

BRAND ACTIVISM:  
WORKING TOWARD PROGRESSIVE REPRESENTATIONS  
OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN ADVERTISING

by

RACHEL BENNER

A THESIS

Presented to the School of Journalism and Communication  
and the Robert D. Clark Honors College  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Arts

June 2018

## **An Abstract of the Thesis of**

Rachel Benner for the degree of Bachelor of Arts  
in the School of Journalism and Communication to be taken June 2018

Title: Brand Activism: Working Toward Progressive Representations of Social  
Movements in Advertising

Approved: \_\_\_\_\_

Professor Kim Sheehan

Brands and advertising agencies have always used the cultural energy of social movements to connect to new audiences and promote their products. Academics have written a large body of critique about the intersection of social movements and marketing, but it is largely ignored by the advertising industry. This thesis addresses that disconnect, helping advertisers address critical discourse around social movements and brands, leading to industry success and progressive allyship with social movements. After exploring studies of social movements' framing in advertising messages, this project assesses the strengths and weaknesses of those frames with a theoretical model. In-depth interviews with advertising professionals shape a best practices guide for creating activist ads. Advertisers today can leverage successful framing strategies to address social movements in their work by extending existing critical conversations about brand activism beyond large-scale strategy and into the message creation process. They can also succeed by giving their brand activism the context of tangible action and responsibly researching the audience they seek to reach with their messaging.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Kim Sheehan for her patience, insight, and commitment to my thesis experience. She has seen this project evolve from a seed of an idea on a scribbled notebook page to a prospectus presentation to – finally – a 100-page culmination of four years of learning. Professor Sheehan has shaped my growth as a student both inside and outside the classroom with her intelligence and kindness. I could not imagine a better mentor and advisor.

I am also extremely grateful to Professors Dean Mundy and Tim Williams for serving on my thesis committee. Both challenged me in the classroom, making me a stronger writer and critical thinker.

Of course, I owe gratitude to many others. Professor Deborah Morrison helped me get my interview recruitment off and running and Hannah Lewman was my *first* first reader and ever-patient sounding board. This thesis process has been challenging, frustrating, exciting and satisfying. If nothing else, it has reinforced my belief in this sentiment from Tom Stoppard: *Comparing what we're looking for misses the point. It's wanting to know that makes us matter.*

## Table of Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Introduction  | 1  |
| Positionality Statement                               | 3  |
| Research Questions                                    | 4  |
| Background  | 5  |
| Advertising   | 5  |
| 1950s-1960s   | 5  |
| The Creative Revolution                               | 6  |
| Advertising Today                                     | 8  |
| Corporate Social Responsibility and Brand Citizenship | 9  |
| Literature Review                                     | 12 |
| Social Movements and Advertising                      | 12 |
| Normalization and Amplification                       | 13 |
| Limits of Normalization                               | 15 |
| Stereotypes and The Double Bind                       | 16 |
| Commodification and De-politicization                 | 18 |
| Framing Theory  | 21 |
| Theory of Moral Development                           | 22 |
| Analysis Framework: Brand Activism Spiderweb          | 24 |
| Model Limitations                                     | 30 |
| Study 1: Case Study Analysis                          | 31 |
| Research Question                                     | 31 |
| Methods   | 31 |
| Case Study 1: “The Talk”                              | 31 |
| Case Study 2: “Stress Test: Raise”                    | 40 |
| Case Study 3: “This Land”                             | 49 |
| Case Study 4: “LGBTQAlphabet”                         | 58 |
| Study 2: In-depth Interviews                          | 69 |
| Research Question                                     | 69 |
| Methods   | 69 |
| Subject Recruitment                                   | 69 |

|                                      |     |
|--------------------------------------|-----|
| Interview Methods                    | 70  |
| Findings                             | 71  |
| Context and Brand-Building           | 71  |
| Context and Client Relations         | 73  |
| Agency and Advocacy                  | 74  |
| Stereotypes                          | 77  |
| Call to Action and Depoliticization  | 77  |
| Discourse and Scale                  | 79  |
| Industry Dynamics                    | 80  |
| A Cultural Shift                     | 82  |
| Future of Brand Activism             | 83  |
| Discussion                           | 85  |
| Recommendations                      | 90  |
| Industry Recommendations             | 90  |
| Agency Recommendations               | 90  |
| Client Recommendations               | 91  |
| Conclusion                           | 92  |
| Appendix 1: Email Recruitment Script | 93  |
| Appendix 2: Interview Question Bank  | 94  |
| Appendix 3: Best Practices Guide     | 97  |
| References                           | 111 |

