

**SOCIAL MEDIA AS A TOOL FOR ANTI-RACIST CORPORATE DISRUPTION IN
THE FASHION INDUSTRY**

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1. Introduction:

Social media is increasingly one of the most frequently viewed types of media in our society, and allows individuals to produce and promote their own messages with greater ease than other forms of media. Thus, social media is also one of the most powerful platforms for sparking change, spreading messages, and starting important conversations. The rise of social media has changed the ways in which corporate social disruption, or a disruption in a brand's political agenda, can occur, allowing for a faster spread of information than ever. Individuals can use social media platforms to spread messages about unjust practices within corporations and brands in effective ways, sometimes even eliciting responses and actions from the corporations they are calling out. One industry in which social media has effectively served as a tool for corporate social disruption is the fashion industry. Specifically, as a result of networked activism, many fashion corporations faced backlash in the wake of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests for promoting and tolerating racist corporate cultures. Drawing upon Caroline Heldman's research on corporate social activism, Sarah Banet-Weiser's theories on political branding, and William McGuire's inoculation and immunization theories, fashion brands Everlane, Aritzia, Brandy Melville, and Boyish Jeans will be analyzed as examples of the different ways that networked activism can serve as a tool for anti-racist corporate social disruption. Through these analyses, it will be shown that networked activism via social media is an effective tool for activism against the hegemonic norms that uphold racism within the fashion industry, that it is more effective at sparking change in organizations that practice corporate social responsibility than those who do not, and that inoculation serves as an effective corporate marketing tool for mitigating backlash from public criticism.

2. Racism & Mistreatment in the Fashion Industry:

There is a dictum within the fashion industry attributed to Wallis Simpson, that is “You can’t be too thin, young, or pale”—this saying is proven to be believed by the fashion industry through the majority of advertisements and people shown in fashion marketing.¹ The fashion industry is historically racist in that any features varying from the Western norm of pale, thin, and young are uncommon in fashion advertising and on the runway.² This exclusionary practice promotes an underlying negative message to those who do not fit the norm, communicating that only certain customers are meant to purchase clothing from certain brands as well as normativizing “beauty”. Individuals may look at a company’s advertisements in a futile attempt to find people who look like themselves in the clothing. The influence of lack of representation in marketing can be extremely harmful over time, telling a particular story about how an individual should look and contributing to one’s sense of cultural reality and identity.³ It is shocking to realize, for instance, that the first Black model on the cover of *Vogue France* was in 1988, on the cover of *Vogue UK* in 1987, and on the cover of *Vogue US* in 1974. *Vogue UK* went from 2006-2018 without featuring a Black model on their cover. At the time of writing, *Vogue US* still has not featured a model of Asian descent on their cover.

Racism against Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) is normalized and accepted in the fashion industry in an extreme way, not only through lack of diverse representation, but also through racist corporate practices and structures.⁴ One example is top-tier fashion publishing conglomerate *Vogue*, which has failed to hire an adequate amount of Black editors, writers, photographers, and designers, on top of their lack of representation within their editorial campaigns.⁵ The same holds true in many clothing companies’ corporate structures as well. As corporate social responsibility becomes a more common practice, more and more

fashion companies are attempting to politicize their brands in ways that distract from the inherent racism demonstrated, both in the ways that they choose to represent their brands and the ways that their brands are run on a corporate level. This can be demonstrated by brands advertising their clothing on racially diverse models or appropriating fashion trends from Black culture while continuing to perpetuate corporate racism through lack of internal representation or discrimination against BIPOC employees and customers.

The fashion industry is notorious for bad labor practices, body shaming, ageism, and racism, among a slew of other corporate social issues. The second decade of the twenty-first century has shown an increase in political branding and corporate social responsibility (CSR), a business model that values sustainability and equity. Many fashion companies choose to brand themselves as being sustainable and practicing CSR while ignoring other issues within their companies, having a facade of sustainability while continuing to promote harmful, racist labor practices. A commonly observable offense within the fashion industry includes “greenwashing”, a phenomenon in which companies project an image of environmental consciousness to attract customers while ignoring other issues of sustainability within their company.⁶

It is important to note that companies that are environmentally sustainable in their practices but that simultaneously perpetuate racism are contributing to environmental racism. Issues relating to the environment and issues relating to race are inherently intertwined, and ignoring issues of race within a company while building a brand on ‘environmental sustainability’ is another form of greenwashing. Environmental racism refers to the way in which minority group neighborhoods (populated primarily by BIPOC and members of low socioeconomic groups) are burdened with a disproportionate number of hazards, such as toxic waste facilities, garbage dumps, and other sources of environmental pollution that lower quality

of life.⁷ This results in a disproportionate amount of BIPOC suffering from waste and pollution-related health problems. Thus, any company that chooses to pride themselves on their environmental sustainability must consider the disproportionate ways in which BIPOC communities are affected by environmental issues.⁸

Another common violation of sustainability and human rights that occurs within the fashion industry is on the textile production level. The garment and textile industries have endemic poor labor practices and sweatshops are one of the biggest industries of undocumented workers who are treated poorly as a result of their conditions. Mistreatment of textile factory workers is a common offense in the fashion industry, as is racism on the corporate and retail levels.⁹ Racism and poor labor practices exist within all levels of the fashion industry. This includes corporate culture, advertisements, the way that customers are treated, and the factories producing fabric and clothing.

Furthermore, in a historically racist industry, and in an age where brands use politicization as a tool for gaining consumer popularity, it is inevitable that fashion brands will engage in performative activism to further their own self-interest. Performative activism might look like a company ignoring the fact that they are upkeeping systemic racism within their industry through greenwashing, employee discrimination, and/or lack of representation, both in external campaigns and within companies. Social media is an effective tool to “call out” these companies for their wrongdoings, and, in some cases, to compel them to make real changes to their corporate practices.

