

JUST DOUGH IT! AN ANALYSIS OF NIKE AND BEN & JERRY'S USE OF
CORPORATE ACTIVISM AS IT PERTAINS TO THE BLACK LIVES MATTER
MOVEMENT

by

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Arts at George Mason University

by

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DEDICATION

To Lea Jefferson, who encouraged everyone to use their voices and fight for what they believed in. I have felt your presence with me every step of the way.

To anyone who feels out of place in a round world that makes you think you belong in a square box. You don't. The world will be a better place because of it.

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ABSTRACT

JUST DOUGH IT! AN ANALYSIS OF NIKE AND BEN & JERRY'S USE OF CORPORATE ACTIVISM AS IT PERTAINS TO THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT

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George Mason University, 2021

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On May 25th, 2020 George Floyd, an innocent Black man, was unjustly murdered by a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Mass Black Lives Matter mobilizations occurred around the nation. Shortly after his death, corporations took to their own social media pages and posted statements condemning this incident and what they would be doing to help combat this injustice. Nike and Ben & Jerry's released statements that highly resonated with the public. This thesis looks at how corporations engage with activism and shape public discourse. I conducted an online qualitative content analysis looking at Nike and Ben & Jerry's Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram pages and online news articles. This study revealed that corporate activism can be categorized into three categories: Conscientious Activism, which is when corporations boldly and shamelessly engage with activism, Performance Activism which is when corporations only engage with activism to appear proactive or socially just, and Reactive Activism, which happens

when corporations engage with activism only after being pressured by other consumers, the state, or other corporations.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

On May 29th, just four days after the latest 2020 Black Lives Matter protests started, Nike released a video across their social media platforms stating “for once, just don’t do it” urging their consumers to stand up to racism in the United States (2020). Shortly after this posting, Ben & Jerry’s released a similar statement titled *Silence Is Not An Option* stating “until white America is willing to collectively acknowledge its privilege, take responsibility for its past and the impact it has on the present, and commit to creating a future steeped in justice, the list of names that George Floyd has been added to will never end” (2020). Public support for racial justice was historic. Nike’s advertisement was widely accepted and shared among the sportswear sector, having Adidas and Puma post it on their own social media platforms in a show of support. A large sector of the public felt that the ad was empowering, and that Nike was taking a stand not to sell their product, but to make a real difference in society. To many consumers, the ad struck a decidedly authentic tone and was welcomed as a positive break from the standard profit-driven messaging. In an online interview conducted by *Ace Metrix*, a technology company that measures the impact of various advertisements by “showing the ad to a unique set of 500 respondents who complete standardized qualitative and quantitative surveys” (*The Ace Metrix Process* N.d.), one individual said, “thank you for this ad. This is exactly the kind of ad that is needed right now, and I wish

more companies would stand up and take a stance like this. Not that I'm surprised as they were also the same company that stood behind [Colin] Kaepernick. This moved me to tears and I sincerely hope it airs and people are touched like I was. This is important and now is the time, no more silence" (Metrix 2020). Another consumer stated "I think Nike is a brand that people of all backgrounds can relate to. The brand has the moral authority to lead the country through a conversation about racism and police violence. The ad was simple but highly effective" (Metrix 2020). Though the support was overwhelmingly positive for Nike's ad, there was some backlash from individuals who felt a multi-billion-dollar company could claim no moral authority, should not be telling people what to do, and disagreeing with them engaging in social justice topics at all. In the same interview, another person vocalized, "I really dislike this ad. I don't think that brands should be putting their message out there in an ad platform. Using this situation to put eyes on your product is kind of gross. I do agree with the message, but if you were really wanting to be a part of the change, then don't put your branding at the end of it" (Metrix 2020). For this consumer, such a play was mere exploitation. But the chorus of consumer support, in the end, rang louder.

Along with the acceptance of Nike's ad, Ben & Jerry's statement impressed many consumers. The company had an unapologetic, straightforward callout of racism in America, and named a responsible source for its persistence: white silence. This struck a chord with a lot of individuals online. Their statement was declared in the world of social media as THE statement that 'set the bar' for other corporations to follow. Co-founder of *rePlant Capital*, Robyn O'Brien expressed her enthusiastic support, "this is true

corporate social responsibility- putting powerful words to the deep emotions felt and providing four items we can collectively take. Niceness won't change this horrific, systemic issue. Courageous collaborative action is required.”¹ One Twitter user responded to the statement thanking Ben & Jerry's for their “steadfast, unwavering, and dogged commitment to equality, inclusion, fairness, and justice” continuing, “while others have already forgotten, you have not. We cannot let up.”² Similar to the reaction to the Nike ad, the flood of positive comments for Ben & Jerry's principled stand continued for days. There were also some critiques to their activism as pandering, absent of real risk or real impact, one self-proclaimed activist stated, “They're not in a position to really change the nature of the conversation. Ben & Jerry's should do something that would affect their bottom line. Specifically naming a flavor after a prominent activist of color. When you begin naming your product after Mohammad Ali or Colin Kaepernick maybe you'll see a slip in your bottom line” (Epp, 2020). Both statements came on the heels of mass mobilizations already underway as large groups poured into public areas across the United States, as well as, around the world to protest the unjust killing of George Floyd.

An estimated 82 million people took to the streets across the U.S. in June 2020 to demonstrate against the murder of George Floyd, one of countless Black men, who was murdered by a police officer (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel 2020). These protests brought newfound attention to other shootings of Black individuals including another unarmed Black man, Ahmaud Arbery, brutally murdered in February of 2020 by two white men

¹ Robyn O'Brien's Twitter Page, accessed April 10, 2021, <https://twitter.com/RobynOBrienUSA/status/1268174447732613120>

² Twitter page withheld to protect confidentiality of individual, accessed April 10, 2021.

(Fausset 2020) and Breonna Taylor, an unarmed Black woman killed in her apartment by police while asleep in March of 2020 (Levenson 2020). All of this unfolded against a backdrop of a pandemic that upset work and school, drove people into isolation and literally emptied the street, buses and highways. As COVID-19 cases continued to rise and restrictions in the United States tightened, in an odd twist the number of people engaged in public support for social activism, calling on large corporations via social media to take a stand against police brutality committed against the black community, grew. Individuals also began to engage in traditional and protest politics in increasing numbers, calling on their congresspeople to make a difference and taking to the streets more often.

This thesis examines two contemporary cases of corporate involvement in the civil sphere focusing on how corporations engage with social justice efforts and shape political discourse. Corporations have a long history of taking stands on social justice issues. Whether driven by profits or moral imperative remains an open question, but what is certain is corporations are part of our political and social fabric, both reflecting and shaping societies shared political and social values. Although the Black Lives Matter movement started in 2013, and has been a growing social movement since, May of 2020 following George Floyd's murder was a critical tipping point with massive and sustained protests across the globe. There was also a major shift in public support for the movement for Black Lives. This could be seen most notably in the sudden and considerable change in online worlds from relative acceptance of white silence and indifference to a rightful declaration, "white silence equals white violence" (Wink 2020). Mainstream support for

individuals calling out corporations for their inaction and silence grew. Two corporations stood out and were praised for being ahead of the curve with their social justice statements and marketing campaigns that were unapologetic in their support for BLM; these were Nike, Inc. and Ben & Jerry's. This thesis attempts two things: to situate Nike and Ben and Jerry's actions within a broader discussion within the business community about the nature of corporate social responsibility and examine systematically the content of messaging by Nike and Ben Jerry's and the response from its consumer base. This thesis also attempts to understand why these two company's messaging was seen as genuine, yet other corporate efforts to support social justice were not. This thesis does not answer the question of motive or why corporations engage with activism, but it shows that some simply do more than others and some do it better than others. In this thesis, I discuss why Ben & Jerry's and Nike have been successful with this engagement by looking at their messaging, advertising, and timing. I investigate what distinguishes these two corporations as standouts. I suggest positive consumer engagement as a result from these two corporations actively and publicly speaking out against injustices even before online communities called upon them to do so and in the case of Ben & Jerry's, this political activism continues to be a critical part of their brand.

Nike and Ben & Jerry's have a history of supporting progressive social causes outside the mainstream of watered-down political liberalism and have received positive consumer responses for their on-the-record support for social justice initiatives. However, this is not the case for all corporations. Many corporations have either not taken a stand on social justice issues or have tried to make similar statements but are labeled

disingenuous, often because their actions are seen as “too little, too late.” When the Oreo Twitter account tweeted “Trans people exist”³ they were highly scrutinized for not taking an actual stand for trans rights or taking any actions to securing rights for trans individuals. Corporations run a risk when they speak out only after pressure from the public to do so. Many corporations released a statement after the George Floyd protests, but seeing as many of these read more like generic “we stand against injustice” messages, consumers felt the statements lacked the purity that other corporations introduced in their statements and actions following the June 2020 protests. I would be remiss if I did not mention that although Nike has supported various social justice issues, they also have a history of undermining human rights. As I will discuss more in depth in Chapter 2, Nike has long outsourced their labor to other countries including Bangladesh, India, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam. Nike came under fire in 1998 after a lawsuit was filed against them “alleging unfair and deceptive practices for failing to disclose working conditions at Nike’s overseas supplier factories” (1998). They came under fire nearly 20 years later for a slew of similar human rights issues including not paying their employees in Cambodia the proper living wage, forcing workers in Vietnam to work overtime, restricting the use of toilets, and even padlocking the exit doors (McKay N.d).

While investigating these companies approach to social activism, I draw primarily on the literature on consumption across disciplines including sociology, business, and cultural studies. The literature on political consumption is a growing body of research marked by several critical areas of inquiry. I focus this inquiry on corporate social

³ Oreo’s Twitter Page, accessed April 11, 2021, <https://twitter.com/Oreo/status/1365038991469281280>

responsibility, advertising, branding, and the corporate role in activism. While there has been much research done on corporate social responsibility, a small handful of researchers have examined the emergence of corporate activism, which is the focus of this thesis. I define corporate involvement in justice activism as including financial contributions to social justice organizations, using their platforms to shed light on social justice issues, amplifying marginalized voices, signing and sharing petitions, interacting with other types of activists, directly and indirectly calling on other corporations to take a stand, and creating products that benefit various social causes. Corporations engage in framing practices and shape public discourse for a broad range of issues. Understanding the impact of these framing activities is important for understanding both corporate influences in the civil spheres and creating structures of accountability for corporations when they enter the civil and political realms. Social movements have recognized that corporations and consumer markets can be allies on advancing a cause. For instance, Patagonia's environmental activism has helped to spotlight human caused climate change. The company belongs to the *Sustainable Apparel Coalition* and *1% For the Planet*, a broad coalition of like-minded companies committed to ensure that they are creating ethical and sustainable products that will slow human harm to the planet that "fast fashion" and other garment production and consumption practices create (Wolfe 2020). They also offer a repair and recycle program so instead of someone throwing away their broken garment, they can send it in to Patagonia for a repair or Patagonia will recycle it for them when there is no longer a use for it. Like Ben and Jerry's and Nike, Starbucks has shown support for social causes including ending racial injustice. At the

beginning of 2021, they pledged to invest 100 million dollars by 2025 to the *Starbucks Community Resilience Fund* where they will focus on “advancing racial equity and environmental resilience by supporting small business growth and community development projects in BIPOC⁴ neighborhoods” (2021). Although corporations can function as allies in support of certain causes, they also can undermine a cause or have little impact whatsoever, despite a clever ad campaign that seems to promise real change. Notably, Gillette’s 2019 ad series shedding light on toxic masculinity, apart from highlighting the dangers of toxic masculinity to men themselves, did nothing else to make substantial change for gender equality. They made no contribution to gender equity causes, nor did they commit to transform the gender climate in their own corporation. Both would signal a commitment to organizational or structural change. Though discursively powerful, in the end, the series was a mere ad campaign. Pepsi is notable as a brand that unintentionally harmed the Black Lives Matter movement and their own legitimacy as a corporate ally. In 2017, Pepsi released a commercial where Kendall Jenner was seen walking with protestors up to a line of police officers. She hands the police officer a can of Pepsi and it seems to mitigate all tension that the protestors and police had between each other. It was a monumental failure for obvious reasons. Though Pepsi pulled the advertisement and released an apology, the damage was done. Elle Hearn, the executive director of the Marsha P. Johnson Institute and a former BLM organizer, sat down with *The New York Times* and said “[the ad] plays down the sacrifices people have historically taken in utilizing protests. No one is finding joy from

⁴ Acronym for Black and Indigenous People of Color.

Pepsi at a protest. Pepsi is appropriating imagery from serious protests to sell its product, while minimizing the danger protestors encounter and the frustration they feel” (Victor 2017). The case of Pepsi is revealing. The lesson for corporations: any effort to amplify the brand alongside amplifying the social injustice message is tantamount to treason.

Corporations are often uneasy allies. They have taken righteous stands on social justice issues but we cannot deny that corporations’ motivations are almost always profit driven, focused on gaining greater market share by tailoring their messaging, alongside their products to specific market segments they wish to gain or retain, yet their messaging does have important impact. Corporations then should be thought of as political actors, seeking and exercising influence, for better or worse, in the political and civil spheres. For instance, Political Action Committees (PACs) and Super PACs, often approach and succeed in gaining donations from corporations, even if it is not in the best interest of the public. Corporations are more likely to donate to the political candidates, for instance who would benefit their financial goals. Corporations can try to look inclusive and committed to social justice causes on the outside, while indirectly helping a candidate intent to compromise those very goals win an election. In 2020, CVS Health pledged nearly 600 million dollars, over five years, to address racial inequality (CVS 2020). President and CEO Larry Merlo remarked “the private sector must take action to get to the heart of institutional racism. As we learn from the perspectives of our Black colleagues and the diverse communities we serve, we’ll use that input to inform our advocacy agenda going forward” (CVS 2020). Contrastingly, in a 2019 article from the Center for Public Integrity, CVS had donated over half a million dollars to the *America*

First Policies PAC, strengthening former president Donald Trump's 2020 campaign (Balcerzak 2019). This disconnect shows the potential threat corporations represent when it comes to engaging in activism and undermining a cause.

This project aims to understand how corporations engage with activism and how they can shape public discourse through media. I looked at two case studies, Nike and Ben & Jerry's. I chose these two corporations because they both have sustained involvement with the Black Lives Matter movement, share a history rooted in social justice issues, and have articulated a commitment to learning from mistakes they have made in the past. I conducted an online qualitative content analysis where I analyzed Nike and Ben & Jerry's Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram pages, as well as news articles written about the corporations in relation to the Black Lives Matter Movement. I conducted research starting on May 25th, 2020, the day George Floyd was murdered, through January 20th, 2021, Inauguration day. This time frame was purposely chosen to capture the media peak of the Black Lives Matter movement protests and when presidential power was transferred from former President Donald Trump to President Joe Biden. This produced a total of 2,318 social media posts and 328 news articles.

CHAPTER TWO: HOW DID WE GET HERE? A LOOK AT THE HISTORY OF THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT, NIKE AND BEN & JERRY'S

In this chapter I will briefly highlight the history of the Black Lives Matter movement, Nike and Ben & Jerry's, discuss their history with supporting social justice issues, and identify controversies that emerged for the companies surrounding their support of specific justice issues.