## **List of Figures**

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Figure 1: Research Model                                | 3  |
| Figure 2: The Creative Revolution's "Lemon" VW Ad.      | 7  |
| Figure 3: Brand Activism Spiderweb                      | 25 |
| Figure 4: "The Talk"                                    | 32 |
| Figure 5: "The Talk" Brand Activism Spiderweb           | 40 |
| Figure 6: "Stress Test: Raise"                          | 41 |
| Figure 7: "Stress Test: Raise" Brand Activism Spiderweb | 49 |
| Figure 8: "This Land"                                   | 50 |
| Figure 9: Johnnie Walker logo                           | 51 |
| Figure 10: "This Land" Brand Activism Spiderweb         | 58 |
| Figure 11: "LGBTQAlphabet"                              | 59 |
| Figure 12: "LGBTQAlphabet" Brand Activism Spiderweb     | 66 |
| Figure 13: Brand Activism Spiderweb Comparison          | 67 |
| Figure 14: Interview Participants                       | 70 |

## Introduction

A popular clothing store covers the sidewalk outside with a huge rainbow Pride flag. On television, young girls declare that they “can” in front of logos for tampons or deodorant. This isn’t new. Madison Avenue sold cigarettes in the 1970s by telling women’s libbers, “Baby, you’ve come a long way.” Absolut has been the self-declared vodka of the LGBTQ community for decades. Advertising has a long history of incorporating the imagery and catch phrases of social movements with powerful results.

Today the intersection of brands and social movements is more than rainbow flags and girl power anthems. The relationship between advertising and social movements extends beyond just diverse representation and repackaging activist symbols. Recent trend reports note a rise in brands that adopt the voice of activists, integrate timely issues into their campaigns, and align themselves with the aims of progressive movements. In 2017, a lumber company ran a Super Bowl spot about immigration featuring a border wall and car company tied its new model to gender wage inequality. That same year, reality star-turned supermodel Kendall Jenner managed police relations at a protest with can of Pepsi. “Brand activism” is a trend to watch.

Today’s culture of political unrest, protest and populist sentiment is prime opportunity for advertisers to connect with audiences in new ways. Brands adopt the energy of activism and apply it to their carefully constructed identities and products. Blogs, think tanks and newspapers are noting this rise in progressive, opinionated branded content. Some attribute it to a “heightened moral and ethical awareness” (Pathak, 2017). In an age of social media activism, consumers are looking for brands to be good citizens, as well. Others see brand activism as a way to target a coveted young

audience who is far more progressive and political than their parents. To reach millennials, brands must tap into the political energy that generation created and show young people that they can take a stand (Quart, 2017).

Brand activism is here to stay, and its messages are far more political and specific than advertising's past loose alliances with "empowerment," "peace," and "freedom." But, as creative executive Rob Baiocco pointed out in the same article, most companies are not doing activism well. "They are entering a complex conversation they have no right to be in, yet they are forcing their way in," he said. "These creatives are trying to make their toilet paper save the world" (Quart, 2017). Many are asking the same questions: is brand activism helpful or hurtful? How do we make these kinds of ads? But no one has an answer, and most don't even have a plan of action.

This project seeks to learn from the past, from critical scholarship, and from the advertising industry itself to answer these questions. Many academics are quick to point out the ideological tensions between the grassroots or egalitarian goals of a social movement and the consumerist roots of advertising. Advertising scholar Sarah Banet-Weiser was quoted by *The Guardian* critiquing brand activism and saying: "Ads are ultimately manipulating us to spend, not to set our political imaginations free" (Quart, 2017). Regardless, the industry plows forward, forever seeking new creative ways to tap into the causes people care about. Critical scholarship and industry practice are completely out of sync and, at times, that has led to controversy and backlash.

Through a literature review of historical and critical scholarship, a thematic model to organize that scholarship, case studies applying those findings, and in-depth interviews with advertising professionals, this thesis explores the challenges and

potential of “brand activism.” In particular, this project focuses on identity-based social movements: bodies of advocacy around the rights of a group defined by demographic traits like gender, race or sexual orientation. I chose to focus on these types of social movements because they affect specific audience groups that are common in market targeting and audience segmentation in advertising.

This project concludes with a best practices guide that takes into account both critique and practicalities: a bridge between progressive social movements and what they must become when they are attached to a brand. Figure 1 summarizes the components of my research.

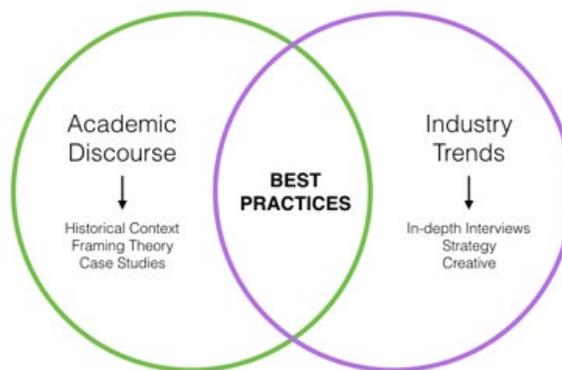


Figure 1: Research Model

### **Positionality Statement**

I would like to acknowledge the position from which I conduct this research, particularly the qualitative interviews. I am a student of advertising who intends to enter the industry I am studying. Though I adopt a critical perspective in my work and have personal misgivings about brand activism, I approached this research as objectively as possible.