3. Corporate Social Responsibility and Politicized Branding:

Corporations often seek to associate their products with progressive politics while simultaneously exhibiting problematic practices as a means to attract consumers.¹⁰ As presented

by Sarah Banet-Weiser's theory on politicized branding, within the contemporary cultural economy of the US, political sentiments have become a marketable commodity and political branding is increasingly present. Many consumers follow the credo "buying good is doing good", so politicized brands' products sell more easily. What constitutes "good" politics is also dependent on dominant trends, which can lead to corporations following political trends for their own success rather than due to genuine interest in certain issues.¹¹ Politics becomes a fashion, with brands following trends and only engaging with popular values. Thus, when some corporations lend themselves to political branding, and promote corporate social responsibility, they are frequently doing so performatively as a means of attracting a wider consumer base rather than as a means of projecting their actual beliefs.

A common contemporary mode/method of brand politicization is promoting environmentally sustainable products, with companies eager to announce their commitment to the environment as a platform for selling products while ignoring parts of their corporations that are problematic, engaging in greenwashing.¹² Green branding strategies mark a space on a historical continuum between niche marketing and advanced capitalism which has capitalized on a growing public awareness of environmental damage over the past fifty years.¹³ Corporations will often insist that their campaigns and intentions are sincere, but only usually attach to politics that are palatable to an audience of consumer citizens and not to politics that are seen as too alienating or disagreeable to customers.¹⁴ Environmental sustainability and green branding can come to stand in for the political, with corporations capitalizing off of green branding strategies while ignoring politics and issues that are less 'trendy' or comfortable for them to approach. Corporate activism can only go so far as to form truly democratic political communities if it only

chooses to represent mainstream politics--political brands are structured by ambivalence, only representing politics that mainstream consumers are 'comfortable with'.¹⁵

Brands are often affirmed and legitimized by their interactions with consumers, especially as consumers use social media to promote certain products and ideals.¹⁶ With the flux of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 media, and with the trending of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag, supporting Black Lives Matter became the dominant political hegemony. Thus, in addition to greenwashing, many companies have begun to engage in performative support of the Black Lives Matter movement, publicizing their support for the movement while ignoring their upholding and furthering of the rampant racism that exists within American society. This is a commonly observable offense within the fashion industry, which is one of the most exclusive and discriminatory industries. As brands become more political, and as social media becomes a more prominent source of news and political discourse, it becomes a powerful tool to affirm, criticize, and expose politicized brands for their actions as a form of consumer activism.

As shown through the research of Caroline Heldman, consumer activism occurs when individuals disagree with a corporation's political views, and social media campaigns are joining the ranks of other dominant types of consumer activism, including boycotts, investment actions, and direct actions. In an age where political branding is prevalent, Americans have been moving toward consumer activism and protest politics in the marketplace to help hold organizations accountable.¹⁷ The current era of consumer activism emerged in the mid-2000s with the rise of social media and is distinct in terms of the sheer volume of activity and use by activists of all four types of consumer activism (social media campaigns, boycotts, investment actions, and direct actions).¹⁸ Online activism has produced what sociologist Manuel Castells calls new

networked movements, a decentralized, leaderless movement in which activists come together through new media platforms.¹⁹ New networked movements have better potential to hold corporations accountable than have previous movements because activists can organize without a formal structure or organization and do not have to rely on mainstream media to shape the narrative of the debate at hand.²⁰ New communication technologies also make consumer activism more effective by conveying unified messages to corporations more quickly than ever before to larger audiences than ever before, and therefore corporations are likely to respond more quickly than ever before as a means of defending their brand image.²¹

4. Social Media and Black Lives Matter:

Networked activism is easier to engage in for Americans with Internet access than most other forms of activism, requiring little more than the click of a button to sign a petition, share a post or a link, or donate to a cause. Spreading negative experiences and facts about companies through social media can result in other forms of boycotting by those who view the negative news, including divestment, consumer protests, and widespread digital criticism. With the help of social media and modern technology, consumer activism has become an accessible tool of the masses.²² The #BlackLivesMatter movement is a predominant example of a historical social movement that started as a social media hashtag. This movement began to fight against the systemic inequality and racism that persists in the United States and the violence that Black Americans face because of it. This includes individuals being actively anti-racist and coming forward against racism within corporate America, an issue that is ever-present in the fashion industry. Consumer activism is one of many tools used by the movement, and social media continues to be a key platform used to further the movement eight years after it began.

In 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement saw enormous growth in publicized support and media coverage, and social media continued to play a key part in organizing for and advocating for the cause. On May 25, 2020, George Floyd was murdered by the Minneapolis Police Department after they were called by a convenience store employee who said that Mr. Floyd had used a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill, sparking warranted outrage and a reawakening of the #BlackLivesMatter movement in order to fight for justice for Mr. Floyd and to fight against racism and inequality in the United States.²³ Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, not all those who wanted to mobilize were able to protest in person, and many took to social media to voice their grievances and demands for justice, perhaps contributing to the record amount of social media activists mobilizing. With that being said, despite the pandemic presenting threats, an estimated 26 million Americans broke away from their months of COVID-19 lockdown to march for the cause in-person, forming the largest movement in United States history,²⁴ not to mention the [at least] forty countries worldwide that protested and marched in solidarity with the movement as well.²⁵ Social media was heavily used as an organizing platform to mobilize those who wished to protest in-person. Facebook's 'event' feature allowed for easy mobilization of individuals who could share the event's information with the click of a button, and Instagram accounts popped up in cities nationwide to post daily about where gatherings would be held.

Social media was used not only as a platform for mobilizing and organizing protests, but also as a platform for activists to spread awareness and news about racial inequality and how to fight against it. Online #BlackLivesMatter activism rose significantly following Mr. Floyd's death, with the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag being used 8.8 million times on May 28, just three days after Mr. Floyd's death, and continuing to be used at record highs in the months following.²⁶ Individuals spoke out and protested not only the injustice of Mr. Floyd's death, but

also aired personal grievances, coming forward on social media to share the ways in which they had experienced racism; sharing ways to combat racism through self-education; and calling out racism seen within companies and our society at large. Consumer activism flourished on social media, with individuals coming forward against corporations for racist behaviors and practices and demanding justice and actions from various brands. Due to the fashion industry's history of racial discrimination, much of the consumer activism that occurred in the wake of the protests consisted of employees from fashion companies coming out against the corporations that they worked for for problematic and racist behaviors. Furthermore, brands that marketed themselves as practicing CSR used their brands' social media accounts to publish statements of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement and sharing the ways in which their brands supported the Black community. Brands who continued their normally scheduled posting during the few weeks following the death of George Floyd were seen as not supporting the Black Lives Matter movement and faced significant backlash, and many brands who posted statements of solidarity faced scrutiny from consumers for performative activism.

