Please talk, but say nothing

A qualitative study examining the perception of brand activism in a woke-washing context

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Abstract

Today everyone is a politician. We communicate our thoughts, ideas and values with each other at an exorbitant rate and magnitude through social media. Following this wave of social awareness, it has become more important that the brands we shop at support our values and beliefs. However oftentimes when they do, the brands are met by accusations of using social movements to push an ulterior agenda. This leads to questions as to how brand activism is perceived, why it is perceived that way and where these allegations of being so called 'woke-washers' stems from. As the concept of brand activism is newly emerged, previous literature does not manage to convey an answer to these questions in a real-life setting. Therefore, we contribute to literature by deriving trends and implications of brand activism in a non-controlled setting. Through an observational study consisting of both a survey and extensive content analysis on 15 Instagram posts, we found that there really is no blueprint on how to be an activist. Our results primarily showed that although people are more or less favourable to a company taking a political stance based on their brand history and personality, people's reactions on social media does not always reflect this. To some extent, companies are always facing woke-washing accusations, but these can be mediated through how intelligently they convey their standpoint and the perceived genuity of their actions.

Key words: Brand activism, Brand authenticity, Woke-washing, Woke, Social media

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1. Introduction

In the 90's, fashion retailer United Colors of Benetton revolutionised marketing by developing campaigns aimed at expressing the brand's values beyond their products (Borgerson et al., 2009, p 212). Campaign images showed people dying from aids, death row victims and people of colour - all to raise awareness and take a stance on social and ethical issues. A pionéer of its time was met by much controversy and disgrace, resulting in the eventual firing of the brand art director and attempts to suppress the societal fuss caused by the company's political involvement - sticking to clothes was considered the safer option (Duffy, 2017). Little did they know that 30-something years later, being a successful brand activist has become one of the most desirable things a company can be. Over the course of just a few years, the concept of brand activism has exploded, and an increasing number of companies engage in the socio-political debate. In 2019, Nike released an advertisement campaign with NFL star Colin Kaepernick to raise awareness about racial injustice in the US after Kaepernick was let go by his team for kneeling during the national anthem to raise awareness for black inequality. The campaign was a large success for Nike and eventually won an Emmy (Vera, 2019). Yet despite an abundant consumer desire for companies to take a stance (Barton et al., 2018), companies are regularly called out and accused of taking advantage of socio-political movements. In 2017, Audi spent millions of dollars on a Superbowl advertisement spot, committing to equal pay for equal work. However, the company was quickly called out for having no women in their executive team. Apparently, you have to hire women before you pay them (Jones, 2018). With a soaring global social media presence, expressing opinions on forums like Twitter and Instagram has become one of the easiest ways for companies to announce their standpoints. However, little research has been conducted in the field of consumer response to online activism, which is fundamental for companies to understand the impact of their activities and direct their efforts accordingly.

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how different acts of brand activism is met in the social media environment, particularly on Instagram. Through classifying Instagram comments on a set of given posts where a selection of companies has communicated a proactive socio-political standpoint, this thesis aims to find trends and themes as to why different posts and/or companies are met with a different response. It is then investigated if these responses could hold for the general population. Further, the theme of 'woke-washing', where companies are accused of

using a social movement to pursue and ulterior agenda, is examined. The thesis investigates trends in woke-washing and studies if it appears that such accusations can be mitigated.

2. Literature review

2.1 Conceptual Background

Over the last few years it has become evident that brands are not just a resemblance of their products' functionality (Saltzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2007), instead people tend to consume brands to a greater extent for what they mean (Hatch & Schultz, 2008). When differentiating a brand or product from its competitors, intangible and expressive factors are a predominant force in consumer decision to consume a brand (Saltzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2007; Câtâlin & Andreea, 2013; Hansen & Christensen, 2003, p. 13; Brady et al, 2008). This entails that the value of a brand lies as much in consumers' perception of a firm's practices as in their products. Ambler et al. (2002) proclaim that the customer assets are the firm's most important asset, especially in relation to maximising brand and customer equity. Some would even argue that brands nowadays are common property (Barton et al. 2018) as customers are becoming an increasingly important stakeholder of a firm's brand value as marketing is increasingly becoming a two-way street (Parmar et al. 2010). The increased presence of services and decline of product differentiation have created stronger ties between customers and brands where customers 'identify' themselves with a brand (Ambler et al. 2002). Buttcharya & Sankar (2003) define consumer company identification as "the primary psychological substrate for the kind of deep, committed, and meaningful relationships that marketers are increasingly seeking to build with their customers". Building on identification theory, consumers are more prone to favour brands that suit their perception of their own self (Ilaw, 2014) and that are trustworthy, desirable and attractive to them personally (Azizi & Daei, 2014). Customers' increasing status as valuable stakeholders entail that it lies in a brand's best interest to pay more attention to consumer preferences beyond products' tangible characteristics. This is resemblance by brands seeing an increasing need to engage in brand activism, as values and ethics are becoming increasingly important for consumers (Korschun, 2021; Mirzaei et al, 2022).

With the emergence of social media forums, people are given endless possibilities to discuss and interact with brands, and their voice holds a stronger power over companies than ever before (Fosdick & Hutton, 2011). Hence, presence on social media platforms is crucial for

brands to develop a relationship with consumers and gain control over their own brand. Despite this, little research on brand activism in a social media setting has been conducted and much is yet to be discovered in the field.

2.2 Brand activism

2.2.1 The perception of brand activism

From brands taking a stand for the Black Lives Matter movement (Kiesler & Menon, 2020) to brands producing rainbow-coloured clothes in support of the LGBTQ+ community (Geslin, 2018), companies are progressively using strategic communication to display support on socio-political issues (Smith, 2021). This display of social values by corporations is termed 'brand activism', an emerging term in strategic marketing that is quickly gaining attention in practice and literature (Knoebel, 2018; Stern, 2021; Schoeneck & White, 2020). Kotler & Sarkar (2018) define brand activism as ''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''. Brand activism is oftentimes confused with Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) but its contentious nature sets the concepts apart (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Whereas CSR oftentimes is rooted in non-divisive topics and is part of a company's strategic plan, brand activism is riskier to engage in and occurs more on an ad-hoc basis (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). However, many argue that brand activism is a progression of CSR that has altered to fit into modern society (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018). As brand activism is a newly emerged concept, much is yet to be discovered about its consequences and implications in a real business setting (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Sibai et al., 2021; Whitler, 2021). Previous research into CSR shows that consumers tend to hold more positive attitudes towards companies that engage in social causes (Sen et al, 2006). Engaging in socially responsible practices can make an organisation appear warmer (Aaker et al., 2010), more trustworthy (Vlachos et al., 2009) and more compassionate. (Heyward, 2020). According to Mukherjees & Althuizen (2020), brand activism typically evokes stronger reactions than CSR, and it may therefore reasonably be assumed that these positive responses should hold for brand activism as well.

Ultimately, much research points towards the favouritism of brand activism and that it is expected by consumers and society. A global study shows that 62% of consumers want brands to take a stance on social political issues (Barton et al. 2018). Likewise, old CSR practices are

not enough, explicitly shown by 58% of respondents in a global Deloitte survey stating that they expect business practices to change in alignment to proactive socio-political standpoints (Hutcheon, 2021). This aligns with self and social identity theory, and our inherent desire to search for brands that match our values and self-perception. Hence, research points towards that brand activism should be positively met by the public.

Several attempts where brands have tried to speak up on divisive socio-political issues have shown that successful execution can be very challenging and incorrect execution costly. A Stanford Business study from 2018 found conflicting results about brand activism. Although 65% in general favoured CEO's taking a stance on social, ecological and political issues, doing so often generated a lot of negative response (Larcker & Tayan, 2018). Examples include the 2017 Pepsi scandal which fronted supermodel Kendall Jenner trying to stand united with the Black Lives Matter movement (Victor, 2017) or Mark & Spencer's 'LGTB' Sandwich attempting to support the LGBTQ+ society (Duffin, 2019). Contrary to much research pointing out benefits of brand activism, Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) suggest that there is little upside to taking a stand, even if it is in consumer perception 'the right one'. In a controlled experiment, they found that consumers agreeing with a political stance did not signify an increase in brand attitude because they 'expected' the brand's behaviour to resemble their personal values of what is considered good social behaviour. Negative experiences could however be detrimental to a brand as they tend to have stronger effects on cognitive processing and there is a stronger desire to exit a negative state than a positive (Baumeister et al., 2001). This could entail that people are more prone to comment negatively to let off some steam. This raises thoughts if brand activism merely has an agitating effect on consumers and should thus resemble much negative response by the public.

2.2.2 Brand activism in an online environment

Little research has been conducted on the topic of positive and negative sentiment towards brands purely based on their actions on social media. However, negative experiences have previously resulted in a high incidence of negative word of mouth (Lau & Ng, 2001) and social media constitute a highly beneficial environment for spreading a word quickly (Pfeffer et al., 2013). Therefore, negative sentiments expressed in an online setting easily have the ability to turn into online firestorms, defined as ''the sudden discharge of large quantities of messages containing negative WOM (word-of-mouth) or complaint behaviour towards a person, a company or a group in social media networks'' (Pfeffer et al., 2013). Despite this, contradictory

studies show that positive word of mouth is more frequently occurring than negative word of mouth (East et al., 2007). There is also contradictory research on the inclination to spread opinions on social media. Stephen (2016) suggests that people are less inclined to express opinion in social media because of a high perceived social risk. Meanwhile, Gerbaudo & Trére (2015) suggest that social media poses as a digital comfort zone, lowering the barrier of engaging in activism. This became apparent in a study conducted by Brown et al. (2017) which revealed that the trending hashtag #SayHerName became a forum for black transgender females, an otherwise minority group. However, as social media makes it fundamentally easier to express opinions while remaining anonymous, it poses a barrier for sustaining civilised political discussions (Kruse et al. 2018) and can thus also function as a forum for spreading hate.

A study on tweets concerning climate activism shows that even though the occurrence of positive and negative sentiments may be similar, there is a stronger display of emotion on negative sentiments (Williams et al. 2015). On the contrary, Garcia et al. (2012) showed that we have bias towards positive language, as it feels better to express positivity. This entails those responses should display pro-social behaviour. Further, Garcia et al. (2012) demonstrated that negative expressions in written text offline are used less but carry more meaningful information. If this holds for the online climate, we can expect to detect negative trends with deeper emotional content.

The theory exposes conflicting aspects, both in regard to if companies should take a standpoint in the first place and second what reaction they may encounter when doing so. The literature does not explicitly convey how the media landscape around brands taking a standpoint actually look like, which leads to the following research question:

RQ1: Do users appreciate brands taking a stance in the online environment?

2.3 Brand Authenticity

An accepted view in the marketing community is that brands should not take a political stance if they cannot do so in a brand-consistent way which is perceived to be authentic by their target markets (Moorman, 2018). Consumers are often sceptical when brands engage in socio-political issues as their intentions are often unclear and their motivations are primarily

perceived to be profit-seeking (WARC, 2019) and commercialization tends to reduce the perception of authenticity (Holt, 2002). A company cannot simply take a political stance; its actions need to be credible if the company expects to realise the benefits. Therefore, being perceived to be brand authentic and being able to communicate this authenticity is a crucial element to successful brand activism (Vredenburg et al. 2020; Mirzaei et al, 2022).

Brand authenticity is defined as 'the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be faithful and true toward itself and its consumers, and to support consumers being true to themselves' (Morhart et al., 2015, p. 202). Furthermore, Vredenburg et al. 2020 perceive authentic brand activism as a "strategy in which brands have a clear and purpose- and value-driven communication around an activist stance of socio-political issues while also engaging in prosocial corporate practice". This definition also emphasises the importance of the perceived alignment between communicated values and actual practice. However, there is no prevalent framework defining the dimensions forming brand authenticity. Bruhn et al. (2012) has defined brand authenticity as a multidimensional construct consisting of four dimensions: continuity, originality, reliability, and naturalness. (p.569) Further, Morhart et al. (2015) has developed a scale defining brand authenticity with the elements: continuity, credibility, integrity and symbolism. All theories stress brand history (continuity) and fit (reliability, credibility) as important factors to brand authenticity.

Brands that are perceived to be authentic have an increased likelihood of reaping favourable benefits such as increased customer loyalty, purchase intention and a higher tolerance for bad brand experiences (Fritz et al., 2017). Further, brands can experience more positive word of mouth (Morhart et al., 2015), increased positive brand attitudes and more trust toward the brand (Ilicic & Webster, 2014.).

2.3.1 Brand history and brand personality

Brand history and continuity (ie. The brand is consistent over time and stays true to itself and its values (Bruhn et al., 2012)) are important factors when customers evaluate a brand's authenticity (Bruhn et al., 2012; Fritz et al., 2017). An individual will rely on a company's history to evaluate whether the brand has an honest concern in the relevant cause (Joo et al., 2019). Joo et al. (2019) argue that consumers perceive brands that engage in several causes are perceived as more authentic. However, consumers may respond differently to various CSR

initiatives by the same company as context can change views of authenticity. Therefore, customers might judge the activities differently in different settings (Joo et al. 2019).