Black Lives Matter

The Black Lives Matter Movement emerged in 2013, led by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi. The movement quickly grew in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the man who shot, and killed Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenage boy walking alone on his way home from a friend's house on a school night. The only item in his possession was a pack of Skittles. The outcry of this injustice was palpable. Since then, the Movement for Black Lives has grown to have a global presence, effectively reframing our understanding of fair justice and race. The Black Lives Matter Movement is decentralized, meaning that the leadership of this movement is not headquartered anywhere, rather spread throughout different locations. In 2014, Michael Brown was another innocent Black young man murdered by police in Ferguson, Missouri. The BLM organizers teamed up with local activists in Missouri and organized a "national ride during Labor Day Weekend that year" (*Herstory* 2020). The infamous "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" protest slogan was born out of these protests. After leaving Ferguson, organizers from eighteen different cities created additional Black Lives Matter

chapters in their own towns, though BLM activity had already emerged in places where chapters had not existed (Garza 2014:1). The Black Lives Matter movement now has over forty chapters globally and works diligently to “propel the conversation around the state-sanctioned violence” that black individuals often face (*Herstory* 2020). Xhercis Méndez’s article, *Which Black Lives Matter? Gender, State-Sanctioned Violence, and ‘My Brother’s Keeper’* focuses on the gender discrimination in state-sanctioned violence, and how Black women are often overlooked (2016:99). She offers that because of this lack of records kept on Black women and state-sanctioned violence, create conditions for “sexual politics that undermine collective efforts, such as those of BLM” (Mendez 2016:101). This is not to say that Black Lives Matter is not drawing attention to the record exclusion of Black women, but that as a movement it will be hard to advance if attention is not drawn to this gender bias. The murder and aftermath of Breonna Taylor has shed light on this issue. Following the 2020 murder of George Floyd and the leadership from protestors in Minneapolis, the president of the New York chapter of Black Lives Matter spoke out and said that “if the movement fails during nationwide protests over George Floyd’s killing by Minneapolis police officers it will ‘burn down this system’” (Moore 2020). Given the United States’ fraught and enduring history of denigrating, dehumanizing treatment, subjugation, exploitation, and outright violence toward Black people this response is warranted, and now it is time to speak up to each other and demand more from not just these large corporations. It is time to hold everyone accountable. The Black Lives Matter organization’s goal is to “support the development

of new Black leaders, as well as create a network where Black people feel empowered to determine their destinies in their communities” (*Herstory* 2020).

Justice Do More! Nike’s History with Social Justice

“Just Do It!” Its slogan is internationally known. Nike, Inc. started as a small sneaker company known as Blue Ribbon Sports in 1964 (Meyer 2019). The company officially rebranded to Nike, Inc. in the early 1970s, where they continued to create and sell sneakers. Nike was always a successful company, given that they created a new type of sneaker technology, however it was their creative and innovative use of advertisements that separated them from competitors. In 1987, Nike released their first “Just Do It” Campaign, a poster slogan to originally accompany their television ad. The phrase “Just Do It” came to Nike by fluke chance, drawing inspiration from murderer Gary Gilmore and his last words of “Let’s Do It” (Wieden N.d.). Almost instantly the slogan caught on, as consumers would write and call to Nike stating how connected and empowered the slogan made them feel. Nike ran with it, including the slogan in all television and print ads, which ultimately drove their profits up and helped them gain notoriety. The next “Just Do It” Campaign came out in 1999 and was dedicated to women and featured a print that read:

“You were born a daughter. You looked up to your mother. You looked up to your father. You looked up at everyone. You wanted to be a princess, you thought you were a princess. Sooner or later, you started taking yourself seriously. You know when you need a break. You know when you need a rest. You know what to get

worked up about, and what to get rid of. And you know when it's time to take care of yourself, for yourself. To do something that makes you stronger, faster, more complete. Because you know it's never too later to have a life. And never too late to change one. Just do it" (Wieden N.d.).

This campaign strategy vaulted them into a new category of advertising, where they held the appearance of empowering consumers, while also profiting hugely off of them. After the success from their campaigns, Nike gained support with celebrities, athletes and the public alike (Meyer 2019). Nike has partnered with athletes such as Michael Jordan, LeBron James, Megan Rapinoe, and Colin Kaepernick, the later three propelled to high celebrity status not just because of their athletic ability, but because of their outspoken stance on gender and racial injustices. These three players have showed time and time again that activism is a core part of who they are. Colin Kaepernick took a knee to protest police brutality at NFL games in 2016 and later was blacklisted from the NFL because of it. He then went on to create the *Know Your Rights Camp* that focuses on “the liberation and well-being of Black and Brown communities through education, self-empowerment, mass-mobilization and the creation of new systems that elevate the next generation of change leaders” (KYRC N.d). LeBron James has a long history with activism, first using his platform in 2012 to raise awareness for the unjust killing of Treyvon Martin (James and Lombardo 2016). His strong activism shines through today as he works on his newest project *More Than a Vote*, a project that will help individuals in voter-suppressed cities learn the basics on how to vote, what is on the ballot, and how people are working to suppress these votes and how to get around that (Duarte 2020). He also pressured NBA

arenas to open their doors and set up polling stations to become mega polling sites for the November 2020 election (Zucker 2020). Megan Rapinoe has committed to suing US Soccer over unequal working conditions and pay between male and female soccer players (O’Dowd and McMahon 2019). In a 2019 interview Megan Rapinoe said “the most rewarding part of her 2019 year was the way her team has been able to transcend sport and use their platform to address inequalities on and off the field. Activism is second nature in women’s sports because gender discrimination is an ‘endemic’ in the industry” (O’Dowd and McMahon 2019). Later on in this thesis I will discuss Nike’s checkered past with not supporting women, and in some cases reproducing gender inequality. Their past points to poor treatment of female athletes and female laborers. Inadvertently, Megan Rapinoe supporting and endorsing Nike shows how complicit both Nike and she is in the exploitation of women. It raises the question of how we as a U.S. society are able to both know that what Nike is doing is harmful, but still support and idolize the company. These three individuals have endorsed Nike both in their athletic and personal life. Notably, Michael Jordan did not gain his celebrity status in tandem with his activism from when he was an active athlete. He steered clear of activism even going as far to say, “Republicans buy sneakers too” (Bontemps 2020). In the ESPN documentary *The Last Dance*, he mentions that he never thought of himself as an activist, just as a basketball player (Bontemps 2020). In June of 2020, Jordan, in conjunction with the Jordan brand, pledged 100 million dollars over the next ten years to fight for “racial equality, social

justice, and greater access to education.”⁵ This about face, speaks to the turning tides.

Political engagement was once seen as a sure path to end a career. In today’s political and social climate, social justice concerns are front and center. Most recently, Simone Biles, a Black female athlete and the world’s greatest Olympic gymnast, left Nike and signed a deal with Athleta, a workout brand that is focused on women’s empowerment and sustainability. Biles ultimately made the switch because of Nike’s checkered past with not supporting female athletes (Draper 2021). Nike was stifling her efforts to speak on the sexual abuse many gymnasts faced with an Olympic doctor, while Athleta has welcomed her with welcoming arms, and has encouraged her to continue with her plans to go on a “Gold Over America Tour”, which will help Biles share her experience with U.S.A. Gymnastics (Draper 2021). This choice spotlights Nike’s troubling past and raises questions about what and who they value.

Nike has a long self-identified history of engaging social justice as part of a broader engagement in community ventures stating in part of their mission statement “Our mission is what drives us to do everything possible to expand human potential... We do that by making a positive impact in communities where we live and work” (*About Nike* 2020). We can see this engagement in early Nike webpages from the late 1990s, where one webpage from January 1998 features a tab titled *Play Like A Girl* highlighting how their products are both marketed and endorsed by female athletes (1998). Nike contributes to various organizations, not just social justice ones, including churches and

⁵ Jordan Brand Twitter page, accessed April 11, 2021, <https://twitter.com/esteeep/status/1268996027698331650/photo/1>

boys' and girls' clubs. Nike's commitment to social justice in their advertising started officially in 1995 when they featured an "HIV-positive long-distance runner" in one of their campaigns (CBC News 2018). In 2017, Nike ran an advertisement produced "by women for women and girls" (CBC News 2018). Later in 2017 they released two campaigns, one featuring prominent Black athletes entitled *Equality*, calling for equality to be extended to everyone, everywhere. The other campaign featured Middle Eastern Women and the boundaries they were breaking. The ad showcased five Middle Eastern female athletes who are asked the question "what will they say about you" (Morgan 2017)? This ad shares the sentiment that Emirati athletes are strong too.

In 2018, the 30th anniversary of the "Just Do It" campaign with Colin Kaepernick was released, an advertisement that featured Colin Kaepernick exclaiming to "believe in something, even if that means sacrificing everything" (Guardian Sport 2018). Nike took a stand, continuing to support Kaepernick, the former San Francisco 49ers quarterback who sat on the bench and then eventually took a knee during the national anthem to protest police brutality and support the Black Lives Matter movement. As a result of this strategic payoff, Nike gained the respect of many activists and the profit margins to match. These included celebrity activists like Alicia Keys and Angelina Jolie, athlete activists including Venus Williams and those mentioned above, social media activists like Charlie Dark and Hend Amry, and traditional activists, like Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi; the founders of the Black Lives Matter movement. I define activist as someone who is a champion for social or political change in whatever space they occupy. Most common, we see traditional activists organize at the grass-root level,

but as our society calls for more accountability, we see celebrities and athletes join in the conversation.

Nike has targeted Black audiences for decades, often including big-name Black celebrities in their advertising campaigns to appeal to Black youth. A calculated decision like supporting Colin Kaepernick and making him the face of the brand helps Nike appear to be embracing diversity, when in reality this is a profitable decision. By supporting a Black man who was ostracized by a major corporation solely because of his views of racial justice, they garner the Black audience they cater to and their allies, knowing that the people who would not support this decision aren't really their target audience anyway.

After releasing the advertisement, many conservatives' expressed outrage that Nike would defend and support Kaepernick, so much so that they burned their Nike apparel and posted videos condemning Nike online (Ferrerias 2018). Though in theory this was supposed to hurt Nike, it ended up helping them. After the media showed clips of Nike's apparel and sneakers burning, the Nike stock jumped 31% (Linnane 2018). Despite this conservative backlash, or quite literally because of it, Nike won an Emmy award for this advertisement in the category 'Outstanding Commercial', which was their first Emmy in 17 years. (Mitra 2019).

Although Kaepernick had not played in the NFL for nearly two years by the time the ad was released, Nike continue their partnership with him, five years after his last NFL snap. In July of 2019, Nike made the decision, in conjunction with Kaepernick, to pull a sneaker release that featured a sewn flag by Betty Ross, after Kaepernick had

raised concerns that the flag could offend people, as it was a symbol of slavery when it was made and has later been known to be a hate symbol used by various white supremacy terrorist organizations (Chappell 2019). In December of 2019, Nike released a ‘Nike x Colin Kaepernick’ line featuring a pair of black Air Force 1 shoes with Kaepernick’s face embroidered on the heel, his logo on the tongue, and a number seven hang tag, along with a solid black jersey commemorating his time in the NFL (Nike 2019). Within one day, the shoes sold out everywhere (Fies 2019). In a February interview with Nike CEO John Donahoe, he remarked that when it comes to social justice issues Nike has and always will “lead with the athlete’s voice” (Ciment 2020). He mentioned that Nike will continue to take a stand on social justice issues, but only if it is in the best interest for their athletes, consumers, and company. Take the example of sustainability. Nike created their own sustainability committee, which helps provide guidance on sustainability issues and tries to integrate that into Nike’s business, product design, manufacturing, sourcing, and operations (*Governance* N.d). This committee was put into place because consumers and athletes alike wanted Nike to show they cared about the environment. This started with looking into the dye they used and continues with the creation and utilization of this committee (Paine, Hsieh, and Adamsons 2015).

I Scream, You Scream, We Scream, For Social Justice!

Ben & Jerry’s was founded in Burlington, Vermont in 1978 in a renovated gas station by Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield. Both free spirits, who leaned more on the liberal side throughout their life (Lager 1994:7). They kicked off their social justice

journey shortly after their opening in the year 1985, where they established the Ben & Jerry's Foundation, which stated that "7.5% of the company's annual pre-tax profits would be donated to fund community-oriented projects" (*The 1980s* 2020). Throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, the ice cream team consistently showed up for social justice, utilizing their ice cream flavors/names to start discussions on various environmental issues. In 2000, Ben & Jerry's was acquired by *Unilever* but was promised that the brand would keep their socially just mission (Hays 2000). The deal allowed Ben Cohen to evaluate Unilever's justice involvement, allowing for them to still be involved in "affirming the principles they have advocated for since 1978" (Hays 2000). Continuing with their advocacy, in the early 2000s, they took public stances on deforestation and oil drilling, and then in the late 2010s moved to address human rights concerns, first same-sex marriage and most recently the Black Lives Matter movement. Ben & Jerry's website even states that "this is not new for them" (2020). Ben and Jerry's support of Black Lives Matter is not another instance of a brand jumping on the bandwagon. It's an example of the brand attempting to engage their business and also leverage it for the social good on the principle that engaging the social good is favorable for business. This is a specific business philosophy shared by a small but growing number of corporations and shared by members of the broader business community. For Ben and Jerry's, their entire brand identity is built upon it, expressed in various ways, including its names of ice cream flavors. It's a brand strategy that has worked well for them. The following list (Knoebel 2020) are some of the flavors that Ben & Jerry's has incorporated into their activism over the years:

- *Rainforest Crunch*— “Save the Rainforests” (1988)
- *One Sweet Whirled*— Launched in partnership with the Dave Matthews Band to call attention to global warming (2002)
- *Yes Pecan!* — In support of Barack Obama (2009)
- *EmpowerMINT*— Voter suppression in NC (2016)
- “*I Dough, I Dough*”— Marriage equality (2015)
- *Pecan Resist*— In response to Trump’s immigrant ban. Made to honor and stand with immigrants, People of Color, and the millions of activists and allies who are courageously resisting the President’s attack on values, humanity, and environment.
- *Save Our Swirled*— Join the world climate movement (2015)
- *Home Sweet Honeycomb*— Save the Bees (2017)
- *One Sweet World*— Advance issues of social and economic justice (2017)
- *Justice ReMix’d*— Prison reform (2019)
- *Bernie’s Back*— In support of Bernie Sanders campaign in 2020— Made solely by Ben Cohen and not by Ben & Jerry’s.

But Ben & Jerry’s brand identity as socially conscious extends beyond ice cream flavors. On the Ben & Jerry’s website, they have a *What’s New* page where they update their consumers on political news from voting to the Derek Chauvin murder trial to mass incarceration. This page serves to showcase various social justice issues that are important to the Ben & Jerry’s brand and also keep the public informed on these social issues, suggesting Ben and Jerry’s has defined their role as an informational source on social justice concerns for their consumer base. Consumers can also offer comment on

the news feeds. In this sense Ben and Jerry's operates also as a space of critical conversations about pressing social issues.

The long history these two corporations have in standing up for various social justice issues, but in particular racial injustice, makes them model corporations to study for this research.