5. Introduction to Case Studies and Inoculation Theory:

Four case studies on networked corporate activism against fashion brands in the wake of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests which had varying outcomes are observable within the brands Everlane, Aritzia, Brandy Melville, and Boyish Jeans. These companies' responses to criticisms and the varying degrees of backlash they have faced due to racist corporate practices will be analyzed in part through the lens of William McGuire's inoculation theory. Inoculation theory is one of the most comprehensive psychological approaches to inducing resistance to criticism, arguing that refutational defenses to criticism and showing vulnerability result in

resistance to later attacks.²⁷ Immunization is a form of inoculation in which an attack's arguments are refuted before an attack is given. A form of immunization might include a brand including mildly negative statements about themselves to explicitly refute the importance of such negative statements if presented with them. Inoculation theory proves to be a useful conceptual framework for advertising and branding specialists to use to avoid conflict with consumers.²⁸

Furthermore, companies that advertise themselves as being sustainable, or that publicize their practices of corporate social responsibility, are more likely to positively respond to networked activism than brands that do not. For example, if a brand has never shown efforts to improve the representation and inclusion of marginalized groups, they are less likely to respond to criticisms than a brand that has made efforts in these fields. Everlane and Aritzia will serve as examples of brands that have advertised themselves as being socially responsible and responded to social media outcry (to differing degrees), while Brandy Melville will serve as an example of an exclusive brand that perpetuates racism and body shaming and showed no efforts to change their ways despite the mass networked activism that occurred against them. Boyish Jeans will serve as an example of a brand that has immunized themselves against criticism through marketing tactics, but that continues to uphold racism and problematic industry standards while not receiving significant backlash for their behaviors.

5A. Case Study I–Everlane:

The first example of consumer activism within the fashion industry that occurred as a result of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests is clothing brand Everlane, a company which prides themselves on their sustainability but was outed for their racist corporate culture and practices. Everlane is a clothing company that prides itself on “Radical Transparency”, which is

the brand's mantra. Everlane's website states that they partner with "the best, ethical factories around the world" and "share the stories" of the manufacturing and distribution process with their customers through radical transparency.²⁹ Everlane also states on their website that they spend months finding the best factories around the world and that each factory is given a "compliance audit to evaluate factors like fair wages, reasonable hours, and environment", and maintain a goal of a score of 90 or above for every factory's compliance audit.³⁰ While Everlane's transparency about the production process of their clothing may help to combat the fashion industry's struggle with unethical working conditions in garment production, Everlane has faced backlash and countless allegations of employee mistreatment and racism within their corporate culture in recent months.

Former Everlane employees started an Instagram account with the handle @ex.wives.club, exposing Everlane for many injustices and violations of their supposed "radical transparency". In the wake of the George Floyd protests, Everlane began posting messages of solidarity with the Black community and of support with the Black Lives Matter protests. The @ex.wives.club account posted a series of slides on June 25, 2020 in response to these posts of solidarity, deeming them performative due to the ways in which Everlane perpetuates racism within their company. The account detailed that while Everlane is transparent about their supply chain and cost structure, their means of production are inherently connected to systemic racism and racialized capitalism and lack full transparency in that way. The slides stated that "Everlane has relied on Convenient Transparency, shedding light on *certain* parts of the supply chain", and that as former BIPOC and white allied employees, the creators of the account have witnessed and experienced anti-Black behavior, prejudice in advancement of BIPOC employees, bullying, racial supremacy, and manipulation and intimidation of employees who attempted to address

these issues.³¹ The post revealed that those who dared to speak up against how terrible management was at addressing issues like diversity and representation were “subdued with excuses, questioned on their loyalty, and fell victim to retaliation”.³²

The @ex.wives.club post detailed many specific stories shared by employees of their experiences, including the following: a white male, college graduate was offered the same salary that a queer woman of color, who had 4.5 years of work experience beyond college, was being paid; an ex-employee presented 32 black models to the CCO of Everlane, Alexandra Spunt, and Spunt said no to 31 and a “maybe” to a light-skinned Black model, stating that the models’ looks were “too severe” and “edgy” for Everlane, and that the Everlane woman should look “intellectual”; a white employee took the ideas of a Black employee as her own without giving her credit; among many other stories.³³ The @ex.wives.club account also posted a demand for Everlane to make the move from convenient transparency to *true* ‘Radical Transparency’ through the following actions: issue a letter of apology and acknowledgement of how Everlane has benefitted from systemic racism and set a no-tolerance policy for the manipulation and intimidation that has existed in the company’s culture for years; hire an external expert on environmental sustainability to analyze and publicly share the findings of a sustainability report; commit to being intersectional environmentalists, detailing a plan of how they will stand behind the most vulnerable communities which make up the majority of the labor in their industry; directly support BIPOC lives by donating to BIPOC-led organizations; hiring BIPOC executives at the C-Suite level who are not in a Diversity & Inclusion role; publicly outline the steps of retention they will take toward BIPOC employees; publicly outline safe avenues they will create for BIPOC employees to voice concerns about the brand; and, finally, ensure anti-racism training

is nuanced.³⁴ @ex.wives.club demanded that Everlane issue their response and apology by June 25, 2020. The post received over 17,000 likes.