## **Research Questions**

**Research Question 1:** How have identity-based social movements been framed in advertising messages?

**Research Question 2:** How are social movements framed in advertising today, and how successful are those frames?

**Research Question 3:** How can advertising professionals leverage successful framing strategies to address social movements in their work?

## Background

### Advertising

Advertising is a paid, visible effort to influence consumer behavior. Joseph Turow and Matthew McAllister, editors of *The Advertising and Consumer Culture Reader*, define advertising as the activity of explicitly paying for media space or time in order to direct favorable attention to certain goods and services” (Turow and McAllister, 2009, p. 2).

Many stakeholders are involved in commissioning, strategizing, purchasing and producing advertisements. Advertising serves as revenue for media sources. It reinforces capitalist decision-making and ideology. The brand planners who determine the target markets for advertising also rely on demographics and psychographics to target messaging. The industry’s very function is intertwined with social, political and economic institutions, and so its work has cultural implications beyond selling products (Turow and McAllister, 2009, p. 3). In this section, I will outline some key elements of advertising’s recent history.

#### *1950s-1960s*

Though advertising has been a cultural institution for much longer, this time period marks the beginning of what some scholars have called America’s “consumer culture,” when advertising adopted a stronger voice in cultural discourse, according to cultural historian Gary Cross (2009, p. 339).

After the end of World War Two, the United States enjoyed a period of economic success. Economists and politicians agreed that managed growth fueled by

mass production and consumption was the path to prosperity. Advertisers had an important role to play in this process. As Cross writes, “All people really require is a cave and fire, but advertising informed them of the new and improved. Without it, Americans would still be content with the old and inferior” (Cross, 2009, p. 340). Advertising at this time focused on the basic traits and qualities of the products it sold. With gaudy prints and exaggerated claims about product benefits, mid-century advertising fueled a collective national reliance on consumption through the early 1960s. The industry flourished.

This unrestrained consumerism did not go unchallenged. In the late 1950s, politicians began to take note of advertising’s potential to exploit consumers. One senator proposed a “Department of the Consumer,” and legislation like the Fair Packaging and Labeling Act sought to protect Americans from misleading claims about product benefits. Cross argues that consumer exploitation became “the central problem of modern society” at this time, and that “the core of this critique was an attack on advertising” (2009, p. 340). Under new regulation, advertising was forced to adjust.

### *The Creative Revolution*

These new social and political barriers led to a new chapter in the advertising industry: the creative revolution. This term refers to an industry-wide shift toward creativity and away from product benefits and research based tactics. Iconic advertisements from this period melded design and copywriting in new ways to appeal to consumers beyond explicit product claims (*Ad Age*, 2003). For example, the classic Volkswagen Beetle campaigns advertised the car’s potential drawbacks with memorable, self-aware copy (Figure 2). This era also brought us the Pillsbury

Doughboy and Ronald McDonald: creative brand personifications that endure today (*Ad Age*, 2003).



## Lemon.

This Volkswagen missed the boat. The chrome strip on the glove compartment is blemished and must be replaced. Chances are you wouldn't have noticed it, Inspector Kurt Kruger did.

There are 3,389 men at our Wolfsburg factory with only one job: to inspect Volkswagens at each stage of production. 3,332 Volkswagens are produced daily; there are more inspectors

(than cars.)

Every shock absorber is tested (spot checking won't do), every windshield is scanned. VWs have been rejected for surface scratches barely visible to the eye.

Final inspection is really something! VW inspectors run each car off the line onto the Funktionshilfsmittel (four letter stand, like up 15P check points, get ahead to the automatic

brake stand, and say "no" to one VW out of fifty.

This preoccupation with detail means the VW lasts longer and requires less maintenance, by and large, than other cars. It also means a used VW depreciates less than any other car.)

We pluck the lemons, you get the plums.



Figure 2: The Creative Revolution's "Lemon" VW Ad.

During this period of American history, non-conformist youth culture rejected the materialism and consumerism of the previous decade. The social movements and sub-cultures of the 1960s heavily influenced creative advertising. With campaigns like the "Pepsi Generation"<sup>1</sup> brands attempted to cut through the exaggerations of past advertising and build relationships with a powerful and vocal audience: young people.