Chunky Dunky Corporate Social Responsibility:

Though these corporations have been praised by the public for their open commitment to social change, they are not exempt for their own controversies. Widely known, Nike creates their products in factories in China that have notoriously terrible work practices and innumerable human rights violations. According to Washington Post, a Nike factory in China reported that the workers were "working under conditions that strongly suggested forced labor" (Fifield 2020). Naomi Klein discusses this in her critically acclaimed book *No Logo*, where she demonstrates persuasively that there is a distinct disconnect for consumers between a brand's labor practices and the brand's logos. In the age of meaning, production is hidden away, second to the powerful symbol and the image a brand commands. Production becomes less of an issue for people when the brand is tacked onto the product (Klein 2014), in part because the manufacturing of the product itself has become tangential to brokering in social meaning in the economy of symbols and signs. Klein characterizes Nike as a "product-free brand" since they outsource their production to other countries (Klein 2014). However, Klein also makes the point that Nike has come under fire in recent years, because their labor practices in

global markets have worsened. The erosion of union labor, the absence of environmental checks and balances, the global outsourcing of production to reduce labor costs means workers in other countries, far removed from the sites of consumption, are exploited. Klein theorizes a dramatic shift as we have moved from a manufacturing economy to a consumer-driven one. The product and its manufacture do not define the corporation, rather its ability to effectively weave in the economy of signs and symbols serves as the basis upon which a corporation is defined. The brand is ascendant. Its advertising campaigns, which represent a larger and larger share of corporate expenditure, not the products, are what determine a corporation's success according to Klein (2014). We can certainly see this in Nike's brand. They have created a culture around their sportswear that wearing them sends a certain status signal out into the world. What distinguishes Adidas, New Balance, and Nike are their symbols and messaging, not their products, which are all virtually the same. In this competitive market, profits are gained by reducing production costs and attaching the product to a symbol that is resonant. In this context, Nike can outsource their labor, and until recently, totally sidestep the dehumanizing workspaces they rely in other countries. Klein is quick to remind readers that working conditions are terrible in these other countries, and outsourcing has hurt the Western world as well since there are fewer well-paying manufacturing jobs available in the U.S. as a result of outsourcing. In this sense, we can say Nike supports and cares about its consumers, but not its workers, evidenced by the fact that the jobs available are often part-time and/or non-unionized (Klein 2014). Nike also came under fire for other labor matters. When an Olympic runner who they sponsored was told that if she had a

baby she would not be paid by Nike until she started running again (Montaño 2019). Although after they received online criticism, a push from other female athletes, and a follow-up from two Congresswomen, Nike announced a new maternity policy that included eighteen months of paid leave, suggesting that Nike will respond to labor demands in some cases, since if they didn't it could alienate women, who are a sizeable part of their consumer base. One could argue that Nike headed off what could have been a media nightmare as feminist groups would have rallied against them and apply pressure for a more humane maternity policy, though it is often argued that the US labor movements are not as influential in altering corporate actions. One way the labor movement could become influential in corporate actions is by having unions encourage their workers to become owners of capital through pensions funds. Labor economist, Teresa Ghilarducci coins this "pension activism" (2004:232). Since bargaining regulations have a narrow margin of what is considered legitimate, workers would negotiate for pension funds instead of the instant gratification of time off (2004:235). Pension activism works in a way that allows for workers to negotiate for better working conditions or corporate conduct, by allowing for shareholders to use their position of power to advocate for these changes. This could give labor movements some credibility in impacting corporate actions.

Although Nike has made multiple public commitments to social justice issues and supported various athletes and activists that speak frequently about equality and equity, their executive board speaks a bit differently. Their team is made up of sixteen people—twelve of them men, including the company CEO, COO, and Executive Chairman. Four

executives are women, thirteen of them are white passing, and three are Black; two Black men and one Black woman. Ben & Jerry's on the other hand has a different executive layout. Since the company is technically under Unilever, they don't have an executive team, but they do have a Board of Directors. This was a deal Ben & Jerry's made before selling the company so they could still commit to their chosen social justice initiatives as they wanted. This is made up of two white men, one white woman, one Black woman, one Black man, and one Indian woman. To me, this signals that Ben & Jerry's is committed to diverse perspectives and is intent on righting the wrongs of exclusion from leadership ranks and include historically underrepresented groups in their corporate decisions. Controversy surrounding Ben & Jerry's is hard to find, however they function under a parent company; *Unilever*. Unilever has been known to violate human rights and treat their workers poorly. A 2019 *Ethical Consumer* article suggests that while their workers were striking, private security guards who were hired by Unilever came and attacked the workers, shooting pepper spray at them (Carlile 2020). In summer of 2020, the African Coalition for Corporate Accountability (ACCA 2020) wrote that "a group of 218 current and former Kenyan tea workers have filed a formal complaint against Unilever to the UN" (ACCA 2020). The complaint included two allegations:

1. *Unilever placed the victims in a position of significant risk of attack on their plantation and yet has refused to provide adequate redress or assistance to the victims. This was the most serious known case of human rights abuse suffered by the largest concentration of Unilever workers anywhere in the world and yet*

Unilever has failed to take adequate steps to address and remediate the impacts (ACCA 2020).

2. *After the violent events, Unilever failed to provide appropriate assistance to the victims and instead unilaterally stopped their wages for a six-month period, further exacerbating their situation. Facing a specific request for remedy from the 218 victims of ethnic violence in 2016 in the form of a civil claim for damages against Unilever in England, the company refused any remediation and sought to block any prospect of access to remedy by hiding behind its corporate structure. In order to prevent the claims from proceeding in England, Unilever insisted that it could not be held legally responsible for any failings of their Kenyan subsidiary, while knowing that these claims could not be brought in Kenya (ACCA 2020).*

It is apparent from their executive teams, as well as their labor practices, both of these companies struggle with remaining consistent in practice with the messaging they attempt to portray in their advertisements. What I show above highlights the relationship between Nike and their celebrity sponsorships and the laborers they employ and abuse. It shows that although they do socially good, their power structures actively work to reproduce structures of inequality, despite what Nike tries to push on their social media and web pages. Though Nike tries to come off as a brand that is ethical and socially aware, their labor practices remain troubling, nor have they hired a diverse executive team to stand by that. Since Ben & Jerry's parent company is in question, they have not called on *Unilever* to change their practices as they call on other institutions to change

theirs remains an open question. *Unilever* gets to appoint a specific number of seats on their board of directors, which is a double-edged sword for Ben & Jerry's. They are caught between continuing to speak out against social injustice elsewhere instead of addressing it from the inside of the Unilever corporation. Both companies are riddled with contradictions. Yet they do continue to engage in social justice work.

Collaborations and new releases are one way that companies like Nike and Ben & Jerry's bring their social justice initiatives to the forefront. On May 23rd of 2020, Nike and Ben & Jerry's released a collaboration on a sneaker design that featured a Nike low dunk with the classic design of a Ben & Jerry's ice cream pint called the *Chunky Dunky Sneakers*. The fact that these two corporations worked together to provide a shoe that was made in a factory with inhumane working conditions, to boost both of their brands, shows how far they need to come to match their ethos with their branding. For the purpose of this thesis, I will be looking at their response to the Black Lives Matter movement and how they utilize activism to their advantage.

CHAPTER THREE: LITERATURE REVIEW

Corporate activism is complex, historically rooted and shaped by broader trends in corporations' interactions with society. This is certainly evident in the cases of Nike and Ben & Jerry's. According to Professors of Management Robert Bies and Jean Bartunek, Business Professor Timothy Fort, and Sociologist Mayer Zald an emerging trend of corporations banding together in pursuit of social good is increasingly common. The authors define corporate positive social change activities as "initiatives to improve the well-being of communities on local and global levels in such areas as health, race relations, the environment, or economic development" (Bies, Bartunek, Fort, Zald 2007:788). As I discuss below, a corporate focus on the social good, is not a new concept but has gained greater steam in the last decade. Variations of corporate social responsibility can be seen across the century, with an ebb and flow depending on several mediating factors. Bies et al point to "the United Nations Global Compact, which involves hundreds of corporations from all regions of the world who work together to advance ten main principles that address human rights, labor, the environment, and anti-corruption policies" (Bies, Bartunek, Fort, Zald 2007:788), as the most recent concerted commitment to positive corporate impact. They explore the question of the role of corporations to take on social change and why they would want to. The goal of the UN Global Compact is to "increase knowledge and the understanding of corporate citizenship in shaping present and future global business leaders" (Bies, Bartunek, Fort, Zald 2007:789). Ultimately, the authors call on scholars to look internally at their assumptions

about what the role of corporations are and how they impact society. The authors mention that “empirical, legal, and philosophical insights are frequently left as separate fields of inquiry” (Bies, Bartunek, Fort, Zald 2007:792). Interdisciplinary scholars should, they argue take these accounts into consideration when researching and theorizing on corporate social good.

The notion that corporations could have altruistic motives has been met with much suspicion by labor movements and critical social scientists who point to poor labor histories at a global scale and deplorable environmental records as evidence of nefarious and fraudulent intent to promote a self- image as corporate “do-gooder” in order to redirect attention away from labor and production related problems. Scholars in business fields often think quite differently though about corporate society interactions. Paul Klein’s article in *The Guardian*, questions if corporate social responsibility is a “casualty of the law of diminishing returns” (Klein 2014). Is social responsibility creating more value or just more checkboxes? Klein interviews four professors from four different business schools who collectively call for a “fundamental rethink of the social purpose of business” (Klein 2014). During Klein’s interviews, Jay Handelman, a professor at Queen’s School of Business, argued that businesses tend to overlook their social impact, for a variety of reasons, but are generally focused on short-term goals, which are often financial (Klein 2014). Klein goes on to say that “getting the views of different sectors could make a significant contribution to redefining the role of corporations as agents of social change” (Klein 2014). In this sense, Klein agrees with Bies, Bartunek, Fort, and Zald in that he also feels that leaders in business school can both add and shape how

corporations can better understand their societal impact. Corporations also face changes in consumer expectation. More consumers are guided by moral concerns, are increasingly skeptical of corporations themselves, and long for authentic and ethically bounded consumer experiences (Brown 2013). This includes consideration of how products are sourced and made, but also in what the corporations decide to take a stand on.

Sociologist Keith Brown's key book *Buying Into Fair Trade: Culture, Morality, and Consumption* focuses on the consumer side of the fair trade market. The fair-trade market is largely there because of consumers who want to participate in a more ethical, conscientious and moral form of consumption. Brown details how in a consumer capitalist world driven by capital and material accumulation, a logic of the next best consumer thing, morally sanctified consumption such as fair trade coffee, chocolate and textiles, can allow consumers to still enjoy the rewards of consuming and dispense with the guilt of reproducing an unequal and unsustainable system. He starts his book by detailing a trip he took to Nicaragua, where it becomes clear that people who engage in fair-trade consumption care about labor issues, yet even fair-trade production is riddled with dilemma after dilemma as we learn coffee producers struggle to make ends meet. Brown's book focuses on how self-identified socially conscious consumers attempt to shop ethically (Brown 2013). Brown also sheds light on how the fair-trade market can help make the world a more "socially just place" (2013). The fair-trade movement tries to resolve the tension arising from capitalism, which profits off of the exploitation of workers and the environment. In theory consumers can still participate in traditional consumption, without the weight of contradiction in knowing their purchases degrade the

environment and increase human suffering. Brown notes that when socially conscious consumers share their experiences of why they shop fair-trade to others, it's often done without the moral high ground to come off better than them. It focuses more on the tangible qualities and benefits fair-trade has, like quality of products and more ethical labor practices. Brown's ethnography examines the consumer perspective, attempting to clarify the complex internal negotiations around the meaning of consumption. While building from insights exploring the intersection of morality and the consumer markets from the consumer angle, I intend to look at how corporations engage in activism in an effort to project a brand identity as ethical, caring and committed to social good. Both hold deep contradictions as I attempt to capture in the discussion that follows. The big question of this thesis is can corporations be agents of positive social change, despite the fact that they often recreate systems of inequality? This literature asks the question of the types of change corporations pursue and the frameworks for understanding them.

Symbols, Branding, and Advertising:

For corporations, it isn't necessarily about the quality of their product, it's often about the symbol. Naomi Klein makes the distinction that the shift from mass marketing to segmented marketing was when corporations needed to start to cultivate a new brand identity. This was because the products were no longer sufficient enough in helping a corporation stand apart from others in the same category. For instance, when drinking a cup of coffee, there is a certain societal place that people give off when they drink Starbucks versus when they drink Dunkin. If every cup of coffee came in a white cup,

that identity marker would be gone, and consumers face the possibility of not telling which cup of coffee came from which place on top of not being able to tie part of their identity to their coffee cup. Corporations' marketing strategies of the past were intended to appeal to everyone, what was once called mass marketing. In the context of growing market competition for various wares, corporations shifted to target markets, focusing on messaging to specific subgroups: Black youth, or moms, or teachers. Seeking out new target markets drives the consumer train. Psychologist and Sociologist Daniel Yankelovich speaks about segmented marketing saying that because segmented marketing is a homegrown theory, drawing from social scientists, it has this "ability to impose patterns of meaning on the immense diversity of the market" (1964). Since segmented marketing thrives because the market is so diverse, it helps solidify the meaning people give to certain brands. As I discussed above, segmented marketing focuses on targeting a specific group of individuals. As an example, we see this with Brighton, a fashion jewelry and accessory brand, which often is marketed towards teachers. They frequently have sales around Teacher Appreciation Week and the start of the traditional school year. The ascendance of symbols has taken a precedence over the manufacturing of products, since corporations are looking to maximize profits, they turned to cutting labor costs down. In return this produced horrible labor practices. At the same time this was happening, corporations sought to be standouts, so they increased advertising budgets, also cutting from labor allowing for these conditions to worsen. For example, Nike has been linked to sweatshops in Vietnam and horrible human rights violation in their factories, however, the signature swoosh has become such a cultural

status symbol that there are people who are willing to turn a blind eye. It's not necessarily the sneakers that mean something, but what society has said about owning a pair of Nike shoes. Klein hypothesizes that "as more people discover the brand-name secrets of the global logo web, their outrage will fuel the next big political movement, a vast wave of opposition squarely targeting transnational corporations, particularly those with very high name-brand recognition" (Klein 2014). Those high recognizable brands include Nike, Disney, McDonald's, and Shell.

Brands exercise influence, shaping consumer behavior. We buy Nike sneakers not because we actually run faster in them, but because of what they represent in the sphere of meaning. Nike is able to capitalize on the surface image of movement, but under the surface Nike has pivoted their brand to almost entirely focus on marketing. They represent much more than an athletic person. The Nike swoosh comes with a status marker that an individual is high-end. Klein mentions that Nike has done this in three ways: having celebrity endorsements, downplaying the competition, and selling pieces of their brand like "it's the Berlin Wall" (Klein 2009). What is critical in this context is the brand ability to transform, reinvent, and attach itself to new images and new signs quickly. Goldman and Papson, authors in *The Consumer Society Reader*, refer to this as *sign value* (1996:84). Sign value is often associated with the status of a product. For instance, consumers attribute more status to someone driving a Tesla than they do someone driving a Honda. Goldman and Papson assert that Nike was able to monopolize the sneaker market largely due to them effectively signing Michael Jordan in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Goldman and Papson 1996:83). Once a brand that had no value

associated with their logo, the use of celebrity endorsements allowed for Nike to gain and assign that value to themselves (Goldman and Papson 1996:89). Consumer tastes are notoriously fickle. To stay current and competitive in a sea of other similar brands, whether we are talking sneakers, coffee, or ice cream it's the meaning that is the key driver. Klein makes this point. As much as the logo is critical for widespread brand recognition, the brand-adaptability also matters. Corporations unable to adapt, will be left behind. We have seen this lack of adaption from failed brands such as Blockbuster, Blackberry, Sears, and even MySpace. Klein highlights Nike's "brand-oriented approach" noting their agility in brand adaption (Klein 2009). That's why "Nike is the champion brand builder" (Willigan 1992). Klein notes that brands who made their logo an integral part of their brand image often have a harder time with this adaption. For instance, the McDonald's golden arches that come together to form a letter 'M' (Klein 2009). It will be hard for McDonald's to adapt their logo because the societal meaning given to them signifies that the arches are for McDonald's and McDonald's only. In Sedona, Arizona there is a McDonald's location that the arches are blue and not gold. This is because the city would not approve the gold color, since it clashed with their scenery (Jones 2018). Since the arches that form an "M" are so engrained in their brand identity, this switch of color had no effect on people identifying that the two arches together were a McDonald's.

Branding is incredibly important, especially in contemporary society of endless and saturated consumption, however, a brand's adaptability to consumer demands is just as important for a corporation to survive and flourish. One dimension of Klein's broader

argument regarding the shift away from the production of things to the production of signs is recognition that consumers can see “behind the brand” and will not support the brand and may even adopt an outspoken activist role, critical of it, if the brand cannot adapt in a context of changing sentiments. For instance, in a current situation, Abercrombie refused to adapt their products to be more size-inclusive. The rise of the body positive movement was successful in launching a sustained critique of retail’s perpetuation of unrealistic body sizes in the actual sizing and in their promotional materials. Corporations unwilling to respond like Abercrombie, ran into trouble. They soon fell behind their competitors as consumers wanted brands to make that shift. Today, many clothing brands feature a broad range of body types in their advertising.