Everlane responded to @ex.wives.club's initial demands, first on June 25, 2020 through a series of Instagram 'stories', which disappear after 24 hours, which the @ex.wives.club account deemed an insufficient response and called out Everlane in a post of their own detailing the ways in which their response lacked action, dialogue, and genuity. Three days later, on June 28, 2020, Everlane released a follow-up Instagram post consisting of written slides signed by Michael Preysman, the company's CEO and founder. The post addressed the fact that Everlane has fallen short in addressing the racism within their company and claimed that they needed to take accountability for the harm experienced by their workers. Preysman states in the post that he must work to create an inclusive environment, and that this "Work starts with [him] personally examining [his] own white privilege and how that impacts the culture of the company".³⁵ He then details the steps through which he intends to do this, namely: implementing active anti-racism training throughout the company with an outside company; creating safe, inclusive spaces for employees to voice their concerns through an anonymous HR hotline; moving away from a white-centered perspective towards a more inclusive perspective centering BIPOC at Everlane and in their customer communities; reviewing the pay equity between employees to ensure that all employees receive equitable compensation; developing a code of conduct that incorporates active anti-racism with input from employees and customers; and building workshops for senior leadership teams across the company to examine what needs to change and how.³⁶

The responses to this post, which received 12,200+ likes, were not positive. Thousands of angry consumers and ex-employees left comments on the post, including "I've found your response to be too little, too late. #SorryNotSorry DO BETTER", "Love all this talk about being

"inclusive" when you think about who is doing the including. How about you put your money where your mouth is and actually hire Black folks in the c-suite?", "Appreciate these actions but you also need to hire/promote diverse talent to increase leadership presence of BIPOC", "Your company is absolutely deplorable and I will NEVER shop with you again or support any influencers who continue to schlep your clothes and false ideals" among many others. In response to Everlane's apology, @ex.wives.club released a new post one day later, on June, 29, 2020, titled "Why It's Time to Boycott Everlane". Everlane had not done enough.

@Ex.wives.club's post response calling for the boycott of Everlane stated that "A white man finally saying that a racist and white supremacist workplace culture starts with him is nothing to congratulate. Nor is it a radical statement". The post stated that while Everlane's response was a step in the right direction, they still failed to list concrete steps on hiring, to address greenwashing, and to address a new climate justice initiative that centers on intersectionality, despite @ex.wives.club having outlined steps toward these efforts for them. Everlane also failed to mention donating any funds to Black-led organizations, despite this being a concrete step in the right direction. @Ex.wives.club also revealed that a third-party investigator hired by Everlane had directly messaged them on Instagram, and that this investigator was a white, pro-employer law firm hired by Everlane. This action, according to @ex.wives.club, proves that "Everlane only cares about their profits" and that they cannot truly care about racial justice or climate change without acknowledging intersectional environmentalism and their hand in greenwashing.³⁷

The @ex.wives.club account gained rapid momentum through the ease and speed with which information can be shared on social media, eventually catching the eye of mainstream news and media outlets, including an article in the New York Times Sunday paper. The

@ex.wives.club efforts to boycott Everlane for their racist behaviors proved to be an effective means of networked activism, garnering widespread attention and sparking Everlane to reconsider their company culture and anti-racism training approaches. While Everlane failed to address many of the demands that the @ex.wives.club called for, they implemented a small amount of changes as a result of the negative attention that the @ex.wives.club's networked activism brought upon their company. Through their firsthand accounts, they showed that Everlane's reputation for "transparency" was not fully deserved, and that Everlane was likely only choosing to represent political ideas and transparency when it was marketable to them. This convenient transparency plays into Banet-Weiser's notion of convenient brand politicizing and of brands only choosing to represent 'fashionable' politics. The backlash that Everlane received points to the failure of using "environmental sustainability" as a substitute for real political action, as Everlane's definition of being a sustainable company was exclusive to environmental sustainability and ignored issues of racism within their own culture. Everlane failed to show the transparency that they campaigned their brand on when it came to issues of race, and thus failed to address and affirm the inherent tie between racism and environmentalism through their actions as a company.

5B. Case Study II–Aritzia:

Another example of networked activism as an effective tool against racism in the fashion industry can be seen through individuals coming out against fashion brand Aritzia for racism in the workplace and Aritzia's subsequent response. Aritzia is a brand that prides themselves on their corporate social responsibility, detailing on their website that they have "taken an evidence-based approach to sustainability, with a focus on driving long-term impact over short-term

trends.”³⁸ The company also states on their website that they have conducted comprehensive assessments of their social and environmental impacts, using the help of external corporations who specialize in these fields. They pride themselves on safeguarding human rights in their factories, decreasing water usage in their production processes, using sustainable materials and packaging, and diversity and inclusion within their company. The company has a regularly updated page on their website titled “Corporate Responsibility” in which they address the ongoing efforts that they are taking to be socially responsible. This page includes a timeline listing benchmarks of their social and environmental responsibility efforts from the time that the company was founded in 2010 until the present day (see Figure I).



Figure I: Aritzia’s timeline of their corporate social responsibility efforts.³⁹

Despite all of the aspects of Aritzia’s brand culture that make it more sustainable and socially responsible than the average brand today, given the systemic racism that exists in our society and that is so rampant within the fashion industry, Aritzia is not safe from perpetuating a racist workplace culture. On May 31, 2020, five days after the horrific murder of George Floyd, Aritzia posted a photo of text on their Instagram account in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, stating that they were donating \$100,000 to Black Lives Matter and the

NAACP in honor of Mr. Floyd.⁴⁰ This post elicited mixed responses, as while Aritzia was doing more than some companies through their donations, for a company that advertises themselves as being socially responsible, they were not doing nearly enough by their consumers' standards. The post received over 1,600 comments, including the following: "there's no diversity in your frontline stores, ads, anything at all...", "I hope you address the mistreatment that your black employees face by other associates!", "The last time you posted a dark skin woman was October 18th, 2019.", and "What do you plan to do to help fight racial injustice? What is your specific plan?", among others. In addition to these comments, Aritzia faced backlash from users posting on their personal social media accounts, including Twitter user @EverythingKariss. On May 31, the same day that Aritzia posted their donation announcement and statement of solidarity, @EverythingKariss posted a personal statement on her Twitter account about acts of workplace racism that she experienced as an Aritzia employee.

