovic, Sierra, 2019, 441). In their study, they point out that most studies that look at business ethics in relation to corporate brands are predominantly theoretical, or focus solely on the goods sector. In their study, which

“examines the effects of customer perceived ethicality of corporate brands”, the results show that “customer perceived ethicality has a positive and indirect impact on brand equity, through the mediators of recognition benefits and brand image...[and] brand heritage negatively influences the impact of customer perceived ethicality on brand image”. The biggest implication that can be drawn from this study and others previously mentioned is that in order to accomplish the overall goal of driving sales and improving brand equity, managers, executives and CEOs must be aware of the need to reinforce brand image along with the product/service benefits, all reinforcing the ethicality of the brand. This can all, as Markovic writes, “facilitate the translation of customer perceived ethicality into brand equity”. Because there is such an opportunity to exploit political movements and customers’ ethical consumerism, brands must be careful about choosing strategic causes/ideologies that will reinforce brand image.

Despite the increase in the past few years of brands becoming more political, markets have been in the past and will continue to be in the future inherently political. They are inherently political predominantly for two reasons: the first is that markets are so tightly bound to the “regulatory functions of the state”. The markets are a reflection of the current political state and the current regulations of the country. The second is that the markets are challenged by consumers who are dissatisfied with the way the market and the economy are functioning, and they use the market as a platform for social change (King, Pearce, 2010). The marketplace is a great way to initiate a movement and act as a catalyst for social change because of how integrated corporations are in the everyday lives of so many consumers. Similarly to how brands can act as a catalyst for social change, they can also piggyback off heightened frustrations and attitudes and use this to project their affiliations to more consumers by appealing to an already

present sentiment. Many brands have used this tactic in recent years, but an important study to examine that occurred nearly 10 years ago was that of Under Armour. In Gavin Weedon's 2012 essay examining Under Armour and its relation to corporate nationalism and post-9/11 cultural politics, he argues that through the branding strategies of Under Armour, an American sportswear company, U.S. nationalism was both exploited and constructed. Weedon states that a central point throughout the paper is that "Under Armour's brand development techniques, as mobilized predominantly through their website, offer important theoretical and empirical insights regarding the production, circulation, performance, and embodiment of post-9/11 cultural politics" (265). One particular advertisement that was studied opens with "My house is freedom, is country, my brothers, my family, my being in my country. I protect it, I swore to protect it...". This ad, part of the Freedom Initiative which began in 2010, is the most prominent and clear example of Under Armour's fifteen-year strategic alignment, or "natural partnership", with the U.S. armed forces. Under Armour describes this partnership as providing "the tactical end-user with gear engineered to perform in the most demanding situations. And now, with UA Freedom, we proudly announce our commitment to the military and public safety officials who risk their lives protecting our house" (Weedon, 265). Since the country was already experiencing such a heightened sentiment of nationalism, Under Armour sought the opportunity to reach more consumers through this shared sentiment, and was ultimately successful with this tactic.

Despite the Under Armour example above, brands haven't always been willing to declare support for politics; in fact, "politics has long been an arena that caretakers of corporate reputation and brand health prefer to avoid" (Jackson, Young, 2017). However, since the election of Donald Trump, avoiding politics has begun to seem less in a brand's control. Since the

election in 2016, there have been various studies that have examined brand risk in this highly charged social, political, and cultural climate. One study, conducted by market research company Ipsos, discusses how to “survive” hyper-partisan consumers in the new age of populism ideology. Not only do companies have an increase in pressure to brand themselves politically, but they are also still learning “to cope with a fragmented media environment providing a platform to anyone with a complaint” (Jackson, Young, 2017), including the president himself. As discussed at length previously, political ideology can and often does spill into the marketplace, and numerous studies and articles have been published in the past several years and discuss why there has been such an increase in this since the 2016 election. As Vadakkepatt, Korschun, and Martin of the American Marketing Association argue, consumers are becoming more political, with political ideology becoming an increasingly important element of self-definition and an increasingly significant part of their daily life, with political ideology easily influencing the way consumers engage with companies. Additionally, regarding different socio-political issues that have surfaced and become more prominent in our society, it has become common for companies or brands to make statements or even to take actions, even when those issues are controversial. For example, when President Trump announced a plan to shrink a national monument in Utah, outdoor clothing company Patagonia announced its strong opposition to the decision on its website and social media, with the headline reading “The President Stole Your Land”.