<sup>1</sup> This series of campaigns positioned Pepsi as the youthful counter to Coca Cola's classic appeal. Even today, Pepsi aligns itself with youth and rebellion, while Coca Cola takes a more classic or nostalgic approach.

In many ways, Madison Avenue's newfound creative forces provided a way for the industry to work around new consumer-protection regulation and continue to promote consumption (*Ad Age*, 2003). Advertising's creative revolution synthesized art and commerce to better connect with a changing world. Its cultural power grew stronger.

As the industry moved into the 1970s, more sophisticated market research led to increased market segmentation (Howard, 2010). Advertisers began to target "liberated" women, African-Americans and LGBT communities as emerging markets. The grassroots identity activism of the 1960s was solidified into market discourse in the 1970s, particularly through targeted campaign efforts like Absolut Vodka's LGBTQ+ campaigns. Historian Ella Howard argues that movements like second-wave feminism changed marketers' approach to female consumers and attracted advertisers (2010). Other scholars have also explored this phenomenon, many concluding that the social movements of the 1960s influenced advertisers to create more identity-targeted messaging (Sender, 2012).

### *Advertising Today*

The advent of the internet and mobile technology in the 1990s and 2000s shook the advertising industry once again. Yet once again, it has emerged with even more sophisticated techniques, leveraging new technologies to more effectively track and reach new consumers. The internet has led to increased media fragmentation; people engage with a wider range of media types than ever before, and legacy media platforms are struggling as a result.

Once, nearly everyone tuned into one of the same three channels for their evening news. Today, people select between many different options for information. On

Twitter, Facebook, and niche news sites, information is filtered through more lenses of identity and ideology than ever before. Consumers can get their news from a lesbian pop culture site, a fellow gamer's feed, or a popular personality's YouTube channel. What matters most is that it is their choice – the act of media consumption and choice in channel; has become a subtle assertion of identity.

So, while legacy media struggles and digital platforms win, data-driven audience segmentation has experienced a revolution. Not only are there more platforms for sponsored content, those platforms are often tied to a distinct identity group of consumers. Social media platforms and new technologies enable new sub-cultural movements to emerge while also providing advertisers with unprecedented amounts of data on consumer habits, values and opinions.

The advertising industry has come a long way from propping up product benefits with exaggerated claims. Today, it is a hub of creative cultural influence and complex research methods. Any advertising campaign is a combination of market research, brand planning, media strategy and creative concepting. As identities and consumerism continue to converge, advertising is entering an era in which social relevance will be essential to success. This in part explains the surge in brand activism, and certainly contextualizes it.

### **Corporate Social Responsibility and Brand Citizenship**

Brands and advertisers today are increasingly interested in integrating corporate social responsibility (CSR) and brand citizenship efforts with their advertising messaging. The United Nations Industrial Development Organization defines CSR as “a management concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns

in their business operations and interactions with their stakeholders” (United Nations, 2007). CSR can encompass a variety of strategies to incorporate social good efforts into a company’s business operations, including the “triple bottom line approach,” which measures company success through economic, environmental and social metrics. Advertising can help companies communicate their CSR priorities (United Nations, 2007).

Brand citizenship is another industry buzzword. This term can be used to describe CSR strategies integrated in the company’s work, but it also captures philanthropic efforts tied to an advertising campaign, or brands taking on topical social issues with their messaging. In a 2017 trend report, Interbrand chief strategist Alex Lirtsmen wrote, “A brand does not need to have CSR integrated into its business model — like Toms or Warby Parker—to break through in this new paradigm. In fact, brands like Nike, REI, and Starbucks are thriving as they develop a more purposeful voice, without needing to become purely CSR-driven companies.” In short, advertising alone can sometimes do the CSR job of a business model: at least to appeal to the consumers looking for a “purposeful” company.

In 2015, prominent advertising agency 72andSunny hired a non-profit executive as the head of the agency’s new “brand citizenship practice.” A Fast Company article reported that 72andSunny’s move “aims to take ‘good’ out of its CSR silo and make it a core marketing concern” (2015). At the agency, social and environmental causes are written into client creative briefs from the beginning of a campaign process. Other agencies have introduced similar efforts to combine causes with their messaging (*Fast Company*, 2015).

These initiatives are not entirely altruistic. According to the American Marketing Association, 70% of the millennial generation, a coveted market with significant spending power, will spend more on brands and products that support causes they care about (Ames, 2015). Another study reports that 55% of consumers of any generation will pay more for goods they see as “socially responsible” (Iezzi, 2015).

