

**WOKE ADVERTISING: CORPORATE BRAND POLITICIZATION AND THE
COMMODIFICATION OF RACIAL JUSTICE AND IDENTITIES**

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Introduction

A global fashion brand talking about global unity, an athletic retail brand tackling racial inequality, and a beverage company portraying protests. These industries and ideas share little in common, but in the broad socio-political climate amid the omnipresent political divide following the 2016 election, commercial brands have relied increasingly on corporate advertising to engage politically activated Gen-Z consumers (Hessikiel). As a generation that has been characterized by strong engagement with social justice movements, an aversion to traditional advertising, and even capitalism at large, corporations have certainly identified messages of social justice to not only target the Gen-Z consumer segment, but also reimagine corporate brands as “woke” brands, or brands conscious of social issues (Hessikiel). To investigate the representation of racial justice in corporate advertising, I will consider corresponding producer discourses as well as wider critical discourses surrounding selected campaigns. By assessing Benetton’s “All the Colors of the World” campaign (1986) as an early example of this phenomenon, I will analyze PepsiCo’s “Live for Now” campaign starring Kendall Jenner (2017) and Nike’s “Dream Crazy” campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick (2018) as current examples of corporations using advertising to leverage racial justice movements to manage brand awareness among younger, more politically activated consumers. Through the analysis of these three campaigns in dialogue with theoretical frameworks and corresponding media discourses, I provide insight regarding how they failed to create advertising campaigns that meaningfully engage with such movements. Through the analysis of these three campaigns and their shortcomings, I will provide insight into whether corporate advertising is a productive form of allyship.

The Politicized Brand

The rise of mass consumer culture in the United States marked a huge shift towards everyday consumer activism where Americans use consumer activism due to the intensified focus on consumerism over citizenship, coupled with the proliferation of social media. This phenomenon of consumer activism and how it has been enabled by the politicization of consumerism of branding in American society. As a result, consumer activism has become increasingly mainstream and culturally normalized. Historizing the rise of brand politicization is vital for foregrounding discussions surrounding advertising trends and the later commodification of racial justice and identities.

Consumption and consumerism have been positioned by politicians as a central component of American identity. According to economist John Kenneth Galbraith, “Americans have historically used consumption to define freedom, personal happiness, social status, and shared identity consumerism as the overriding feature is a relatively new development in American culture” (Rosenstone & Hansen, 3). This posturing of American consumerism is perpetuated by the rise of mass communication in the forms of mass marketing and advertising. Historian Gary Cross explains that although mass consumer culture blossomed around the time of the Progressive Era but that it was during World War II where the expansion of mass marketing of goods and social values were communicated by using television as a medium of mass communication. Along with a plentiful job market, higher wages, and a lack of consumer goods during the war, spending was not only encouraged, but was also positioned as ‘patriotic’ by the political sphere (Hilton, 76). Cross observes the conflation of consumer values with American identity during this transformative era for American consumer culture: “Consumerism succeeded where other ideologies failed because it concretely expressed the key political ideals

of the century – liberty and democracy – and with relatively little self-destructive behavior or personal humiliation” (Cross). Consumer society, through participation and access, was championed by politicians as the way forward and the way to secure a bright future for the United States (Hilton, 74).

According to Rachel Heldman, author of *Protest Politics in the Marketplace*, industrialism resulted in the rise of mass consumer culture has empowered American consumers to be more cognizant of their political, economic, and social footprints within the marketplace (Heldman, 55). Along with the rise of social media, which allows consumers to engage with contemporary protest politics, Heldman argues that social media acts as a means of “new networked movements” not only makes consumer activism “cool,” but also facilitates media discourses that mobilize one another to take action (Heldman, 60). Heldman cites sociologist Manuel Castells, who identifies these new networked movements as “decentralized, leaderless movements in which activists come together around shared problems and goals through new communication technologies (Friedman). Social networking sites, or what Castells postures as “new communication technologies,” ensures rapid access to corporate practices and any individual can easily participate in online boycotts or market campaigns, empowering consumers to voice consumer values in discourses with corporations. Because consumer activism engagement is easier than ever before, consumers can convey a unified response to corporations and can quickly mobilize around a certain cause, creating rich and complex consumer discourse in response to producer discourse (Heldman, 60). The popularization of social media has accelerated engagement with consumer activism as consumers are utilizing market channels to align politically as well as social media to organize and voice action.