In her statement, @EverythingKariss shared that she was the only black manager on her team during the five months that she worked at Aritzia, and that she was treated differently than the other managers by her fellow employees. She shared that she was given shifts at the cash register and that when she shared that she was an Associate Manager and should not be behind the cash register, her associates would not believe her because she was excluded from the rest of the management team. She also shared that when a Black coworker voiced his opinion on his experience with racism in the store, he was fired, and that she was not included in the conversation in which her associates decided to fire him. She also shared that the Aritzia location that she worked at made \$100,000 in one day, showing how the company's \$100,000 contribution may not be as significant as it reads at a first glance.⁴¹ @EverythingKarris brought up the point in her tweet that while the company's donation might initially seem like an amazing

gesture, the fact that they only did it when #BlackLivesMatter was “trending” in the media, and not when Black staff and customers would voice their frustrations, shows the company’s performativity. She stated that when Black customers and staff were not getting the attention that they deserved from the company, she believed it was because they were not a part of the company’s aesthetic then, and that the company only chose to speak up now that supporting Black Lives Matter has become the norm. This notion plays into Banet-Weiser’s idea that political brands only play into political hegemonic norms as a means for capital gain, and rarely politicize their brands in ways that go against the norm.

Supporting Black workers and customers was not on Aritzia’s agenda until supporting #BlackLivesMatter became the hegemonic norm, once again reinforcing Banet-Weiser’s thought that politicized branding predominantly occurs through popular, trendy politics. Racism has been a norm in the fashion industry since its conception, and by staying silent, Aritzia has been complicit in a racist culture since their conception as a brand. @EverythingKariss’ tweet received over 5,300 likes, and as she received messages from people who had similar experiences, she posted them in a thread below her original tweet. She received over 100 responses from ex-Aritzia employees and customers who had experienced racism at the hands of Aritzia. A common theme amongst these accounts was the fact that Aritzia draws from and benefits from the aspects of Black culture that fit their store’s aesthetic, including clothing and music drawn from Black culture, but continuously mistreat their Black employees and customers in a way that alienates them from feeling like they fit into the company’s aesthetic and culture.

One of the anonymous messages that @EverythingKariss received and included in her Twitter thread stated that “Aritzia consumes and exploits black culture yet refuses to represent them”, and that “they continuously play R&B, dancehall music, and hip hop, but continuously

treat their Black customers and employees like sh*t”.⁴² Another user whose response @EverythingKariss anonymously shared stated that “Anti-blackness and racism is a part of Aritzia’s culture and while they preach inclusivity...it’s performative and...a money grab”. Another ex-employee, under the twitter name @justjamjamm, replied to @EverythingKariss’ tweet stating that when she was the only Black person working at her Aritzia location, she was told to straighten her naturally curly hair to maintain the store’s image.⁴³ Over 100 individuals shared stories of racism on @EverythingKariss’ Twitter thread alone, and the thread drew attention from Aritzia’s corporate Twitter page, which replied to several individuals’ comments with different variations of the message: “Thank you for bringing this to our attention, we take these issues seriously. We’d like to hear more about your experience with us. If you’re comfortable, please DM us your contact information”. This one-on-one response via social media was unique to Aritzia when compared with the other case studies in this paper, and served as an effective way of showing the company’s desire to work on themselves and provide their customers and employees with a voice.

Ten days after @EverythingKariss’ Twitter thread went viral, on June 10, 2020, Aritzia posted an Instagram series detailing how they planned to implement major changes in their company moving forward with regard to the treatment of BIPOC employees. The first order of business listed in this post detailed the fact that the company planned to donate \$1 million to expand and strengthen the Diversity and Inclusion programs within their company. They shared that they were assembling an advisory group of BIPOC voices across all levels and geographies of their company; that they were evaluating the BIPOC representation across all levels of their business; that they were implementing mandatory training and education on systemic racism, racial inequality, and social injustice for all employees; and that they have an email account for

individuals to voice any thoughts or qualms with the company with regard to diversity and inclusion.⁴⁴ Aritzia's exclusive, racist, and discriminatory treatment of BIPOC employees was exposed through individuals like @EverythingKariss coming forward online, and because of the traction that these stories gained, Aritzia implemented major changes. As shown through Caroline Heldman's work on consumer activism, this rapid spread of networked activism and the subsequent response from Aritzia is an excellent example of the power of social media as a consumer activist platform. The question of whether or not these changes were performative is largely up for speculation, although Aritzia's actions are in line with the notion that political brands often only represent ideas that are the hegemonic political norm for their own capitalist interests.

Aritzia's response showed more concrete efforts than that of Everlane. Aritzia's response detailed their promise to hire BIPOC workers and advisors through all levels of their company and to allocate \$1 million to their company's Diversity and Inclusion programs, among other measures. In contrast, Everlane listed nonspecific promises to implement anti-racism policies throughout their company, to move away from white-centered perspectives, and to build workshops to work on themselves as a company, among other measures. While Everlane's response was a step in the right direction, it did not fulfill the wishes laid out by the @ex.wives.club account, while Aritzia's response showed more concrete and long-term solutions like those laid out in the Everlane @ex.wives.club's call to action.

Through political branding, Everlane and Aritzia have attempted to attract consumer bases that likely value sustainability and equality, and thus it was necessary to their success that they reply and quell the worries of their respective customer bases when facing backlash for their behaviors. Both companies' responses might be considered performative, albeit to different

extents, given their corporate interests and their desires to stay true to their brands in order to maintain their customer bases. Everlane's response showed performativity and self-interest more than anything, while Aritzia's response and subsequent actions proved to be more concrete than those of Everlane. With this in mind, companies that hold different values might have drastically different responses to similar social media callouts, with Brandy Melville being an example of this.

5C. Case Study III–Brandy Melville:

Brandy Melville is a company that has, time and time again, shown themselves to promote exclusivity within their company and branding, and shown ignorance of CSR. Being a one-size-fits-all clothing company that sells clothing that is in the extra-small to small size range at most other companies, they are automatically exclusive of many different body types. In addition to being exclusive in only making clothing that fits the normative body type, their hiring practices and treatment of their staff has long promoted racism and discrimination against those who do not fit Western beauty standards. Brandy Melville has historically centered their advertisements around social media campaigns, reposting photographs of clientele wearing their clothing, with said clientele usually being thin white women. Wearing Brandy Melville's clothing might be considered a symbol of status to some, with those who are able to fit into their clothing fitting into a niche of normative beauty standards including whiteness and thinness.