Political affiliations in the marketplace is an increasingly important topic, but “while consumers, companies, and other organizations are incorporating politics into their respective thinking and behavior, there remains a relative dearth of research on the relationship between

these political activities and marketing” (Vadakkepatt, Korschun, Martin, 2018). It is argued that companies are becoming more comfortable with the uncertainty that the changing political and social climate is generating, but that “they are spending more time addressing social topics that may or may not be related to their core business, guided by their organizational principles and values”. The overall study looks at how the roles of CCOs and CMOs are evolving in this era of polarization, fake news and shifting social and political landscapes. These works mentioned above are critical in the process of delving further into my topic of political affiliation in the marketplace, and how brands project these certain political affiliations to consumers. Additionally, the branding efforts through corporate social responsibility and ethical consumerism of the companies previously discussed is also important as I look at how the commercialization and exploitation of political movements by large corporations prove to be a success for some brands and a failure for some others.

Methodology

I will be examining this question through a case study of several companies that have taken stances on a social justice movement that has become more widespread and prevailing in today’s culture—companies that have had successful campaigns using political branding as well as companies that have had failing campaigns using political branding. I will look at how Pepsi, Procter and Gamble, and Nike have co-opted the social justice issue of race relations and police brutality. I will be analyzing these brands and their brand communications by looking at their websites, advertisements (both past and present), and social media mentions and comments, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube. Additionally, I will be examining the

history of each company in terms of their specific previous activism and stances on political and social movements – which is crucial when evaluating whether and how it worked for each company. Before delving further into each company specifically, it is important to look at the context of the industries and recent marketing tactics in general, as social and political context is very important when considering this question.

In order to truly understand the issue and answer my specific research question, understanding the key issues within the current social context is crucial. In order to determine if the campaign was successful, I will look at sales or stock prices for the company directly before the campaign launched and directly after and determine if they increased or decreased. I will also look at mentions on Twitter and determine how many were negative and how many were positive. This will help me determine the consumer sentiment regarding the advertisements and statements by these brands. Then I can begin to determine the overall market response to the brands' positioning. After determining if the response was negative or positive, I can combine those findings with the research I completed of the history of the company and past campaigns in order to determine why or why not this tactic worked for the companies.

Results and Discussions

With more and more companies “violating” the social norm of remaining apolitical in their messaging since the election of President Trump, numerous social movements have been used in advertisements by countless brands in an attempt to connect to their current and potential consumers. I have focused on three separate brands that have used one particular social movement. Through case studies of Pepsi, Procter and Gamble, and Nike and the three brands’

separate use of race and racial tensions in the U.S., I was able to examine what allows success for a brand and what can lead to failure when co-opting prominent social issues and movements.

Before examining the three brands, I looked at the recently published Earned Brand Study by Edelman which discusses how brands are increasingly expected to take a stand on issues, and how consumers are using brands as a form of political activism. The report states that “today more than ever, consumers are putting their faith in brands to stand for something. To do the right thing. To help solve societal and political problems. Whether people are shopping for soap or shoes, they’re weighing a brand’s principles as much as its products. Opting out of taking a stand is no longer an option for brands” (Edelman, 2018). The study reveals that nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of consumers around the world now buy products based on belief and value, a significant increase of 13 points since 2017. These “Belief-Driven Buyers”, as the study calls them, will choose, switch, avoid or boycott a brand based on where it stands on the political or social issues that they care about. This belief-driven buying is becoming a mainstream mindset across all age levels and all income levels, and it is necessary to discuss how important the political/brand connection is for consumers, which in turn makes it more important for the brands themselves. Within this new “brand democracy”, consumers believe in brands as an effective and important force for change, and according to the report, 46% of consumers agree that “brands have better ideas for solving our country’s problems than government”, and 53% agree that “brands can do more to solve social ills than government”. Consumers are not just choosing brands and products to purchase based on the quality of the product, but also because it is a way to express our values and commitments.