This project seeks to address some of the challenges that these initiatives introduce. How can agencies address social causes through their work authentically, without appropriating the movements they are working with? Such a misstep would both dissuade young audiences and hinder the cause involved. In the worst-case scenario, a poorly handled brand activism campaign can backfire, causing damage to the brand and agency involved. Corporate social responsibility and brand citizenship are industry trends for a reason: they help the bottom line for both advertising agencies and the companies they serve. Advertising that is tied to social movements is proven to be provocative and effective – plus, it routinely garners coveted awards for the advertising agencies itself. The advertising industry wants to make activist ads, and it is in their best interest to make them well.

Arguably, CSR and brand citizenship represent the next phase of advertising’s evolution. As advertising continues to synthesize marketing data, creativity and social movements, knowledge and guidelines about this process will be essential to maintaining the “win-win” dynamic of brand-movement partnerships. Now that the industry has mastered the arts of creativity and market segmentation, it can begin to address those markets through the lens of social good.

## **Literature Review**

This literature review summarizes existing research on social movements and advertising. Although no studies at the time of my literature review focused specifically on the brand activism phenomenon of today, this literature review offers relevant historical context and examples of how this trend has manifested in the past. It should also lead to a useful framework to examine today's media landscape. Though today's advertisements look different thanks to cultural, technological and industry changes, the theoretical intersection between activism and branding remains complex and worth investigating.

Advertisements of the past interacted with identity-based social movements in many ways, and have been both critiqued and celebrated by scholars. Existing studies often focus on a single social movement and how it relates to advertising tactics. They explore this relationship by examining both social movements using paid advertising, and advertisers capitalizing on social movements in their work for brands.

While my research will focus mainly on the latter relationship, and takes a broader approach to "social movements," this review of more specific studies is important for a holistic perspective on how social movements and advertising intersect.

### **Social Movements and Advertising**

In a 1998 paper, historian Susan Dente Ross offers a basic overview of the relationship between social movements and mass media like advertising. Dente Ross notes that while most social movements emerge from "unstructured, emotional and innovative" collective behavior, successful social movements mature to "organize

around a central goal of communicating core messages to disparate groups” (Dente Ross, 1998, p. 519). Media outlets play a vital role in framing these core messages; a movement’s success is directly related to media frames assimilating into the “general political culture” of a society (Dente Ross, 1998, p. 519). I will adopt Dente Ross’s argument in my research. A movement is successful when it achieves political victories, but also when it distributes a clear and coherent message through media—which includes advertising.

### *Normalization and Amplification*

Scholars point out advertising’s power as a media vehicle to communicate a social movement’s core messages across several movements and time periods. Advertising can normalize images of an identity group into larger consumer culture, and can even amplify a movement’s message to reach a greater audience. Often, however, these efforts have drawbacks.

In Susan Dente Ross’s 1998 study titled “*Their Rising Voices: A study of Civil Rights, Social Movements and Advertising in the New York Times*,” she explores the way Civil Rights Movement leaders used advertising in major publications to frame their efforts. In her qualitative analysis of Civil Rights advertisements in the New York Times, Dente Ross argues that the ads used framing techniques to extend and normalize the movement’s goals, and to prime audiences to receive more radical messaging.

It is important to note, however, that Dente Ross analyzes movement framing from the perspective of activists framing their own efforts, not advertising translating the discourse of a movement into a brand message (1998). In this study, advertising acts

as a normalizing and amplifying force for the civil rights movement, but the movement itself had complete agency over the messaging.

Advertising has helped to normalize and amplify other movements, as well. Media scholar Susan Douglas examines the role of late twentieth-century popular media in women's lives and the women's movement in her book, *Where The Girls Are*. Douglas considers mass media to be both feminism's "worst enemy" and its "best ally" (Douglas, 1995, p. 294). Though feminism regularly critiques problematic representations of women in media, Douglas argues that feminists "needed the same media outlets they were attacking," and still do (Douglas, 1995, p. 10).

Media representation remains essential to proliferating the message of the women's movement. To create change, feminists must first inform and inspire women on a large scale. Women's magazines like *Ms.* needed advertising support to continue circulating their pro-feminist messages. Douglas argues, "because young women became critically important economically, as a market, the suspicion began to percolate . . . that they might be important culturally, and then politically, as a generation." (Douglas, 1995, p.10). Her book views advertising that embraces feminism in a positive light, as it promotes the goals of the movement and raises awareness.

The LGBTQ+ movement saw similar victories, as Katherine Sender argues in her book *Business, Not Politics*. In the 1950s and 60s, LBGTQ+ advertising was limited to "gay window" representation: ads with coded messages that gay readers would understand as targeted to them, but would not be noticed by straight consumers (Sender, 2012). By the 1970s, however, brands began to align explicitly with LGBTQ+ communities, as well; Absolut Vodka is a famous example.