Brands that have little previously established social corporate practice are more likely to be perceived as inauthentic due to the lack of customer expectations of the brand's messaging, purpose, and values (Vredenburg et al., 2020). The non-existing expectations also result in more extreme and polarising reactions from customers and the public, either positive or negative (Vredenburg et al. 2020). On the contrary, brands that have clear messaging, purpose and values and an established practice of engaging in socio-political issues can expect a larger range of customer reactions and a lower risk of customer outrage (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

These extreme feelings due to polarisation seem to somewhat be derived from brands' human-like characteristics such as personality (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2018). This is supported by Aaker & Fouriner (1995) who argue that consumers judge brands the same way they evaluate people's actions. Thus, products and thereby brands are evaluated beyond their physical attributes and are rather evaluated on their intangible features and image (Saltzer-Mörling & Strannegård, 2007, p 412). Brand personality can therefore be a driver of strong emotions and thus enhance polarisation in a company's customer base. Brand personality is defined as "the set of human characteristics associated with a brand" (Aaker, 1997, p.347). Perceived positive brand personality can positively affect brand love and establish a deeper connection between customer and brand, which has positive effects on WOM and eWOM (electronic word-of-mouth) (Iqbal et al, 2020; Roy et al. 2016). Perceived negative brand personality can lead to negative emotions such as brand hate (Sanjit et al., 2022) which could influence consumers to engage in activities such as complaining, brand switching and have negative effects on WOM (Romani, Grappi & Dalli, 2012).

2.3.2 Alignment of values and practice

'Fit' in the context of brand activism has been defined by Mirzaei et al. (2022) as "the extent to which the woke topic is in line with the brand's current or past core business, meaning/image, positioning and culture". Vredenburg et al. (2020) stress the importance of match and an appropriate alignment between a brand's purpose, values, messaging and practice. Both

definitions illustrate the importance of coherence between a brand's practice, branding and values to be perceived as authentic. However, congruency between a firm's actions and their practices may not be enough to evoke feelings or attention as more companies adopt brand activism (Knoebel, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2019). Theory instead suggests that companies should engage in socio-political debates that are slightly incongruent to their brand as this will encourage consumers to engage in deeper processing and subsequently depict stronger reactions (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

However, a too large lack of fit between what the company sells, and their messaging can result in that company's actions can be seen as hypocritical (Alhouti et al., 2016). Mirzaei et al. (2022) argue that low fit can result in perceived inauthenticity due to the perception of deceptive motivations and opportunism. A low perceived fit and no practice combined with a trendy woke activism topic such as Black Lives Matter or the MeToo movement can be seen as if the brand is taking advantage of the situation for profit-seeking reasons (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Further, evidence suggests that a brand interested in addressing complex social issues, such as racism or sexism, is more likely to be seen as authentic if it remains neutral and inclusive to all target audience groups (Mirzaei et al., 2022).

However, Schmidt et al. (2022) argues that commerciality and cause can co-exist in customers' minds as long as the brand activism activities are seen as more than just communication. Therefore, practice needs to follow the message and brands need to "walk the talk" to not be perceived as opportunistic. A lack of fit between the brand's practice, values and messaging can result in a brand's activities can be perceived as inauthentic and thus being perceived to be "woke washers" (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

The literature has demonstrated the influence of brand authenticity on brand activism. However limited literature can be found pertaining to underlying factors that could plausibly explain what drives consumers' response to brand activism and that can explain their commentary on social media. This leads to the following research question:

RQ2: What are the underlying brand characteristics affecting perception on brand activism?

2.4 The concept of ‘Woke’

The adjective ‘Woke’ is defined as being ‘’aware of social & political issues, especially racism’ (Oxford Dictionary: Woke, 2021). The word was originally positively infused and simply resembled a state of being aware and acknowledging social injustices in society (Blow, 2021). However, the term is now being used in a stigmatising manner, often to label firms for inconsistencies between their corporate social initiatives and firm purposes, value or practices (Rose, 2021; Pitcher, 2021). Some suggest that the word instead has become ‘weaponized’ (Shadijanova, 2020), emphasising that being ‘woke’ is today rather an insult than a compliment.

2.4.1 Woke-washing

Time and time again, companies are being judged based on their responses to social issues and are accused of being ‘’woke’’ or ‘’woke washers’’ (Warren, 2021). The first concept pertains to believing companies should not engage in social initiatives because they do not align with their purpose which is often viewed as opportunistic capitalism. This idea of being negatively conditioned ‘woke’ is employed by companies adopting current socio-political issues that are antithetical to the firm's purpose (d’Abrera, 2019). The second concept pertains to companies being accused of being ‘woke-washers’ which ultimately means that the companies proclaim to engage more than they actually do and that they therefore are pretending to be ‘woke’ (Warren, 2021). Some argue that woke-washing goes beyond hypocrisy and is intoxicating the business environment (Mahdawi, 2018).

As woke-washing is an emerging concept within strategic marketing limited literature can be found on the topic. Little literature can be found on trends within the woke-washing and the drivers behind these accusations. The lack of literature therefore leads to the following research question:

RQ3: What are the trends in woke-washing and what are the drivers behind these accusations?

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

As can be seen from the literature, brand activism is a fairly unexplored topic in the field of marketing research, especially in a context of 'wokeness' (Cammarota et al, 2021; Vredenburg, 2021). The few studies investigating consumer response to brand activism comprises both experimental and observational studies (Mukherjee et al. 2020; Cammarota et al., 2021; Mirzaei et al., 2022). Amongst the most comprehensive studies aiming at explaining brand activism in general terms & implications, Mukherjee et al. (2020) applied an experimental method. Although explaining underlying factors affecting the liking or disliking of brand activism, little insight into its real-life implications was provided. Similarly, observational studies (Cammarota et al., 2021; Mirzai et al., 2022) instead applied the concept of content analysis of diverse media forums to spot trends and sentiments. This allowed for a greater display of real life reactions but failed to grasp any emotions beyond the commenters. The contradictory research on brand activism suggests that responses range from a span of positive to negative and that these responses might take different forms and shapes. This suggests that to conduct a comprehensive study of the phenomena of brand activism in a woke-washing context, it is necessary to take a broader approach that captures both off- and online reactions.

The research will be constructed around a given set of Instagram posts published by a few globally known companies that take a proactive standpoint on a social-political issue. The main objective of this study is to find patterns, trends and underlying factors as to why people hold a certain type of perception on brand activism from an idealistic viewpoint. Given the nature of the research questions, we will use qualitative data analysed through an observational approach. The study will apply content analysis by examining publicly available social media conversations to explore different elements of sentiments towards different posts and brands. Content analysis allows researchers to apprehend themes and concepts in conversations (Neuendorf, 2002, p.1) and to overcome limitations pertaining to studying authenticity of reactions in controlled settings ie. through experiment (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Since everyone does not engage in the media debate, a survey exposing the respondent to the same posts will be used to capture underlying themes and concepts of the people who may not engage in online conversations.

3.2 Derivation of social issues

Referencing the literature, brand activism is an overarching phenomenon that generally means that a brand is taking a stance on some sort of socio-political issue. Kotler & Sarkar (2017) distinguishes six domains of brand activism that can be recognized by all: social activism, legal activism, economic activism, business activism, political activism and environmental activism. Out of these, social activism particularly stands out as it touches upon ubiquitous issues. As stated in the theory, consumers want brands to stand for the things they believe are important, and personal exchange in marketing have the power to strengthen or weaken a brand's perceived position in consumer minds (Jancic & Sabkar, 2002). As consumers value intrinsic elements in marketing, it suggests that the perceived personal relevance of a brand's direct marketing activities to consumers determines how much attention they directed to these activities, and ultimately how much they care about its content. Therefore, global social issues concerning inclusion were selected. There was an evident need to demarcate the selection in order to make the study viable, yet a strong need to include as many social groups as possible. Therefore, the following social issues were selected; racial inclusion, LGBTQ+ inclusion and gender equality. These issues have gained much attention and traction during the last couple of years (BBC, 2022; Dawson, 2020; Casserly 2016; Maqbool, 2020) and the societal debate and initiatives around them is considered a step towards a more equal and inclusive society (UN, 2021; UN, 2022; UN).

3.3 Selection of companies

Traditionally the view of companies' role in society has been to produce products and services that customers value (Sastry, 2011). However, today society expects more of organisations as the magnitude of their impact on society has increased. Both society and investors are expecting companies to take more responsibility dealing with social issues (Cormack and Fitzgerald, 2006, p.7-9). The increasing popularity of brand activism can help companies signal responsibility and concern toward socio-political issues (Mirzaei et al., 2022).

Two criteria guided the selection of companies for this study; The companies must have addressed all three selected social issues at least once and the companies customer base must reflect a diverse part of the population. Therefore, American retail-brands which are market leading within their respective industry were chosen as they have a large customer base consisting of diverse customer segments with various demographics. This was further

enhanced by the choice to include companies that operate in different categories within retail. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that the reaction is made by and therefore reflects a varied part of the population. The companies chosen were Nike, Starbucks, Ben & Jerry's, Victoria's Secret and Levi's.

Table 1. *Brand Selection*

Company	**Industry**	**Examples of previous brand history of socio-political engagement**
Nike	The world's largest supplier and manufacturer of athletic apparel and sports equipment. (Tighe, 2022) The brand was established in 1964. (Britannica)	Nike has a long history of engaging in social issues. Nike's second "Just do it!"- campaign from 1989 advocated for people with disabilities. Since then, Nike has been vocal in issues such as gender issues and the AIDS pandemic. In recent years Nike has evidently supported racial inclusion. (Tyler, 2018)
Starbucks	American global coffee house chain and coffee company. Established in 1971. (Lock, 2021)	Starbucks has several prominent political and social activism campaigns which has intensified during the time CEO Howard Schulz has been with the company. (González, 2015) Starbucks has been involved in the refugee debate as they committed to hire 10 000 refugees in an open letter to company partners as a response to previous president Donald Trump's announced travel ban in 2017. (Knoebel, 2018; Starbucks, 2017)
Victoria's Secret	American women's night and underwear brand. Established in 1977. (Smith, 2022)	Historically, the brand has not been involved in brand activism and/or CSR.
Levi's	The brand is credited to have invented jeans and is one of the most well-known apparel brands. Established in 1873. (Smith, 2022)	Levi's has most evidently taken a stand against gun violence in the American gun-patrol debate through an open letter by their CEO in 2016. (Bergh, 2016; Bhattarai, 2018)
Ben & Jerry's	American ice cream brand established in 1987. Currently owned by Unilever. (Ben & Jerry's)	The brand is a self-named social justice company and has a strong history of CSR. (Knoebel, 2018) The brand has previously campaigned on issues such as marriage equality and refugee issues. (Fleming, 2019)

3.4 Selection of Instagram posts

The Instagram posts were derived from the official Instagram profiles for each of the companies. Representative posts for each of the chosen issues were selected. Further, the Instagram posts must not have been posted later than 2020.

3.5 Content analysis

Social media allows for a high level of interaction by bringing people together thus creating online communities with intense exchange of opinions and thoughts (Khan & Jan, 2015).

Social media has revolutionised the role of consumers in the marketing context, providing them with the same, or an even louder, voice on marketing efforts as the one of the brand itself (Dhaoui et al., 2017). The intensified usage provides us with extensive amounts of human generated, unstructured yet semantically rich data in the form of communicative text, videos, photos, third party sharing on social platforms amongst others (Olshannikova et al., 2017). Furthermore, the volume of media content produced daily makes manual content analysis impractical if not impossible on a large scale (Dhaoui et al., 2017). For gaining and analysing this type of data, data analysis methods should be applied (Olshannikova et al., 2017). In order to determine consumer response to brand activism in a social media setting, sentiment analysis can be used.

Sentiment analysis is the contextual mining of text (Gupta, 2018). Sentiments are a representation of our private thoughts, opinions and experiences and oftentimes dependent on context. This makes sentiments subjective and a representant of our individuality (Tabaoda, 2016). Therefore, researchers often define sentiment analysis quite loosely as a way to classify statements as either positive, negative or neutral (Tabaoda, 2016; Pang & Lee, 2002; Melville et al., 2009). The social media landscape allows for quick response in the form of written opinions; therefore, it is becoming increasingly important to find out what other people think (Pang & Lee, 2008). Sentiment analysis allows companies to look beyond demographic characteristics of consumers and instead measure the quality of brand-consumer interactions. Hence sentiment analysis provides valuable marketing intelligence that facilitates the formation of marketing strategies (Wertz, 2018).

3.5.1 Automated content analysis

To automate sentiment analysis several approaches have been applied, there amongst machine learning algorithms trained to detect sentiment on text (Prabowo & Thelwall, 2009). Machine learning approaches, also known as supervised learning models, have often been reported to be more accurate than other models (Dhaoui, 2017) and have been used in previous marketing research studies (Pathak & Pathak-Shalal, 2016). With the rapid advancement in machine learning and AI for natural language processing (NLP), multiple advanced methods have been proposed to automatically predict whether a certain piece of text contains primarily negative, neutral, or positive sentiment (Ahmad et al., 2017).

Researchers at the University of Washington and Facebook have trained a neural network on enormous amounts of data from Wikipedia, books, and news to generally understand language and word connections (Liu et al., 2019). This network, building on the foundation of language representation model BERT (Devlin et al., 2018), suggests model modifications to improve end-task performance (Liu et al., 2019).