Branding and the Commodification of Racial Identities

Corporate advertising has soon caught up to this political shift in brand management. Cultural theorist Raymond Williams perceived this changing face of advertising in his essay “Advertising: the magic system,” providing more insight on this phenomenon: “... [Advertising] has passed the frontier of the selling of goods and services and has become involved with the teaching of social and personal values; it is also rapidly entering the world of politics” (Williams, 421). Williams recognizes advertising’s shift towards selling “social and personal values,” as products now serve as vessels to communicate a broader brand value and awareness. Williams also explains that advertising propagates these values into “the world of politics,” referring to our modern capitalist society, as consumers are ruthlessly targeted to generate revenue. Author Naomi Klein writes about a similar phenomenon to Williams’ in her book *No Logo* (1999), observing that the shift away from products towards brands and perceived social and personal values has only intensified. Klein augments Williams’ argument in the context of corporate branding and advertising, coining this phenomenon as the “marketing renaissance”: “Overnight, “Brands, not products!” became the rallying cry for a marketing renaissance led by a new breed of companies that saw themselves as “meaning brokers” instead of product producers. What was changing was the idea of what — in both advertising and branding — was being sold. The old paradigm had it that all marketing was selling a product” (Klein). Klein offers insight into the same shift Williams observed earlier in 1980, adding that newer corporations are placing more importance on branding over their products. Marketing as a means of selling a specific product is what Klein calls “the old paradigm,” as a result of this shift from products to brands.

In the new model of corporate marketing, Klein proclaims that “product always takes a back seat to the real product, the brand, and the selling of the brand acquired an extra component

that can only be described as spiritual. Advertising is about hawking product. Branding, in its truest and most advanced incarnations, is about corporate transcendence” (Klein). Klein highlights how specific products have strayed from the central focus of advertising and the promotion of the more nebulous brand and its values has become the focal point. Beyond this phenomenon, branding is about “corporate transcendence,” or the positioning of products as concepts, experiences or as a lifestyle over commodities.

Contemporary branding is enabled by a Marxist concept, from Karl Marx’s 1867 book *Capital: Critique of Political Economy*,” called the “fetishism of the commodity.” Marx delves deeper beneath the superficial appearance of commodity production by distinguishing between the use-value and exchange-value of commodities, claiming that “the value-relation between the products of labor which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties... it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour as soon as they are produced as commodities, and is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities.” (Marx, 60). Marx insinuates there is a mystical social relationship between consumers and commodities where the consumers’ perception of a product “attaches itself to the products of labour” (Marx, 61). The fetishism of commodities consists of products seeming to have inherent when in reality, the value is produced by humans integrating such products into a system of meaning. In our current stage of advanced capitalism, economic value is transformed into an object or commodity, in which consumers believe has intrinsic value, thus informing the modern practice of political branding by corporations. Thus, modern corporations leverage advertising to infuse intrinsic value into the brand rather than the product. This phenomenon is essential to consider upon analyzing corporate campaigns leveraging sentiments of social justice to politicize their

brands. Doing so both foregrounds and contextualizes selected campaigns case studies and their corresponding critical discourses.

Building on this rhetoric of the social value as a result of commodification in advanced capitalism, the practice of racial capitalism enables corporate advertising to leverage racial justice movements and racial identities in order to position their brand as more socially conscious. Nancy Leong, a law professor at the University of Denver who focuses on civil rights and discrimination law, wrote an article for the Harvard Law Review coining the practice of “racial capitalism”: “the process of deriving social and economic value from the racial identity of another — occurs when racial capital is exchanged in the market” (Leong, 2156). She further contextualizes the practice of racial capitalism within advanced capitalism as “the use of nonwhite people by corporations and institutions to make money or boost their brand” (Illinig). The practice of racial capitalism today exposes the power dynamics of the dominant group – predominantly white corporations – who leverage racial identity for ulterior motives like targeting specific audiences, gaining revenue, or branding. The issue with the practice of racial capitalism is that it enables the commodification of racial identity and diversity (Leong, 2199). Commodifying racial identity, Leong proclaims, “...impoverishes our thought and discourse surrounding race. It infects the way we think about and talk to one another. Commodifying race causes us to think of it as just another *thing* — like bread or furniture — that we can take, use, consume, exploit, enjoy, and discard as we wish” (Leong, 2213). This line of rhetoric is fundamentally paradoxical to the objective of racial justice and diversity, impeding cultural progress towards racial equality. Leong’s framework of racial capitalism and the commodification of racial identities is important to consider in weighing selected campaigns to ultimately examine selected advertising campaigns.

United Colors of Benetton “All the Colors of the World” Campaign (1986)

Benetton, founded in 1965 in Treviso, Italy, is a global fashion brand with upwards of 5,000 stores internationally, reporting 17.9 billion euros in revenue in 2019. The brand has historically capitalized on social justice concepts and movements to appeal to their target audiences in their advertising campaigns (Zargani). A company whose campaigns were hailed as successful for their inclusion of racial diversity and international unity has attracted considerable critics and controversy for their campaigns starting in 1982. Campaigns predating 1982 solely focused on the quality of the clothing, with campaigns portraying closeups shots of the clothing. That is, until Oliviero Toscani was hired as Creative Director for the Benetton Group. Working in tandem with Luciano Benetton, Benetton’s President, Toscani was bestowed sole control over everything in the advertising process, from design to artistic direction to ad spend to final execution.

Toscani seems to be somewhat of an advertising antihero as he is a harsh critic of the industry’s pervasiveness into consumers’ lives as well as of the field of mass communication:

The advertising industry has corrupted society. It persuades people that they are respected for what they consume, that they are only worth what they possess. . . One day there will be a Nuremberg trial of advertisers who have corrupted every form of communication. I will sit on it, I will be the prosecution and the public” (quoted in Clough, 15).