Yet, this example doesn’t fully resolve the paradox of brand loyalty, because consumers are not all powerful. Corporations narrow consumer choices and limit options. Consumers can become aware of underhanded corporate strategy; object vehemently and still purchase their items. We saw this in the Summer of 2020 when a viral post rumored that Starbucks wouldn’t allow their employees to wear apparel that said “Black Lives Matter” in fear of driving part of their consumer base away. That did not stop people from purchasing their coffee from them. Status and brand recognition are powerful drivers of human action, if the sign is powerful and effective, consumers will often resolve these contradictions themselves internally rather than demand change from the corporations themselves. Consumers often accept corporate contradictions, sometimes because of status, sometimes because of brand loyalty. When corporations are able to communicate their genuine commitment to social good, consumers are often inspired to

follow these companies because they believe they are being transparent. Certainly, the growth of fair-trade market items speaks to this changing reality. Ben & Jerry's is a company that I suggest falls into this pattern. Ultimately, the changes in messaging created the conditions for corporations to look simultaneously at their image and their product, even if not in their production related practices.

Sociologists Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson suggest as a society we are socialized to recognize sign values at an early age (1996:82). Goldman and Papson support Klein's argument that brand symbols are more important than the actual products as they argue in *The Age of Accelerated Meaning* those same brand symbols have been commodified themselves. The result is that it isn't the actual products people desire, it's the meaning and the identity associated with the logo. Consumers are often hungry for signifiers that can enable them to claim greater prestige and status and ultimately corporations capitalize off of that feeling. Namely, a *Washington Post* study found that from 24 running shoe brands, the top ten most expensive brands were actually worse quality and got worse reviews from consumers than other, cheaper alternatives (Bernstein 2015). This suggests that for corporations it is about the consumer buying their product as a status marker, and not for the quality of their product. Goldman and Papson make the point that the effect is "class has been erased from public discourse" and the conversation has been shifted to individual lifestyle (Goldman and Papson 1996:97). They mean to suggest, that class, which was once a relatively fixed property is defined now by consumption and lifestyle choices. The deep-rooted inequalities that exist between classes and the relations of production that created them are obscured by the consumer

market, its symbols and its objects. Corporations continue to cash in, encouraging consumers to focus more on their lifestyle so even someone who is poor can purchase and wear a Nike shoe. Nonetheless, they are still poor.

Alissa Quart's *Branded: The Buying and Selling of Teenagers*, also confirms some of these same arguments as she details the nefarious actions of corporations to track and increase what teenagers wear and buy. Corporations tailor advertisements to these teens and aggressively push them into buying (or not buying) anything (Quart 2004). She goes on to argue that because teenagers are engaged in identity projects, the pressure to consume in search of that identity is more intense. Teens as a result are more subjected to buying brand names. Sociology of consumption scholars have long argued that consumption plays a role in achieving or expressing social status and prestige. French sociologist Gabriel de Tarde argues that "consumption has been viewed as an identity resource and as a form of collective behavior" (Nakai 2015). Sociologist Amy Best's book, *Fast Cars, Cool Rides*, shows this sense of identity proclamation as well. Best shows a world in San Jose, California where teenagers use their cars as an expression of their identity. She claims that "identities are not 'attributes' that youth carry around with them in their backpacks but are realized in the practices they take up, the activities that occupy their time, the objects they use, and a complex of relations that organizes their everyday worlds, even if they do not originate in those worlds" (Best 2006). For instance, Best discusses a case of two girls who were selected for MTV's show *Pimp My Ride*, where their cars were each extravagantly redone. Both cars created a sense of individuality for the two girls, further confirming that identity expression is rooted in

symbols. This identity formation and expression is not just the case with cars. This plays into one of Naomi Klein's arguments in her predominant book *No Logo*, where she argues that identities are often formed and tied to symbols that we as an American society give meaning to (Klein 2009).

Sociologist Mary Pattillo also makes this point in her book, *Black Picket Fences*, where she points out that Nike quite literally reigns as the lead status symbol among Black urban youth. Mary Pattillo observes that people will buy these brands to show belonging. Being able to purchase desired objects like Nike sneakers is in a sense a type of cultural participation, made all the more meaningful for marginalized youth of color, often blocked from other types of cultural and social participation. Pattillo argues that first the person buying wants to “signifying to themselves, then to friends, and then to ‘the white man’ that they made it” (Pattillo 1999). The consumer objects value lies in what it communicates. For Ben and Jerry's this means liberalism and progressive values. Nike, on the other hand communicates a cool aesthetic.

Mary Pattillo also discusses how Black youth often buy certain brands because they feel they can aspire to be like the people who represent the brand, which is a direct result of the corporation aggressively pursuing celebrity athletes as brand representatives. Kerry Ferris', *The Sociology of Celebrity*, makes the point that celebrities are often commodified (2007:377). Celebrities are easy targets to commodify because they are seen as god-like figures to humanity. They are capable of doing the selling, but also being sold. Celebrities often serve the purpose of encouraging and validating consumer culture through product endorsements (Ferris 2007:378). We see this in the cases of Tom Brady

and his endorsement of shoe brand Uggs, Taylor Swift and her endorsement of Ked's shoes, and Serena Williams' endorsement of Beats sound brand. With their endorsements, these celebrity examples have helped company's gain profits. As I mentioned above, Nike used Michael Jordan in the late 1980s through the early 1990s as the face of the brand and as an aspirational figure. Jordan represented a way of being Black that challenged the pervasive negative stereotypes promulgated by white society of Black people in the 1990s was a stroke of genius on the part of Nike. They worked to gain greater market share among Black youth, a group who had largely been ignored as consumers by the market. The power of this type of recognition by consumer markets should not be overlooked. The consumer realm continues to operate a space of cultural participation for marginalized youth of color essentially excluded and segregated from other key social settings and institutions (Best 2017, Kotlowitz 1999).

Nike continued pursuing and signing Black professional athletes to hopefully appeal to Black consumers, gain market share and further their profits. In their salient article, Criminologists Jonathan Intravia, Alex Piquero, Nicole Piquero, and Bryan Byers highlight the critical role race played in the acceptance of Nike's use of Colin Kaepernick in their "Just Do It" advertisement in 2018 (Intravia, Piquero, Piquero, & Byers 2019:1222). Based on surveys, they found more Black individuals agreed with Nike's decision to use Kaepernick in their ad, and 81% of Black individuals felt that it was Nike's place to speak about social issues, compared to around 50% of non-Black participants (Intravia, Piquero, Piquero, & Byers 2019:1226). The idea that white people lag behind Black people in their support of Colin Kaepernick is hardly surprising. White

people have long been silent or oppositional in naming racism, their own racial advantage, and Black people's systemic disadvantage resulting from a history of racial exclusion and subjugation (DiAngelo 2012). Until the George Floyd protests, a lot of white individuals did not give much thought to their structured privilege in society, these corporate strategies and engagements, or their role in reproducing racial inequality. The findings also reveal how ideas about Blackness are used in markets, in this case Nike's effort to expand their reach and communicate a brand identity, with real payoff, especially among the Black community who represent an important market segment for Nike.

In reviewing the above literature, I have sought to show here how messaging and meaning came to assume such importance in the work of brand identity construction, often supplanting the product and the means by which it is produced as consumer markets expanded rapidly. Attention to the symbolic work of corporations who broker in meaning as much as objects helps us to understand the circumstances that enable social justice messaging to emerge as part of the broader strategy of corporations to link their wares with specific ideas and even virtues. Social justice messaging among corporations must be understood within the context of branding, but should social justice messaging also be understood as an expression of a corporation's social responsibility? To attempt an answer to this question, first attention must be paid to corporate social responsibility and its history. The next section will focus on the history of corporate social responsibility and how it is used and changed in modern corporations.

Corporate Social Responsibility:

It's important to understand that the notions of corporate social responsibility have always been an integral part of the corporations' directive and not something new. In the 1940s, the social science literature noted a shift in the roles and responsibilities of corporations in the social good (Agudelo, Jóhannsdóttir, and, Davídsdóttir 2019:1). The mid 19th century is when corporate social responsibility as a more widespread practice took root. With the first World War over and the second World War in full swing, expectations that corporations do their part in support of the American war effort meant corporations were expected to forgo profitability in exchange for helping Americans and soldiers. In order to do this, the Lend-Lease Act was passed by President FDR. The act lent supplies to countries that were allies of the United States, and eventually trickled down to Americans and soldiers in the form of "clothing, flour, beans, meat, orange juice, and other food goods" (Seidl, N.d.). Hormel, who produced Spam, partnered with the government through the Lend-Lease program to provide food supplies for those affected by the war (Myles 2019). During this period, corporations were starting to be seen as institutions with social obligations, however, it was not until the 1950s when those responsibilities would be discussed more fully within and among the business community (Agudelo, Jóhannsdóttir, and, Davídsdóttir 2019:3). In the 1950s, Sociologist Howard Bowen argued that social responsibilities for businesses looked like "the obligations of businessmen to pursue policies, to make decisions, or to follow lines of action which are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of our society" (1953). It is known that Bowen was well ahead of his time in thinking that businesses were linked to social

impact, and for this he has been crowned the “Father of Corporate Social Responsibility” (Agudelo, Jóhannsdóttir, and, Davídsdóttir 2019:4). An ethos of responsibility for corporations continued to evolve in the 1960. With the rise of protest culture in the 1960s, a larger number of consumers viewed corporations with a critical eye. As protests shifted from small student-led initiatives to full blown political activism directed toward large organization entities, corporations became the next target for protestors to change. Activists applied pressure on companies to change, focusing primarily on companies affiliated with the war (Agudelo, Jóhannsdóttir, and, Davídsdóttir 2019:4). In 1960, William Frederick constructed five requirements to keep businesses in check. The five requirements included: 1) to have a criteria of value (in this case for economic production and distribution), 2) to be based on the latest concepts of management and administration, 3) to acknowledge the historical and cultural traditions behind the current social context, 4) to recognize that the behavior of an individual businessmen is a function of its role within society and its social context, and, 5) to recognize that responsible business behavior does not happen automatically but on the contrary, it is the result of deliberate and conscious efforts (Frederick 1960). Archie Carroll offered a definition of corporate social responsibility in 1979 as being assigned “economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary responsibility and expectations upon corporations” (Agudelo, Jóhannsdóttir, and, Davídsdóttir 2019:15). The 1980s witnessed a shift away from corporate social responsibility, as President Ronald Reagan argued heavily for the social pressure to be taken off of businesses for the free market to flourish (Agudelo, Jóhannsdóttir, and, Davídsdóttir 2019:6). A myriad of problems can be traced to unregulated markets,

including increasing social inequality and environmental degradation. Sustainability was brought to the forefront in the 1980s when both the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and the Exxon Valdez oil spill occurred. Modern environmental movements and anti-nuclear movements had been organizing since the 1970s. Their sustained attention to these problems combined with the disastrous effect of Valdez and Chernobyl, created a space for reconsideration and greater calls for corporate responsibility. During the 1980s, corporations were essentially free agents, unrestrained and free to pursue profits and cast aside moral and ethical concerns (Dudley 2019). These events led to the creation of the “European Commission’s Environment Directorate-General, the establishment of the World Commission on Environment and Development, and the creating of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Agudelo, Jóhannsdóttir, and, Davídsdóttir 2019:7). In the 2000s, there were huge strides in CSR practices. Craig Smith (2020) notes that public interest was the driver for corporate policies changing and as a result of these changes there was often a positive social impact (2000:24). He argues that if CSR were to become a foundation in a company’s strategic plan, it would help them become more successful in the future. Smith states that “these obligations go beyond legal requirements and the firm’s duties to its shareholders. Fulfillment of these obligations is intended to minimize any harms and maximize the long-run beneficial impact of the firm on society” (Smith 2000:3). Agudelo, Jóhannsdóttir, and, Davídsdóttir argue that “the year of 2015 can be considered as the most relevant in the decade because the 15 years to follow after it will be marked by the Paris Agreement, the launch of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and the adoption of seventeen Sustainable Development Goals...”

(2019:14). These Sustainable Development Goals specifically do not mention the private sector, so it allows for a gap that corporate CSR models can fill and continue to grow. Countries that adopt these goals will still have to create specific policies to either implement or improve current structures that will in return pressure private sectors to create some form of a CSR model (Agudelo, Jóhannsdóttir, and, Davídsdóttir 2019:14). Corporate social responsibility objectives have continued to evolve since the 1970s. Corporate Social Responsibility challenges a company to balance economic, environmental, and social issues, while also trying to protect their partners' and stockholder interest. From the perspective of social movements, corporate responsibility as a doctrine often falls short. There is considerable debate as to the drivers of corporate social responsibility. Unido, the “specialized agency of the United Nations that promotes industrial development for poverty reduction, inclusive globalization and environmental sustainability” (2020), offers that although CSR is valuable there should be a distinction between the CSR and a corporation’s personal philanthropic work in order to appease various stakeholders. This distinction should be made because corporate philanthropy work focuses on forms like financial contributions, time and resources, while CSR works draws on the business model to make a company more socially just.

According to Laura Illia et al., “stakeholders believe companies perform CSR for their own advantage instead of to benefit the community or society at large” (2015:40). Illia et al details how corporations utilize the digital spaces online to discuss CSR issues. For example, corporations have opted into using social media platforms and online forums to discuss and “develop a collective agenda on future issues” (Illia et al 2015:45).

A small but growing number of corporations have also started to include their employees into conversations around CSR, with the help of online forums and video calling systems. CISCO did this with its *Connected Healthy Children* project that aimed to “transform children’s healthcare through collaborative technologies” (Illia et al 2015:52). The online spaces include “those designed for co-learning, co-innovating, and co-deciding” (2015: 54). These spaces allow for stakeholders, corporate officials, and internet users to discuss issues of CSR, such as costs, reputation, and clashing views of employees, executives, and stakeholders. Without a doubt social media has played a crucial part in these dialogues, even allowing the corporations I will discuss in my research to hold these discussions with a large and willing group of individuals who hold differing expectations. With the help of consumer suggestions and their CSR team, Ben & Jerry’s highlights three parts for their “path forward” to help achieve racial equity in their 2019 Social & Environmental Assessment Report (SEAR). These included “building transformational knowledge, setting performance measures, and sustaining a strong operationalization” (*SEAR N.d.*). A large number of the CSR dialogues focus on the individual corporation itself instead of situating it as a whole realm in society. Sarah Feldner and Kati Tusinski Berg examine the structure of actual CSR reports and make the argument that the CSR report functions as a way for corporations to manage both stakeholder expectations and legitimate corporate behaviors, some of which are questionable (2014:16). Feldner and Tusinski identify the benefit to utilize both the CSR reports and online dialogues for corporations to be held responsible by the company’s shareholders and the public to become more socially conscious. This is because a CSR report comes from an internal

evaluation, while adding the consumer response from online dialogues might help corporations see how their efforts are being perceived and learn what consumers want.