It is becoming increasingly important for companies to brand themselves politically, but it has also become more difficult to do it in the right way. According to Anna Kambhampaty of CNBC, consumers feel as if the current political climate is failing them. Because of their decreasing trust in government, media and even nonprofits, they're more likely to turn to brands to have a voice and make them feel as if they can make a change. In today's political market, companies that fail to take a stand risk losing the respect and therefore commitment and brand loyalty of consumers; but brands who do it—and do it right—have a high pay off. According to Edelman's global head of brand practice Mark Renshaw, brands that "live their beliefs in all that they do, and invite consumers to take action with them, will be rewarded with more conversation, more conversion, and ultimately, more commitment" (Kambhampaty, 2017). Companies that discuss social movements in the right way in their advertising and branding are rewarded with more brand loyalty. This begs the question of how this is actually done correctly and successfully by brands, which is the key question I asked moving through the case studies of the three companies.

One of the most important findings from my research is that there are three primary factors that will help determine the success of the advertisement or campaign that co-opts a social movement: authenticity, a brand's commitment to the issue, and transparency. Authenticity is very easily perceived by consumers and may be the most important factor. If the social issue is something that either the brand has been tied to in the past or is something that is tied to their everyday company culture, it will be perceived as more authentic rather than simply being exploited for marketing purposes and increased profit. Companies need to convince consumers that the social movement is part of their brand identity; consumers use goods as a reflection of

their identity, and if they see a similar identity reflected in brands as well, results will be very positive for the brands. Another component of authenticity is the ability of the brand to allow the ad to preserve the integrity of the social movement's message. The ad cannot seem like just an advertisement; consumers must view it as an authentic and genuine catalyst for the conversation for action and change. The second factor, a brand's commitment to the issue, is deeply tied to the authenticity factor. There must be an authentic connection between the social movement and the brand's company culture. Does the brand fight this issue in their culture or their social responsibility efforts? Or is this ad the first occasion in which consumers are seeing the brand and social movement connected? If that is so, it will be perceived as less authentic and therefore as a shallow effort to exploit the movement for profit. The brand must make a real attempt to make a difference within this movement and for this issue. The third factor that must be looked at when evaluating whether or not the advertisement was successful is transparency. This can look different for each ad, campaign, or brand, but it is also often tied in with the other two factors. Brands must be transparent with what the issue actually is—they need to discuss how the problems affect consumers, and it needs to be a constructive dialogue. The ad cannot simply show the product/brand embedded in a scenario in which the social movement is present, but it needs to be transparent in how the brand is making a difference or sparking a conversation for the movement.

The Edelman report, from their research on brands and belief-driven consumers, discusses the “Brand Stand Spectrum”, which is broken up into three different elements, similar to the three factors identified above. The three elements they argue that brands must pay attention to when co-opting social movements are purpose, culture, and activism. Purpose is an

articulation of why the brand exists and a proactive effort to address that purpose. Purpose is something that the brand must be “living” every day. The second element is culture, which is an authentic connection of the brand’s stand to a relevant moment in culture, or the social movement. The most important thing for brands to remember in regards to culture is that they cannot just co-opt it, they need to actually be connected to it. The third element is activism, which is the element discussed by Edelman that is most closely related to the three factors identified above (authenticity, a brand's commitment to the issue, and transparency). Activism, as defined here, is when a brand confronts a controversial issue that has a direct impact on its stakeholders and brand. Brands must ask themselves if their stakeholders and consumers/potential consumers will support the issue and if they will act on it. The activism that a brand partakes in must authentically fit into who the brand is; they must show particular commitment to that issue beyond just in advertisements, and they must be transparent in actions they are actually taking regarding their activism.

The specific research question asked at the beginning of this essay was: How do brands project certain political affiliations to consumers, and how does the commercialization and exploitation of political movements by large corporations prove to be a success for some brands and a failure for some others. In order to answer this question, I looked at Pepsi, Procter and Gamble, and Nike; for each company, I analyzed their advertisements, owned media, consumer reactions and comments, and previous brand activism/stances. Within each case study, in order to determine if they were successful, I asked if the three factors were present in each case.