Toscani’s critique of the advertising industry is due to the overwhelming emphasis on the product and its manipulation of the public to prize materialism as a result of these advertising campaigns. Moreover, Toscani establishes his role and practice in advertising: “I am not here just to please my clients. To do that is a waste of everything. I don’t want to have ideas: I have my own reality” (Back & Quaade, 66). Toscani seeks to utilize his platform on Benetton advertising campaigns as his canvas to convey his own reality, neglecting the fundamental purpose and concept of advertising; to drive traffic to your brand and attract consumers to purchase your

products to drive revenue. Having trained at Zurich University of the Arts, a world-renowned art school, perhaps these comments highlight his artistic practice as he aims to divorce his work from the context of the industry. These comments and Toscani's artistic background are key in viewing his campaigns for Benetton in that they contextualize his perceived role and creative control over the execution of these campaigns.

Toscani's 1986 campaign for Benetton, following his inaugural Benetton campaign entitled "All the Colors of the World," was significant in that Benetton's iconic "United Colors of Benetton" logo was first introduced. This campaign consists of shots mirroring each other in form, displaying two subjects dressed to represent stereotypes of different countries. This campaign alludes to international political conflicts with references to the US and the USSR, Germany, and Israel, Greece and Turkey, Argentina and England (Back and Quaade, 67). In these shots, the subjects either link arms, hold hands, or support a globe, echoing the message of racial diversity and global harmony. It is also important to note that no specific product, seasonal launch, or clothing line is being promoted, further supporting the shift from product to brand observed by Williams and Klein. Instead, Toscani is using Benetton's platform and reach illustrate his "own reality" (Back and Quaade, 67).



Figures 1 and 2: Selections from Benetton's "All the Colors of the World" campaign (1986)

Throughout Benetton's campaigns, differences between cultures are reduced to stereotypes and simplified caricatures which are conveyed as racial "archetypes" (Back &

Quaade, 68). One version of the shot presenting an ‘Arab’ and a ‘Jew’ supporting a globe initially included money in their hands, according to Back and Quaade (68). This initial shot “caused considerable offense in the Jewish community in Paris, who felt that the image connoted notions of antisemitism. The banknotes were subsequently lifted from the advertisement, which was then put back into circulation” (Back & Quaade, 68). This narrow representation rooted in racial stereotypes is what David A. Bailey coins the processes of “fragmentation,” where the diversity of a national culture is reduced to a stylized individual as well as “objectification,” where such cultural difference is leveraged and thus, commodified (Bailey, Back and Quaade). Toscani’s campaigns for Benetton, specifically in the 1980’s, operate on these concepts of fragmentation and objectification while lacking the cultural understanding to portray cultural representations that goes beyond stereotypes. As a result, Benetton was both condemned for its appropriation of these issues to sell goods, but also praised for incorporating urgent social concerns into its advertising (Giroux).

Oliviero Toscani unites his “own reality” of transcultural harmony with Benetton’s branding. However, Back and Quaade identify a contradiction between Toscani portraying his own world view and the processes of fragmentation and objectification in his work (Back and Quaade, 68): “... the images of international communication and unity is realized by emphasizing difference and creating fetishistic images of nationalism, cross-racial stereotypes and images of otherness” (Back and Quaade, 68). Beyond the representation of these “fetishistic” “cross-racial stereotypes,” these colorful, harmonious images seem almost too idyllic, especially during the 1980s, a decade rife with political, economic, and cultural unrest, with the Cold War, the biggest recession since the Great Depression, and the start of the Iran-Iraq Conflict that resulted in a million lost lives. Toscani produces work for Benetton informed by his own

Eurocentric experience, crafting his own idealistic reality and worldview through the portrayal of fetishistic imagery rooted in racial stereotypes as archetypes for international cultures.

In 1989, one of the starkest examples of “fragmentation and objectification” was a shot portraying a black hand and a white hand handcuffed together, entitled “Handcuffs.” This campaign incited varying reactions between cultural contexts across the globe. The United States immediately withdrew this ad from the print due to the handcuffs harnessing



Figure 3: “Handcuffs” (1989)

iconographic connotations of slavery and the criminalization of Black Americans. However, John Rollins of Spin Magazine, one of two magazines that continued to print Benetton campaigns, applauded the brand for igniting discourse among their consumer audience, proclaiming that, “The campaigns can create good awareness of Benetton among its core audience of young adults. “If you can stimulate a discussion among your audience, it's always to your benefit,” he added. (Elliott). In Britain, London Regional Transport refused to put these ads on display, with their publicity officer at the time commenting, “Posters in a tube station are inescapable... because they are compulsory, we have a special responsibility” (Back and Quaade 70). Since the start of their advertising campaigns, Benetton has drawn praise for their representation of “multi ethnic models” and has “been recognized as a promoter of racial diversity... In addition, Benetton drew approval from consumers because it used the same advertisements worldwide, sending a firm message that racial diversity should be celebrated”

(Trescott). Despite such mixed discourses, this campaign won the most awards of any campaign in Benetton's advertising history, winning the French Grand Prix de l'Affichage, and other prizes in Italy, Holland, Denmark and Austria (Baack and Quaade, 71).