We are in a moment of redefinition regarding the nature of corporate social responsibility. In a 2020 Harvard Business Review article, Lily Zheng detailed how corporations could become more socially conscious for reasons beyond enhanced marketing, suggesting a different set of motivations for responsible corporate behavior. Lily Zheng calls for a shift from the traditional corporate social responsibility, which she defines as using social issue marketing, philanthropic efforts, employee volunteer initiatives, and diversity and inclusion work to satisfy customers and build their brands (2020) to what she coins “corporate social justice” (2020). Corporate Social Justice (CSJ) reframes CSR, so it centers the initiatives on “the lived experiences of groups harmed and disadvantaged by society” (Zheng 2020). She claims that “consumers and other stakeholders want companies that see social good as a necessity, and not just a marketing strategy” (Zheng 2020). She concludes her article with various ways that corporations could start incorporating the corporate social justice model into their business, laying out that the first step is to recognize that this is needed for a more just society. Zheng’s call suggests corporations share the responsibility of social betterment yet, cultural critics and social scientists have long been skeptical of the professed aims of CSR. The social media response to this article was highly positive. Many consumer Twitter accounts agreed with Zheng’s point that corporations need to take a stand regardless if it will isolate some of their consumers. Users agreed that there is no time to be silent anymore. Nike and Ben &

Jerry's have both taken the first steps and have moved on to the fourth step which is to take an unabashed stand even if it alienates some of their consumers.

Sociologist Jill Timms discusses how CSR should be used to unify rather than to divide. She argues that there are four main types of CSR agendas: a) Political which focuses the messaging on “acting responsibly which is good for competitiveness and business growth”, b) Corporate, which focuses on “how business have a positive social role even when in crisis”, c) Professional which focuses on “CSR as an expert field for businesses to survive”, and d) Activist which focus on how CSR demonstrates the failure of voluntarism and the need for regulation” (Timms 2017:109,117). Timms argues that sociologists need to get involved in CSR literature in order to help better understand what exactly CSR encompasses and to help fuse together the many definitions that come with it. A myriad of corporations who utilize a CSR model and/or CSJ are so accepting of it because the models offer a way to self-regulate their own practices. Sociologists and Business scholars alike have determined that the corporations want the benefits of looking socially just, without the actual commitment to accountability. There is a growing amount of literature around corporate accountability, the difference between that and CSR, and what accountability would look like for corporations, which I discuss more in Chapter 5. Political Scientist Kate Macdonald and Cross-Disciplinary Scholar Shelley Marshall define corporate accountability as “the more confrontational or enforceable strategies of influencing corporate behavior” (N.d). This places CSR as a more voluntary position for corporations, whereas corporate accountability could potentially have legal ramifications. It's important to note that corporations generally do not want to be held

accountable by the state or the country, they want to be able to regulate their systems themselves, so corporate accountability would not benefit their bottom dollar per say.

Both Nike and Ben & Jerry's made a gamble by taking a heavy stand on Black Lives Matter, however it has worked out to their benefit in both cases. In 2018, Nike almost cut ties with Colin Kaepernick instead of embracing him, but one Nike executive was worried that not supporting him and what he kneeled for "could lead to repercussions in the media and with consumers" (Singer 2018). Nike and Ben & Jerry's are both seen as part of a broader conversation of racial justice, Twitter even going as far to award Ben & Jerry's with the "Best brand speaking out and standing up" award.⁶ Once corporations commit to CSJ, they have the opportunity to be evaluated to become a certified B Corporation. Ben & Jerry's has been granted B Corporation status, while Nike has not. The next section examines social enterprises and certified B Corporations, which are similar to CSJ, in that they assess companies on transparency, accountability, impact on employees, community, the environment, and the beneficial impact of its product.

Social Enterprises and the Case of Certified B Corporations in the United States:

Social enterprises, which are "businesses that trade for a social or environmental purpose" (Dale and Kyle 2017:81), use their business practices to address social needs. Most importantly, social enterprises are not necessarily profit driven or focused solely on shareholder demands. Although social enterprises can and often do make some form of

⁶ Twitter Marketing's Twitter Page, accessed April 28, 2021, <https://twitter.com/TwitterMktg/status/1334498793530732550>

profit, usually it is put back in to enhance whatever social causes the business supports and/or advances. According to Sociologists John Dale and David Kyle, in the United States, social enterprises may be legally structured as “non-profit organizations, for-profit organizations, co-operatives, microenterprises, benefit corporations (B corps), low-profit liability corporations (L3Cs), or flexible-purpose corporations” (2017:84). Ultimately, some businesses focus on using their structures to solve social problems without the constraints of shareholder priorities. For the purpose of this thesis, I have spotlighted B Corporations, as Ben & Jerry’s has this recognition and Nike does not.

According to the official website for B Corporations, a business can be classified as a certified Benefit Corporation (B Corporation or B Corp for short) if they meet the “highest standards of verified social and environmental performance, public transparency, and legal accountability to balance profit and purpose” (*About B Corps*). Not every socially just corporation will receive B Corp status, in fact, there are only 3,905 companies globally that have earned this status. Among those businesses include Patagonia, Tillamook, Sunday Riley, and Ben & Jerry’s. As mentioned above, Nike does not hold a B Corporation certification, which raises important questions about the reach of their social commitments. When a company gains this certification, they sign a declaration of interdependence that states:

“We envision a global economy that uses business as a force for good. This economy is comprised of a new type of corporation - the B Corporation- which is purpose-driven and creates benefits for all stakeholders, not just shareholders. As B Corporations and leaders of this emerging economy, we believe:

- *That we must be the change we seek in the world.*
- *That all business ought to be conducted as if people and place mattered.*
- *That, through their products, practices, and profits, businesses should aspire to do no harm and benefit all.*
- *To do so requires that we act with the understanding that we are each dependent upon another and thus responsible for each other and future generations” (About B Corps N.d.).*

There are various reasons that a company would want to gain this certification including to protect their mission statement, build relationships, and to improve their social impact (*Why Companies Certify* N.d.).

Overall, the B Corp movement established formal procedures for corporations to commit to being socially just organizations. It is important to note that many human rights scholars and business scholars view the B Corp as the bridge between business and human rights (Woods 2016:94). However, the way that I see it and also how it is playing out in my research is that although gaining a B Corp certification suggests commitment to a different corporate logic focused on improving society and their corporate impact, it is not enough and often times does not hold the companies accountable for other circumstances that might be socially unjust related to their company; labor issues, gender discrimination, racial discrimination, etc. There is sometimes a disconnect between company’s marketing and operations that allow for many corporations to appear as though they are socially just from the outside looking in, but internal operations reveal a

multitude of practices that contradict this. The B Corp certification is just a step toward a more collaborative link of business and social commitment.

Corporations Part in Activism:

By now, we have all heard the popular TikTok phrase “open your purse” which was created in 2020 in response to the mass release of corporate statements condemning police brutality (Farhat 2020). Popularized by content creator Rosa, it is aimed at celebrities and corporations to push them beyond the performative act of phony statements and into financially contributing to organizations that can make the changes for a more just society. As corporations dip their toes into corporate activism, they will need to pivot from saying what they think their consumer wants to hear, not see this as an opportunity to cash in, but commit to authentic, substantial activism. This would include diversifying the company’s internal team, financial contributions to social justice organizations, and calling or partnering with congresspeople to make intentional and lawful changes in the public’s best interest. Rhianna, a music icon, has launched a few companies including *Fenty*, a fashion brand, *Fenty Beauty*, a cosmetic brand, and *Savage X Fenty*, a lingerie brand. On June 2nd, 2020 Rhianna paused sales in support of the Black Lives Matter Movement. She released a personal statement on Instagram saying “we ain’t buying shit!!! And we ain’t selling shit neither!! Gang gang! #BLACKOUTTUESDAY

AF!!! @fenty @fentybeauty @savagexfenty.”⁷ Her companies later posting a formal statement saying:

*“Fenty as a brand was created to elevate beauty, power and freedom! At this very moment racists are attempting to rip those values away from Black people and we will not stand by and let that happen. We are too powerful, creative and resilient. In support of the Black community, we will be donating funds to Color of Change and Movement for Black Lives. We ask you to speak up, stand up, and pull up against racism and discrimination in all forms... Fenty will NOT be conducting any business on Tuesday June 2—globally.”*⁸

This gesture shows that corporations have the option to value human rights over their bottom dollar, but some chose not to. Corporations who don’t commit to authenticity are labeled as performative, largely by other activists and the public. I suggest that being labeled as performative indicates that a corporation is engaging in activism to better their social status among consumers. Social scientist Marissa Wood examines performative functions in regard to the #MeToo movement provides a useful framework to understand what is simply performative and absent concrete outcomes and action that result in concrete change. She defines performative actions as when someone is “doing something with their words” (Wood 2018). There are two major conclusions from Wood’s study: performative activism is used often to promote solidarity and it can be used to assert

⁷ Rhianna’s Instagram Page, accessed April 28, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CA6_ckAHFvR/?utm_source=ig_embed

⁸ Fenty’s Instagram Page, accessed April 28, 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CA684X7oYEe/?utm_source=ig_embed

knowledge onto others (Wood 2018). This translates to corporations because when corporations engage in a performative action, they are trying to stand in solidarity with activists and social justice causes. In reality consumers can identify that it is performative and can then gage the authenticity of that corporation. Becoming a certified B Corporation is also a way to gain notoriety and gain brand recognition in a highly competitive consumer market where lots of brands get lost.

There is growing skepticism regarding corporate social responsibility, by consumers, calling corporations out on the stances they take, based on either practice they participate in or they are doing “performative activism” and not actually following through with what they commit to do. Tracy Jan, et al., highlights the disconnect between corporate rhetoric and corporate action. Large corporations in America say they support Black Lives Matter, but that is all they do. In their corporate boards there is no follow-up, no internal changes, and no ownership to their own actions. They are empty words and empty promises. Employees at companies such as Walmart, Google, and Wayfair (Gurchiek 2019) have long called for policy change and for higher level executives to take ownership for their companies’ actions and their personal actions and often are met with little response, with some exception. In response to an El Paso mass shooting at Walmart, employees across the nation organized a 15-minute walkout and moment of silence in August of 2019 to protest the sale of firearms (Gurchiek 2019). In response to these employee-led protests, Walmart pulled all sales of ammunition for handguns and assault style rifles in their stores and asked their customers to refrain from bringing a gun into the store even if state law said that was legal (Balu and Fares 2019). It could be

argued that this signaled a shift in tides as corporate executives are now under a microscope and are often criticized from the public for their inaction or outright abominable behavior. The founder and CEO of CrossFit was pressured to retire due to him saying vile things in the wake of George Floyd's murder, including "We're not mourning for George Floyd—I don't think me or any of my staff are" (Jan et al 2020:4). Though Ben & Jerry's and have conflicting records as corporations, other companies could take notes on their strategy for incorporating social justice. What also seems clear is that statements that are blatantly anti-justice are no longer acceptable to the wider public particularly since consumers have shifted to voting with their dollars. So, when corporations and their leadership violate the changing set of corporate behavioral norms, they can expect a flood of public scrutiny, suggesting corporations must adapt to the changing sentiments of the American public and when they don't, trouble awaits. Some corporations may weather the storm as in the cases of the NFL and their decision to release Colin Kaepernick from his contract or Disney who were able to overcome accusations of tokenism, but public opinions of inappropriate corporate behavior do exercise some influence to reshape corporations and their internal processes.

In fact, new occupational categories have emerged to guide corporations in navigating the increasingly complex social responsibility social justice landscape along which corporations must travel. These individuals are called Social Intrapreneurs and they are responsible for creating a profitable product, service, or business model that benefits both society and the company (Jenkins 2018). They help companies meet sustainability commitments and create a mutual value between customers and

communities (Jenkins 2018). Take for instance BP oil company's determination to salvage their image after the 2010 BP oil spill. They ran campaigns that BP cares and that they don't partake in negligent safety practices, attempting to counter the reality of the situation. BP Oil has a record of cutting safety corners, which we saw once the oil spill happened. It would be the job of the social intrapreneur to rethink how these corporations can recover from their mistakes and ultimately decide what would be mutually beneficial to the public and to the company. Though this sounds like a positive, according to the Stanford Social Innovation Review, one problem of social intrapreneurship is what they call the "corporate immune system", where corporate executives chose to focus on expanding existing programs and businesses as opposed to starting a new program (Jenkins 2018). For instance, Apple Inc. went through a series of ideas in the 1990s that made its way through the company but could have been detrimental to the sales of already made Apple products. One of these ideas challenged the concept of the *Apple Newton*, a personal digital assistant that looked similar to an iPad with an attached stylus pen. As a result of this conflict, the creator of the *Apple Newton* almost quit (Knight-Ridder 1993) and the *Apple Newton* ended up failing. Sociologists Gerald Davis and Christopher White argue that social intrapreneurs are necessary as the world changes. They argue that as consumers seek a more ethical approach to their consumption patterns "smart companies will enable their employees to help guide them on important social issues, a role for which social intrapreneurs are well suited" (Davis and White 2015). Davis and White point to a changing dynamic between social movements and corporations. They suggest that corporations can benefit from supporting social

movements, which will allow for more activism within the corporate settings (Davis & White 2015). Social intrapreneurs are not the same as activists who put pressure on corporations to make a change, of course as social intrapreneurs don't pressure a company to do anything, they are there to guide the company to make more ethical decisions or at least the appearance of them. Activists are different from social intrapreneurs, as activists tends to stand outside the corporation and social intrapreneurs inside it. Likewise, the activist networks are much larger and are not necessarily regulated by any other person. Activist networks have access to both in-person and online networks. Social Intrapreneurs are not the drivers of change, unlike activists. They are there to mediate and attempt to manage scrutiny. Yet Davis and White argue at the same time social activists and social intrapreneurs are similar in that they both "operate without the benefit of formal institutional authority to create what they perceive to be positive change" (2015). Davis and White suggest social intrapreneurs are the key to corporations changing. They often bring the social issues to the right people and can under the right conditions encourage other corporations to do the same thing. For example, if Target raises their minimum pay to 15 dollars after being presented the pros and cons from a social intrapreneur, it could set in motion Walmart doing the same. This kind of corporate network influence could be useful in changing corporate behavior. Activists are different from intrapreneurs. They can function similarly, though activism tend to stand outside the corporation and intrapreneurs inside it. Likewise, the activist networks are much larger and are not necessarily regulated by any other person. Activist networks have access to both in-person and online networks.

Business and Corporate Law Professor Jennifer Fan's important article *Woke Capital: The Role of Corporations in Social Movements*, addresses how corporations engage in activism and the crucial role media plays in pushing for corporations to become more socially just (2019:444). Fan details that the "evolving role of the corporation, the advent of social media, and the effect of shareholders, managers, and consumers on businesses have pushed corporations to become leaders on social issues and influencers in social movements in particular" (2019:445). She offers that US corporations get involved in social movements because of societal pressure to do so. If they chose to withhold speaking on social issues it could have negative impacts on the company. She noted that a 2016 Public Affairs Council study mentioned that over "three quarters of corporations whose revenue is 15 billion dollars annually have experienced an increase of pressure to take a socially just stand" (Fan 2019:453). Fan also identifies how business law does not allow or advise corporations to get involved in social movements. She argues that corporations are often pressured by internal members to not participate in social movements in order to avoid liability. Suggesting the road to activism is bumpy, corporations interested in CSR must navigate competing demands as they strive to serve the social good and ensure profit returns (Fan 2019: 461). This is why corporations who make large profits need to not only evolve their companies but get involved in socially just causes.