Brandy Melville's marketing tactics are extremely unique in that they are centered around their social media, with a \$0 advertising budget.⁴⁵ Brandy Melville is one of the earliest brands to use Instagram as a means of selling their clothes, the brand has posted almost every day since they first made an Instagram profile in 2010, having over 8,200 posts and 3.7 million followers.

The brand's account almost exclusively posts photographs of thin, white customers wearing their clothing (See Figure II).

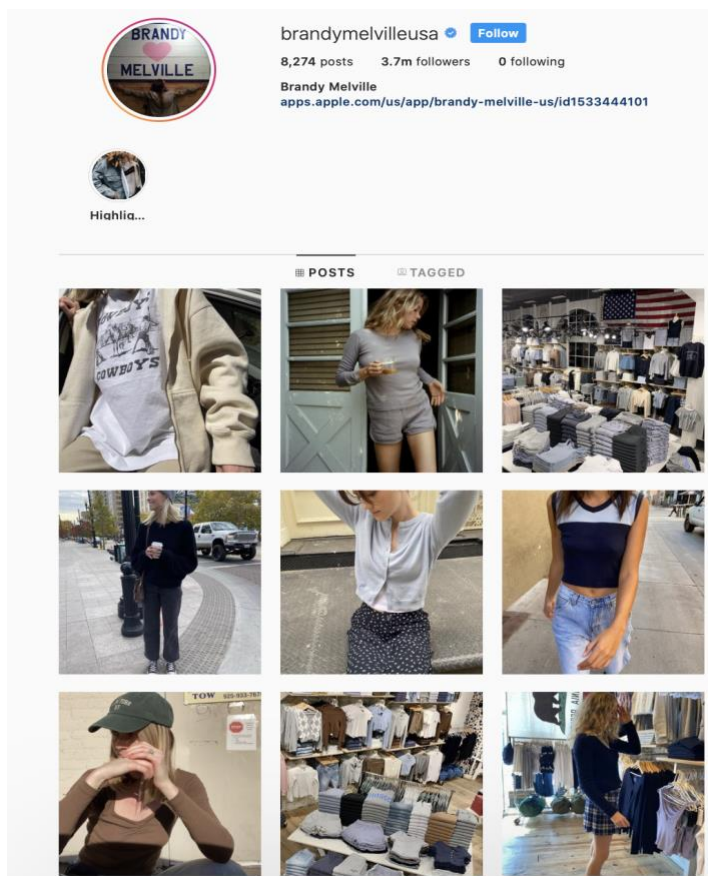


Figure II: Brandy Melville's official Instagram account.⁴⁶

In May 2020, after the murder of George Floyd sparked a national uprising, most major corporations acknowledged the events and released statements of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement and BIPOC employees and affiliates of the company. Brandy Melville, however, remained silent. George Floyd's death occurred on May 25, 2020, and Brandy Melville continued to repost photographs of thin, white consumers of their clothing from May 25-May 28, with no acknowledgment of Mr. Floyd's life or of the mass uprisings occurring due to race inequality in the United States. The company then stopped posting on their account for three weeks, never acknowledging the current events of their country despite their large following and

their consistent perpetuation of behaviors that uphold racism. In these three silent weeks, the @brandymelvilleusa Instagram account received thousands of comments calling for corporate change, including “no inclusivity on your page. disgusting.”, “being racist isn’t edgy or cute Brandy Melville”, “WHEN WILL I SEE A BLACK GIRL MODELING FOR YOU? #blacklivesmatter”, and “ADD CLOTHING FOR PEOPLE OF DIFFERENT BODY TYPES BESIDES SIZE 0 WHITE FEMALES”,⁴⁷ to name a few. When they finally began to post their regularly scheduled posts three weeks later, they had to disable comments due to the high volume of hateful comments that they were receiving. As of November 2020, the comment feature on their posts is still disabled, showing the company’s lack of care and concern with the issues that people have with them and their racist, exclusive culture. They refuse to give their customers, employees, and those who disagree with their brand’s values a voice.

Backlash against Brandy Melville picked up in early June as they began to post their regular content again, and TikTok user Callie, @calliejeanxo, a former Brandy Melville employee, subsequently posted a 15-part TikTok video series titled “Reasons you should NOT shop at Brandy Melville”. In each video, Callie detailed a list of reasons why Brandy Melville’s corporate culture is corrupt, and promotes racism and body shaming.⁴⁸ In this TikTok series, Callie shared that she was hired while shopping there as a sixteen-year-old with no prior job experience and a store manager asked her if she wanted to work there based solely off of looks (Callie is a thin white woman). In this same video, she shared that her second week working at Brandy Melville, someone came in with a resume asking if her store location had any openings. Callie stated that she went in the back to show her boss the woman’s resume, which had a lot of relevant experience on it, and that rather than looking at the resume, her boss asked “what race” the candidate was. When Callie shared that the candidate was Asian, her boss responded “No,

tell her we're not hiring", even though they were. She also shared that the majority of her coworkers were white, tall, and skinny while working there.⁴⁹ Callie's TikTok series became viral, with her most popular video receiving over 8 million views and over 18,000 comments of users sharing their own similar experiences and words of support and affirmation for Callie's claims and against Brandy Melville.