Upon weighing varying global discourses surrounding Benetton advertising campaigns, it is fruitful to draw from Stuart Hall's concepts of encoding and decoding, and how audiences digest and understand work despite apparent intentions of the producers. Hall introduces the process of "encoding" as the production of a message, so in this case, the production of an advertising campaign (Hall, 508). After encoding a message, the process that follows is "decoding," in which viewers attempt to understand and interpret the producer's message. Within decoding, Hall references the subprocesses of "denotation," or literal meaning, and "connotation," which is informed by the individual perspective, affecting the meanings viewers may decode (Hall, 512). Effective communication, or what Hall coins "achieved equivalence" when the producer's intention lines up with viewers "decoding," or interpretation of their message (Hall, 511).

Within the process of decoding, Hall characterizes three different positions within the process of decoding; the dominant or preferred reading, the negotiated reading, and the oppositional reading. The dominant reading is where the viewer can decode the exact purpose encoded, however, Hall points out that those who embody this position would be "operating inside the hegemony of the dominant code" (Hall, 515). That is, the hegemonic dominant narrative is inscribed as the "preferred reading" of a media text and those who favor the dominant reading are understood by those with a cultural understanding that prefers the dominant reading. On the other hand, the negotiated reading of a text is a combination of both accepting and rejecting different elements of the text. This manifests as readers acknowledging

the dominant narrative, but also are not fully willing to completely accept or approve of the message inscribed by the producer. Lastly, the oppositional reading of a text is where the viewer can understand the denotative and connotative meanings of the text, but decodes an entirely different message, given the viewer's unique cultural background and understanding of the given messages. It is in the oppositional reading of a text polarized discourses can arise, with the potential political discourse emerging as "events which are normally signified and decoded in a negotiated way begin to be given an oppositional reading," joining the 'politics of signification' and the 'struggle in discourse' (Hall, 516). It is relevant to consider Hall's different readings within the process of decoding in order to identify whether varied discourses produce non-dominant meanings, as Hall is interested in ways dominant readings can be deconstructed.

In response to these campaigns' backlash, Peter Fressola, Benetton's Director of Communications in North America, proclaimed, "We're not that stupid. We're doing corporate communication. We're sponsoring these images to change people's minds and create compassion around social issues. We think of it as art with a social message (Squires, 18). Advertising's inextricable link to capitalism, profit, and commercialization exposes the central point of discomfort in these Benetton campaigns. The campaigns' primary purpose is to sell their products, yet they leverage the problematic representation of fetishistic imagery to procure cross-cultural harmony, during a time particularly tense with international conflict.

The aforementioned Benetton campaigns have failed to achieve equivalence among global audiences because of the polarized reception and interpretations among viewers. These campaigns act as productive sites to explore the struggle over meanings according to varying cultural contexts. The wide range of discourse, from condemnation and calls for removal to praise for the inclusion of diverse cultures outside of a Eurocentric narrative, reveals the

continuum of experiences with racism depending on cultural context and understanding of racialized identity politics and stereotypes (Murji, 271). The capacity for a wide range of responses within discourse can be characterized by Hall's concept of polysemy, the capacity for audiences to create new meanings from a text (Hall, 513). However, when releasing this campaign, Benetton lacked the intercultural understanding to grasp how viewers took offense to such imagery based in cultural characters and racist symbolism.

Although Benetton's comments imply that they are using their advertising campaigns to "change people's minds" and "create compassion around social issues," Benetton cannot control how viewers decode their imagery, despite attempting to proclaim that they are reforming the advertising medium to be "art with a social message" (Squires, 18). With the "United Colors of Benetton" emblem slapped on each campaign, regardless of what stance Toscani and Fressola fulfill as producer discursive actors, advertising "will always be limited by the advertisement's inherent bias: the sales pitch" (Tinic, 23). Rooting their diverse representation in fetishistic stereotypes and lacking the intercultural understanding of certain symbolism in other countries, Benetton missed the mark in meaningfully representing different ethnic groups with corporate advertising. Echoing Leong's frameworks regarding the practice of racial capitalism and racial commodification, Toscani has used the medium of corporate advertising and attempted to send a global harmony and cultural understanding campaigns. However, by relying on fetishistic, stereotypical imagery representing different cultural identities, he commodifies these representations to boost the Benetton brand to seem globally-minded and diverse. Failing to allocate efforts to support these causes in ways beyond the brand, however, Benetton missed the mark. In the end, given the increase in sales and the widespread international

publicity Benetton has received, these campaigns have achieved the brand's motive of boosting revenue (Giroux).