Marketers saw great consumer potential in LGBTQ niche markets, especially those who needed specific products for identity coding and signaling. Sender notes that capitalism and advertising of this nature “facilitated the development of gay identity, distinct from same-sex sexual activity,” which helped the LGBTQ+ movement in its early efforts to normalize its community and increase public visibility (Sender, 2012, p. 25).

### *Limits of Normalization*

In her 2010 study titled *PINK TRUCK ADS: Second-wave feminism and gendered marketing*, Ella Howard makes a more nuanced argument. Howard’s research focuses on advertisements that emerged during the height of second-wave feminism, and argues that during this time advertisers profited from women’s increased financial independence while continuing to perpetuate gender stereotypes. Howard points out that advertisements at this time drew from a commercial “post-feminism” that associated women’s liberation with increased consumption (Howard, 2010).

In her study, Howard acknowledges the wide variety of “feminist” ads from this time. Some focused on a false narrative of independence through consumption. Others addressed women as knowledgeable consumers in ways they had not before. Others still represented how “activists tried to place women’s consumerism in the service of their cause” (Howard, 2010, p. 138). She concludes that feminist intervention in advertising in the 1970s and 1980s did have a positive cultural impact, though it translated only a limited view of feminism into mainstream consumer discourse (Howard, 2010).

Advertising communicated and perpetuated greater financial independence for women, and normalized that independence, but it did not do much more than that.

The LGBTQ+ movement is another example of these limits. The AIDS epidemic of the 1980s “put gay-themed appeals back into ‘the deep freeze’” (Sender, 2012, p. 36). When, at this time, the LGBTQ+ community’s goals turned to a more difficult subject than simple visibility, advertising was no longer a potential vehicle for their message. Though the 1990s brought more commercial visibility in advertisements and increased representation of LGBTQ+ populations, this was more a reflection of increasingly diverse gay media outlets than a renewed commercial commitment to the cause (Sender, 2012).

Though Sender does see advertising and commercial media as a contributor to the visibility victories of the LGBTQ+ movement, she ultimately argues that it is the movement that shaped the gay market, not an “intrinsically fair” market process (Sender, 2012, p. 24). She also calls advertising a “disfigurement of feminism” and notes the lack of intersectionality in most LGBTQ+ targeted advertising; campaigns rarely feature lesbians, non-binary folks, or LGBTQ+ people of color (Sender, 2012).

### *Stereotypes and The Double Bind*

Successful social movements work to dispel harmful stereotypes about identity groups to achieve political victories. When anti-stereotyping messages are translated into advertising campaigns, however, activists and advertisers encounter problems.

Karim Murji’s 2006 study, *Using racial stereotypes in anti-racist campaigns*, explores a double bind of identity representation in advertising. Murji examines a series

of advertisements from the UK's Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) in 1998. Though these ads were meant to raise awareness of racial stereotyping and inspire change, they drew critique because of their questionable use of those stereotypes.

The CRE ads used a "tease and reveal" campaign that provoked audiences with blatantly racist ads, and then revealed their true intention after the backlash. Though the CRE argued that these ads "[brought] a little-discussed topic to public attention," Murji suggests that stereotypes already harm groups by making them hyper-visible, so to further that visibility through advertising is actually counterproductive (Murji, 1998, p. 261). Effective communication should address policy changes to remedy institutional problems. Murji argues that campaigns like the CRE's struggle to navigate between individual and systemic frames in their pro-social communications (1998).

Other scholars have considered some of the stereotyping and challenges that arise when advertising agencies attempt to reach identity groups as specific audiences, such as African Americans. Sender notes that after World War Two, advertising agencies began to see black communities as a viable market, in part because of the efforts of the civil rights movement (2012). A market researcher published an article titled "Don't Do This – If You Want To Sell Your Products to Negroes!" with tips to avoid egregious stereotypes in advertisements. Some large agencies hired African American marketing specialists (Sender, 2012). The effects of these efforts were complex. Some interpreted African Americans becoming a legitimized market through advertising as a symbol of cultural acceptance and social progress, though others argued that it was a "co-optation of an authentic subculture by corporations" that threatened independent black businesses and markets (Sender, 2012, p. 59).

Murji's and Sender's analysis also points out a "wider problem in the discourse and strategy of anti-racism:" expressing racism as simple prejudice, rather than a systemic issue (Murji, 1998). If racism is seen as an individualistic problem characterized by stereotypes and misconceptions, awareness-based tactics and specialized messages are appropriate. However, racism is also a deeper systemic problem that involves institutions like the justice system, law enforcement and schools. Advertising faces a double bind: using ads as a medium to perpetuate stereotypes is obviously counterproductive, but using them to combat stereotyping is tricky. Messages that address systemic issues and do not re-present negative perceptions are possible, but rare.