Despite this, Brandy Melville still remained silent. Because of their silence, Brandy Melville lost a significant following. On May 25, 2020, the day of George Floyd's murder, @brandymelvilleusa lost 10,502 followers on Instagram after posting their regularly scheduled content.⁵⁰ In the months following, this downward decline continued. As of November 2020, Brandy Melville loses an average of 26,800 Instagram followers per month, and has lost a total of 175,000 followers since they disregarded the Black Lives Matter movement and showed their lack of concern with the racist and fatphobic corporate culture and standards that they breed and uphold.⁵¹ While Callie's networked activism did not elicit a response from Brandy Melville, her message, and those of others who recognized Brandy Melville's exclusivity, clearly had an impact on the company's reputation due to the sheer amount of people who her message reached. Social media provided Callie with a platform to organize and spread her truth without relying on mainstream media, and she ended up spreading her message to millions of people, showing the power of online consumer activism as presented by Caroline Heldman.⁵²

5D. Case Study IV–Boyish Jeans:

Boyish Jeans is a women's denim brand that was founded in 2017 as a collection of "sustainable women's denim". Boyish Jeans' website boasts that "at the core of all Boyish collections lies a deep commitment to leaving as little impact on the earth as possible", and that

the company uses “ethical and sustainable practices through a completely environmentally-friendly and cruelty-free process”.⁵³ This process includes working with ethical factories, using less harmful chemicals during the dyeing process, using one-third the amount of water typically needed to produce a pair of jeans, and working exclusively with recycled fabrics and materials for everything put out by the brand. The brand boasts a long list of third-party certifications of their sustainability, including approval and certifications from PETA, Oeko-Tex (the product label for textiles tested for harmful substances with the largest prevalence worldwide), Intertek (a multinational product testing and certification company), GOTs (The Global Organic Textile Standard), and Climate Neutral (a certification for companies that achieve a carbon footprint of net zero), among others.⁵⁴ They post an annual sustainability report on their website, detailing the ways in which they furthered their sustainability practices each year. In addition to being environmentally sustainable, Boyish Jeans boasts a commitment to working with suppliers that have fair, safe, and healthy working conditions. All of their factories pay wages over the minimum wage, and they are a part of the Lowest Wage Challenge, publicizing the lowest wage at their company to fight against the poor conditions in textile work that often plague the fashion and textile industry.⁵⁵ Through their environmentally sustainable practices as well as their efforts towards their workers, Boyish Jeans proves themselves to be a company that practices CSR and that is doing their part to fight against the unfair working conditions and environmental footprint that often exist within the fashion industry.

Because of their sustainability practices implemented in the environmental and labor sectors, Boyish Jeans uses their sustainability as a point of advertising their brand. Like many contemporary retail brands, Boyish uses social media in large part as a means of advertising. One of their advertising campaigns uses the slogan “Greenwashing is Cancelled” (See Figure III)



Figure III: Boyish Jeans’ “Greenwashing is Cancelled” Instagram advertising campaign⁵⁶.

Through this advertising campaign, Boyish Jeans acknowledges the concept of greenwashing that so many retail brands are complicit in with a straightforward approach. This advertisement serves as a form of immunization from criticisms about their sustainability practices, and serves as a deliberate form of trust-building with any consumer who might see it. This is a form of inoculation: by advertising themselves as a brand that is “cancelling greenwashing”, they are insinuating that they themselves are not complicit in it in a way that will prevent their consumers from calling them out for greenwashing or similar behaviors.

Amidst the spike in Black Lives Matter activism in May 2020, Boyish Jeans released their statement of solidarity later than both Everlane and Aritzia. It took Boyish Jeans ten days after George Floyd’s death to release a statement of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter

movement, and in those ten days, Boyish Jeans continued to post their regularly scheduled content on Instagram. On their May 31st Instagram post, they received comments such as “Environmental issues and race issues are deeply entwined with one another, and watching this brand ignore current events while continuing to promote product and thin white women is disheartening and disrespectful.”, “Where’s your statement regarding the Black Lives Matter protests?”, and “I was a bit bothered seeing this post on my feed yesterday, considering everything going on in the world right now. I love your brand for its eco-friendly initiatives, however, how can you claim to care for the earth when you don't care for our black brothers + sisters being murdered in the streets?”, among many others.

Finally, on June 3, Boyish Jeans posted an Instagram series showing their solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. This post featured a series of slides stating the following:

“What we currently do: post all different ethnicities in our feed. **What we will do better:** We will incorporate more POC in our feed, more frequently, **What we currently do:** we support numerous organizations that help people like Generation Her & Midnight Mission through our Cool To Care events. **What We Will Do Better:** We will support more organizations who specifically help the black community. **What we currently do:** We donate to organizations that help the environment and women's rights like Solar Sister which helps black women in Africa. **What we will do better:** We will donate to organizations who support the black community. **What we currently do:** We constantly share info and educate on how to live sustainably and consciously. **What we will do better:** We will educate and encourage change on how to support the black community. **What we currently do:** All people matter to us. Most importantly Mama Earth, if we don't put the Earth first we won't have a place for all humans. **What we will do better:** Black lives do matter to us so we will be more specific in helping this community.”⁵⁷

Following this post, Boyish did not implement consistent and meaningful changes as promised. As of November 2020, only approximately 20 out of @boyishjeans’ 1,080 Instagram posts contain women of color, and three of these posts were part of a series titled #Boyishdoesbetter in which Boyish Jeans attempted to improve their efforts towards anti-racism and inclusivity.⁵⁸ The first #Boyishdoesbetter post was posted six days after Boyish’s initial

statement of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. In the caption of this first post, Boyish stated that they were going to consistently start highlighting “artists, brands, books and podcasts focusing on amplifying the black community”, with the first post being a painting of a Black woman done by a Black artist, who Boyish showcased in the caption.⁵⁹ After this initial post, Boyish only included four other posts in their #Boyishdoesbetter series, with the last post being on June 30, twenty-seven days after their statement of solidarity with Black Lives Matter and their promise to do better. The other posts in the #Boyishdoesbetter series did not detail any concrete actions that Boyish had taken to help the Black community past highlighting Black influencers and creators on their Instagram posts and stories.⁶⁰

Furthermore, on Boyish’s website, they have a section titled “Social Change”. Under this section, they list their partner organizations and state that they aim to “give at least 1% of our annual profits to organizations that share our core values of sustainability and equality”.⁶¹ Boyish’s promises to “donate to organizations who support the black community” in addition to Solar Sister, which they had already partnered with, and to “be more specific in helping [the Black] community” suggested that they would introduce new partnerships and donation initiatives with Black-led organizations. However, the social change section of their website has not seen any changes since their initial promise to do better, nor have they publicized any donation efforts towards Black-led organizations or organizations that directly help the Black community. While their advertising campaign states that “Greenwashing is Cancelled”, Boyish Jeans’ lack of concrete action and the impermanence of their #Boyishdoesbetter campaign does not appear to align with their values as a company. Given the ways in which environmental issues disproportionately affect BIPOC, it is crucial that any brand claiming to not be complicit in greenwashing also support BIPOC through their actions. Based on Boyish Jeans’ actions

toward the BIPOC community and lack of representation, one might discern that they are, in fact, a company that participates in greenwashing.