Brand Politicization and Consumer Activism during Trump's Presidency

After the 2016 United States Presidential Election, Trump's era of division and political politicization only magnified these dynamics between consumer activism and social media. Both Trump supporters and those who oppose Trump have utilized social media to mobilize and take organized action. Shannon Coulter, a small business owner, launched the #GrabYourWallet boycott of Trump brands and companies that sell Trump family products (Heldman, 54). Liberal consumers also launched a boycott against New Balance after a company representative told a reporter, "With President-elect Trump, we feel things are going to move in the right direction." This statement inspired Andrew Anglin, a neo-Nazi blogger, to name New Balance shoes the "Official Shoes of White People" (Heldman, 55). Engaging in new networked activism, liberal consumers posted pictures and videos of them setting their New Balance shoes on fire, using the hashtag #boycottnewbalance (Heldman, 55).

Online consumer activism wasn't characteristic of the left alone. In the months following the election, Trump supporters organized numerous boycotts of companies with executives who publicly opposed Trump. For example, #BoycottGrubHub trended on twitter after an email written by CEO Matt Maloney was leaked, stating that the company would not tolerate actions or words demeaning minorities and immigrants even though it "worked for Mr. Trump" (Heldman, 56). As a result, Grubhub's stock fell 5.1% in a single day. Moreover, Pepsi's CEO Indra Nooyi told a reporter that "our employees are all crying" over Trump's election win. Soon thereafter, #BoycottPepsi trended on Twitter. Regardless of political party, consumers have increasingly engaged in consumer activism to align with or against Trump. Author and corporate marketing

expert Peter Horst explain the current state of brand politicization: “It used to be [brands] could sit on the sidelines, and say, ‘I make software, I make soup, I don’t do politics. There’s really no such thing anymore as that bland easy middle” (ABC7). Building on Heldman’s argument, Horst goes even further by saying during Trump era, brands are not even afforded “that bland easy middle” of apoliticism. As a result, under this everchanging set of strategies for business success, corporations have been increasingly identifying core values and causes in order to target consumers. It is important to consider these phenomena of brand politicization along with consumer activism during Trump’s presidency to contextualize PepsiCo’s “Live for Now” campaign (2017) and Nike’s “Dream Crazy campaign (2018). The incendiary political atmosphere during Trump’s presidency enabled both brands and consumers to align politically. In weighing both these campaigns, I will focus on surrounding producer and audience discourses to gauge audience perception of selected campaigns and producer intentions.

PepsiCo “Live for Now” campaign featuring Kendall Jenner (2017)

On April 4, 2017, PepsiCo (Pepsi) launched a campaign entitled “Live for Now,” starring supermodel and reality star Kendall Jenner (Gottell). The ad was crafted to specifically appeal to emerging Gen-Z and millennial audiences that are politically and civically activated as well as engage with social justice movements. The two-and-a-half-minute campaign depicted a protest with an attractive cast of extras. The young protesters held signs with ambiguous phrases like “Love,” “Peace” and “Join the Conversation,” while many were pumping their fists in the air and chanting. The protest then passes Kendall Jenner, during a photoshoot, who then wipes her dark lipstick off and throws her blonde wig to her black assistant to join the protest. The group of protestors are then stopped by a line of police officers, yielding a pause in the musical score, signifying a moment of tension in the storyline. Jenner emerges to the front of the protestors to

give one of the officers a can of Pepsi. He opens the can, takes a sip, and smiles, causing the protestors to start cheering enthusiastically, high-fiving and fist-bumping Jenner. The ad closes, displaying the phrases “Live Bolder,” “Live Louder,” and “Live for Now” of course, with the iconic blue and red Pepsi logo. While attempting to target a younger, politically and socially activated generation, Pepsi trivialized movements thought to be portrayed, like #BlackLivesMatter. The ad was pulled just one day after distribution due to intense online criticism and backlash (Victor).

The response to the campaign was swift and intense, as many immediately took to social media to condemn the campaign. Entertainment Weekly called the ad “a tone-deaf attempt to co-opt a movement of political resistance” to increase sales (Gettell). Many Twitter users expressed concern and disgust following the ad’s release, claiming that it trivialized social justice movements where several people lost their lives fighting for an actual cause. One user @deray tweeted, “If I had carried Pepsi I guess I never would’ve gotten arrested. Who knew?” (Deray). Even Bernice King, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s daughter, tweeted “If only Daddy would have known about the power of #Pepsi” with a picture of her father in an altercation with police officers (Be A King). Whether viewers responded with sarcasm, disdain, anger or humor, there is no doubt that the campaign was widely condemned across social media for the way it portrayed racial justice movements.



Figure 4 & 5: Still from Pepsi’s “Live for Now” campaign (2017) and “Take a Stand in Baton Rouge” (2016)

The campaign was also widely criticized for allegedly coopting the iconic “Take a Stand in Baton Rouge” image of Iesha Evans at a protest following the murders of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile at the hands of police. The image captured Evans being approached by heavily armed police officer moments before she was arrested in July 2016 (Chira). Although the campaign did not explicitly mention Black Lives Matter, its imagery evoked sentiments of the movement, that critics felt it trivialized. What is tone-deaf about the comparison between these two images is simple; white privilege. While Jenner is met with a smile from the police officer and subsequent celebration from the fellow protestors, Evans was met with handcuffs shortly after this image was captured. The anticipated moment when Jenner approaches the police officer is filled with tension. Jenner offers the officer a can of Pepsi, pacifying the tension into celebration and unity among police and protestors. This part of the campaign is what is the most disturbing part for Shalini Shankar, Anthropology professor at Northwestern University: “The most disturbing part [of the “Live for Now Campaign”] is her approaching the police through white privilege, in a way that all other folks might not have been able to” (Jones & Yu). Shankar also poses the question of whether Kendall Jenner was perhaps the best fit for the campaign.