### *Commodification and De-politicization*

Many scholars critique the relationship between advertising and social movements on the basis of advertising's inherent capitalist goals. Robert Goldman, Deborah Heath and Sharon Smith argue that while advertising can and does promote some aspects of the feminist movement, it simultaneously enforces non-feminist concepts. Simple, attractive messaging glosses over such contradictions.

Goldman, Heath and Smith use the term "commodity feminism" to describe the way advertisers reduce feminist ideas into a marketing tool aimed at the insecurities of individual women. "Commodity feminism" applies the activist rhetoric of empowerment to consumer behavior, positions products as an avenue for freedom, and shapes its messages of liberation around the female body.

Commodity feminism in advertising tells women that liberation is positive and attainable, but it must be bought and sold in the market (Goldman, Heath & Smith, 1991). As Goldman, Heath and Smith write, “when framed by ideologies of possessive individualism and free choice, feminism in its ‘new’ commodity form forgets its origins in a critique of unequal social, economic and political relations” (1991, p. 336). It reduces the collective political goals of the movement into individual lifestyle choices.

In her book *We Were Feminists Once: From Riot Grrrl to Covergirl, The Buying & Selling of a Political Movement*, writer Andi Ziesler also examines the fraught relationship between feminism and pop culture. She notes feminism’s relatively recent rise into “trendiness.” With celebrities like Beyoncé and Emma Watson publicly aligning themselves with the term, feminism has become more attractive to marketers. For Ziesler, who cofounded a feminist pop culture magazine, this is both exciting and concerning. While she sees this breakthrough as a step forward for the movement, she also notes complex problems that arise through “marketplace feminism” (Ziesler, 2016). Like Goldman, Heath and Smith, Ziesler argues that marketplace feminism is decontextualized and depoliticized. Marketing and movies have made it a buzzword, but not much more than that.

Ziesler worries that the “feel-good feminism” of advertisements can sometimes “pull focus away from deeply entrenched forms of inequality” (Ziesler, 2016, p.) “Feminist” ads offer “nips and tucks,” not real change. She critiques the way that when a credit card, for example, aligns itself with gender equality and freedom, it makes purchasing a “feminist” act. This is an application of the movement that feels like co-optation, especially when it doesn’t recognize that without feminism, women would be

unable to hold a credit card in their name, and were unable to do so until 1974 (Zeisler, 2016).

Verizon's 2014 "Inspire Her Mind" campaign also garnered attention as a "feminist" campaign. Zeisler critiques this version of marketplace feminism as well, but with a few reservations. She notes that because Verizon did not attach their pro-girl message to a specific product, the focus was more on the message than consumption. Additionally, because Verizon incorporated a legitimate partnership with an activist group, their "femvertising" was more meaningful (Zeisler, 2016).

The meeting-place of feminism and capitalism will always be a tricky one. Co-opted liberation, decontextualized freedom, and glamorous imagery are not necessarily anti-feminist, according to Zeisler. In fact, she points out that some see this mainstream adoption as a sign of the movement's success. But marketplace feminism will never capture the complexity and context of such a large-scale movement, nor threaten the status quo in the name of activism.

Often, advertising ignores many of the key struggles for justice that the feminist movement and other social movements pursue. It does not acknowledge intersectional issues like race and class. In fact, neoliberal capitalism perpetuates the kind of structural inequalities that radical feminism seeks to disassemble. Conflating advertising with activism is an attractive idea: it seems to satisfy two ideologies that were previously at odds with one another. Yet advertising may depoliticize a movement's goals, even as it promotes some of its core messages. As Zeisler puts it, "advertising has one job to do, and it's not to reflect the nuances of social movements" (Zeisler, 2015, p.). It can be a gateway, but its utility is limited.

## **Framing Theory**

Framing is a theoretical approach to media studies rooted in sociology and anthropology that can support a message-level analysis of brand activism strategies. Many scholars have defined framing in different ways. Most simply, it describes the study of what communicators highlight, include and exclude in a mode of communication, and how they do so. In his classic 1974 work, *Frame Analysis*, sociologist Erving Goffman argues that frames organize and define our experiences. According to Goffman, we understand the world through mental frameworks and schema that “establish, define and evaluate normative behaviors” (Goffman, 1974). Frames are a powerful mode of defining and communicating reality.

Goffman’s definition is merely the root of framing. Communication scholars like Robert Entman have created rubrics that allow scholars to apply the principles of framing theory to specific works of communication. For example, Entman suggests that when analyzing communication, one should consider how particular frames define problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgments, and suggest remedies in the text (Entman, 1993). This is just one of many structures that attempt to capture framing theory. Some scholars name frames with labels that refer to relevant schema, like a “war frame,” or a “love frame.” Others compare single phrases to determine their differing impact (Schuldt, 2014).