The first company I looked at was Pepsi, examining in particular the advertisement called “Jump In” featuring Kendall Jenner. This now infamous political ad was released in April of

2017 and received immediate backlash, being pulled from the air by PepsiCo almost immediately after debuting. The ad begins showing a group of attractive, young and happy looking protestors marching through the street while Kendall Jenner models in a blonde wig and dark lipstick, “which signifies she is a tool of The Man” (Grady, 2017). Jenner then sees the wave of Pepsi-fueled protestors and, feeling impelled to join, throws the wig off and wipes the lipstick away. As she joins in with the marchers, who are holding vague signs of protest with messages such as “Peace”, “Love”, and “Join the conversation”, she sees a wall of police officers standing in front of the protestors looking threatening and ominous, borrowing heavily from the imagery that is so connected with the Black Lives Matter movement. She seems to take no time to figure out what needs to be done to solve this issue—she grabs a Pepsi, walks toward the cop in slow motion, hands it to him, and he drinks it. The protestors go wild, hugging and cheering, fist-pumping and beaming. A Muslim woman in a hijab stands in the background and pulls out her camera to document it all. The cops smile at each other and everything is okay—thanks to Kendall Jenner and Pepsi. Viewers of the ad weren’t so pleased, and the backlash was extreme.

Pepsi pulled the ad from air less than 24 hours after it debuted due to the anger and mockery the spot received. Viewers saw through the company’s attempt to exploit a social movement and mocked the ad’s suggestion that we can stop police brutality by drinking soda, simple as that. It eradicates the fact that these protests begin with real people trying to change their lives and fix a system that has oppressed them; it eradicates the fact that these protests are often filled with violence and do not end happily. Grady, in her article, discusses outrage from viewers because they, unlike Pepsi so it seems from this ad, are aware that protests in general (and Black Lives Matter protests in particular) are not scenes of lighthearted revelry, despite

Pepsi's suggestion—through cheerfully dancing black men in Pepsi's imagined protest—that they are; and “they’ve fact-checked the idea that white women are at the center of the Black Lives Matter movement while women of color stay in the background, documenting everything” (Grady, 2017). Viewers reacted very negatively, taking to Twitter and YouTube to comment on Pepsi's now deleted video.

Through my analysis of various selected comments on both Twitter and YouTube, the largest theme that was present in these comments was anger over the historical inaccuracy of the representation of the way people are treated at marches for racial equality. Martin Luther King Jr.'s daughter, Beatrice A. King tweeted a photo of Martin Luther King Jr. in the middle of a protest being shoved by a police officer, with the caption “If only Daddy would have known of the power of #Pepsi”. Another user saying “Next time @pepsi do one where Kendall Jenner marches to Montgomery but the cops don't bludgeon her bc she's white & has a refreshing @pepsi”. The video has since been deleted on both Pepsi's official YouTube channel as well as Kendall Jenner's, however the video is still available on other channels, with one video having nearly 13 million views. Comments such as “Capitalists just looking to exploit actual revolutionary change. not surprised. and Jenner is the perfect person for it. This wealthy billionaire could care less about struggles of working class people”, and “Just give cops Pepsi and everything is solved. Genius”, have flooded the comment section. Networked Insights, a research firm that uses artificial intelligence and social media to gauge responses, was able to determine the amount of positive and negative reactions recent ads received through online mentions within two weeks of their respective release dates, (Kambhampaty, 2017). They found that only 8 percent of the 737,708 mentions of this ad held positive sentiments, while 21 percent

of them held negative ones. And the positive ones, they reported, were largely from Pepsi expressing regret or from a loyal Kardashian-Jenner fan base, rather than from the ad content itself.

Pepsi's ad echoed images from the Black Lives Matter campaign, but replaced "the people of color with a white woman, and the idea of protesting police brutality and systemic racism with the idea that we should all drink more Pepsi" (Grady, 2017). The ad was tone deaf in its attempt to connect to consumers by showing them how in tune they are with the political mood. It failed, and it failed because the three factors were not present. The ad severely lacked authenticity, as pointed out by viewers and tweeters. It was clearly appropriating the sensitive, and sometimes violent, political protests; there was no attempt to create a positive or transformative conversation around this issue. It was perceived as simply an attempt to sell Pepsi. Furthermore, the company has shown no major commitment to the issue of police brutality or Black Lives Matter, so this random exploitative ad furthered the insincerity. Additionally, there was no transparency about the brand/ company in relation to the issue. There was no dialogue about the issue and no discussion about what the company was trying to do to make it better. It was an ad for the sake of profit, and that was very evident to consumers. The company did issue the following apology after the ad was pulled from air: "Pepsi was trying to project global a message of unity, peace and understanding. Clearly, we missed the mark, and we apologize. We did not intend to make light of any serious issue. We are pulling the content and halting any further rollout. We also apologize for putting Kendall Jenner in this position" (Paquette, 2017). The apology did little to help how the ad was perceived, as it still received a majority of negative reactions. However, sales were not negatively affected overall for the

company; during the second quarter of 2017 revenue rose 1.9% to \$5.2 billion in the North American beverages division, the company's largest unit.