John Campbell points out that little literature has discussed why corporations choose to utilize a CSR model, as he identifies the "conditions corporations are likely to behave in socially responsible ways" (2007:946). These conditions include public and

private regulation, the presence of nongovernmental and other independent organizations, institutional norms, and organized dialogues among corporations (Campbell 2007:946). Campbell notes that the consumption literature does not address the harmful effects of social responsibility. He suggests that certain institutions affect corporations and effectively push them into or out of acting in a socially just way. The institutions Campbell outlines are regulatory, normative, associative, and stakeholder. Regulatory institutions refer to the state's regulations that are put into place. These regulations include workplace safety measures. Campbell pointed out that "during the 1980s and 1990s the government deregulation created an environment for US corporations to act in more socially irresponsible ways" (2007:954). Normative institutions are ones that most people are familiar with. He argues that the idea that "managers seek to act in ways that are deemed appropriate by other managers and significant actors in their environment" (Campbell 2007:958) could be a normative institution. They are what most people see as the "corporate norms" of a company. Associative institutions build on associative governance. For instance, in the United Kingdom or Germany, since those countries are more susceptible to associative governance, they have "property rights in place that are more supportive of collective business activity" (Campbell 2007:956). Finally, stakeholder institutions refer to this idea that a corporation would be more likely to engage in corporate social responsibility if their stakeholders were involved and wanted it (Campbell 2007:962). Though this article discusses the potential negative effects of corporate social responsibility, it still focuses mainly on stakeholders and profits. Campbell's whole argument is centered on "that economic conditions affect the degree to

which corporations act in socially responsible ways...” (2007:953). Campbell concludes with this idea that overall the economy is what decides if corporations engage with social justice, however, there are other factors that could persuade them like “engaging with unions, employees, or community groups” (2007:962). These various institutions Campbell introduces are necessary for corporations to help guide and refocus these company’s decisions to include social responsibility. All things considered, there are accountability structures in place to both help corporations engage with social justice and prevent them from engaging in social justice.

Frequently as corporations engage with consumers and other interested parties, their stake in social justice increases. As a result of these CSR efforts, political engagement within civil society has also grown. This participation takes the form of activism, voting, educating, and advocating for social change. It is a double-edged sword as many consumers have become increasingly brand selective based on the corporation’s record of social giving and social justice. Corporations that are socially just, create the conditions for companies to take a stand on social justice issues if they can foreshadow the profit that will come from committing to them.

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

In this project I attempt to understand how corporations utilize activism and how their activism structures adjust once consumers engage with their social media posts. Since I am looking at how corporations use activism and not focusing on the consumer themselves, and because of COVID-19 restrictions, an online qualitative content analysis would enable me to answer my research questions and conduct a study that was possible under COVID. According to Hsieh and Shannon, “qualitative content analysis can be categorized into inductive and deductive analysis and then further categorized into conventional, directed, and summative analysis” (2005:1278). I used what Hsieh and Shannon would classify as “conventional content analysis” as I am working with an existing theory, but the literature is limited (2005:1279). In a conventional content analysis, the researcher avoids using preconceived categories and allow the categories and names to flow from the data” (Hsieh and Shannon 2005:1279). “The conventional approach to content analysis is limited in both theory development and description of the lived experience” (Hsieh and Shannon 2005:1780). This means that researchers who use this type of content analysis are faced with limitations on what they can do with their findings other than potentially create some new concepts/terms from them. This is in contrast to other types of content analysis that allow researchers to develop their own theories.

An unforeseen challenge that affected my project was the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to March of 2020, I was conducting field research in a small political shop called

The Outrage in downtown DC. I planned on conducting an ethnography for this project and have it focus more on ethical consumption, however because of COVID-19 the store closed for a considerable amount of time to help mitigate the spread. Since *The Outrage* closed and the unjust killing of Black individuals that happened this summer, I shifted gears and focused on a type of methodology that would keep me and others at home and safe from COVID-19.

I conducted an online qualitative content analysis to examine two specific corporations and their social media feeds: Nike and Ben & Jerry's. I selected the Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram pages from Nike and Ben & Jerry's, since they are the most utilized social media platforms. Since these social media accounts are visible to the public, anyone has access to them online. I collected a total of 1,886 Tweets, 211 Facebook posts, 211 Instagram posts, and 328 news articles in between May 25th, 2020 and January 20th, 2021. I also examined online news articles featuring the two companies and the company histories that have been produced regarding the two brands. I also used both the George Mason University Library resources page to find news articles and the Google News tab to find additional content.

Data Collection

I started by looking at the social media pages and online news articles from these two corporations beginning on May 25th, 2020 through January 20th, 2021 for a total of almost eight months. I collected this data over three days. I then went through each post and looked at the username, title, and posting date to ensure I was not saving duplicate

information. The reason I chose this timeline is because May 25th, 2020 was the day that George Floyd was murdered, prompting a national outcry from Black Lives Matter organizers and resulting in protests starting in Minneapolis, Minnesota on May 26th, 2020 and then nationally shortly after (Taylor 2020). I ended my research on January 20th, 2021 when presidential power was transferred on inauguration day from Donald Trump to President Joe Biden. Originally, I planned on ending this research on Election Day in November, however what ensued in the seventy-eight days before the shift in presidential power, including the former president's refusal to concede the election, which resulted in the January 6th, 2021 insurrection of the Capitol, which could not go unnoticed. This timeline is consistent with the shift in mass media coverage of protests from the Black Lives Matter movement in the Summer of 2020 to the coverage of the U.S. Presidential election.

To identify relevant social media posts, I collected any post that had the following criteria;

- Any post that referenced Black Lives Matter or the causes they stand for (including mass incarceration, police brutality, and Black liberation)
- Any post that referenced police brutality
- Any post that referenced Civil Rights (including slavery, Jim Crow laws, and reparations)
- Any post that referenced “defund the police”
- Any post that referenced racism, and tweets that appear on the company page whether that be directly from the company or a retweet.

- Any post that referenced current political events (like voting and climate change)
- and
- Any of Nike's #YouCan'tStopUs campaign

I classified the last two bullet points in a separate category of social justice posts that do not fall under the perimeters of Black Lives Matter. As for the collection of news articles, I utilized the Google News tab online and searched key terms such as *Nike*, *Ben & Jerry's*, *Nike BLM*, *Ben & Jerry's BLM*, *Ben & Jerry's Activism*, and *Nike Activism*. I followed the same criteria as above and collected any news article that mentioned any form of social activism. To collect these articles, I filtered the search to go month by month so I could minimize the margin of error or artificial intelligence bias.

When all data were collected, I had accumulated and analyzed the following totals: 1,886 Tweets, 211 Facebook posts, 221 Instagram posts, and 328 news articles between the two corporations. I then manually coded this collection using three broad codes: Black Lives Matter justice posts, Non-BLM social justice posts and posts that did not discuss social justice at all. From there I looked at more concentrating themes such as brand promotions, condemning white supremacy, and if their brand participated in the perpetuation of anti-Blackness. I define anti-Blackness posts as one that a) uplift white voices that adopt pro-white rhetoric, b) suppress the knowledge and opinions on racial justice from Black individuals, and c) purposely does not addressing internal issues, like labor practices, that harm communities of color. Finally, I analyzed how the corporations responded to their consumers around different justice themes.

In coding my data, I utilized an emergent coding strategy which is most often used in content analysis (Stemler 2001). I first read through the articles and social media posts and made notes of the above themes. Then I separated the articles and social media posts into what I classified as concrete activism and spontaneous activism. This will be discussed more in the conclusion and discussion section, but I classified concrete activism as acts that will provide some tangible effect on society, like donations, podcast shows, or links to petitions and spontaneous activism as acts like calling out other corporations with no backing or responding to tweets with a generic message.

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS

“Oh no... @benandjerrys is making doggie ice cream now!? As usual, feel free to have all my money. Anti-racism + dogs + ice cream = love.”⁹ While analyzing my dataset, I came across this tweet from a public Twitter user. Undoubtedly, this shows that consumers will purchase from companies that align with their values and interests. Once I completed coding, there were three major themes that were present in the social media posts, news articles, and regular articles I examined for this project: Conscientious Activism, Performance Activism, and Reactive Activism. I define Conscientious Activism as taking a bold, shameless stand on a social justice issue, Performance Activism as taking a stand on a social justice issue to appear proactive or to appear socially just, and Reactive Activism as taking a stand on an issue in response to pressure from consumers, the state, or other corporations. This chapter examines how I came to these themes, a breakdown of social media posts and news articles, and how corporate activism fit into each theme.

The breakdown of social media posts and news articles I examined in regard to these two corporations can be found below in Table 1 and Table 2.

⁹ Twitter page withheld to protect confidentiality of individual, accessed April 11, 2021.

Table 1: Ben & Jerry's Data Collection

Twitter	Facebook	Instagram	News Articles
Social justice tweets relevant to BLM: 143	Social justice posts relevant to BLM: 58	Social justice posts relevant to BLM: 59	Social justice articles relevant to BLM: 122
Non-BLM social justice tweets: 110	Non-BLM social justice posts: 38	Non-BLM social justice posts: 34	Non-BLM social justice articles: 84
BLM related retweets: 5			
Non-BLM social justice related retweets: 7			
Miscellaneous Tweets: 1284	Miscellaneous Posts: 115	Miscellaneous Posts: 108	Miscellaneous Articles: 15
Final total: 1,549	Final total: 211	Final total: 201	Final total: 222

Table 2: Nike's Data Collection

Twitter	Facebook	Instagram	News Articles
Social justice tweets relevant to BLM: 5	Social justice posts relevant to BLM: 0	Social justice posts relevant to BLM: 6	Social justice articles relevant to BLM: 73
Non-BLM social justice tweets: 9	Non-BLM social justice posts: 0	Non-BLM social justice posts: 8	Non-BLM social justice posts: 3
Miscellaneous Tweets: 323	Miscellaneous Posts: 0	Miscellaneous Posts: 7	Miscellaneous Posts: 30
Final Total: 337	Final Total: 0	Final Total: 21	Final Total: 106

As you can see in the tables, between Nike and Ben & Jerry's, the number of posts on their social media account is drastically different. I discuss the reason why this may be more fully in the conclusion and discussion chapter.

I define the miscellaneous categories as any company product promotions, responses to consumers about products or issues, and news articles that had the company name in the title but was either about product promotion or non-social justice related issues. I classified data as Conscientious Activism if the post or article appeared to be genuine. This looked like posts that interacted with their consumer base, posts that prominently called out injustices, and articles that described company activism as authentic or sincere. I classified data as Performance Activism if the post or article copied a generic or scripted blueprint of calling out injustices. Timing also played a huge role in deciding if something was performative or not. If a company released a statement only after being called out by the public, I classified it as performative. I also considered if the corporation had spoken out on social issues previously. I reviewed retweets from various companies to see if they would continue to post, regardless of the attention their personal brand was getting. Finally, I classified something as Reactive Activism if the post or article came after the corporation received public criticism or private scrutiny. I also evaluated something as conscientious, performative, and reactive based upon the consumer response to the posting. For example, L'Oréal Paris released an Instagram post stating "speaking out is worth it. L'Oréal Paris stands in solidarity with the Black community, and against injustice of any kind. We are making a commitment to the @naacp to support progress in the fight for justice. #BlackLivesMatter."¹⁰ In response to this, several consumers called out the company for being hypocritical, as they fired their

¹⁰ L'Oréal Paris' Instagram Page, accessed April 23, 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CA5MXbdD8ts/?hl=en>

first Black Transgender ambassador in 2017 for standing up against racism (McGonagle 2020). One consumer saying “@lorealparis is not a brand for this decade. Don’t think you can be forgiven for your treatment of @munroebergdorf.”¹¹ Another consumer saying “The hypocrisy is LAUGHABLE. Lies! The Lies! I have to laugh. #istandwithmunroe.”¹² The consumer response shows how the message is being represented and the news articles show how these messages are being seen by the public at large.

I further classified the news articles into five main categories which are detailed below:

- Articles from Local News: which included 39 articles written from local news channels from NBC, ABC, CBS, CBC, and other local news.
- Articles from Well-known sources with a national audience: which include 88 articles from well-known news organizations like *The New York Times*, *The New York Post*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, *CNN*, *Fox*, and *The Guardian*.
- Opinion Editorials (Op-eds): which included 146 articles from lesser known news networks and were classified as opinions on the websites.
- Articles from University Papers or Non-profits: which included 19 articles from university newspapers or blog posts.

¹¹ Instagram page withheld to protect confidentiality of individual, accessed April 23, 2021.

¹² Instagram page withheld to protect confidentiality of individual, accessed April 23, 2021.

- Articles from Business/Marketing Platforms: which included 36 articles from business sources including *Bloomberg Business*, *Harvard Business Review*, and *World Trade Market Review*.

Theme #1: Conscientious Activism:

There is a growing list of corporations whose brand identity is based in part on the premise of doing good and is largely aligned with progressive causes. Besides Ben & Jerry's and Nike, these corporations include Patagonia, Chobani Greek Yogurt, and Zappos. These corporations go far beyond Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) into what Marketing Professors Meike Eilert and Abigail Cherup call "Corporate Activism" (2020). Corporate Activism refers to "a company's willingness to take a stand on social, political, economic, and environmental issues to create societal change by influencing the attitudes and behaviors of actors in its institutional environment" (Eilert and Cherun 2020:38). Nearly 50 percent of articles I collected and analyzed referred to corporate activism as a way to describe both Ben & Jerry's and Nike and pointed out that they both go beyond the standard CSR model other corporations follow. But what factors shaped this perception? When looking into what made these two corporations stand out, it became quite apparent that authenticity of message was the strongest factor. Throughout the 195 articles about corporate activist position relating back to Nike and Ben & Jerry's activism within the BLM movement, the term *authentic* was used a total of 61 times for

Ben & Jerry's and fifty times for Nike. The term *genuine* was used 32 times for Ben & Jerry's and ten times for Nike, suggesting authenticity and genuineness are high value virtues. There are four main components to authentic corporate activism: a) an understanding of the cause, b) strong brand values, c) commitment to the cause, and d) set activism efforts in place to support the cause (Holland 2020). Corporations that can communicate these values in their messaging with their actions will likely hit it off with consumers. One Twitter user exclaimed "Ben & Jerry's is on this week's Bloomberg issue. Corporate activism with a cherry on top lol. I appreciate businesses that don't shy away from political or social issues for the sake of saving face or money. Plus, their product is A1. It's really 10s across the board."¹³ Another user stating "Amen! @benandjerrys this is what #authenticity looks like, not just grabbing a popular cause to make money. #Bravo."¹⁴ It should be noted that Ben & Jerry's has a dedicated activism team that is tasked with bringing social justice issues to their Board of Directors. Figuring out the best course of action to make change is a critical charge for the team. This showcases the step above CSR that corporate activism is.

Sociologist Andrew Lynn discusses corporate activism arguing that "without a social paradigm guiding their actions, businesses reach for their broader managerial paradigms to guide social activism" (2018). Often times this means that if a business chooses to make an ethical decision, it is most likely highly calculated and strategic, as opposed to being altruistic. As I highlighted in Chapter 2, Nike's choice to support Colin

¹³ Twitter page withheld for confidentiality of individual, accessed April 23, 2021.

¹⁴ Twitter page withheld for confidentiality of individual, accessed April 23, 2021.

Kaepernick was not because they were inspired by him, but a deliberate choice that they felt would ultimately help their bottom line and it did. Lynn goes on to say that businesses who root their activism in managerial paradigms instead of social ones don't face major changes as they can still "apply pressure to other institutions, shape public opinion, and make life fairly miserable for those who disagree with them" (Lynn 2018). However, social causes that align with business often benefit from this considering that the social movement will get the fast response they need, and businesses generally do not have to commit a great deal of time (Lynn 2018). This then leads to the idea that corporations will engage in corporate activism, as a way to avoid being held accountable. Corporate accountability holds corporations to a standard where "corporations answer to people, not the other way around" (*Who We Are* N.d.). As discussed in Chapter 3, it differs from corporate activism mainly in how regulation works. Corporate activism is often self-regulated, pulling from internal strategies, whereas champions of corporate accountability want there to be regulations given to corporations both from society and legal regulations for them to meet. For example, the United Kingdom, France, and the Netherlands all have laws in place to combat the efforts corporations use to violate human rights (Goodwin 2020). Though it is hard for other countries to hold businesses accountable due to the exporting of their production. In the U.S. civil society helps hold corporations accountable in ways like shopping local, shopping more ethically, like purchasing fair-trade items, and joining movements that are calling out corporations for the abuse they inflict on others (Goodwin 2020). This thesis will focus mainly on corporate activism, and how corporations engage with it.

