

Activism in the Marketplace

Introduction

With the increasing public awareness on Corporate Social Responsibility, firms have started utilizing their platforms and social influence for good causes such as advocating political activism through advertisement campaigns or projects. Nevertheless, the advocacy of some businesses are often criticized as performative or being profit-driven. Such disapproving sentiments are not ungrounded, however, because the goal of firms and their public engagements is to attract customers and turn their loyalty into sales.

Some believe that the commodification of social justice by firms, regardless of their true intentions, empowers the movement as there are benefits and power that come with media visibility. However, how empowering is commodified activism, really, to the actual movements themselves? It is to only a small degree, doing more harm than good, for three main reasons: 1. inconsistency in business activities, 2. alterations of political scenes and messages, and 3. giving a deceptive idea amongst people that buying self-proclaimed activist brands' products is enough activism.

Commodified Racism

In a capitalist, consumerist society, anything lucrative becomes a business item. Consequently, there is inadequate compartmentalization between materials appropriate for commodification and those that are not. Nike's commodification of racism in recent years epitomizes a multitude of detrimental effects marketplace activism has on the actual anti-racism movement.

In September 2018, Nike revealed its new brand ambassador: Colin Kaepernick, a former quarterback in the National Football League who boldly took a knee before the game to protest against police brutality. Ostensibly, Nike appears to be supporting the anti-racism movement and denouncing centuries of systemic oppression that has been disproportionately

affecting Black people. However, although Nike could be supporting the social cause wholeheartedly, such appropriation of activism inescapably disrupts the course of the actual movement within the society for several reasons.

Firstly, the extent to which Nike acknowledges its responsibility to tackle social injustice as an established corporate in a capitalist society is questionable due to its unethical business practices. Nike's factory practices are a manifestation of its low social consciousness: in 1991, the atrocious realities of Nike's factories— to which an American labor activist equated a sweatshop — in developing countries were exposed to the public ("Nike sweatshops: inside the scandal", 2019). Thus, a call for racial equality from businesses like Nike carries more hypocrisy than sincerity.

Furthermore, Nike's shallow, self-serving marketing misleads consumers into believing they are actively tackling systemic anti-Blackness by wearing Nike products. In other words, the advertisement "trivializes the urgency of the issues and it diminishes the seriousness" (Barenblat, 2018). Taking the recent Black Lives Matter (hereafter, BLM) marches as an example, the rallies amid the pandemic would have been unnecessary if an act as simple as wearing a Nike T-shirt could attain racial equality. Such a false notion generated by Nike's advertisements, in which "the tangible struggle of Black people" is commodified and reduced to a "sellable symbolism", that consumers are being effective allies results in them forgetting that more practical work could be and should be done (Munoz, 2018).

In fact, with Kaepernick as its new face of the brand, Nike's revenue and profit rose by 10 percent and 15 percent, respectively (Thomas, 2018). Had the brand supported the BLM movement in a non-profit-making manner, its advertisement would have met with public approval. Yet, Nike ultimately enriched itself by capitalizing on an issue that has been terrorizing the Black community, thus hijacking— and not supporting— the movement.

Pepsi's "Live for Now" commercial in 2017 starring Kendall Jenner is another example of tone-deaf advertisements mindlessly equating a social movement to a mere product. Pepsi illustrates its championship of the BLM movement, yet, similar to Nike, Pepsi's past controversial commercials undermine the authenticity of the support. For example, an advertisement by Pepsi in 2013 was heavily criticized as it reinforced racist stereotypes associated with Black people: high crime rates and violence. Knowing such a history of Pepsi, the "Live for Now" commercial must be taken with a grain of salt.