Myriad researchers have since expanded and amended this language model to better understand specific text domains and to predict certain tasks like sentiment analysis by training it on large sets of domain-specific annotated data. To our knowledge, no model has yet been fine-tuned and trained on data from Instagram, but researchers from Cardiff University and Snap, Inc. have used a large corpus of Twitter data to predict sentiment of tweets. Two separate models are used in this paper to ensure quality of predictions: one trained on ~58 million English tweets (Barbieri et al., 2020) and one trained on ~198 million multilingual tweets (Barbieri et al., 2021). These two models were used to compute an average to account for abnormalities and to compose more accurate sentiment predictions. The models understand semantic meaning for individual words but also how they relate to each other using an attention mechanism. The models pools together the meaning of individual words and their relation to each other to get a complete semantic understanding of the meaning of a sentence.

In order to scrape the Instagram comments, the web scraper extension for Google Chrome was used. The scraper collects selected data which in this case is the Instagram comments and exports them to a csv-file. To conduct the sentiment analysis, the hugging face transformers python library was used to load the selected models. This library was imported into a python script where the two pre-trained models were loaded using the AutoModelForSequenceClassification helper function. Then the derived data from the csv-file was inserted into the model functions which then predicts a sentiment of either positive, negative or neutral.

These models were used to evaluate the sentiment of Instagram comments extracted through web scraping from the different selected posts. The models categorised comments as either positive, negative or neutral and captured overarching sentiment trends on each post individually. While comments were retrieved, not all could be captured, entailing that the full range of comments was not analysed and that there were different amounts of comments in the

samples derived from each post. The comments were then manually clustered into different themes identifying overarching trends.

3.5.2 Manual content analysis

The automated machine learning models purely capture sentiments and cannot conduct more granular analysis. As we wish to capture trends pertaining to woke washing, there was a need to conduct a more comprehensive manual content analysis.

As some posts exhibited thousands of comments, it was necessary to choose a numeric sample to determine the share of negative 'woke-washing' compared to positive comments. Therefore, the hundred latest comments on each post that expressed either positive or negative sentiment were recorded. Positive sentiments were judged based on the definition ''Positive emotions include pleasant or desirable situational responses, ranging from interest and contentment to love and joy, but are distinct from pleasurable sensation and undifferentiated positive affect'' (Cohn & Fredrickson, 2009). Further, to eradicate irrelevant comments not conveying any meaningful information ie. people commenting ''first'', asking for advice etc. It was decided that positive comments had to show some type of favouritism towards the post or company. The positive reactions also included a specified set of emojis including hearts, ''100'' signs, fire sign, emojis with heart eyes and positive hand gestures such as thumbs up and clapping. Although emojis do not explicitly convey opinions, emojis are an emerging way to communicate support and liking (Robinson, 2019). Negative comments included comments expressing woke-washing concerns that fell within the scope of the definition by Warren (2021). This definition was further expanded to include comments that expressed wishes and demands that the brand would talk about other socio-political issues or social groups as these comments accuse the companies for not being as woke as they imply due not being aware of other socio-political issues. Further, the comments were clustered into sub-themes according to the nature of the content.

3.6 Survey

To get a better understanding of drivers behind the reactions from the automated and manual screening of the Instagram comments an online survey was conducted. The survey generated 97 complete data sets. A data set was regarded as completed if the participant had finished 90% of the survey as all questions were answered. The data was mainly collected via social media

and social networking sites with a wide range of users. In an attempt to ensure a diverse and representative sample the survey was also distributed to random people in subways in central Stockholm. Therefore, it is assumed that the data reflects a broad range of the population. An online survey is a useful technique to obtain more data with limited field efforts and fewer human errors (Kumar, 2019). Further, the absence of an interviewer also reduces the tendency of respondents to provide answers that they assume that the interviewer wishes to hear (Phillips and Clancy, 1972). Therefore, it can be assumed that the collected responses reflect the participants' true reflections and impressions of the chosen companies and Instagram posts.

The participants were first introduced to an Instagram post addressing one of the chosen social issues (Racial inclusion, LGBTQ+ issues or equality with focus on women's rights) from one of the selected companies (Nike, Starbucks, Ben & Jerry's, Victoria's Secret or Levi's) official Instagram accounts. The images were randomly distributed amongst the participants.

The main parts of the survey included questions related to perceived brand authenticity, personal and brand relevance and feelings toward the company based on previous knowledge. (See Appendix 9.2) The questions were recorded on a seven-point Likert scale, where 1 denoted the least favourable opinion and 7 denoted the most favourable opinion. Further, the participants were asked to give a short explanation of their feelings toward the company based on previous knowledge, their feelings about the brand taking a stance on social issues and brand personality. This type of qualitative data can collect extensive explanations which can be helpful by seeing which events lead to which consequences (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p.4), and therefore we can get a better understanding why the participants felt a particular way when presented a particular company and a post addressing a socio-political issue.

4. Results and analysis

4.1 Classification of posts

Three types of posts were identified among the chosen posts: Communicative post, informative posts and portrayals. Communicative posts aimed at showing support toward a particular movement or societal group either through text or portraits of people. These posts did not specify how the firm intended to support or help the cause. They only stated that the organisation wished to support the particular cause or societal or ethnic group. Informative

posts supported a socio-political issue by presenting facts and information on how the firm would support the cause and/or how society could get involved. Contrary to the communicative posts, informative posts both conveyed a proactive stance and aimed at conveying knowledge and information on how society could change to better support the cause. Portrayals reflected people and or situations aimed at supporting a particular cause. These types of posts depicted people from the particular community they wished to support as a tool to illustrate the problem.

Table 2. *Instagram post classification*

Company	**Socio-political issue**	**Type of post**	**Motive**
Levi's	LGBTQ+	Portrayal	Show two males wearing Levi's latest collection, consisting of rainbow coloured denim and pride colours.
	Racial inclusion	Communicative	A statement supporting the Stop Asian Hate movement. The post briefly shows concrete actions Levi's take.
	Gender equality	Informative	Presents facts and statistics in connection to the MeToo movement relating to sexual assault and abuse. The post acknowledges both men and women's experiences.
Ben & Jerry's	LGBTQ+	Communicative	Statement attempting to bring awareness to 'trans day of remembrance by supporting 'Trans Lives Matter''.
	Racial inclusion	Informative	Aims at spreading awareness about critical race theory as a way to support the Black Lives Matter Movement.
	Gender equality	Informative	Present the gender distribution pay-gap for different ethnic groups.
Starbucks	LGBTQ+	Portrayal	Shows a same-sexed couple that met while working at the organisation in an attempt to bring awareness to pride month.
	Racial inclusion	Communicative	This post is communicative and addresses the Black lives matter-movement with a supporting statement from former CEO, Kevin Johnson.
	Gender equality	Portrayal	Describes the friendship between a customer and a barista that has emerged after the barista has lost her mother. The post encourages people to comment on a female that inspires them.
Nike	LGBTQ+	Portrayal	Display people from the LGBTQ+ community discussing their journey to self-discovery.
	Racial inclusion	Informative	A statement supporting the Black Lives Matter movement and describe how Nike stands up for equality.
	Gender equality	Communicative	A quote from Chinese pro tennis player Li Na encouraging young girls and females to believe in themselves.
Victoria's Secret	LGBTQ+	Communicative	A statement celebrating #NationalComingOutDay
	Racial inclusion	Communicative	A statement expressing support to the Asian community.
	Gender equality	Communicative	Show different women highlighting female-owned brands. Express support for females in awareness of women's history month.

4.2 Automated content analysis

The initial content analysis demonstrated that companies overall experienced a similar share of positive comments, with Starbucks ranking the highest and Ben & Jerry's ranking the lowest. The observed share of negative comments was more dispersed, with Levi's having the highest amount of comments expressing negative sentiment and Nike the lowest. Overall, there was a net positive percentage, entailing that there was a dispersion between positive and negative comments with an overall large share of positive comments. However, individual posts often showed similar shares whereas some posts showed large amounts of positive or negative comments, affecting the average. Furthermore, Nike was also the company experiencing the greatest dispersion between positive and negative sentiments.

All companies experienced different results on different posts when compared to each other, thus no social issue stood out as consistently positive or negative. This implied that the receival of brand activism on social media appears to be more related to factors other than the nature of the social issue itself.

Table 3.1 *Automated content analysis*

Company	Issue	No of comments	No of positive AI1/AI2	No of negative AI1/AI2	% positive comments	% negative comments
Levi's	LGBTQ+	619	102/113	298/297	17,37%	48,06%
	Racism	86	37/36	30/38	42,44%	39,53%
	Equality	51	25/25	15/15	49,02%	29,41%
Ben & Jerry's	LGBTQ+	267	116/115	51/57	43,26%	20,22%
	Racism	126	35/35	51/51	27,48%	40,48%
	Equality	315	63/63	131/159	20,00%	46,03%
Starbucks	LGBTQ+	311	105/119	51/109	36,01%	25,72%
	Racism	746	324/316	206/266	34,99%	32,31%
	Equality	209	141/134	25/38	65,79%	15,07%
Nike	LGBTQ+	488	242/244	76/83	49,80%	16,29%
	Racism	654	158/161	140/205	24,39%	26,38%
	Equality	700	374/388	54/85	54,43%	9,93%

Company	Issue	No of comments	No of positive AI1/AI2	No of negative AI1/AI2	% positive comments	% negative comments
Victoria's Secret	LGBTQ+	199	82/81	39/59	40,95%	24,62%
	Racism	190	109/111	36/47	57,89%	21,84%
	Equality	291	45/42	97/99	14,95%	33,68%

Table 3.2 *Average share of expressed sentiments, combined posts*

Company	Average % positive comments	Average % negative comments
Levi's	36,28%	39,00%
Ben & Jerry's	30,35%	35,58%
Starbucks	45,60%	24,73%
Nike	42,87%	17,53%
Victoria's Secret	37,93%	26,71%

4.2.1 Levi's

Levi's experienced the largest share of negative sentiments in their comments, with a percentage of 39,00% of the total comments. The amount of positive comments represented 36,28% of the total (See table 3.2). Levi's post on LGBTQ+ stood out, as it was perceived as most negative both among the posts by Levi's and in relation to the share of positive comments. The major theme was resentment against the LGBTQ+ society, portrayed by both shorter forms of communicative text, such as emojis throwing up, as well as longer explanatory sentences expressing resentment toward the post's motive. These comments were believed to be driven by political and religious beliefs that do not align with the standpoint taken by Levi's. The post on racial inclusion showed similar trends of political engagement relating to gun control, where commenters point out the contradiction about supporting the Asian-American community while supporting gun control. Kruse et al. (2018) suggest that social media makes it increasingly difficult to keep political discussions civilised and our results provided insight that the comment section, when brands take a stan, constitute a perfect arena for firing up discussions. The nature of the comments provided indicators that Levi's customer base is politically driven and believe that Levi's brand activism is not coherent with the brand original purpose, which is supported by the theory by Bruhn et al. (2012) suggesting that brand activism is less likely to succeed if efforts are not coherent with brand history.

The post on gender inclusion was substantially more well received than the other posts. The issue raised the most emotional responses, which can be detected through the many positive themes (See table 4.3). The nature of these comments suggests much support that Levi's was using their platform to shed a light on sexual abuse from a multigender perspective. This post provided indication that brand activism may be more positively met if remaining neutral to all target groups, as suggested by Mirzaei et al. (2022) Interestingly, it is positively received that the post first raises the question about sexual abuse towards men. Sexual abuse is often talked about in relation to women so it is therefore possible that this could have been perceived as upsetting. However, this may be a result of optimal incongruence, as presented by Vredenburg et al. (2020). Levi's thus appears to have found a way of expressing a political standpoint in a way that is coherent with their target group yet still a little 'off-brand'.

Table 4.1 *Levi's, LGBTQ+*

Negative Themes Values misalignment	*''What the fuck is here? Why are you promoting this?'', ''I would rather Burn my money''*
Disappointment	*''Levi's History just destroy in this post😂'', ''And to think that at the beginning this jeans were meant for hard working miners, they dropped their morality too low!''*
Religious beliefs	*'There are definitely better things to raise money for, other than for supporting sin and promoting confusion for younger generation''*
Positive themes Support	*''Love it 🏳️‍🌈❤️🏳️‍🌈❤️🏳️‍🌈'', ''Love to see it 👏🏻🔥''*

Table 4.2 *Levi's, Racial inclusion*

Negative themes Accusive	*''Stop asian hate? Meanwhile behind the curtains your fighting for gun control preventing asians from being able to protect themselves'', ''Levi's supports Chinese Affirmative Action, I wonder why…'', ''Next, speak out against the genocide happening in China right now! China is anti Muslim!''*
Political	*' #gunrightsareasianrights'', ''Used to buy nothing but Levi's. GUESS WHAT. NOT ANYMORE. Thanks for funding groups that are trying to extinguish or 2nd amendment''*
Irrelevance	*''And who hates asians? 🤔'', ''How about stop people hate.''*
Positive themes Solidarity	*''Love that brands are standing in solidarity. What about the individuals that work in or support these brands? @Levis''*
Support	*"❤️🙏❤️ Spot on Levis 👌🏻'', ''LET IT BE KNOWN!!! 🙌''*

Table 4.3 *Levi's, Gender equality*

Negative themes Anger towards desinformation	''That's kind of a CONUNDRUM tho..... if they are not being reported then how does anyone KNOW...literally.....heheh😂😂'', ''How do they know how many cases dont get reported if they're not reported?''