The next company I examined was Proctor and Gamble, looking more in-depth into an ad spot released by the company in 2017 called “The Talk”. The spot features several black parents, both past and present, talking to their children about different situations in which they will experience or have experienced racial bias. One parent talks to her son about the fact that people will continue calling him “that nasty word” and there is nothing they can do about it, but he needs to rise above them and not let it affect him; one set of parents walk with a discouraged-looking boy away from a baseball field, and talk to him about how there are some people who won’t include him because of what he looks like; and one parent talks to her daughter about what will happen when cops pull her over, not because of what her driving is like but because of what she looks like. The spot ends with writing being shown that reads “Let’s all talk about ‘The Talk’...So we can end the need to have it” followed by a specific call to action for the viewers that reads “It’s time for everyone to #TalkAboutBias”. It’s important to know that the ad was not promoting a specific product, but rather the company as a whole, as it was released as part of the company’s “My Black is Beautiful” campaign.

Unlike the Pepsi ad discussed previously, “The Talk” was met with more positive reactions. According to Networked Insights, the ad received over 26,000 mentions online, 29 percent of which held positive sentiments, 20 percent negative, and the remaining neutral. Through my analysis of various selected comments on both Twitter and YouTube, the largest theme that was present in these comments was the discussion of values and principles that consumers are happy to see being discussed more and more. Comments on the video on the

official “My Black is Beautiful” YouTube channel included “This commercial is so necessary, for the times. It’s been our reality for years! It didn’t just start in 2017”. Twitter saw many more positive reactions as well, as viewers appreciated the important topic that the ad brings up. One Twitter user says “Thank you Procter and Gamble for dealing with racial bias far too long people have pretended that it does not exist. Thank you for The Talk”, and another says “Some powerful and moving work from Procter and Gamble about racial bias and ‘The Talk’ #goodisthenewcool” (Twitter). The ad was not just met with positive reactions by consumers, but also by the creative industry, winning awards such as an Anvil Award and an Emmy; the ad was globally recognized as being a success.

When contrasting the reactions to the Pepsi ad with the Procter and Gamble ad, it is necessary to understand why the former ultimately failed while the latter succeeded. Procter and Gamble’s ad was so successful because it encompasses all three of the necessary factors. The ad was perceived as being very authentic. It did not market a specific product, so it came across more like a moving and emotional plea for change rather than an attempt to exploit an issue to sell a product. Its inclusion of the call to action of consumers by including the hashtag at the end shows that the company has a genuine interest in the issue, and genuinely wants consumers to start a conversation around this issue. The company has also shown a real commitment to this issue, rather than just exploiting it in one ad for the sake of profit. This ad was part of the My Black is Beautiful campaign, an initiative that was started over a decade ago by black women at Procter and Gamble. As a company, Procter and Gamble’s mission is to “touch and improve lives”, and they aim to do this through more than just the products that they sell, and the My Black is Beautiful initiative is one example. This initiative aims to improve African-American

women's image of themselves and to promote loyalty to P&G brands in their hair care, cosmetics, oral care, and feminine care. Because the company has shown a sustained interest and commitment to this issue, the ad is perceived as more authentic and genuine.

As a company, they have had a history of addressing sometimes sensitive political issues in their advertising. This may simply be because they are trying to connect to younger consumers; many younger consumers are buying from brands that align with their beliefs, and they want to see companies take stands on issues such as race. P&G is, at the end of the day, a company trying to sell products, so they know if they have a reputation of being a company committed to doing good, they will be able to capture brand loyalty from younger generations, meaning more customers for years to come. Whatever the case may be, these politically charged ads have worked for P&G. The company has also won praise for advertisements such as its "Like a Girl" campaign that challenges stereotypes of young girls and women, and Pantene's "Strong is Beautiful" campaign that shows NFL players braiding their daughter's hair (Meyersohn, 2019). The company also recently debuted the Gillette ad "We believe: The Best a Man Can Be", which challenges men to question and stop their toxic masculinity behavior.