Additionally, the "Live For Now" advertisement provides an extremely simplified image of protests. In it, Kendall Jenner eases the tension by "handing an officer a can of Pepsi, prompting cheers" ("Pepsi pulls Kendall", 2017). Such a distorted commercial is problematic, especially in the current social climate, as it trivializes the issue of— if not denies the reality of— police brutality at protests. Numerous protesters at the recent BLM marches have unreasonably gotten tear-gassed and rubber bullets fired at them, which is antithetical to the scene depicted by Pepsi. Thus, it is not hyperbolic to claim that this advertisement falsifies the reality of protests by reducing them to mere parades that can be ended peacefully with a can of Pepsi. As a BLM activist's comment on the advertisement implies, it gives nothing but frustration to the protesters on whom the police are abusing their power: "If I had carried Pepsi, I guess I never would have gotten arrested. Who knew?" ("Pepsi pulls Kendall", 2017).

Commodified Feminism

Along with anti-racism, gender equality is the most frequently branded political topic by businesses (Jalakas, 2016). With the rise of women in their 20s and 30s as a dominant consumer group, many advertisements have begun portraying women as empowered

individuals rather than objects or commodities, and the term ‘femvertising’— which SheKnows Media defines as the amalgam of ‘feminism’ and ‘advertising’— was coined.

Femvertisements are facing backlash, however, because the majority of the businesses employing feminist messages are merely “jumping on the feminist bandwagon” for monetary purposes, rather than making an effort to implement actual change (Tariq, 2018). Sarah Banet-Weiser, a Media and Communication professor, expressed her concern on our overreliance on femvertisements as a means to achieve gender equality: “It’s difficult to see how feminist advertising is committed to structural change, since the appeal is to individual women rather than a collective movement” (Curtis, 2018).

Dove is one of the businesses that joined the trend of femvertising by releasing an advertising campaign, called “Real Beauty”, to spread the message of self-love. Although the campaign was met with positive press, criticisms soon followed for negatively affecting the actual endeavors for equality.

One of the criticisms Dove received was that as a cosmetics brand selling female beauty products and capitalizing on women’s insecurities, Dove is in no position to shine a light on body positivity and self-love. Furthermore, Dove sharing its parent company with Axe, whose advertisements had been heavily criticized for sexism, makes the message unclear. It is the performative activism like “Real Beauty” that is toxic to feminist advances; in Banet-Wieser’s words, “femvertising plays no role in the fight for women’s equality if the company doesn’t live up to feminist ideals... they’re redefining the meaning of feminism in a dangerous way — diminishing it to a tagline and dumbing it down to a hashtag” (Curtis, 2018).

Dove’s “Real Beauty” is an impediment to women’s empowerment for two main reasons. Firstly, buying its products has no meaningful impact on progress. Regardless of its principles, as a profit-driven business, Dove unavoidably reinforces and glorifies impractical

body image and maintains “female body dissatisfaction” so that its products are in demand (Jalakas, 2016). Thus, consuming the products of self-proclaimed feminist brands like Dove is unhelpful for not only feminism itself, but also feminists who strive to liberate women from toxic beauty ideals.

Secondly, such capitalization of women’s empowerment encourages feminist consumerism, wherein female consumers subconsciously equate empowerment to commodity purchases, reestablishing “the same societal constructs that feminism is against” (Patrick, 2014). Despite these drawbacks, businesses continue to adhere to empowertising or femvertising because, simply, feminism sells. Dove’s “Real Beauty”, in fact, brought about a sales growth from \$2.5 billion to \$4 billion, and this explains why the vicious cycle, in which brands do little to no actual work to implement change but consumers still willingly purchase their products, cannot be terminated (Curtis, 2018).

The selling of International Women’s Day (hereafter, IWD) T-shirts by Net-a-Porter is another example of how commodified activism ruins the nature of the actual movement. One of the most harmful aspects of activism commercialization is the modification of the political message(s) the movement embodies. Marketplace feminism is constantly “watered down and defanged” to become marketable and non-threatening (Rottenberg, 2019). As Lisa Jalakas astutely puts, “a feminism used for the purpose to sell will always be adjusted to exactly that: selling... this results in a weakened and partly depoliticised version of the ideology, simply because the feminism in advertising does not have a political purpose— but a commercial one” (Jalakas, 2016).