Positive themes Gratitude	‘’Thank you Levi’s for shining a spotlight on this important issue’’, ‘’💖💖💖 thank you for using your platform to bring awareness.’’, ‘’Thank you for also sharing the men’s experience. It’s not tamed about enough’’, ‘’Thanks for also sharing about men's experiences, which are sadly disregarded.’’
Support	‘’Sooo amazing to share this ❤️’’
Pride	‘’Proud you are taking a stand, what a wonderful campaign!! Good job Levi’s!’’
Solidarity	‘’🙏🏻🙏🏻🙏🏻❤️❤️❤️ let’s change these stats!!!!!!’’

4.2.2 Ben & Jerry's

Ben & Jerry’s (B&J) experienced the smallest share of positive comments with a total of 30,35% and the second largest share of negative comments of 35,58% (See table 3.2). The post on LGBTQ+ was perceived as the most positive. In contrast, the post on gender equality faced the most negative comments. The positive themes were similar across posts and primarily included strong brand sentiments, expressing love and loyalty. Many comments showed support in short forms, but on the post concerning LGBTQ+, many took time to write extensive positive comments expressing their love, support and gratitude to B&J using strong words such as ‘’favourite’’ and expressing how they appreciated that B&J cared for everyone and how genuine it felt. This might entail that the customer base of B&J is possibly more prone to identify with the standpoints taken by B&J, and especially to the LGBTQ+ community and thus they are more favourable to the post which can be explained by the self-identity theory by Buttcharya & Sankar (2003). Negative themes across the post varied. For the post on racial inclusion, many comments were upset on how facts were presented, causing social groups feeling attacked and resulting in feelings of agitation. This can be related to the theory by Mirzaei et al. (2022) highlighting the importance of remaining neutral to all social groups. A major theme in the comments were long, negative sentences relating to the lack of coherency between the company's values and practices. This leads to the question if the self-identity theory presented by Buttcharya & Sankar (2003) leads to a conscious consumer judging the brand more harshly if they think that the issue is relevant to them. It was not well received by consumers for B&J to talk about the wage gap while not expressing how concrete actions were taken. Further, negative themes also included the desire that B&J should stay out of politics, insinuating that “nobody cares what ice cream thinks’’. Among the LGBTQ+ comments, resentment towards the community was also identified.

Table 5.1 *B&J, LGBTQ+*

Negative themes Dislike of activism	*‘’Just stick to ice cream guys’’, ‘’I really dont need to hear what ice cream thinks’’, ‘’can we just eat ice cream’’,*

	''Ben and Jerry's should stick to ice cream. #twogenders #defaultmode''
Value misalignment	*''It is a mental disorder…'', ''where do I throw up.....''*
Positive themes	
Love	*'I LOVE YOU BEN AND JERRYS 💞💞💞'', ''I love the fact that you're not afraid to take a stance and it never feels like a marketing ploy. It seems as though you actually care''*
Gratitude	*''One of the many reasons why you guys are literally my favourite ice cream brand. Thank you ❤️''*
Statement of support	*''This is why I buy only your ice cream- because you care about everyone and aren't afraid to put it out there!'' ''your stance makes your ice cream sweeter'', ''I love this. I'm going to go eat a ton of fatty, milky, sugary ice cream and get addicted to it now! 🤙 Thanks Ben and Jerry's!!''*

Table 5.2 *B&J, Racial Inclusion*

Negative themes	
Dislike of activism	*''Go make some new ice cream flavors for the Holiday season and stay out of Politics you clearly don't know wtf your even saying'', ''Can you STfU and just make ice cream 👏*
Accusive	*''Meanwhile Unilever who owns B&J is anti semetic'', ''Coming from you racists this post means less than nothing 😂😂😂'', ''Get woke, go broke.''*
Positive themes	
Gratitude	*'Thank you for being an ethical brand I will definitely be buying Ben & Jerrys ❤️''*
Love	*''This is why I love you. 🇬🇧🙏''*

Table 5.2 *B&J, Gender equality*

B&J Gender eq.	
Negative themes	
Accusive	*''So you're insinuating that you pay your female employees less than your male employees! That's very sexist of you!''* *'' Is ben & Jerry's admitting that they pay women less?''* *''Yeah how about Ben & Jerry's as a multi billion dollar company just stop throwing crumbs and pretty words and flawed statistics''*
Anger towards desinformation	*''I feel there needs to be some context to this...isn't there like a bill in place that makes it illegal?''* *''Where are the fact checkers on this?''*
No credibility	*''You posted this yet I don't see anything about how you're changing it! Why don't you enlighten us and clarify how this doesn't apply to your company. How do you pay women? Is it equal to the men? Do you pay based on the job regardless of gender or race? Conduct blind interviews with voiceovers and I guarantee would pick the woman majority of time.''*
Firm inconsistency	*''Said by two white men overseeing subordinates. #theemperorhasnoclothes'', 'I think they forgot that their CEO is a white man lmao''*
Agitation	*"Asian' women? The experiences of a Japanese woman are tangibly different than that of a Filipino woman...#wearenotamonolith''* *''Just say "Hispanic" women, wtf is latinx supposed to even mean, only white people use that term''*
Dislike of activism	*''Could you stop? You need to stick to ice cream Losers''*
Positive themes	
Support	*"B&J Always Spittin The Facts!! 👏🏽👏🏽👏🏽"*
Loyalty	*''My ice cream brand loyalty is through the roof 🔥 ''* *''I will never buy another ice cream brand again. 👏''*

4.2.3 Starbucks

Starbucks experienced the highest average amount of positive comments on their posts, with 45,60% of the total comments showing positive sentiment. A share of 24,73% of all comments expressed negative sentiment, the second lowest share out of all companies (See table 3.2). Starbucks gender equality and LGBTQ+ posts were received more positively than negatively whereas the post on racial inclusion generated similar shares of positive and negative comments. Positive statements primarily expressed love, support and pride, oftentimes in short form either using smileys or short phrases. The post on gender equality received the most positively emotionally charged responses, suggesting that many commenters experienced similar personal relationships that aligned with the purpose of the post. The portrayal type of post sparks discussion at a deeper level and also engaged several Starbucks employees. The self-identity theory presented by Buttcharya & Sarkar (2003) could explain the motivation for this. In contrast to the theory stating that positive sentiments are primarily expressed in short form presented by Garcia et al. (2012), Starbucks experienced meaningful positive comments to a great extent beyond smileys and short positive phrases. This also stands out from the other companies that experienced shorter and empty phrases. It is also contradictory to Mizraei et al. (2022) stating that taking a standpoint is never favourable, even if it is the right one. Further, it sparks a discussion if portraying motives that are engaging one social group boost the liking of brand activism as long as it does not upset another, which could be an extension of the theory presented by Mirzaei et al. (2022) highlighting the importance of staying neutral to all interest groups. Starbucks did not experience as many negative themes in their comments, other than comments expressing pure dislike of their activism attempts. For the LGBTQ+ post it was also evident that there is a value misalignment between the consumers values and the brands practise which could be explained by dislike toward the social group presented.

Table 6.1 *Starbucks, LGBTQ+*

LGBTQ+ starbucks **Negative themes** Value Misalignment	*''very disgusting, even the animals can not accepte it. Don't be opposite the nature , you will never be comfortable''* *''Sick ! what ever you do you know it's not right and not normal 😁''*
Dislike of activism	*"Starbucks, please stop being politically motivated! We want your yummy coffee not your opinions on every little political issues"* *"Stick to coffee ☕"*
Positive themes Supportive statement	*"Happy pride! Support with all my heart, love the gays ❤️💕"* *"This is the correct way to celebrate as a corporation 👏👏👏"* *''So great to have so much support within our company 👏 Yay for everything Pride month has in store for us! 💜💙💚💛🧡❤️''*

Table 6.2 *Starbucks, Racial inclusion*

Negative themes Dislike of activism	*"Keep politics out of your coffee pot.", "You don't need to make a statement on these topics. Stay in the coffee lane"*
Positive themes Pride	*"Proud to be a partner and a part of the Black Partner Network! We are way more than just coffee! 🤎🤎🤎🤎"* *"I love you Starbucks! Seeing this message, makes me a proud customer"*
Love	*"This is why I love Starbucks. 💚", "why i love yall"*

Table 6.3 *Starbucks, Gender equality*

Positive themes Love	*"my love for starbucks more like it🔥", "I love my Starbucks customers!! Regulars will be some of the nicest people 💚"* *"Some of the best woman I know are my Starbucks coworkers 💛💛💛"*
Societal impact	*"The community Starbucks builds is unlike any other 🤣❤️", "I want to now work for Starbucks! Thank you for caring about the world we live in! You are #1 in my book!!!!!💕💕💕💕 #catastrophepa"*
Pride	*"This has got to be the cutest photo ever! Way to make all of us partners feel proud! ❤️❤️❤️"*
Inspiration	*"My mom is a regular Starbucks customer and loves making friendships with all of the staff! She looks forward to seeing them and will often talk with them on their breaks and bring them Chrsitmas gifts. I'm inspired so much by both my mom and the care of the Starbucks staff!"*

4.2.4 Nike

Nike experienced the second largest share of positive comments as 42,87% of the total comments showed positive sentiments. Nike also experienced the lowest share of negative comments, with 17,53% (See table 3.2). This entails that Nike had the largest net positive percentage. Both the post on LGBTQ+ and gender equality showed a clear majority of positive sentiments. Positive themes almost exclusively pertained to short, communicative text in the form of emojis showing love and support. This suggests that the findings by Garcia et al. (2012), who showed that positive sentiments are usually expressed in short text and carry less valuable meaning than text on negative, holds for social media as well. Three main negative themes could be detected. On the LGBTQ+ post, resentment towards the LGBTQ+ community could be seen through statements threatening to boycott Nike due to their standpoint. These beliefs were oftentimes rooted in political or religious beliefs. For the post concerning racial inclusion, some comments expressed a concern of the brand's credibility, entailing that Nike used the social issue to push an ulterior agenda. In the post concerning gender equality, much criticism was directed towards Nike's ongoing operations in Russia due to the war between Russia and Ukraine. This depicts how sensitive the online climate is to current news and events and indicates that an online firestorm can deteriorate the purpose of a post. Overall, Nike received low engagement in both negative and positive comments, perhaps being an indicator

of the theory presented by Vredenburg et al. (2020) about too high congruence resulting in a low engagement.

Table 7.1 *Nike, LGBTQ+*

Negative themes Value misalignment	*"Gross. Well, I guess I no longer purchase Nike.", ''This flag is represting everything BUT normal, which is straight. You should thank straight people for all your existence''*
Accusive	*''Pushing that agenda nicely''*
Religious beliefs	*''You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination.Leviticus 18:22''*
Positive themes Love	*"❤️", "👏👏", "🙌nice", "😍😍😍"*

Table 7.2 *Nike, Racial inclusion*

Negative themes No credibility	*"Stop virtue signalling! You know you don't care! Otherwise the Chinese lives that manufacture your products and are overexploite"* *"No more Nike for me it's @user from now on they aren't woke virtue signaling"* *"Wow, such hypocrites. How about stopping the factories where your products are made? #slavelabor"*
Positive themes Support	*"👌👍☝️💯✅✅", "Definitely agree 💪🏾💪🏾💪🏾🤎", "🙌", "🔥🔥🔥🔥🔥🔥🔥"*

Table 7.3 *Nike, Gender equality*

Negative themes Irresponsibleness	*"You are the sponsors of the Russian economy and the army! You sponsor the war"* *"you support the war by not leaving the Russian market!! More than 100 children have already died in Ukraine"*
Positive themes Love	*"love u🔥❤️"* *"You really inspired me to be stronger than I was thank you"*
Support	*"The girl is super cool"*

4.2.5 Victoria's Secret

37,93% of the total comments on Victoria's Secret (VS) Instagram posts expressed positive sentiments while 26,71% of the comments expressed negative sentiment (See table 3.2). Thus, they hold a mid-position for both the positive and negative if compared to the other companies. VS experienced more positive comments on the LGBTQ+ and racial inclusion posts than they did for the gender equality post. Like with many other companies, positive themes were primarily recognised through smileys and short texts expressing love and support, which supports the theory by Garcia et al. (2012). However, all VS posts experienced similar negative themes, which stands out compared to the other companies and could be an indicator that VS

as a company is held more negative in consumers' minds when associated with taking any standpoint. This is supported by the nature of the negative comments, which expressed accusations of VS being opportunistic. Comments also point out that VS has not been taking activist standpoints previously and call the brand out for misalignment between brand value and practice, this provide insight on the theory by Bruhn et al. (2012) and Fritz et al. (2017) and could lead to a further discussion if the consumer knowledge of not taking a stand previously affects the strength of the accusative comments. The gender equality post received an overwhelming amount of comments expressing negative sentiment due to the firm's inconsistency about promoting gender equality and trying to be a women's advocate but simultaneously not paying their workers properly which results in accusations of hypocritism. This also indicates that firm inconsistency and lack of credibility can lead to online firestorms.