The company is not afraid to address issues in their advertising, and Damon Jones, the vice president of global communications and advocacy at P&G says "Important discussions can be tough discussions and we're not shying away from that". Brands with such a prominent platform have a responsibility to act as a catalyst for change and discussion for change, and as stated by Jones, P&G is willing to bring these conversations to the table, even if it may mean some backlash for the company. The third factor that is present is transparency. Throughout the ad, it is very clear what the issue is and what the ad is trying to tackle. They make it clear how

the issue affects their consumers, and why people need to start talking about this bias. It's not an ad with a vague and appropriating reference to an issue or movement, it is a way to start a constructive dialogue around this issue.

The third brand that I studied is Nike, particularly their ad featuring Colin Kaepernick which was released in September of 2018. Nike received a lot of notable backlash after announcing its partnership with Kaepernick, who himself had a lot of controversy surrounding him after acting as a catalyst for the wave of NFL national anthem protests against racial inequality and police brutality. Kaepernick, a former quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, angered many Americans after he began kneeling during the national anthem at NFL games, leading him to being blacklisted by NFL leadership. The ad, which was released on the 30th anniversary of the company's iconic Just Do It slogan, features young athletes attempting and failing to do some impressive move. It begins with a young skater falling off a railing repeatedly, then shows a young boy with no legs competing in a wrestling match, a young boy running, a girl boxing, and a surfer surfing a large wave. Throughout the ad the narrator says inspiring messages to encourage us to dream bigger and fight to be the best. Through the compelling shots of athletes and the inspiring voiceover, the ad inspires us to try as hard as we can to be the best we can be. The ad continues with a voiceover (who turns out to be Kaepernick) saying: "Believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything". It then continues on to show athletes like Serena Williams and one-handed NFL player Shaquem Griffin, who have defied odds to get to where they are today. Kaepernick continues with the line, "Don't ask if your dreams are crazy, ask if they're crazy enough". The ad ends with a shot of Kaepernick walking alone in a street, and the text "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything". The ad immediately

became a controversy, with consumers—who were prior Nike supporters—posting videos of themselves destroying or burning their Nike products. Posts on social media criticized the notion that Kaepernick’s choice to kneel which resulted in his blacklisting from the NFL would mean he sacrificed “everything”; many of these critics showed family members who served in the military and lost their lives, which they believed truly meant to “sacrifice everything”. Many claimed they will be boycotting the company and started a #BoycottNike movement, and even President Trump tweeted “What was Nike thinking”.

Despite the immediate backlash, the ad was in no way a failure, and it gave Nike a significant sales boost. A report from Edison Trends says that Nike’s online sales grew 31% in the days following the release of the ad, and Apex Marketing Group says that Nike received more than \$43 million worth of media exposure after the release (Morris, 2018), with over 1 million mentions in posts the day the ad came out—more than 50 times more than their typical 20,000 per day (Jordano, 2018). Partnering with Kaepernick was a risk that was bound to spark controversy; and although it did spark controversy, the risk paid off. Nike knew exactly what they were doing with this ad, and they knew exactly who they were targeting. The previously loyal Nike fans who burned and boycotted the products never really mattered to Nike anyway, as their core audience is disproportionately younger and more liberal than average. Nike knew that creating a well-done social justice ad would resonate with their core consumers and have a positive impact. While examining social media posts relating to the ad, Lou Jordano, CMO of Crimson Hexagon, says that “comparing Nike’s audience to the groups of consumers positively and negatively posting about the Kaepernick campaign reveals something fundamentally important: the people who spoke positively about the ad were *much* more in line with Nike’s

target audience” (Jordano, 2018); the age breakdown of the negative posts is much older than the positive posts, with almost 60% being 35 or older. The more progressive, younger audience resonates with this slightly politically charged ad, which is just one of the things that makes this ad work so well.

Through my analysis of various selected comments on both Twitter and YouTube, the ad had many more positive comments than negative, and the largest theme that was present in these comments was the inspiration that the ad brought to viewers, and the notion of standing up for what you believe in. One YouTube viewer comments “Everyone says that I will never succeed in my crazy dreams. But this ad has inspired me to prove them all wrong”; another comments “Inspire, Hope, and Dream crazy!! Love it NIKE and all the participating Athletes, I commend YOU! KAEP your sacrifice is not in vain.” A Twitter user praises Nike for their bravery and support in standing by Kaepernick, saying: “I applaud you and everyone else who is standing for love, in solidarity with Colin Kaepernick, my special thanks to Nike for their support and fellowship in righting a wrong, while doing the right thing, at the same time. Nike forever”. These comments, which were taken from YouTube and Twitter, span from the month the ad was released up until last month, so there is still much support being shown for the ad.