Building on Shankar’s question, John Gallegos, CEO of prominent creative agency United Collective, proclaims that that, “there is nothing wrong with a white, non-ethnic person being the protagonist for a minority group... But it has to be the right person. If the hero doesn’t have a genuine connection to the cause it will come off as superficial” (Jones & Yu). Choosing Kendall Jenner as the heroine of the campaign was the brand’s first misstep in that she hadn’t previously engaged with social justice movements, even being accused of cultural appropriation and ‘black-fishing’ in the past. Ultimately, relying on the supermodel’s cultural clout to target a younger generation of politically activated youth was a flawed strategy to begin with. Critics

immediately bashed PepsiCo and the advertisement on social media in a digital deluge of tweets, comments, and posts.

To further understand the critical reception of Pepsi's "Live for Now" campaign starring Kendall Jenner, it is vital to take into account the campaign's producer discourse. After the campaign was pulled, just a single day after distribution, Pepsi defended the ad and the brand's intentions, stating, "This is a global ad that reflects people from different walks of life coming together in a spirit of harmony, and we think that's an important message to convey" (Gettell). However, Pepsi later acknowledged their mistake and tweeted the following apology:

Pepsi was trying to project a global message of unity, peace and understanding. Clearly, we missed the mark and we apologize. We did not intend to make light of any serious issue. We are removing the content and halting any further rolling. We also apologize for putting Kendall Jenner in this position (Victor).

Through this apology statement, we can understand what Pepsi intended with the ad as well as *how* exactly they perceived their missteps. The apology subtly acknowledges those accusing Pepsi of coopting the Black Lives Matter movement by trivially portraying the movement, stating that "we did not intend to make light of any serious issue". Pepsi's attempted "global message of unity, peace and understanding" is articulated very similarly to Toscani's visions behind Benetton campaigns. 30 years after Toscani's Benetton campaigns, Pepsi made similar woes; in a time during Trump's divided America with civil protest against police brutality, the #MeToo movement, and the March for Our Lives, it is tone deaf to craft a re-imagination of global unity and peace during a time rife with tragedy and unrest.

While analyzing producer discourse, it is also important to consider the key producers behind the campaign. Six senior-level producers from Pepsi's in-house agency "the Creators League Studio," who are all white, are credited for the campaign: Michael Bernard (director), Peter Kasko (creative director), Ben Freedman (executive producer), Kristin Patrick (agency

creative director), Ally Polly (agency executive producer), and Allison Snipes (agency producer) (Rahman). According to Shankar, Pepsi's advertising executives did not intend to trivialize racial justice movements, "but if you've only got people who are from certain demographics imagining what normal looks like, this is what you potentially could end up with. Diversify the people in the process, and include people who are willing to provide dissenting views" (Jones & Yu). By highlighting the lack of diversity and representation among the campaign's executives, Shankar reveals the importance of empowering minority voices and diversifying representation in the creative process to create narratives that are not only more realistic, but also in touch with the current socio-political climate. Limited by narrow perspectives and representation, the team's own white privilege and weak understanding riddles the "Live for Now Campaign," perhaps informing their faulty decision of selecting Kendall Jenner to head the campaign. Pepsi's campaign fell short in failing to diversify their creatives and for choosing someone to star their campaign who hadn't engaged with portrayed social justice movements. Pepsi's campaign is the quintessential example of how corporate brands run the risk of trivially portraying and demeaning such movements through commodification of social justice themes.

Nike "Dream Crazy" campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick (2018)

Colin Kaepernick, quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers at the time, first started kneeling during the ceremonial singing of the national anthem during their preseason game against the Green Bay Packers in September 2016. When NFL Media questioned his actions after the game, Kaepernick explained that kneeling was a form of protest against racial injustice in America: "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color" he shared during a post-game interview with NFL Media (Mather). He continued to explain that "To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my

part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder,” in reference to a series of murders by law enforcement that ignited the Black Lives Matter movement (Mather). Kaepernick then added that, he would continue to protest in this way until he feels that “[the American flag] represents what it’s supposed to represent” (Hunnicut). Kaepernick’s protest of the national anthem drew both support and criticism. On September 24, 2017, President Trump blasted Kaepernick at a Republican rally for the 2016 Presidential Election by saying “when somebody disrespects our flag [..] ‘Get that son of a bitch off the field right now. Out! He’s fired. He’s fired!’” (Mather). He also slammed the NFL’s ratings, equating them to Kaepernick’s protests and encouraging fans to boycott football games via Twitter: “If NFL fans refuse to go to games until players stop disrespecting our Flag & Country, you will see change take place fast. Fire or suspend! NFL attendance and ratings are WAY DOWN. Boring games yes, but many stay away because they love our country. League should back U.S” (TIME). It is important to consider President Trump’s comments about Kaepernick’s protest of the national anthem as they foreground and inform the polarized political responses to his Nike campaign along with support the rise of brand politicization.