Table 8.1 *Victoria's Secret, LGBTQ+*

Negative themes Firm inconsistency	*'Lol whatever makes you 💰 🤑''* *''Is that why you have a transgender model ?''*
Accusive	*''Y'all are just trying too hard at this point😂*
Dislike of brand activism	*''Imagine not trying to pander to every minority group and just making bras. Stick to what you're good at''* *''I identify as disinterested in your brand, you sell outs. PS. Just put the whole alphabet in and openly declare war on capitalism''*
No credibility	*''VS cares more about fitting into democratic agenda than about the designs and quality of their product *sad to see you losing yourself''*
Positive themes Love	*''This was really sweet and it made me love VS even more.❤️🧡💛💚💙💜It makes me feel like we are getting somewhere when bigger company'', ''❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️'', "@Vicotriassecret I ❤️you so much! Thank you!!!!''*
Gratitude	*''Thank you! ❤️''*

Table 8.2 *Victoria's Secret, Racial Inclusion*

Negative themes Firm inconsistency	*''This will mean something when you stop taking advantage of the cheap and often child Chinese labor''* *''Then hire more Asian models''*
No credibility	*''Concretely, which actions are you going to take?''* *''But do you care about dozens of asians being executed in myanmar every day?''*
Accusive	*''Very original. Just change the race and call it a day.''*
Positive themes Support	*Queen sh*t, VS. Well done! 👸💖''*
Respect	*''Respect..i'm an Asian and i adore ''*
Love	"❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️😍😍😍"

Table 8.2 *Victoria's Secret, Gender Equality*

Negative themes Firm inconsistency	*''You can't empower women in one country by exploiting women in another country! #PayYourWorkers #VictoriasDirtySecret''* *If you truly cared about women, you would pay the 8million that is owed to your garment workers. #payyourworkers #victoriasdirtysecret*

4.3 Survey

When participants were asked to rank the perceived genuineness considering both the post and the company simultaneously, a large majority fell in the range between 3-5. This indicated that the participants were relatively neutral towards the brand activism statement. The same range was found when the participants were asked to assess only the genuinity of the post. However, when participants were asked to only rank the genuineness of the company, the large majority fell in the range between 1-3. This could indicate that people are not sceptical toward the social issue or the credibility of the post but rather toward brands taking a socio-political stance. Further it can indicate that there is an underlying mistrust as soon as brands are involved in brand activism, which provides evidence for the theories of Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) and Mirzaei et al. (2022) that no brand activism statements are positively met.

A majority of the participants found it important that the assigned company took a socio-political stance on the particular assigned issue and on other social issues as 56% of the participants ranked it as important and fell in the range between 5-7. In addition, 15% of the participants did not have a strong opinion, therefore identified as neutral. This is expected according to the theory by Barton et al. (2018) as people have a desire for brands to take a stand, yet our results implies that when they do, it is instantly met by some measurement of negativity.

Further, we found that the majority of the participants were positive toward the assigned company taking a public stance based on previous knowledge about the company as 44% of all participants were positive and 39% were neutral. Roughly all positive comments expressed positive sentiment toward the company taking a stand due to the organisation being of such a size that they could use their platforms to bring awareness and influence. This is contrasted with the findings of Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) and Mirzaei et al. (2022) which debate that consumers' expectation of brands taking a stand does not result in any extensive consumer reactions. This is because consumers expect the brand to take public standpoints if their own

values align with the brands values. Instead, we see indications that consumers in fact appreciate companies taking a stand, even though it may be expected of them.

Only 17% of the participants expressed negative feelings toward taking a socio-political stance. Several of these comments often emphasised the importance of the company taking a political stance, however, were sceptical of the genuineness of the brand's intentions, Oftentimes the participants could not specify exactly why they perceived the brand's activities to be ungenuine (See table 9). This could indicate that there yet again might exist underlying structures of distrust in the consumer-brand relationship. This was often based on the company's lack of previous brand activism (See table 9). This could imply that it is difficult to change perception of a brand and its brand activism activities in an authentic way when the company does not have a previous history of brand activism. This finding resonates with the findings of Joo et al. (2019) and Vredenburg et al. (2020) which emphasise the importance of continuity in perceived brand authenticity.

Furthermore, participants that ranked the companies more favourable in terms of previous knowledge and the brand taking a political stance often described the brand with more favourable personality traits. Likewise, participants that ranked the companies lower in terms of previous knowledge and taking a political stance described the company with less favourable personality traits.

Table 9. *Survey*

Company	Previous brand knowledge	The brand taking a political stance	Brand personality
Levis (21 answers)	**Positive themes** *"They can make a large impact when taking public stance"* *"Large corporates should use their platforms to spread the message"* *"Feels like a genuine company. Good quality products, good working conditions, good brand image etc."* *"I know they've worked with LGBTQ people before and for a long time. They also showcase a lot of different people when they have campaigns. Not just white people"* *"Old, Well recognized brand"* *"They feel like a genuine company that's been around since forever. Also it's such a cool vintage brand that all Influencers wear"*	**Positive themes** *"They can make a large impact when taking public stance"* *"Because doing good things without monetary intentions is fucking great."* *"I like that they talk about something that matters"* *"Large corporates should use their platforms to spread the message"* **Negative themes** *"Feels like a selling point for them"* *"They use LQBTQ+ issues to sell more pants"* *"White-washing"* *"Company's disguising consumption in activism is nothing but cynical"*	**Positive traits** *"Caring, classic"* *"Fun and inclusive"* *"Hipster, cool, urban"* *"Loyal, friendly and sturdy"* **Negative traits** *"Bland"* *"Shallow"*

		"I don't really know, I feel like it does not make a difference" *"It's something that should be discussed but they haven't proved or shown what they have done to combat workplace harassment in relation to metoo."*	
Nike (20 answers)	**Positive themes** *"They use all kinds of models"* *"Support athletes and create Good products."* *"I assume it is unconscious, the brand is well known and known to campaign openly about cultures and differences."* *"I recognise the brand and like their products that I've tried. However I'm not very involved in the brand in general and don't know much about them."* *"I like This company because they use their social platform to raise awareness. Also it feels as if they support black people in other aspects than just posing about this"* **Negative themes** *"Negative ... child labour in Taiwan etc"* *"Slightly negative in terms of ethical issues"*	**Positive themes** *"I think it's great that they do. They are so large and have such a huge fan base. Also sport is definitely something that unites people and then it feels like what Nike says actually makes an impact"* *"I believe it can have A much bigger impact - when it's a whole company - instead of just individuals expressing important issues. In terms of the company, I think it's important to support all groups and genders."* *"It's important that big companies take responsibility"* *"Big firm with a lot of power"* *"Industry leads need to lead by example"* *"They have a broad audience that can be informed better"* **Negative themes** *"The are dishonest about intentions however there is a positive gain from their actions regardless"* *"I have noticed that they have lots of ads and content talking about social issues, which I think is good (even tho it might just be to further their brand amongst younger generations)"* *"I'm not certain about what kind of stances they have done previously on social issues"* *"I have not seen much of it"*	**Positive traits** *"Including, diverce, quality"* *"Active, energetic, engaging, caring, motivating"* *"Modern, new-thinker, edgy"* *"Inclusive, grit, never give up"* *"Progressive, athletic, social"* *"Gait, hard working, focused"* **Negative traits** *"Capitalistic"*
Starbucks (20 answers)	**Positive themes** *" great experience with them as a customer"* *"Big company over the world"* *"Global coffee chain, their decisions have global impact which is good"* **Negative themes** *"It doesn't feel genuine"* *"Double standards + I do not rate their products"* *"Does not feel genuine"* *"They're just a coffee chain to me"* *"In the middle. The management and a lot of employees probably feel strongly, but if there was no 'return' on saying something, they wouldn't do it. That's business, in a way, and so I have no*	**Positive themes** *"Global enterprises have enormous reach, and should leverage this to stand up for social issues when appropriate and applicable"* *"they are such a large company with many employees, probably of color, and should send a clear message about the issue."* **Negative themes** *"Feels cynical and opportunist"* *"Because I do not feel that the company's intentions are sincere. The importance of the matter is massive, but I believe that the company's intention is to not get "canceled". Therefore, I believe for the most part that politics should stay out of big institutions' posts. If they really cared about this matter, they would have done something about it way before, as racism has been a problem for a millennium."*	**Positive traits** *"Outspoken"* *"Popular"* *"Friendly"* *"inclusive"* **Negative traits** *"Cynical"* *"Big, mean, trickerish"* *"People pleaser"*

	strong feelings about it."	*"They have a big platform and resources. Actions however speaks louder than words."* *"They don't have a service directly connected to female empowerment or equality, however it's something all chains and brands technically should advocate. So in my opinion the post over all feels neutral, sure it's good that they are saying something about females helping each other but it doesn't really have an impact"* *"I feel like they are doing it because other firms are doing it as well. So I get the motivation for doing it"*	
Ben & Jerry's (16 answers)	**Positive themes** *"They are known to take social stance on different issues in a very clever way"* *"Their actions are in line with what they claim to stand for on social media"* *"Ben and Jerry's has taken a stand in social rights for many years, therefore it does not feel performative"* *''They talk about and bring awareness to many social issues of our time and has done since the start of the company, therefore it feels more genuine since they are and have been consistent. Their products are also created sustainably and therefor gives their posting even more credibility ''* *''They try to focus on sustainability and support local farmers''* *''They are known to take social stance on different issues in a very clever way''* **Negative themes** *"They are multinational, hyper commercial do-gooders."* *"They are not genuine"*	**Positive themes** *"The way they market their opinions is great and makes sense"* *"It spreads awareness"* *''It is important for all companies, big or small, to take a stance for important social issues to raise awareness, but I am not sure how big of a influence they have as people usually relate to them as «good ice cream».''* *''As I said, it seems genuine.''* *''I think it's good that they take a stance in the social issue, although I'm not sure what contribution the stamens has on solving the structural problem and therefore I'm neutral ''* **Negative themes** *"They suppose to sell ice cream not any thing other"* *"It's a hoax. Not genuine:"* *''They make ice cream and they really don't need to take a stand on everything ''*	**Positive traits** *"Woke, funny, outgoing"* *"Young and outspoken"* *"Kind, caring, invested, trying to make an effort, at times: contradictory"* *"Quirky but has social awareness"* *"Fun, delicious, creative"* *"Colorful, happy"* **Negative traits** *"Hypocritical."*

Victoria's Secret (20 answers)	**Positive themes** *"I'm not super familiar with their branding efforts, so I can't really say if they're genuine. But even if they aren't completely genuine (say fx there is anti-asian racism within the company), then I still think it's positive that they take this stance towards the public, because the opinions of large consumer brands like these have an effect on how people form their opinions and behave. So if they can positively affect how their consumers behave that's a good thing, even if they don't themselves internally follow suit."* **Negative themes** *"Because they have always just promoted the "perfect' person and all of a sudden they are now inclusive"* *"Empty words, not genuine care"* *"They Claim to be body positive but Only have skinny models."* *''Fat shaming''* *''They are doing it in the wrong way''* *''My personal opinion on this brand is that for years they have perpetuated a beauty standard that standard that is Eurocentric. Along with the already fairly known fact that they have a bunch of misogynistic controversies attached to them. I believe in seeing this post that it is clearly just a reaction to this criticism and therefore does not in any way feel authentic. I view it as a counter reaction to a reaction!''*	**Positive themes** *"Being such a big voice in the beauty debate and in many ways a thought leader in beauty, I think them taking a stand is super important. They have a broad reach and I believe they have the power to make a difference in the minds of many people"* **Negative themes** *"They have taken a stance as a way to recover from their bad reputation from bad actions"* *"Cause it feels like they're just trying to do the right thing so people will like them and not because they actually care"* *''In addition to what I have already mentioned, I feel like they are being woke only because it now is cool to be woke. I think it is only because of cancel culture that they are speaking out and it is very clearly not genuine.''* *'' They make underwear. How does that qualify them taking stances on global issues''*	**Positive traits** *"aesthetic, reflective, popular, thought-leader"* **Negative traits** *"Excluding"* *"mean girl, cheerleader vibe"* *"Bitchy, basic, excluding, racist, sizeist, misogynistic"* *"Discriminating, selfish"* *"Superficial"*

4.4 Manual content analysis

Table 10.1. *Manual content analysis*

Company	Issue	No of comments	No of positive	No of negative	% positive comments	% negative comments
Levi's	LGBTQ+	70	51	19	72,86%	27,14%
	Racism	63	42	21	66,67%	33,33%
	Equality	34	31	3	91,18%	8,82%
Ben & Jerry's	LGBTQ+	100	71	29	71,00%	29,00%
	Racism	70	38	32	54,29%	45,71%
	Equality	100	36	64	36,00%	64,00%

Starbucks	LGBTQ+	34	25	9	73,53%	26,47%
	Racism	100	51	49	51,00%	49,00%
	Equality	63	51	12	80,95%	19,05%
Nike	LGBTQ+	100	91	9	91,00%	9,00%
	Racism	100	40	60	40,00%	60,00%
	Equality	100	89	11	89,00%	11,00%
Victoria's Secret	LGBTQ+	88	63	25	71,59%	28,41%
	Racism	100	78	22	78,00%	22,00%
	Equality	100	1	99	1,00%	99,00%

Table 10.2 *Average share of expressed sentiments, combined posts*

Company	**Average % positive comments**	**Average % negative comments**
Levi's	76,90%	23,10%
Ben & Jerry's	53,76%	46,24%
Starbucks	68,49%	31,51%
Nike	73,33%	26,67%
Victoria's Secret	50,20%	49,80%

The manual content analysis for woke-washing comments showed that Levi's had the highest average percentage of positive comments followed by Nike (See table 10.2). Among the companies that had the highest share of positive comments (Levi's, Nike, Starbucks), the post addressing racial inclusion issues generated the most negative comments (See table 10.1). Victoria's Secret had the lowest average percentage of positive comments, and the comments were approximately equally positive and negative (See figure 10.2). Among the companies that had the lowest share of positive comments (Victoria's Secret, Ben & Jerry's) the posts addressing gender equality generated the most negative comments. (See table 10.1) The posts addressing LGBTQ+ issues did not generate the largest share of woke-washing comments which contrasts with the automatic content analysis where the LGBTQ+ posts generated the most negative sentiments.