Leadership also sets the tone. I will discuss and develop this more in the last section of the thesis, however, a good illustration of the value of leadership can be seen at an individual Georgia Ben and Jerry's franchise. 14 percent of the articles I analyzed mentioned this idea that having a liberal leaning boss and liberal leaning employees contributed to their use of social activism. A representation of this type of leadership is one Ben & Jerry's shop in Athens, Georgia who opened its doors and announced it was a liberal Black-Owned business in March of 2020. Owner Philip Scotton pledged that the "new leadership team will invest in fostering community activism by becoming a meeting place and support system for the Athens community" (Shearer 2020). Scotton went on to mention that in line with the corporate level of Ben & Jerry's, they hope to serve ice cream and practice social justice with their business (Shearer 2020). It is not clear if progressive commitments are a requirement to own a Ben and Jerry's franchise or not. This I could not determine from any informational sources I reviewed. Ben & Jerry's has long been known as being socially justice oriented, while Nike does not have that history. Ben & Jerry's has built their corporate identity as an unabashed activist company. It makes sense that people who decide to franchise with them are more liberal leaning and align with their activist identities. Nike's business does not follow a franchise model. Nor has activism been central to its brand identity. This is not to say Nike isn't succeeding with their social justice messaging because truthfully, they both have been quite successful in their use of social justice themes. The difference is that Nike does not root their identity in activism, they root it in sports and fitness, while still backing up and supporting various athlete activists with their campaigns. Nike has come under extensive

fire for their human rights issues, so while they engage with social justice themes, they themselves do not market themselves as a socially just company, unlike Ben & Jerry's. Nike's identity is with sports, creating marketing campaigns to feature some of the world's best athletes, while simultaneously shutting down competitors. They have rooted their brand identity in fitness, sponsoring all forms of the Olympics and marketing their products towards "anyone who has a body" (*about Nike* N.d.) Although Nike has taken bold stands on various social justice issues, they are not on the same tier as Ben & Jerry's.

Concrete examples of how corporations exceeded the expectations articulated in the CSR model included donations, calling on the government to change structures in the oppressive institutions and calling out social injustice across the board, not just when it is convenient for the corporation. Seventy articles I reviewed, mostly coming from well-known sources like *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Forbes*, discussed various donations including one from Nike that stated they have started to partner with anti-racist organizations and plan on contributing 40 million dollars over the next four years "to invest in and support organizations focused on social justice, education and economic empowerment to address racial inequality" (2020). In this same post, Nike announced that they have partnered with the NAACP Empowerment Program, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., and Black Girls CODE to support their mission of both racial equity and opening doors for Black individuals in science, technology, engineering, and/or math (STEM) careers. These organizations will receive a one-million-dollar grant (2020). Other notable donations came from Target, Etsy, Warby

Parker, and Coca-Cola. According to Mercey Livingston, Target pledged ten million dollars to advance justice through partners like the National Urban League and African American Leadership Forum, and they committed ten thousand hours of pro-bono consulting for small businesses that are black-owned or owned by a person of color (Livingston 2020). Etsy pledged one million dollars; five hundred thousand going to the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) and five hundred thousand dollars going to the Borealis Philanthropy's Black-Led Movement Fund (Livingston 2020). Warby Parker was one of the first to pledge one million dollars to various racial justice organizations (Livingston 2020). Though these corporations are not looked at as the model for corporate activism, that so many corporations are committed resources to fight racial injustice suggests a shift in culture of activist involvement within the broader corporate community. There have been various corporations to pledge a large donation in the name of racial justice, but often corporations also donate to other organizations that combat these efforts. For example, Coca-Cola committed two and half million dollars in grants from their foundation to the NAACP, the Equal Justice Initiative, and the National Center for Civil and Human Rights. However, in previous years they donated almost equally between liberal and conservative government campaigns (Doering 2020). Another corporation that has come under recent fire for their donations is Delta Airlines. Headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia, Delta Airlines released a statement in February of 2021 detailing their commitment to racial equity including, creating a more equitable talent recruitment team, closing diversity gaps, expanding partnerships, launching an inclusion training experience, and helping diverse business owners. The latter focuses on Delta partnering

with various Black-owned businesses in Atlanta and donating “up to fifty million SkyBonus points” to these companies to help cover travel costs (Writer 2021). It’s worth pointing out that they did not make a traditional contribution of money. Once a business submits an application for the SkyBonus points, Delta Airlines will choose specific applications to give their own rewards points. Meaning if a business is not part of Delta’s rewards system their application does not qualify. Though in theory this seems like a solution, according to a *Business Insider* article, Delta Airlines contributes over half of their financial donations to Republican and conservative channels (Cain 2018). This is not to say that what these corporations are doing is inherently bad, but it does appear duplicitous when one donation is spotlighted while other donations go unseen, and can be regarded in acting in bad faith to make the company look more socially conscious, when in reality they are just playing it safe by playing both sides.

Theme # 2: Performance Activism

Though my research on Ben & Jerry’s and Nike showcased that they as a whole fall into the above theme, corporations can embrace multiple activist approaches. Around 70 percent of the articles I analyzed discussed various brands that they speculate could have engaged in performative activism and/or choose to release statements to maximize their profits or they fear they would lose consumer base. For example, during the May BLM protests, the National Football League (NFL) released a statement condemning racism and the “systematic oppression of Black People” (Anderson 2020). A lot of the articles referenced this as an example of a brand that is out for their bottom dollar and not

for Black lives. The perception of acting in bad faith was largely due to the consumer response to the NFL's post. The NFL's Twitter post received a total of 38,000 retweets, compared to Ben & Jerry's statement which received 129,000 retweets and Nike's ad which received 105,000 retweets. That response tells me that the consumer feels the NFL's statement was not as impactful or as resonant and deserving of being shared. One user claimed "this is an 'oh crap we might lose black people's money. Let's put out a statement' statement. Until I see an apology to Kaepernick, money being donated, and changes being made I'm boycotting the NFL."¹⁵ Another user responded saying "Cool. So since you condemn racism and support protest, I assume you'll be renaming the #redskins and signing Colin #Kaepernick to show these aren't just empty words, right?"¹⁶ Olivia Mazzucato's *Daily Bruins* article states "It's difficult to take the NFL's statement of solidarity seriously given the fact that they failed to mention Colin Kaepernick, who was effectively silenced and barred from the league for his peaceful protest as he knelt during the national anthem..." (2020).

Brands taking a performative stand happened again after former President Donald Trump directed harmful rhetoric to a crowd of his supporters who promptly stormed the Capitol Building during the Insurrection on January 6th, 2021. Most notably, Twitter limited and then banned Trump's access to their social platform that day (Cuthbertson 2021) but many found it disingenuous, as the 45th President had been spewing hate and wrong information for months and years before this domestic attack happened. Another

¹⁵ Twitter page withheld to protect confidentiality of individual, accessed April 15, 2021.

¹⁶ Twitter page withheld to protect confidentiality of individual, accessed April 15, 2021.

questionable corporate decision was the Professional Golfers Association's (PGA) decision to pull the 2022 championship from Trump National Golf Course. Though on the surface this looks like it was in support of social justice, the PGA board released a statement saying "It has become clear that conducting the PGA Championship at Trump Bedminster would be detrimental to the PGA of America brand, and would put at risk the PGA's ability to deliver our many programs and sustain the longevity of our mission" (Draper and Pennington 2021). This response and other like it suggests that sometimes corporations take a stand on something because not taking one is more harmful. There are tipping points even for corporations, and in the case of the January 2021 Insurrection, this was one of those turning points. Ultimately, revolution is bad for corporations. It backs them into a corner and forces them to choose between supporting a social cause or possibly facing derogatory consequences. In the case of the PGA, Former President Trump's actions were so egregious that they pulled their event from his property, but only because the consequences they would have received from not doing anything would have effected them more than changing venues, not necessarily because they felt morally obligated to switch.

Arguably, the most performative act to come out of the Summer 2020 BLM protests happened on June 2nd, 2020 and is now known as #BlackOutTuesday. What started as a call from two Black women, Jamilia Thomas and Brianna Agyemang, on the music industry to "pause business as usual across the music industry" quickly turned into millions of individuals, celebrities, and corporations posting a black square on Instagram and then going on with their days. Drag singer Tatianna pointed out that "posting black

boxes on Instagram and hashtagging Black Lives Matter is rendering the hashtag useless” (Coscarelli 2020). Many corporations including Spotify, Apple, HBO, PrettyLittleThing and TikTok posted these black boxes but did not commit to any radical or sustained program of change within their businesses or provided any additional information (like petitions) with their post. These companies have been heavily criticized as being performative in their actions. YouTube personality Jackie Aina was one of these people who criticized corporations saying that “brands that borrow heavily from Black culture and target Black consumers have a responsibility to push for change” (Hsu 2020). Yet it is difficult to determine if the collective black out squares did push the dial on public opinion in support of racial justice, creating the conditions for subsequent change efforts to gain support. While this thesis does not intend to measure the impact of actions like the adoption of the blackout by corporations whose racial record is spotty at best, a quick dismissal that the blackout meant nothing, is premature. What is interesting is that from the blackouts came a large criticism from the public that the actions framed them as falling short. In this sense, I would argue that there is a shift in behavior that consumers are less likely to accept an act with an empty promise.

Performative activism is not new to the social movement’s world, however, it has become almost standard practice to call out individuals and companies that have not spoken out in advance of shifting public opinion and then have only released a generic and tempered statement leaving it open to walk back for a lukewarm or just post the black box on Instagram. Journalist Kayla Abrams discusses performative activism in an op-ed for Columbia University, where she points out that although performative activism seems

good, in that it is accessible, it actually perpetuates harmful ideals and is overall harmful to the cause (Abrams 2019). For instance, activism that is confined to posting on social media is not helpful. It only moves past that performative stage when it is used as an entryway to a hard conversation, to change the status quo, not when the post is the only conversation. When corporations engage in a shallow or insincere way with social justice issues consumers can see right through it, and since people are shifting to voting with their dollars, such a move could backfire for a company.

Theme #3: Reactive Activism

The third theme that emerged as I was coding was the idea of Reactive Activism, which I define as types of activism when a corporation speak out on a social justice topic but only as a reaction to pressure from consumers, the state, or other corporations. For example, after being called out, Amazon posted a statement clarifying their stance on social injustices and their support for Black lives. However, individuals were quick to write it off as disingenuous because their corporate statistics show that “85 percent of Black workers at Amazon are in unskilled jobs like warehouse workers” (2020). Amazon has also been known to supply police forces with their *Amazon Rekognition* system, a piece of technology that facially recognizes individuals. It was weaponized against protestors in many BLM protests (2020). One individual tweeted “this is a good act. As a corporate superpower, now go further. If you want us to believe you truly care, show us the higher limits of what you can do. Stop supplying police departments and ICE with

facial recognition technology.”¹⁷ This disconnect between action and talk was often grounds for a corporation to be scrutinized. Another famous company that was pressured to make a statement was the fashion brand, Pretty Little Thing. They released a picture that depicted a white hand and a Black hand intertwined with the caption “stand together.” This post was ruthlessly mocked, as the Black hand in the picture was jet black and not a shade that resembled a Black person’s skin tone. One Twitter user commenting “um you do know Black people aren’t actually the shade of black? And our nails are not naturally black as well... It’s an incredibly big mess.”¹⁸ Another user said “delete this and put up another hand shade please. What is this, who approved this, try again.”¹⁹ After the rise in expression by the public, the company decided to take the post down and instead of addressing it responded with a Tweet of their company logo and a message that read “We send our thoughts and condolences to the families of those tragically and innocently killed and we will do all we can to support the fight against racism. We ask everyone to stand together in this time of need. Let’s fight together, not against each other.”²⁰ They have not spoken about Black Lives Matter or racial justice since this incident.

Corporations who speak out on social justice issues only as a reaction to pressure from others such as consumers, the state, or other corporations often don’t follow commonly known guidelines among corporate activists. The three rules are: “Does the issue align with your company’s strategy? Can you meaningfully influence the issue?”

¹⁷ Twitter page withheld to protect confidentiality of individual, accessed April 23, 2021.

¹⁸ Twitter page withheld to protect confidentiality of individual, accessed April 15, 2021.

¹⁹ Twitter page withheld to protect confidentiality of individual, accessed April 15, 2021.

²⁰ Pretty Little Thing’s Twitter page, accessed April 15, 2021,
<https://twitter.com/officialplt/status/1266826352595959809?lang=en>

Will your constituencies agree with speaking out?” (Argenti 2020). These performative acts from corporations are so focused on keeping a brands reputation that they generally miss the mark. I saw how this pressure could quickly intensify while analyzing social media platforms. Reformation, a fashion brand that “roots itself in social justice through sustainability” (Farhat 2020) was called out online after making a post in support of Black Lives Matter, but not addressing the racist work environment in their brick and mortar stores. One individual stated “I am addressing this issue as a stance against companies who play a role in the systems that fail our Black and Brown brothers and sisters daily... It’s a privilege to educate yourself about racism instead of experiencing it.”²¹ Largely, consumers let Ben & Jerry’s know how much they loved their business and how much more money they would be spending now since they released their anti-racist statement in June of 2020. One Facebook post said “It’s a ballsy stance for a business to make, but Ben & Jerry’s have always been outspoken on being on the right side of history. A lot of people won’t like to hear it, but that’s how activism works.”²² And yet, it entirely possible that Ben and Jerry’s has loyal customer base precisely because of their progressive positions and stands and the routine positive feedback they receive from this base has a duplicating effect, drowning out dissenting, less loyal customers and also encourage Ben and Jerry’s to stay the course.

A corporation who has not spoken out may want the same positive recognition that other corporations receive and could feel pressured to declare their opinions on social

²¹ Twitter page withheld to protect confidentiality of individual, accessed April 23, 2021.

²² Facebook page withheld to protect confidentiality of individual, accessed April 16, 2021.

justice issues. Engaging in progressive politics is new territory for many corporations. Though the pressure might be building, some of these corporations do not have public relations expertise to successfully engage and they fail for a couple of different reasons. One of the reasons being lack of PR expertise and one of them being lack of transparency. Corporate information is becoming increasingly and readily available, (Davis and White 2015) and if a corporation is not transparent around their policies, they run the risk of failing, even if they release a socially just statement. Food movement scholars have shown this is can be the case in their field. The movement, “*Vote With Your Fork*” gained traction and encouraged consumers to make a difference with every meal that they ate (Summers 2013). This movement was designed to promote eating locally grown and harvested food. It was suggested that if people did not purchase fast food items, restaurants would start changing their menus to include more locally sourced ingredients (Summers 2013). The same idea goes with voting with your dollar, where a consumer can quite literally control the market. Take Hostess for example, in 2012 they were trying to adapt to what they thought the consumer wanted by introducing a low calorie twinkie. Consumers did not want or accept this change. If Hostess kept their signature twinkie snack and added additional nutritious options, they might have had a chance in returning as a premier snack brand. When the money stopped coming in from this modification, they ultimately had to file for bankruptcy (Adams 2012). This ties into the performative discussion previously. If consumers choose what to spend their money on and shift to more ethical brands, corporations are going to have to either commit to change or their hollow actions will be seen for what they are, shallow and empty. By now

it should be clear, disingenuous efforts are risky. Corporations need to have the correct intentions behind supporting social justice issues. Consumers can sense when something is not bona fide. If the timing of message delivery is off or the company's record spotty on the issue, the message will fail. This is not to say that corporations can't change, but to evaluate something as authentic, it can't be a one and done post or contribution. The change has to be continuous and substantive. Lest they may face decline in profits or a boycott of their products. Sociologist John Dale makes the distinction of various boycott strategies in his book *Free Burma: Transnational Legal Action and Corporate Accountability*. There are three types of boycotts: national boycotts, local boycotts, and transnational boycotts, which are distinctive in what strategies they use. Dale offers that "not only the kinds of action, but also the scale of action affects the success of boycotts" (2011:109). For example, a Massachusetts boycott calling out Burma, now known as Myanmar, for human rights issues brought together the collective connectedness that local boycotts hold and the public outcry that national boycotts hold. Due to this, the scale of the boycott reached local cities, U.S. national states, and villages in Burma, making it a transnational boycott (Dale 2011:111). This resulted in large corporations like Macy's, Chanel, and Proctor and Gamble, divesting from Burma (Dale 2011:111). Not only the scale of a boycott is important, but how they are organized and the power structures within. Dale focuses on selective purchasing laws, which when passed by local governments function not only as accountability structures for individual consumption, but collective market shares. It is not only easier but more impactful when a whole collective boycott as opposed to just a few individuals.