The three factors are present here, but in slightly different ways than they were with the Proctor and Gamble ad, for example. The ad is perceived as authentic because of the subtlety in which the social justice messaging is worked in. The entire ad is not focused on the racial issues that Kaepernick fights against, but it instead has imagery that is very similar to a typical Nike ad. The entire ad is very in line with Nike’s brand, which makes it seem more authentic and less exploitative. Many of their ads have addressed social issues, such as their most recent ad released

in 2019 with their “Just Do It” message directed to women as a fight for equality. The imagery of failure and triumph, and the underlying message of “just do it” in this campaign is no different than in any other recent Nike campaign, and the only political aspect of the ad is Kaepernick himself. There is nothing in the ad that connects him to football, the NFL or the controversy he sparked, nothing except the consumers’ previous knowledge of who Kaepernick is. This is what makes the ad slightly different than the others previously discussed. There is no obvious political message, but there is an obvious political association. The ad works so well because it is not being obviously political; just through the “simple” act of featuring Kaepernick in their ad, they are saying that they stand by Kaepernick, they stand by his actions, and they stand in the fight for racial equality and against police brutality.

The ad is authentic, it’s in line with their commitment for social justice, and it has a clear transparent message. The ad was successful because Nike’s target audience saw this ad as a genuine rallying cry for change, and an authentic additional voice in the conversation about race and police brutality. The piece was moving and controversial enough to continue the conversation around this issue, and although it was condemned by many as clearly co-opting Kaepernick for the purpose of sales, it reached the right audience. They know that younger consumers are increasingly looking toward brands to have a voice in political discussions, in order to reflect their own voice. Nike wants to connect to these consumers and make loyal consumers out of them. Dan Wolken from USA Today argues that this ad aimed to cultivate “an entire generation of consumers who are up for grabs at a moment where the lines between culture, politics, and activism are blurry—a notion that might make older people uncomfortable but is now the coming-of-age reality for anyone under 18” (2018). From the increase in online

sales after the release of the ad, and from the positive social media reactions from younger consumers, this ad proved to be a success.

Conclusion

The marketing “tool” of co-opting a social justice movement has been an important and sometimes successful one for many years, but in the very political and digital world we are in now, it has become even more prominent. In the past, most companies have remained apolitical, but since the election of Donald Trump in 2016, more and more companies are going against this past social norm. A new social norm has been created; it is often expected by consumers for brands to take a stance on some type of social or political issue. Numerous social movements have been used in advertisements by countless brands in an attempt to connect to their current and potential consumers. Younger consumers are often more progressive than their older generation counterparts, so brands seek to obtain a long-lasting loyal consumer base by connecting to these younger consumers on the values that they share. This marketing tactic, however, is not always successful, as the consumers often see the brands political advertising as an exploitative and appropriating attempt for profit. It is important to determine what makes some of this advertising successful while some of this advertising fails.

Through my study of three separate companies—Pepsi, Procter and Gamble, and Nike—I was able to determine the factors that allow social justice advertising to be successful. For the brands to be seen as a positive force for change rather than exploiting a social movement to gain profit, three factors must be present in the advertising and the company as a whole; the first is that the ad must be perceived as authentic; the second is that the brand must show a sustained

commitment to the issue that they are using in the advertising; the third is that the brand shows transparency when discussing how the issue is affecting consumers and society, and what the brand is doing to help. When looking closely at the three brands, I analyzed their advertisements, owned media, consumer reactions and comments, and previous brand activism/stances, which allowed me to determine if the three factors are present. This topic is very important for brands to consider as the line between culture, politics and commerce blurs. In our increasingly digital and politically polarizing society, more and more consumers are using consumer goods as shorthands for their identities. Brands are realizing the necessity of taking a stance on the social justice issues that are so prominent in our society; if a brand does it right, there will be a lot of positive outcomes for brands. If the brand can convince the whole social movement that it is their brand, and that their values align, the results can be extremely rewarding.

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