Inspired by Warren's (2021) definition of woke and woke-washing, the comments were divided into two main groups: Comments expressing feelings of lack of fit between purpose and practice which leads to feelings of opportunistic capitalism, and comments expressing a lack of fit between values and practice which imply that companies are saying that they engage more than they actually do and therefore pretending to be woke.

4.4.1 Opportunistic capitalism

A substantial part of the woke-washing comments reference monetary incentives and has been classified as opportunistic capitalism. Two main types of opportunistic capitalistic comments could be identified: comments expressing concerns about the brand being opportunistic and comments asking specific questions about the brand's financial involvement in socio-political issues.

4.4.1.1 Opportunism

The majority of the comments expressing negative sentiment toward the brands monetary involvement express resentment toward the brand profiting on socio-political issues and therefore accuse the brands of being opportunistic. Victoria's Secret experienced the largest share of such comments while Nike experienced few such comments. This could be explained by consumers' deep-rooted scepticism toward brands taking a socio-political stance as taking a stance is often perceived to be profit-seeking (WARC, 2019). These comments demonstrate a lack of trust toward the companies based on potential financial gain which demonstrates Holt's theory (2002) that commercialization tends to reduce perceived authenticity.

Table 11.1 *Opportunism*

Levi's	*"Just to sell more clothes???", "No one: Levis: "yay more money!""*
Nike	*"go woke , go broke"*
Starbucks	*"get woke, go broke." , "Pandering for a new customer base"*
Ben & Jerry's	*"get woke, go broke." , "'Everyone look! I'm a business masquerading as a woke individual! Buy my trans fat filled ice cream!!!'"*
Victoria's Secret	"Get woke go broke how much money have you lost since you sold out to the devil?", "Lol whatever makes you 💰", "If y'all need more sales just say that"

4.4.1.2 Questioning

A smaller part of the comments addresses monetary uncertainty surrounding statements of support toward a socio-political issue such as asking the brand to specify the amounts donated.

This phenomenon could only be seen on posts where the brand had made communicative posts supporting a social issue and could only be seen in the comment section to some of the brands.

Table 11.2 *Questioning*

Levi's	*"Are Levi's and Valentino donating part of the proceeds towards a charity that supports sexual assult victims? @levis @maisonvalentino maybe @cupcakegirlsorg", "ok but how much of the profits made from this collection are u donating??"*
Starbucks	*"@user how did starbucks stand with black lives matter ? What donations were made etc"*

4.4.2 Lack of fit

The majority of the woke-washing comments express negative sentiment toward the brand due to the perceived lack of fit between the brand's expressed values and actual practices. A lack of fit between the brand's practice, values and messaging can induce a perception of inauthenticity and provoke woke-washing accusations (Vredenburg et al. 2020). Three main themes were found among these comments: hypocritism, feelings of the brand's activities being off-brand and lastly, discontent.

4.4.2.1 Hypocritism

The most apparent theme among the woke-washing comments was hypocrisy. These types of comments could be found across all companies and socio-political issues. A large part of the comments address misalignment between communicated values and actual practice which results in conflicting interests and ultimately leads consumers feeling that the brands have dishonest intentions. These findings resonate with the findings by Alhouti et al. (2016) which suggest that a low lack of fit between a company's business and their messaging can result in a company's action to be perceived as hypocritical.

Table 12.1 *Hypocritism*

Levi's	*"If you really want to stop asian hate than @levis why you hesitating in announcing @deeppikapadukone as your global ambassador why not announcing that on your page just because she is an asian"* *"All pronouns- and yet you divide your products into men/women/boys/girls. Poor attempts at gender-washing your brand. Not good enough."*
Nike	*"😂😂😂😂what a joke!! As you use child labor" , "PINKWASHING!! Homophobic Nike is attacking Lil Nas X ! Boycott Nike!", "If you stand for equality than why don't you #payyourworkers??!!"*
Starbucks	*"Your support for women, and will post pictures of your employees of colour but ban them from expressing it, but have pride in starbucks pins but don't want to be political"* *"didn't y'all tell your employees not to wear BLM pins last may?"*

Ben & Jerry's	*"Yeah how about Ben & Jerry's as a multi billion dollar company just stop throwing crumbs and pretty words and flawed statistics into the social media sphere and actually hire and compensate more to the women woking for them for making up for the supposed "inequality". Matter in fact fire the CEO on the spot because he is a priviliged overpaid white male and hire a person of colour preferably a woman to set a better examle. They are only socially woke as far as it doesn't cost them monetarily. #delusional"* *"Coming from you racists this post means less than nothing 🤣🤣🤣"*
Victoria's Secret	*"Yet the women sewing your lingerie are legally owed millions of dollars.. 👀 no more faux feminism @victoriassecret #Payyourworkers #victoriasdirtysecret"* *"#Payyourworkers women are owed millions for the work they've done for you, having helped you tp reach the millions you have. You want to be feminists? Pay back payand pay your respects! #victoriasdirtysecret"* *"This will mean something when you stop taking advantage of the cheap and often Chinese labor"*

4.4.2.2 Off-brand

A large share of the woke-washing comments also expressed discontent toward the brand taking a socio-political stance and believe that the brand should stay out of the political atmosphere. These types of comments were not exclusive to a particular social issue. Starbucks and Ben & Jerry's were especially affected by such comments, while no such comments could be identified in the comment section to Levi's or Nike.

Table 12.2 *Off-brand*

Starbucks	*"Stick to making coffee. No one cares what you think about anything except coffee! Doesn't matter if I agree or disagree, corporations needs to stop trying to influence their customers on things other than their products. It always backfires and isn't good for them or the country. Everyone is entitled to their opinion, but companies should keep to themselves. You also could be making your employees uncomfortable if they disagree with your stance."* *"You should stick to making coffee and keep your opinions to yourself"* *"All we wanted was a decent cup of coffee. Starbucks needs to keep it lousy indoctrination to itself."* *"Idk that coffee has gender now…"*
Ben & Jerry's	*"Bruh. I don't want politics with my ice cream smh"* *"Go make some new ice cream flavours for the holiday season and stay out of politics you clearly don't know wtf your even saying how bout stand on your own two feet and speak truth instead of being CLOWNS and puppets for the demonic democrats 🚽💩🎯"* *"Just stick to ice cream guys"*
Victoria's Secret	*"Imagine not trying to pander to every minority group and just making bras. Stick to what you're good at."*

4.4.2.3 Discontent

Several of the woke-washing comments expressed feelings of exclusion and wished that the chosen brands should address other socio-political issues and other groups of society than what or who that was addressed in the post. The woke-washing definition was expanded to include comments that expressed wishes and demands that the brands would comment and talk about other socio-political issues or social groups comments as these comments accused companies of impersonating being more woke than they actually are due to not acknowledging other socio-

political issues. This phenomenon was most apparent in posts addressing racial inclusion but could be found in comment sections addressing other issues as well.

Table 12.3 *Discontent*

Levi's	*"Stop slavery #payyourworkers #payher* *"Next, speak out against the genocide happening in China right now! China is anti Muslim!"*
Nike	*"Indian lives matter. All lives matter.", "All lives matter !!! 🤍, "Why are there so many blacks in your ad?"*
Starbucks	*"Never stuck by veterans. Veterans don't count anywhere." , "Black lives matter? All human being's lives matter!!"*
Ben & Jerry's	*"Why doesn't anyone talk about Jewish lives matter. There was just another attack in Austria two weeks ago. We matter too and no one says a damn word."*
Victoria's Secret	*"So do asian lives but no support for us ?"* *"Why is Victoria's Secret not posting anything about National Ingigenous People day??"*

5. Discussion

This study aimed at providing valuable insight on consumer receival of brands taking a proactive stance on socio-political issues through social media by examining how well different Instagram posts were met in the public sphere. In order to examine the concept broadly, five different companies were selected; Victoria's Secret, Nike, Ben & Jerry's, Levi's & Starbucks which all have made public displays of proactive standpoints on the chosen issues; Racial inclusion, LGBTQ+ inclusion and gender equality. To examine potential differentiation in consumer receival between the brands, each post was scanned using both automatic and manual content analysis resulting in comments across 15 posts to be examined. We combined real life data containing content analysis and survey data trying to explain underlying sentiments. From this, an extensive set of themes pertaining to online brand activism were defined, especially in relation to the concept of woke-washing primarily defined by the theory by Warren (2021). We also attempted to derive if the social media landscapes display of brand activism resembles the underlying thoughts of consumers through a survey. From our research, we saw several trends and were able to form some hypotheses:

Altogether, brand activism in a social media context is a minefield. Much research points towards that brand activism are an expectation of consumers (Barton et al. 2018) and should result in many positive effects strengthening the relationship between consumer and company (Aaker et al, 2010; Vlachos et al, 2009; Heyward, 2020). Consumers who expect companies to take a stand should thus be satisfied when they do. Our results indicate that this statement is

partially true. Contradictory to Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) we observe that brand activism does in fact generate a large fraction of positive responses and does thus not only result in agitation. On the surface, this indicates that taking a socio-political stance is a favourable strategy. Our results convey that 3 out of the 5 companies show substantially more positive sentiment than negative, and the remaining two show similarities in the shares of positive and negative sentiment. However, the nature of the negative comments show much stronger negative reactions, oftentimes being both accusive and sharp-tongued. Furthermore, negative comments tend to be longer and more heavily opinionated and information-heavy than positive ones. This demonstrates the findings by Garcia et al. (2012) regarding negative sentiments being expressed more thoroughly in written text functions similarly on social media. As Baumeister et al. (2001) points out, there is an urge to exit a negative state of mind to a greater extent than a positive one and that expressing your feelings through text may be one way to do this. This ultimately leads to the hypothesis that negative sentiments could be assigned greater attention by the receiver, and thus forming an underlying negative perception of the brand's activist stands.

Our findings suggest that although there is strong desire for global companies to take a stand on socio-political debates, particularly due to their influential market power, their public standpoints on social media oftentimes result in a feeling of lack of genuinity. This ultimately functions as a motivator in woke-washing accusations which resonates with the findings by Vredenburg et al. (2020) that misalignment between value and purpose can generate concerns of woke washing. We also observe that the lack of genuinity appears to be related to being presented to the mere name of a company rather than how they actually choose to convey their standpoint. This suggests that people may hold a negative viewpoint of brands taking a stand before they have even taken it, especially as many people fail to explain why they perceive a brand as ungenuine.

Further, our findings suggest that brands are not equally successful when taking a stand on different issues, and that various issues and how they are presented sits differently with different crowds. This supports the findings for Joo et al. (2019) regarding consumers responding differently to various initiatives by the same company as context can change the perception of the authenticity. We observe that despite receiving massive critique when taking a standpoint on one issue, a company can still experience praise when doing so on another. Therefore, our research indicates that there is no predictive outcome when a brand takes a

socio-political stance. Out of the most successful posts we have looked at was Starbucks gender equality post, a portrayal which encourage consumers to engage in the comments. We have debated that this likely is explained by the self-identity theory by Buttcharya & Sen (2003). However, it also suggests an addition to the theory by Gerbaudo & Trére (2015), that argues that social media can be a digital comfort zone, inferring that brand activism that is presented through portrayals and encourages people to express their opinions might result in more positive sentiments.