Consumers are not the only group driving this change either. In some cases, other corporations apply pressure in other cases, a powerful brand can catalyze a broad set of changes that reshape not only corporate behavior but other organizational entities as well. An interesting form of this type of pressure can be observed in NASCAR's response to growing consumer concern about the association of racist symbols with the NASCAR brand. In part in response to a growing chorus of concern about racist relics, NASCAR banned the display of confederate flags on their cars. The effect forced certain states to get rid of their racist symbols if they wanted to compete in NASCAR. In this case, the ban had cascading impacts. When this ban was announced, Mississippi was pressured to eliminate confederate symbols from their state flag, in order to participate in NASCAR racing (Fromm 2020). Actions from brands matter, but in this case, it was not consumer pressure, but another corporation and pressure from other states that got Mississippi to let go of some symbolic racist past, which suggests that pressure often does result in change, and as pressures mount, a tipping point could lead other corporations to follow. This is tricky business for corporations. In some cases, the decision to take a stand on a political issue can have unanticipated consequences, consolidating market control by one brand over the other. Take the divestment movement of the 1980s which through consumer boycotts pressured American companies to divest from South Africa's apartheid system. Some corporations divested. Other did not, in large part because of the pressure from the boycotts. Pepsi divested. Coca Cola did not, proving that they cared more about product profitability than the well-being of Black Africans who often produced, delivered and

consumed these drinks (Spivey 2009). Pepsi ultimately was on the right side of history. But Coca Cola fully controls the soft drink market in South Africa today.

Despite the praise these corporations get, Ben & Jerry's and Nike have not escaped scrutiny. A small number of op-eds from mostly universities question the intentions of both Ben & Jerry's and Nike, and the sincerity of their activism. There have been instances in Ben & Jerry's past that actively upheld anti-Blackness. For instance, Ava DeSantis writes about how Ben & Jerry's "devalues labor, which directly contributes to racist oppression" (2020). These articles plant seeds of doubt that corporations cannot truly function in the activism world, because they are just doing the bare minimum by speaking out against social injustice. Ava DeSantis argues that:

"by praising corporations like Ben & Jerry's for making competent statements on social justice, we allow them to obscure their own important role in enforcing American white supremacy, to paint government as the only party with influence over disempowered and marginalized citizens, and to use the positive self-image they cultivate to stop internal fights for labor justice" (2020).

My findings show that corporate activism can be categorized into three main categories: Conscientious Activism, Performance Activism, and Reactive Activism. My question: is there no room to critique corporations for their problematic practices while also recognizing that they are important in shaping public opinion?

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The choice to support social justice issues whole-heartedly and openly for a corporation is a complex calculus. Many corporations have Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) models, but with the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests shifting what consumers want from a brand and creating a larger platform on Twitter to hold corporations accountable, many companies now go in with what I coin a *preemptive activism* lens. I suggest that after George Floyd's death, several corporations now are in the mindset that they need to take a stand before being called out to appease the consumer. For this reason, I think of preemptive activism as a sub-type of corporate activism, since corporate activism is the predominant form of activism corporations participate in. For example, Hulu was one of the first companies to come out with a statement after George Floyd's murder stating "We support Black lives. Today and every day. You are seen. You are heard. And we are with you."²³ This quick statement came after Hulu's questionable history with lack of diversity in their original shows. Not all corporate activism will be preemptive, however I would argue that if a corporation once was publicly called out for not responding quick enough and then is swift to respond the next time, they make a statement, that should be classified as preemptive activism.

One could argue the turn to corporations is a result of a largely ineffective state to address public problems. In the absence of a functional state to take action, citizens may be turning to corporations, the other large-scale organization that govern much of our

²³ Hulu's Twitter Account, accessed May 3, 2021, <https://twitter.com/hulu/status/1266913549512658946>

lives, to do so. Many people target corporations when the state won't address social issues, as we saw from the antiapartheid divest movements. In the killing of George Floyd, the government was ineffective, showing no mercy and no care for the murder of another innocent Black man. Former President Trump even going as far to say that "when the looting starts, the shooting starts", a popular phrase coined in the 1960s by a Miami police chief defending crackdown on Black neighborhoods (Astor 2020). Whether because of mounting pressure from consumers or other corporations, many corporations choose to support social justice issues and right inequalities. I have designated three types of corporate activism from this project: Preemptive Activism, which I discussed above, Concrete Activism and Spontaneous Activism.

Concrete Activism is when brands donate money to organizations, call for institutional change, and make institutional change within their own systems which means any activism that corporations do that can execute visible societal changes. Ben & Jerry's is well known for this, as they often promote ice cream flavors with a side of social justice. They have made social justice a core value in their company and not adjacent to their mission. As opposed to Nike, who participates in social justice issues, but have not made it a key position of their corporate identity. In 2016, Ben & Jerry's introduced the flavor, Empower-mint, in North Carolina at a "Democracy Is in Your Hands" campaign with the NAACP (2016). The introduction of this ice cream was also paired with the installation of voting registration centers at each Ben & Jerry's location in North Carolina. This encouraged over 30,000 people to go out and vote. This ice cream was also given to congresspeople with a pamphlet detailing voting rights issues that

needed to be fixed. Ben & Jerry's did the same thing last year when they introduced *Justice ReMix'd*, a flavor that shed light on mass incarceration. The company wound up partnering with the Advancement Project National Office, where part of the proceeds were donated to shift the school to prison pipeline (2020). They ended up promoting this flavor six times on Facebook, ten times on Instagram, and ten times on Twitter. The final ice cream I want to mention is their newest partnership in which they partnered with Colin Kaepernick to release a vegan flavor called *Change the Whirled* (2021). This ice cream sheds light on all Colin Kaepernick has been through, regarding his national protests as the 49ers quarterback, and his organization, *Know Your Rights Camp*.

Nike has also shown immense corporate activism strategies, most notably with their donations. Throughout the Summer of 2020, Nike, Inc. had pledged 40 million dollars to various NAACP partners (2020). Additionally, Nike affiliated brands like the Jordan Brand committed 100 million dollars over ten years to “organizations dedicated to ensuring racial equality, social justice and greater access to education” (2020). According to Nike's *How We Stand Up for Equality* web page, over the past five years Nike has invested 417 million dollars to “drive positive impact around the world” (2020). Some of this money is gifted from the *Nike Community Impact Fund*, which is designed to help communities around the United States and globally. A few of the organizations in Oregon, where Nike is headquartered, that have received grants include the Family Justice Center of Washington County, Reading Results, and the Shadow Project. In total for the year of 2019, there were 24 grants given around the state (Oregon Community Foundation 2019). Though 417 million dollars seems like a sizable donation, I believe

that this could be partly done to compensate and draw attention away from the horrid international labor practices they engage in. After all, corporations make large donations for two reasons, because they can use it as a tax write off and because it is good publicity for them. I wonder what it would be like if Nike paid their factory employees a livable wage. According to Maddy Olsen, who wrote an ethics paper and posted it on their blog, Nike's co-founder Phil Knight had once said that the requirement for companies to "pay a living wage is 'unrealistic'" (Olsen N.d). She goes on to mention that technically Nike pays their Indonesian workers the minimum wage in Indonesia, but that it does not cover the cost of living. Olsen says that if Nike raised their Indonesian wages from ten cents to twenty cents an hour it would only cost the company an extra 20 million dollars a year (Olsen N.d), which Nike appears to be capable of but they are electing to spend the funds elsewhere, like sponsoring athletic teams or marketing. That being said, both of these corporations have shown what needs to be done to have a successful corporate activist structure, as opposed to a standard CSR model that often focuses more on just the companies good.

Spontaneous Activism is classified as sharing things online so people can read on their own about them, interacting with their consumers about social justice issues, and sending one and done petitions. Ben & Jerry's interacts quite frequently with their consumers, 40 out of 143 tweets collected being interactions with consumers. Most of these tweets were responding to consumers who were praising them for taking a stand, where Ben & Jerry's responded with a simple "Thank You" or "I Scream, You Scream, We Scream for Social Justice!" Two of these tweets, however, blatantly responded to an

individual calling out racism they experienced at one of their shops. Ben & Jerry's responded by confirming that the employee questioned no longer worked in their shops and that they would investigate what happened. This suggests that Ben & Jerry's values their consumer and wants to have a highly interactive engagement structure. Nike has not been as responsive online. They have not interacted about social justice with any of their consumers, in fact, they do not have many social media posts at all.

One explanation for why Ben & Jerry's is more active on social media than Nike is how they founded their company. Ben & Jerry's created their brand within the context of social good and has committed to that vision. They continue to stay relevant by interacting with social issues and consumers on social media. While Nike did not learn the value of their relevance until later in their company branding. Ben & Jerry's attention centers in tandem on the consumer and social justice, focusing on how they make both the world better and their consumers satisfied. While Nike puts more emphasis on their brand adjacent to social justice. Nike uses social justice issues as a way to boost their brand first and focuses on the betterment of the world second with advertising campaigns and social media, however, one interesting note, Nike's Facebook has been inactive since 2018. As I discussed in Chapter 5, having a liberal leaning CEO or founder increases the odds that a company's brand engages in activism than companies who have a conservative CEO or founder, however this cannot be generalized since I only looked at two corporations. Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield have been arrested in the past for protesting at the "Democracy Awakening" protest at the U.S. Capitol building (Ruggiero and Diaz 2016). It speaks volumes to consumers and other corporations when founders

and other executives are willing to jeopardize their future for different causes. However, this comes with an immense amount of privilege that needs to be recognized. Cohen and Greenfield already have an extremely successful brand that is owned by a parent company, so they do not have much to lose when getting arrested then someone who might work a corporate job or a teacher job. They are also two white men. When they get arrested, most likely they do not have to fear for their lives like Black people and other people of color do. And in the end, their arrest likely further solidifies their brand identity as progressive standouts in a sea of corporate indifference to everything but profit. My hope is this thesis has shed light on the complex interplay of politics and consumer markets in a new way, highlighting the changing tides as corporations venture into a social justice realm. I have highlighted two corporations who have done quite well in their venture into activist realms. Most corporations have not done as well. What the future holds for corporations as they engage in social justice remains unclear. What is clear is the complex entanglements of corporations and political life continue to evolve in new ways.

Corporations and social movements have long been entwined with each other, as some corporations engage in corporate activism. The question though is if these social movements actually benefit from this partnership or if it has potential detrimental consequences. As discussed throughout this thesis, corporations can positively engage in activism which often strengthens both the relationship with their consumers and their employees (Kennedy 2020). Ben & Jerry's has been a great example of a company that engages with activism and has succeeded both with their bottom line and with their

reputation. Though I believe that Nike has been successful in some of their corporate activism as well, they showcase a different more adverse side of activism, often faced with boycotts because of their lack of support for human rights and labor issues. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement deals with both. The positive ramifications from corporations engaging in activism in support of the movement include more monetary donations and laws set into place by the U.S. government. However, because corporations have chosen to get involved with various social movements, they walk a thin line of overstepping and having the public think they are the leaders as opposed to grassroots activists. I'd be remiss if I did not mention that new research states that corporations do not choose the social movements, they engage in based on the profits they think they would generate. Political Scientist Cory Macks-Solomon studies LGBTQIA+ and labor movements and makes the point that "investors don't think such activism affects corporate financial performance. This implies that there is no economic market-based incentive or disincentive for corporate activism" (2020). Instead he agrees with my above point from Chapter 5, that the driving factor is the political ideology of the CEO/ executive team.

Limitations/Challenges:

As with all studies, there are limitations. One limitation I faced while conducting this research was when to implement the cutoff date for my research. As time went on, more and more events kept happening, so it was difficult to decide and justify when to stop collecting data. We were seeing global protests in support of Black Lives Matter

while simultaneously hearing the former President of the United States call those protestors un-American and unpatriotic. We saw just how different people were treated on January 6th when white supremacist terrorists literally broke into the Capitol building and the police did not use any form of teargas, rubber bullets, or other disseminating tactics for several hours while white terrorist roamed the halls of arguably one of the most sacred places of American traditions. Ultimately, for the last eight months of Trump's presidency, it felt like news article after news article was coming out as he tried to both ruin as much as he could and also uplift white supremacy.

A major limitation of this thesis was the process of verifying the social media quotes I included. Before including the quotes, I looked through each profile to ensure their feed was not only responding to Ben & Jerry's and/or Nike or any other corporations, and that they were not repeating what they were saying. This helped me gauge if the account was a bot or not. Since these comments are public, I did not reach out to these individuals to confirm if what they were saying came from a place of genuine interest, or if they were paid by the company to say something. For the purpose of my thesis, I worked with the same mind-frame that I view social media influencers with. According to the FTC they have to include in their post that they were paid to endorse this particular product/company (Zialcita 2019), so if I did not see this disclaimer, I made an informed assumption that these individuals were not paid to engage with these corporations. After looking through each individual profile, I came to trust that these comments were from regular consumers of the company because there were no immediate red flags with these included profiles. I did come across some accounts that

were created in the year of 2020 or that only tweeted at corporations, and for the sake of caution I did not include their quotes in this thesis. The nature of social media does raise some questions for me surrounding verification including: what is a beneficial and reliable way to verify that this is a consumer and not a competitor? How would we track and know which consumers support the brand and which consumers were asked by competitors to post comments and smear the brand? This last question is out of the scope of my project but would be interesting to analyze and include in future research.

Future Research

In the future, a project that incorporated an ethnographic research design would enable deeper understanding of the consumers side on corporate activism. It would be beneficial to see how consumers react to corporate activism and what they would like to see from corporations when it comes to activism. I would also like to see a study conducted on small-businesses and their use of activism. Do consumers hold small businesses to the same standard? Since small businesses do not have a corporate structure, what motivates them to engage in activism? My research can open the door to study other corporations and why they choose to engage in activism and why some corporations do not choose to engage. If there was more time, I would have analyzed a conservative corporation as well, so I would like to see that in the future.

For future research I would also like to focus on and analyze the comment sections of Instagram and Facebook. The way these social media platforms store and present the comments are based on how popular the comment is. Usually, there are

hundreds of thousands of comments on these large corporation's social media pages that I would like to have analyzed to see if corporations responded and what corporations responded to. Considering the amount of comments, it was a methodological limitation for my study that I would like to see play out with the help of digital software and digital sociologists in the future. It should be noted here that after the Asian American hate crimes happened in later March of 2021, Ben & Jerry's did respond and provide their thoughts to the top comment on one post that called them out for not addressing the racism yet.

My goal for this project was to make this research more accessible to individuals. Especially in our political climate, I feel it is important to have academic work accessible to other realms outside traditional academia, so people can learn and understand how important these issues are. I also believe as a white person in society, it is my duty to explain how various institutions shape my relations to other white people in particular. Someone might not think that an ice cream company or a sneakers brand is shaping our society, but my research has provided tangible evidence that corporations do shape our society and how corporate activism plays a role in that. I conducted a qualitative content analysis that, although is not generalizable to all corporations, it showcases how certain corporations are leading the pack and trying to make a better future and a stronger society.

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