That season, Kaepernick filed a grievance against the NFL in which he accused owners of colluding by not signing him to keep him out of the NFL after opting out of his contract with



Figure 7: Still from Nike “Dream Crazy” campaign

the San Francisco 49ers. Despite releasing statements in support of Kaepernick's protest, Kaepernick is thought to be blackballed in the NFL, after Seattle Seahawks' officials cancelled Kaepernick's tryout after he refused to end his kneeling protest during the 2018 season (Mather). Despite such blackballing, it is significant to highlight that over the 2016-2017 season, over 200 athletes engaged in some type of protest to the anthem, including athletes like fellow teammate Eric Reed, linebacker Brandon Marshall, defensive tackle Jurrell Casey, cornerback Jason McCourty, and Megan Rapinoe, midfielder on the U.S Women's National Soccer Team, and professional tennis player Naomi Osaka (US Today) (Ingrassia).

Nike released their ad featuring Kaepernick in 2018 for their 30th anniversary of their infamous "Just do it" slogan with their "Dream Crazy" campaign. Through a simple tweet, Kaepernick announced his partnership with Nike with a simple tweet: "Believe in something even if it means sacrificing everything #JustDoIt" (Mather). Attached to the tweet was an ad, that would later be coined the "Dream Crazy" campaign - a black and white photo of Colin Kaepernick with "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything" centered across his face - a reference to Kaepernick kneeling during the national anthem in protest of police brutality while he was quarterback for the 49ers. The iconic Nike swoosh along with their slogan "Just do it" is printed at the bottom of the ad. Not long after, the full commercial (featuring other prolific athletes like Serena Williams and Odell Beckham Jr.) was released to introduce the 2018-2019 NFL season as well as celebrate the 30-year anniversary of Nike's "Just Do It" brand slogan. The campaign incited a fiery, polarized cultural discourse and controversy. People bought Nikes, others burned their Nikes. The ad was both discussed and condemned on social media and broadcast news outlets. Nike concocted the perfect storm by leveraging politics and social justice, inciting controversy and media coverage to the brand's benefit.

Since featuring Kaepernick in the campaign, Nike's market value rose by \$6 billion within the same year (Gibson). The brand's market shares were up over 36% for 2018. Nike generated \$43 million worth of media exposure in the initial 24 hours following the campaign's launch and sales increased by 31% (Novy-Williams, Reints). Numerous public figures expressed their support for the partnership. Morgan Freeman tweeted "Hilarious watching @realDonaldTrump's core desperately seeking new footwear this morning @Kaepernick7 is a true American hero. @Nike is a true American company #JustDoIt" (Freeman). American Film Producer Tariq Nasheed also tweeted "Nike is definitely on the right side of history by having Colin Kaepernick in their new #JustDoIt campaign. Nike has made BILLIONS of dollars of the image of Black athletes, and it's only right for them to show support for Black athletes who stand up for justice" (Nasheed). Twitter user @marcia_loverdi shared a photo of her new Nike running shoes, tweeting "Bought mine. Kneel for social injustice. Get it right America" (StayTheCourse).

On the other hand, the "Dream Crazy" campaign upset others, inciting some fans to post videos to social media of themselves burning or cutting up Nike apparel or encouraging a Nike boycott in condemnation of Kaepernick. Twitter user @sclancy79 tweeted "First the @NFL forces me to choose between my favorite sport and my country. I chose country. Then @Nike forces me to choose between my favorite shoes and my country. Since when did the American Flag and the National Anthem become offensive?" (Clancy). Along with these sentiments was a video of Clancy setting his Nike shoes ablaze. President Trump weighed in on the issue once again, tweeting "What was Nike thinking? Just like the NFL, whose ratings have gone WAY DOWN, Nike is getting absolutely killed with anger and boycotts. I wonder if they had any idea that it would be this way? As far as the NFL is concerned, I just find it hard to watch, and always will, until they stand for the FLAG!" (Trump). What is significant about these polarized

reactions is that seemingly bad publicity like #Nikeboycott, which trended on Twitter in the aftermath of the campaign, contributed to sustaining long-term attention for the brand. In the end, no matter if consumers are in support of the brand or burning Nike apparel, Nike makes money from the campaign's generated explosive discourse as they continue to sponsor the NFL. On the other hand, presenting Kaepernick's activism on Nike's platform amplifies his cause, further increasing Kaepernick's visibility.