Moreover, our findings show that the social media landscape does not always reflect the underlying sentiments. This phenomenon can be observed in Victoria's Secret, where underlying sentiments found in the survey are mostly expressed as very negative, whereas the social media landscape does not reflect negativity to the same extent. This might imply that long-term underlying factors may result in a more negative or positive default mode towards the company taking a stand in the first place. We observed that people assign more emotionally negatively charged characteristics to brands when they perceive their activist stand to misalign with the brand for various reasons. This can be particularly observed in brand personality where brands that generate a large share of woke-washing comments such as Victoria’s Secret seem to be described with more negative personality traits compared to brands that experienced a lower share of woke-washing comments.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, we found that people to some extent appreciate brands taking a standpoint through both our content analysis and our survey. People appreciating brand activism appear to be less emotionally involved online compared to those with a negative perception. Although brand activism is oftentimes expected, people seem to naturally question a brand’s intentions when taking a socio-political stance. This might imply that there is an underlying mistrust toward organisations’ intentions to engage in brand activism. There are no obvious trends pertaining to certain social issues or companies and we found that how the company conveys their standpoint appears to be less or more favourable with their individual crowd. Perceived genuineness and previous brand history seems to affect the underlying perception of a brand; however, the media climate does not appear to react coherently. This suggests that brand activism engagements are not to be treated as a collective as they can generate different reactions depending on how genuine a company's intentions about that specific post are

perceived. Nevertheless, all companies face backlash in terms of being accused of pursuing an ulterior agenda. Further, perceived lack of fit between the brands communicated values and actual practice was the main contributor to accusations of woke washing. Among these comments the most apparent theme was hypocrisy which can insinuate that consumers perceive brands intentions for taking a socio-political standpoint as dishonest.

6.1 Theoretical implications

This paper contributes with insights on actual occurrences of brand activism using a real-life approach. Therefore, we contribute to the literature by providing insights and hypotheses of potential outcomes when brands choose to engage in the socio-political debate. The paper also manages to show that the reception of brand activism in a social media context does not always resemble what people think off-line. This implies that social media easily can provide a space for the most critical voices, especially as people seem to spend more time and effort into writing negative thoughts than positive.

6.2 Managerial implications

Further, we pinpoint important trends and implications especially pertaining to woke-washing accusations revolving around online brand activism that can be used to guide companies in their attempts to brand themselves as activists in a social media setting. Thereby, this thesis provides an understanding of what may and may not work when deciding to engage in the socio-political debate. It was found that brand activism generates different reactions depending on how genuine a company´s intentions about a specific post are perceived. Therefore, it is important for brands to understand their customer base and the reaction that they wish to evoke. Further, brands are prone to always face accusations of woke-washing to some extent. It appears as if one wrong step can have much larger implications and awaken a much stronger reaction than one step in the right direction can do good.

7. Limitations and further research

The main objective of this study is to find patterns, trends and underlying factors as to why people hold a certain type of perception when brands take a socio-political stance. The findings were mainly based on discussions in a social media setting. The main limitation of this study is therefore if it is reasonable to expect that the social media climate represents society in an

accurate manner. Further research could therefore include more data from a larger part of the population that does not engage in the social media debate to overcome this limitation.

This study attempted to get a better understanding of the underlying reasons for consumers' reactions to brand activism in a social media setting. Further research could thus examine the outcomes of reactions to brand activism in a social media setting, focusing on the cost of taking a stance versus not taking a stance. Further, we found that previous brand history is an important factor for consumers when evaluating the perceived authenticity of a brand. However, there is little literature on how brands should begin to engage in brand activism in an authentic way if there is no previous history of such activities. Therefore, further research could examine how companies can proceed in taking a stance in socio-political issues when there is no previous history of engaging in brand activism.

Moreover, a framework was presented in the results classifying different types of Instagram posts depending on their content. Further research could explore if there is an optimal approach for brands to use different types of posts to convey their message and could to a greater extent explore the connection between the different types of posts and perceived brand authenticity.

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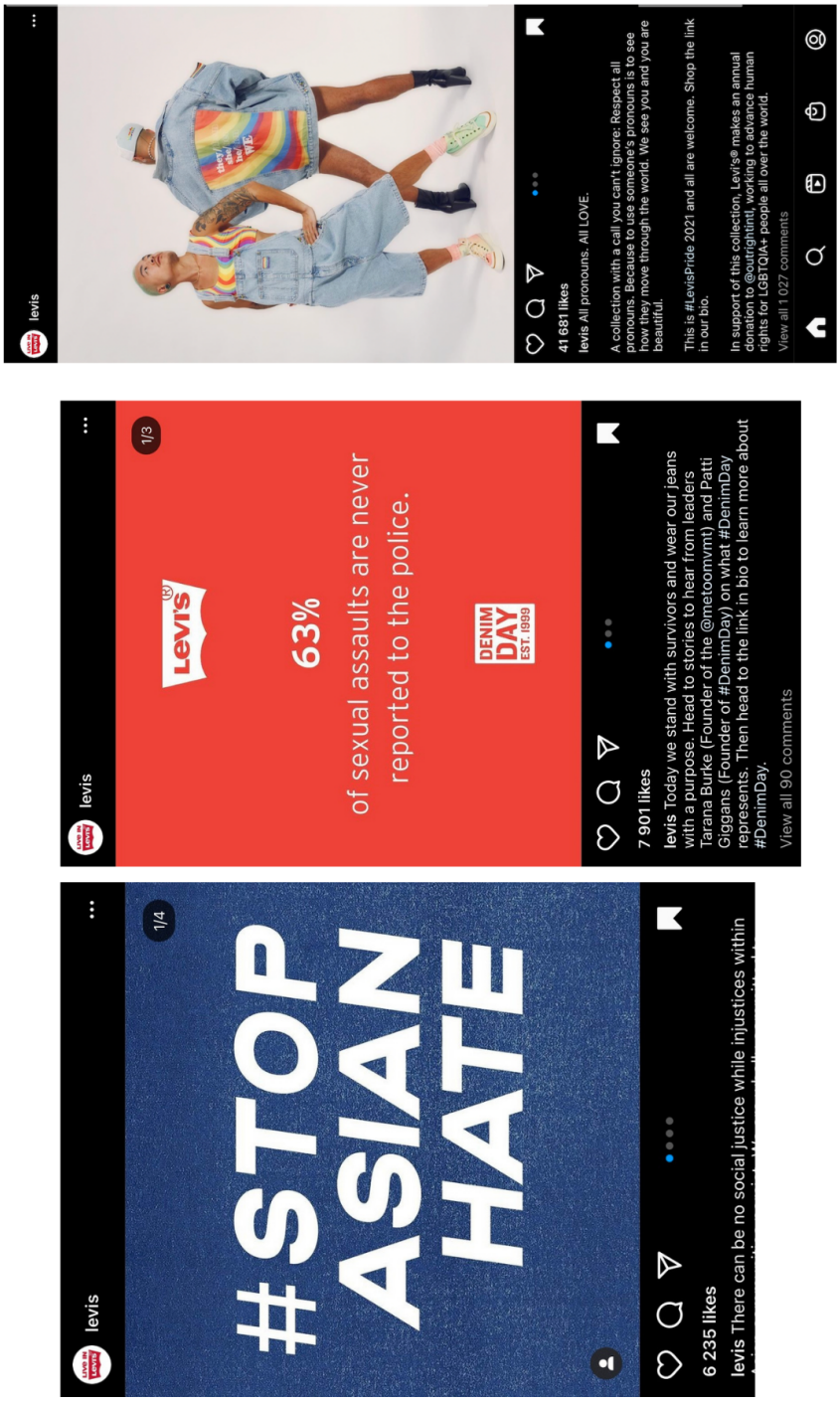
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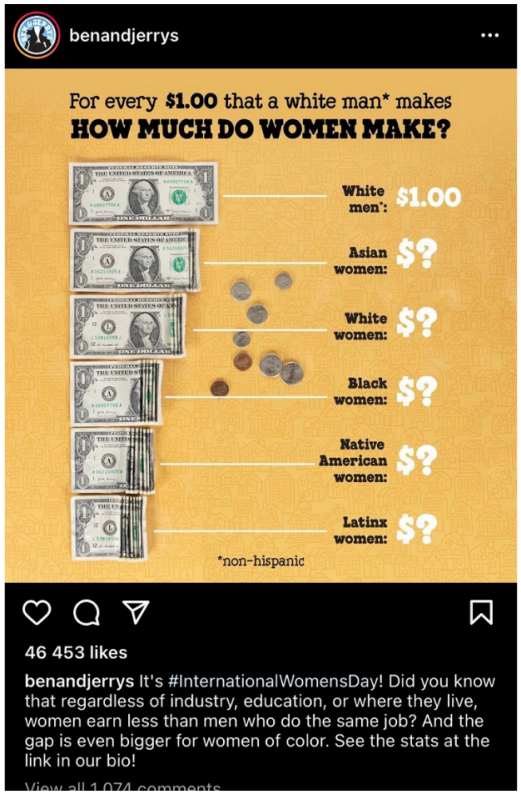
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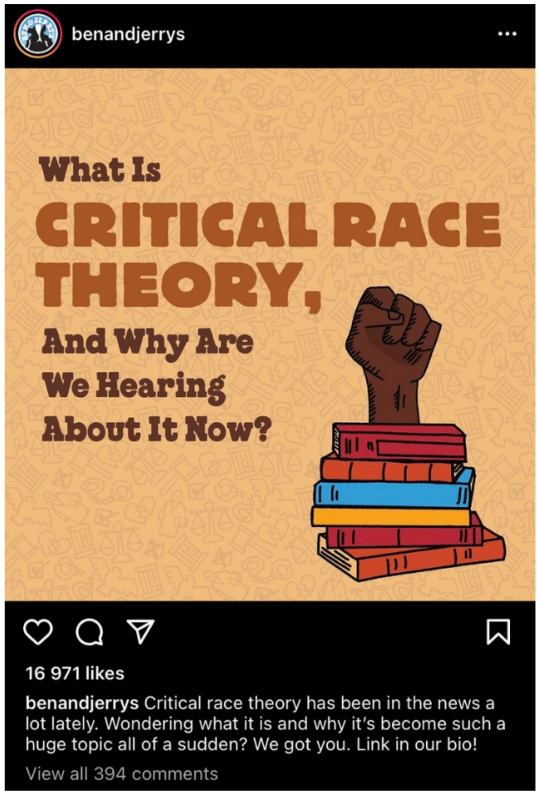
9. Appendix

9.1 Instagram posts

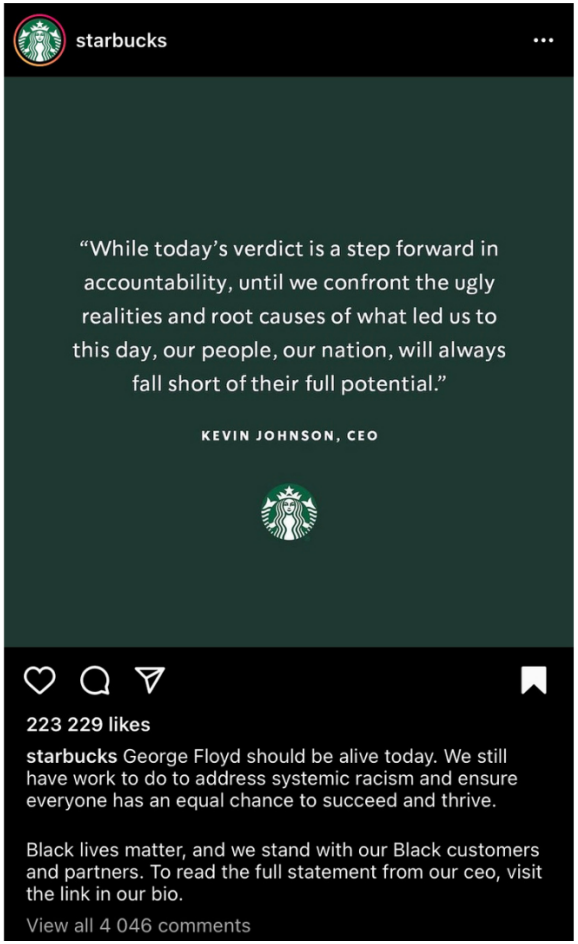


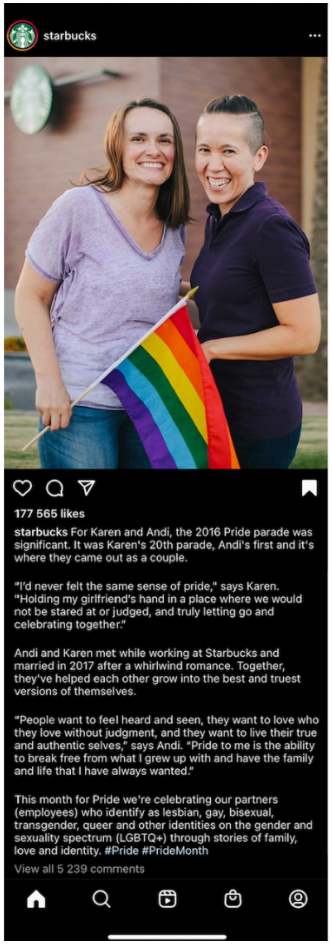

benandjerrys
TRANS
LIVES
MATTER
57 659 likes
benandjerrys Today is Trans Day of Remembrance, the day we remember those who have been lost to anti-transgender violence. Learn more about how you can support the trans community from our friends at @transequalitynow. Link in bio! #transdayofremembrance #tdor
View all 778 comments

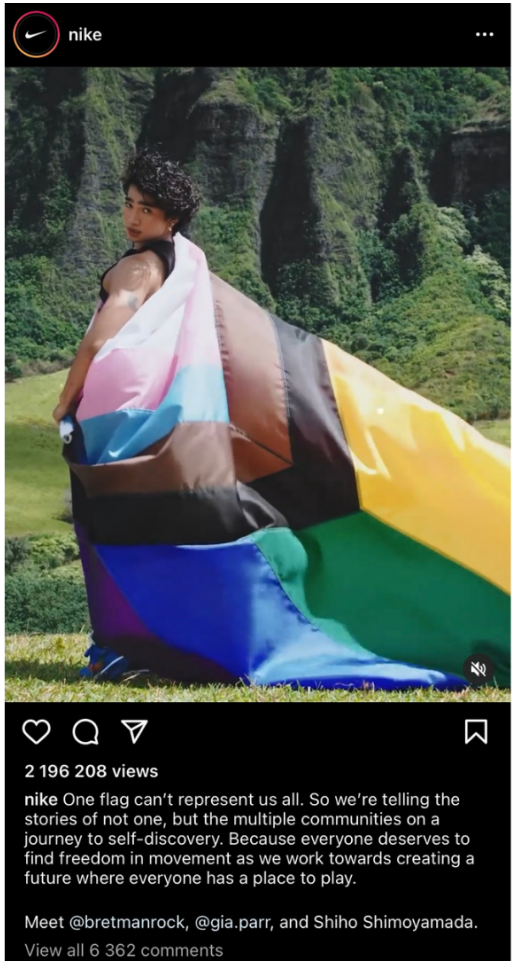

benandjerrys
For every $1.00 that a white man* makes
HOW MUCH DO WOMEN MAKE?
White men*: $1.00
Asian women: $?
White women: $?
Black women: $?
Native American women: $?
Latinx women: $?
*non-hispanic
46 453 likes
benandjerrys It's #InternationalWomensDay! Did you know that regardless of industry, education, or where they live, women earn less than men who do the same job? And the gap is even bigger for women of color. See the stats at the link in our bio!