Together with softened faux feminism, Net-a-Porter’s IWD apparel deceives consumers that they are active feminists. The selling of such T-shirts is well-intentioned. However, it should be realized that simply wearing a T-shirt that says “I am her” or “Divine

Feminine” does not make them the vanguards of feminist advances; rather, they become self-satisfied and complacent, believing the clothes they bought promise gender equality.

Furthermore, Net-a-Porter has failed to notice that by pushing its agenda for feminist advocacy, it is risking the exacerbation of other issues such as “consumerism, sweatshop labor, and a worsening environmental footprint” (Vo, 2018). Simultaneously, encouraging purchases of quasi-feminist apparel without calling attention to the exploited female workers who made them not only is hypocritical and opportunistic of the brand but also does not help dismantle sexist systems, consequently making feminism “only last as long as a fashion season” (Jalakas, 2016).

A Model Approach to Brand Activism

While brand activism seems unsuitable for a capitalist market, Ben & Jerry’s provides an excellent example of how brands should approach and achieve social advocacy. The ice cream brand has an undeniably long history of political activism. Since 1985, the founders of Ben & Jerry’s have donated 7.5% of annual profits to various community organizations in the United States— which equates to annual donations of 1.8 million dollars, excluding the thousands of dollars Ben & Jerry’s Foundation has funded for progressive causes (“How Ben & Jerry’s Incorporates”, n.d.).

Ben & Jerry's does more than simply donating. In fact, one of the founders of the brand participated in protests against “money in politics” and went so far as to getting arrested (Ziady, 2020). Furthermore, Ben & Jerry's stays vocal on social media as well, giving perennial attention to social issues. These consistent efforts are what makes Ben & Jerry’s brand activism feel genuine; although its advertisements generate profit, it promotes products to raise awareness for social issues rather than the brand itself.

Positive Effects of Activism Commodification

While the commodification of activism is harmful to the progression of the actual movement, its merits must be acknowledged. For example, increased media exposure accentuates the ongoing state of social injustice. Also, such commercials are an effective introduction to activism for youths, as “popular culture can lower the threshold to political engagement” (Jalakas, 2016). Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, a feminist activist, acknowledges the power of advertisements by commenting, “when activism infiltrates advertising... it has the chance of awakening an interest in someone, somewhere” (Jalakas, 2016).

Additionally, with the initiative taken by Nike, an environment in which other businesses can follow suit is promoted; they are encouraged to get involved in raising awareness and advocating social causes. Increased media visibility achieved by Dove and Net-a-Porter’s commercials have certainly shone a positive light on feminism, which often is taboo in many Asian countries.

Conclusion

In a capitalist context, “to consume is also to act politically” (Sturken, 2012). Consequently, consumers show “more loyalty to brands that go beyond providing them with just a product and advocate for the same values they hold” (Hodge, 2020). There are advantages to commodifying activism, yet they do not outweigh the harm it simultaneously inflicts, for “visibility filtered through capitalism does not necessarily further the cause” (Bianco, 2016).

As the examples of Nike, Pepsi, Dove and Net-a-Porter show, activism has been “incorporated and reshaped by the power of capitalism”— many businesses commodify political movements or activism under the cloak of solidarity and advocacy (Jalakas, 2016). The dire consequences of performative activism are not limited to encouraging people to “express their solidarity not through struggle or protest, but by shopping” (Rottenberg, 2019).

Beyond that, such tokenism desensitizes people to rampant social issues and makes exploitative systems unidentifiable.

For these reasons, the commodification of activism is empowering to the actual movement to only a small extent. Knowing that “the best way to constrain the power of a social movement is to commodify it”, we do not need racial or gender-inclusive advertisements anymore; what we truly need is an increased racial and gender diversity in business offices and board meetings (Bianco, 2016). Statistics show that female creative directors in advertising account for only 11 percent of the entire profession, and reveal the wage discrepancies between races and genders— meaning on the other end of every empowering campaign, there exist exploitations of minorities (Cohen, 2017). We need to be aware of what goes on behind the scene of the commercials by self-proclaimed activist brands that outwardly demand equality.

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