It is important to consider Nike's producer discourse, especially involving such a politicized, incendiary campaign. After the advertisement's release, Nike founder Phil Knight, defended the ad, explaining that, "It doesn't matter how many people hate your brand as long as enough people love it. And as long as you have that attitude, you can't be afraid of offending people. You can't try and go down the middle of the road. You have to take a stand on something, which is ultimately I think why the Kaepernick ad worked" (Beer). Gino Fisanotti, a Nike vice president of brand marketing for North America, weighed in on producer discourse, sharing that, "We believe Colin is one of the most inspirational athletes of this generation, who has leveraged the power of sport to help move the world forward" (Hunnicut, Aleen & McGurty). Nike's "Dream Crazy" campaign incited explosive politicized discourse, igniting those who typified Kaepernick as unpatriotic along with those who view the campaign as inspiring and as a demonstration of Nike standing on the right side of history. On a representational level, Nike is undoubtedly sending a powerful message to consumers by partnering with Kaepernick for the campaign and amplifying his cause. When the campaign was first released, many of the middle-school students I taught during a summer program reposted the ad on Instagram. My students were from predominantly low-income neighborhoods of color

in the Bay Area; seeing a role model who both represented their hometown and activism on Nike's widespread platform was both inspirational and persuasive.

However, aligning with Kaepernick and his activism also exposes Nike's hypocrisy, transcending the campaign on a representational level. Partnering with Kaepernick has to do more with Kaepernick's transformation as a public figure and activist, rather than taking a political stance: "For Nike, Kaepernick's cause is simply good business—if it were anything other than a cynical branding exercise, the company would surely not be simultaneously doing business with the NFL, which has done its best to stifle Kaepernick's protest movement" (Hunt). This hypocrisy demonstrates the brand's lack of commitment to Kaepernick's activism; since the release of the "Dream Crazy" campaign, Nike has not really utilized Kaepernick (currently a free agent) or made efforts to engage with the current racial injustice movements. "That may be the Kaep ad's most damning legacy" proclaims *Fast Company's* Jeff Beer. "That it was all just an ad" (Beer). At a representational level, Nike and Kaepernick's collaboration was successful to an extent in that it popularized his dissent in mainstream culture, perhaps making his activism more engaging and accessible. However, by limiting support for Kaepernick and his activism to the campaign itself, Nike is capitalizing on racial justice activism, and may be undermining or even demeaning the causes they claim to support through the commodification of such activism. Nike's choice of Kaepernick to front the "Dream Crazy" campaign sends a powerful message, however commodifies the causes Kaepernick stands for. Corporations need to be wary of appropriating social justice movements. Doing so risks equating buying products to supporting such activism and movements.

Conclusion

Utilizing medium of advertising, modern corporations have attempted to derive racial capital in order to boost their brand and target younger, more politically engaged audiences. This phenomenon has been enabled by a broader shift towards the brand. Assessing Benetton's "All the Colors of the World" campaign (1986) and corresponding producer and audience discourses revealed Toscani's attempted portrayal of global harmony and peace, only to commodify fetishistic imagery of racial stereotypes during a time particularly rife with international conflict. These processes of objectification and fragmentation thus commodified such images of contrived racial diversity to position the Benetton brand as progressive and culturally-minded. However, the explosive discourse condemning Toscani's "Handcuffs" soon after in 1989 revealed the brand's lack of symbolic understanding across cultures.

During Trump's turbulent and polarizing presidency, we have witnessed brands take it upon themselves to engage with politics through corporate advertising. Assessing PepsiCo's "Dream Crazy" campaign (2017) exposed the dangers of picking a figure like Kendall Jenner, who is primarily known for her reality show and her modeling career, as well as exposed the lack of representation among the producers of the campaign. Pepsi's oversight of white privilege in the context of protests was clear in the final cut of the campaign. Viewers were quick to condemn the campaign, accusing PepsiCo of coopting the Black Lives Matter movement in a trivial, superficial manner to engage younger, politically-activated audiences. With Nike, their "Dream Crazy" campaign was powerful for featuring Colin Kaepernick on their platform on a representational level. The campaign incited polarized discourses, yet gained huge amounts of revenue and publicity. However, Nike has not furthered their interactions with Kaepernick and his activism since and has continued to sponsor the NFL, who has done their best to hinder his

cause. The mere representation of racial justice causes through advertising both commodifies and derives racial capital to boost their brands.

Informed by this transition from products to the intrinsic values of the brand, corporate brands want you to resonate: their aesthetics, their voice, and now their politics. While creating this project, I was deeply inspired by the mass mobilization of activists, public figures, and even brands voicing their support for “Black Lives Matter” this past summer during the George Floyd protests. I grew wary, however, when this moment of fiery support and resistance waned. And I am fearful that this resurgence will become just that: a fleeting moment in time. My capstone begs this question: Can advertising contribute meaningfully to social justice initiatives? At best, brands can leverage advertising to give activists a platform to gain visibility on a representational level, similar to Nike’s “Dream Crazy” campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick. However, advertising’s undeniable link with advanced capitalism and commercial gain risks commodifying and exploiting such important racial justice movements. If a brand is dedicated to furthering racial justice, corporations should look inward to assess company policies and initiatives. Implementing anti-racism personnel policies and diversity and inclusion training, commitment to pay equity, and empowering diverse voices in company processes, are just a few strategies that can demonstrate a company’s commitment to advancing racial justice on a structural level. Advertising cannot be a brand’s only way to advance social justice; doing so exploits and fails minority employees and exploits such important dissenting movements.

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