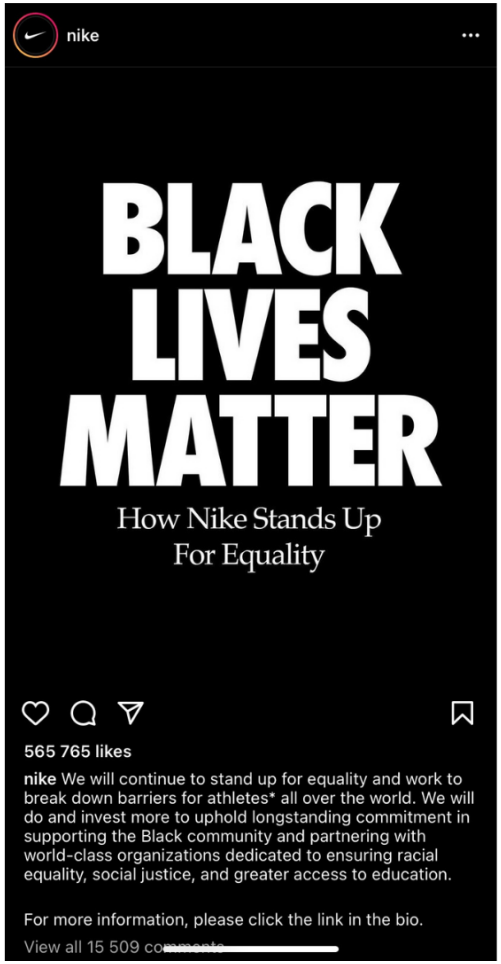

benandjerrys
What Is
CRITICAL RACE THEORY,
And Why Are We Hearing About It Now?
16 971 likes
benandjerrys Critical race theory has been in the news a lot lately. Wondering what it is and why it's become such a huge topic all of a sudden? We got you. Link in our bio!
View all 394 comments

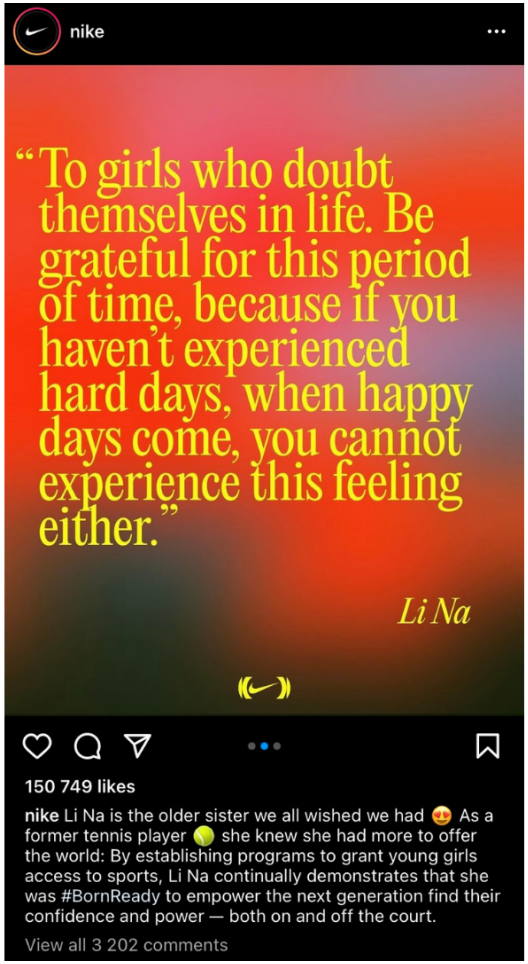

starbucks
71 731 likes
starbucks In celebration of #InternationalWomensDay, we're asking you to share something you love about a woman in your life.
For shift supervisor, Shannon, it's the unexpected friendship she's formed with her customer, Ms. Patti, who helped her find comfort and confidence after losing her mother.
"We have conversations and she's very motivating. She encourages me to not give up and to continue to grow."
View all 376 comments

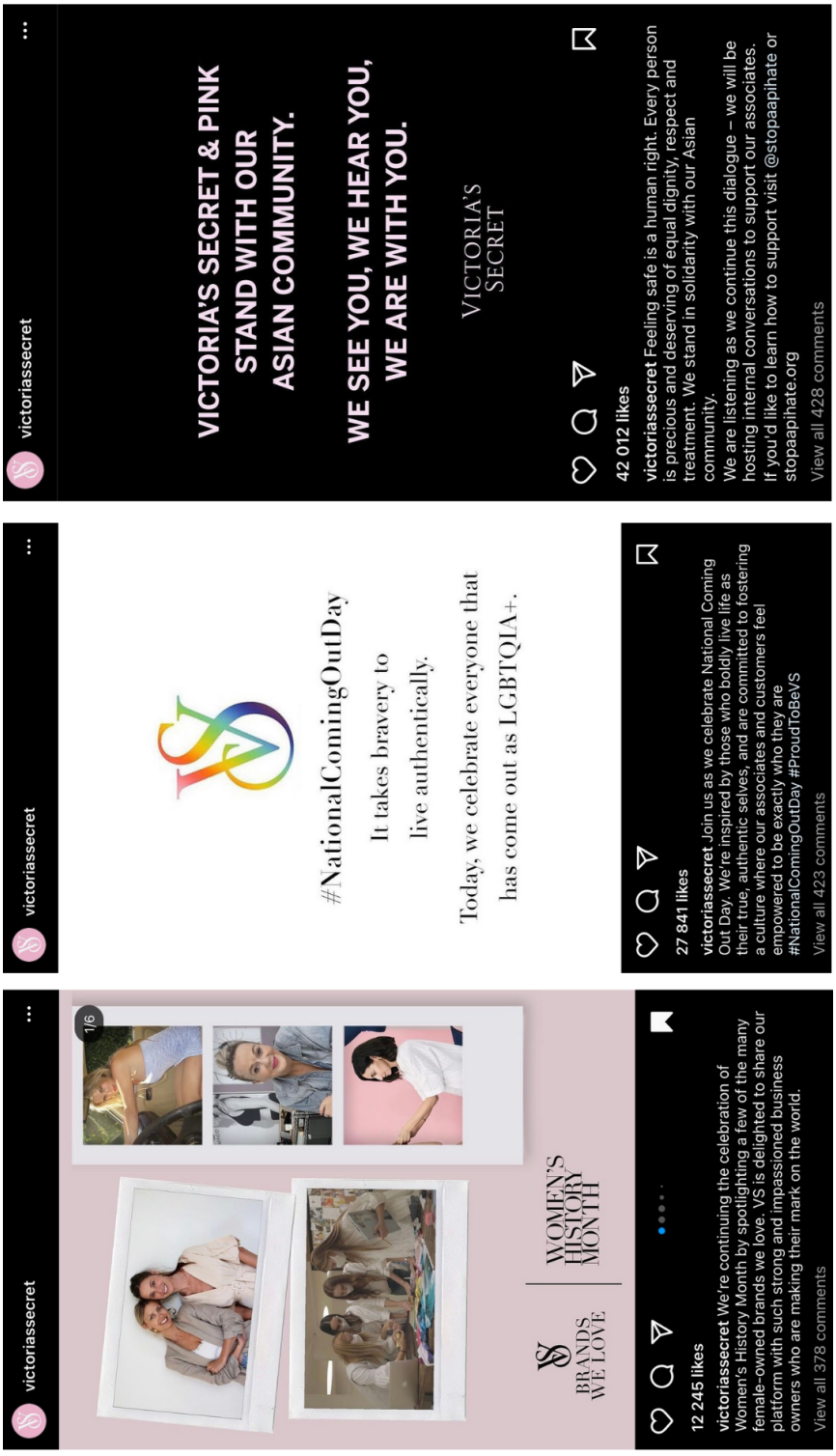

starbucks
"While today's verdict is a step forward in accountability, until we confront the ugly realities and root causes of what led us to this day, our people, our nation, will always fall short of their full potential."
KEVIN JOHNSON, CEO
223 229 likes
starbucks George Floyd should be alive today. We still have work to do to address systemic racism and ensure everyone has an equal chance to succeed and thrive.
Black lives matter, and we stand with our Black customers and partners. To read the full statement from our ceo, visit the link in our bio.
View all 4 046 comments


starbucks
177 565 likes
starbucks For Karen and Andi, the 2016 Pride parade was significant. It was Karen's 20th parade, Andi's first and it's where they came out as a couple.
"I'd never felt the same sense of pride," says Karen. "Holding my girlfriend's hand in a place where we would not be stared at or judged, and truly letting go and celebrating together."
Andi and Karen met while working at Starbucks and married in 2017 after a whirlwind romance. Together, they've helped each other grow into the best and truest versions of themselves.
"People want to feel heard and seen, they want to love who they love without judgment, and they want to live their true and authentic selves," says Andi. "Pride to me is the ability to break free from what I grew up with and have the family and life that I have always wanted."
This month for Pride we're celebrating our partners (employees) who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and other identities on the gender and sexuality spectrum (LGBTQ+) through stories of family, love and identity. #Pride #PrideMonth
View all 5 239 comments


nike
2 196 208 views
nike One flag can't represent us all. So we're telling the stories of not one, but the multiple communities on a journey to self-discovery. Because everyone deserves to find freedom in movement as we work towards creating a future where everyone has a place to play.
Meet @bretmanrock, @gia.parr, and Shiho Shimoyamada.
View all 6 362 comments


nike
BLACK LIVES MATTER
How Nike Stands Up For Equality
565 765 likes
nike We will continue to stand up for equality and work to break down barriers for athletes* all over the world. We will do and invest more to uphold longstanding commitment in supporting the Black community and partnering with world-class organizations dedicated to ensuring racial equality, social justice, and greater access to education.
For more information, please click the link in the bio.
View all 15 509 co


nike
"To girls who doubt themselves in life. Be grateful for this period of time, because if you haven't experienced hard days, when happy days come, you cannot experience this feeling either."
Li Na
150 749 likes
nike Li Na is the older sister we all wished we had 😍 As a former tennis player 🎾 she knew she had more to offer the world: By establishing programs to grant young girls access to sports, Li Na continually demonstrates that she was #BornReady to empower the next generation find their confidence and power — both on and off the court.
View all 3 202 comments



9.2 Questions and measurement survey

Perceived genuineness

1. Keeping the post & company in mind: How genuine do you feel like the brand's intentions are? (scaled from “Very questionable” to “Very genuine”)

2. Keeping only the post (motive on picture and caption) in mind: How genuine do you feel like the brands intentions are? (scaled from “Very questionable” to “Very genuine”)

3. Keeping only the company in mind: How genuine do you feel like the brands intentions are? (scaled from “Very questionable” to “Very genuine”)

Relevance & importance of the issue

1. Keeping the post & company in mind: How relevant do you think it is that this company talkes about this issue? (scaled from “Very irrelevant” to “Very relevant”)

2. Keeping the post & company in mind: How relevant is the social issue being talked about in the post to you personally? (scaled from “Very irrelevant” to “Very relevant”)

3. Keeping the company in mind: Do you think it is important that this company express an opinion on this and other social issues? (Scaled from “Not important” to “Very important”)

Previous brand knowledge

1. Based on you knowledge about this company: You feelings toward them is (scaled from “Very negative” to “Very positive”)

2. Why are your feelings toward this company positive/negative? Is it anything that they do particularly? (Open question)

Taking a public stance

1. Based on your knowledge about this company, are your feelings about them taking a public stance on social issues (“Positive”, “negative”, “neutral”, “I don’t know”)

2. Why do you feel this way? (open question)

Brand personality

1. If this brand had a personality, what characteristics would it have? Key words (Open question)