The temporality of the #Boyishdoesbetter series and the broken promises to the Boyish consumer base so clearly shows the ways in which Boyish Jeans only publicly supported the Black Lives Matter movement while #BlackLivesMatter was a trending hashtag, and only while they were facing backlash from their consumers for their silence on the industry racism which they are complicit in promoting and upholding. Boyish Jeans is the perfect example of a brand who only chooses to uphold the hegemonic political norm, and how political brands are structured by ambivalence, as presented by Banet-Weiser in her theory on political branding. Boyish, like Everlane and perhaps Aritzia, serves as another example of a brand who uses the cover of environmental sustainability to ignore their need for sustainability and equality in other facets of their company. Their statement of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement proved to be entirely performative through their lack of concrete action and broken promises to help the BIPOC community. Despite this, they did not face significant backlash to their performative actions in the same way that Everlane did, perhaps due to the immunization that they imposed through their “Greenwashing is Canceled” campaign. It is also worth noting that Boyish Jeans is a newer company than any of the other three analyzed, and thus also a company with a smaller following, which could play into the lack of significant criticism faced as well.

6. Analysis of Case Studies:

Everlane serves as an example of a company that faced backlash for racism on social media and responded through action, the extent to which was deemed insufficient and performative by many due to the lack of sustainable long-term actions they implemented toward anti-racism. Their response to criticism served as a means of inoculation from extensive future

criticism—although they continued to face backlash after consumers viewed their response as being performative, they did not face nearly the same extent of criticism as they initially did. Responding to consumer complaints of racism and exclusivity was in Everlane’s best interest, as a company that practices CSR and markets themselves as being sustainable as part of their branding process. It was necessary for Everlane to respond and uphold their image in order for their continued success as a brand.

Aritzia serves as another example of a company that promotes sustainability that faced backlash for racism on social media and responded through action. Their responses to the claims from their ex-employees and customers inoculated them from future criticisms in a more effective way than that of Everlane, as they were more receptive to the criticisms and suggestions that they received from their consumers and ex-employees than Everlane was. While Aritzia’s actions were more lasting and sustainable than those of Everlane, responding effectively to criticism was in Aritzia’s best interest in terms of furthering its agenda, from a financial and reputational standpoint. Thus, the question of whether or not its actions were performative remains up for interpretation—regardless of whether or not individuals on the Aritzia team may genuinely care about equality and CSR, their actions served their best interests as a business.

Brandy Melville serves as an example of a company that has historically marketed to an exclusive consumer-base and has not made efforts towards sustainability or inclusion, which faced backlash for racism on social media and did not respond nor make efforts to change any of their discriminatory practices. Brandy Melville embodies a reverse-inoculation in that they have always stayed true to their brand’s image as being an exclusive space and have never made efforts towards CSR or inclusivity. They have never attempted to inoculate themselves from criticism to the point that they have made it clear that they will never be receptive to criticism.

Despite their significant loss in Instagram followers, Brandy Melville still continues to boast over 3 million followers. Perhaps in a contemporary society that values brands that value CSR more than ever before, Brandy Melville will become obsolete eventually. In the meantime, they continue to uphold a culture of racism and body shaming and have made it abundantly clear through their lack of response to backlash that they do not plan to change their ways.

Finally, Boyish Jeans serves as an example of a company that has used social media marketing to brand themselves as being sustainable and inclusive, and thus has not received significant backlash from their consumers despite showing performative acts of inclusivity and anti-racism. Through their advertising campaigns and use of the phrase “Greenwashing is Cancelled” in many of their advertisements, they immunize themselves from significant criticism about their sustainability practices, addressing the practice of greenwashing in a straightforward manner that prevents individuals from accusing them of it. However, when looking at their representation of different races, body types, and ages in their advertisements in conjunction with their only other advertised ‘sustainable’ practice being their environmental sustainability, it is clear that they are lacking sustainability in many facets of their company. When Boyish faced mild backlash due to their slowness to show support for the Black Lives Matter movement, their response proved to be short-term and performative. After their clearly performative response to criticism, they faced no noticeable criticisms or backlash, in stark contrast with the abundant backlash that Everlane and Aritzia continued to face after they responded to networked activism against them. Boyish uses environmental sustainability as a substitute for the political, engaging in acts of greenwashing and calling themselves a sustainable company while ignoring the fact that they uphold and promote the exclusive and racist culture that exists within the fashion

industry. However, their consumers are less likely to criticize them for these exclusive practices or to even notice them due to the immunization that occurs through their marketing campaigns.

7. Conclusion:

Systemic racism is now, and has historically been, a significant problem in the fashion industry. The advent of social media and the ease with which almost anybody can be heard has allowed the public to call out companies for wrongdoing and to effectuate change. Many companies in the fashion industry have sought to use politicized branding and CSR to increase their popularity and sales while simultaneously upholding harmful and racist practices, both internally and through exclusionary advertising practices. Social media has proven to be an effective tool to call out these brands and to expose the divergence between how the brand presents to the public and how they actually act. Through the above case studies, it is shown that social media and networked activism can effectively expose the systemic racism and lack of sustainability that actually exist within companies that attempt to disguise this behavior with media campaigns that portray them as sustainable and fair. Anti-racist corporate disruption in the fashion industry has been greatly bolstered by new networked activism made possible by the powerful tool of social media.

Endnotes:

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