In “Seven Models of Framing: Implications for Public Relations,” Dr. Kirk Hallahan explains different ways that persuasive communicators frame messages to achieve their desired effect. One way is by framing responsibility for the message and its contents. Hallahan outlines several framing techniques related to this theme. One is a

binary structure: episodic and thematic framing. Episodic framing describes stories focusing on specific people and events. Thematic framing refers to broader stories that focus on societal implications. Hallahan notes that, in general, media outlets have an incentive to use episodic framing because audiences find specific stories more engaging, but episodic stories also make audiences feel less responsible for social problems (Hallahan, 1999, p. 221). These framing techniques subtly assign responsibility for events and messages, which can have important implications. This is particularly true for messages about identity-based social movements, which address large social issues that can be easily written off as individual problems. This particular dimension of framing theory can help scholars critically examine contemporary examples of brand activism.

### **Theory of Moral Development**

Another theoretical model that will be useful in examining messaging and advocacy around social movements is Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development. This theory, too, comes from different field of study: developmental psychology. Kohlberg's six-stage model for evaluating morality is oft-debated but widely known. Though created to analyze the cognitive development of individuals, this theory also has applications in media studies—particularly, in analyzing the morality of message creation and communication (Vozzola, 2014, p. 26).

Kohlberg's theory structures how organizations and individuals talk about themselves and justify their actions into six stages and three levels. At stage one, people follow social norms for fear of punishment or authority, while at stage two they are

motivated by their own best interests. These stages are known as pre-conventional: the first level of moral development. Stage three behavior adopts a conformist mentality that values approval from others. At stage four, rules and laws drive behavioral decisions. Together, these stages form the conventional level. Stages five and six, or the post-conventional level, describe the highest level of moral development. At stage five, people make choices out of respect for others' well-being and safety. At stage six, they value justice and the good of society over their own self-interest. Notably, these moral classifications are rooted in Kantian ethics, and so prioritize self-sacrificial decisions and altruism when evaluating moral worth (McCombs, 2004). This theory is useful in analyzing the context and motivation behind brand activism efforts.

## **Analysis Framework: Brand Activism Spiderweb**

Thus far, this thesis has examined a range of academic literature and related tools to answer this question: How have identity-based social movements been framed in advertising messages? Researchers have explored many cases of advertising adopting and co-opting social movements. The high visibility of advertising provides a valuable platform for movement awareness. Some scholars even see advertising as a force for normalization: when people start to see marginalized identity groups in the context of advertising, they find those groups easier to accept.

The literature I reviewed also addressed the limits of that normalizing force. Often, the movements and people involved have no agency in the creation of advertising messages about and for them. This can lead to counterproductive messaging or empty messages from companies that actually work against the movements in question. Commercial speech has also reinforced harmful stereotypes. Additionally, many scholars note a fundamental disconnect between the commercial goals of advertising and the social goals of a movement.

In the past, advertisers have framed identity-based social movements in many different ways. The success of a frame from a critical, pro-advocacy perspective depends on the contextual commitment of the organization advertising, the agency of the movement in creating the message, the use of stereotypes, the call to action included, the focus of the imagery and the discursive framing of the advertisement itself.

We now move out of the past and into the present: How are social movements framed in advertising today, and how successful are those frames? To answer this

question, I used my research to create the Brand Activism Spiderweb: a thematic model that compares the strengths and weaknesses of various advertising campaigns based on the critical dimensions addressed in the body of research on this topic (Figure 3).

### Brand Activism Spiderweb

Example



Figure 3: Brand Activism Spiderweb

Each “leg” of model is evaluated on a scale of 0 to 3. Higher scores reflect more successful brand activism frames. Comparing case studies using the Brand Activism Spiderweb can reveal larger trends in the way the advertising industry approaches social movements. This can illuminate the best path forward for socially conscious advertisers who hope to create meaningful advocacy with their work.

#### *Context*

The Context dimension uses Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral Development. To evaluate this leg of the model, I will consider research on the motivation and actions of the brand advertised.

**1:** A score of 0.5 reflects Kohlberg's first stage of the first, "preconventional" level of moral development: following social norms for fear of punishment or authority. A score of 1 reflects the second stage of the first level: motivated by their own best interests.

**2:** A score of 1.5 reflects the first stage of Kohlberg's second level: conformist mentality that values approval from others. A score of 2 reflects the second stage of the second, "conventional," level: decisions driven by rules and laws.

**3:** A score of 2.5 represents work that falls into stage one of Kohlberg's "post-conventional" level of moral development: choices made out of respect of others' wellbeing and safety. A score of three reflects the final stage of moral development: valuing justice and the good of society over self-interest.

### *Agency*

This score is inspired by Dente Ross's study on the use of advertisements by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Dente Ross deemed advertisements successful when they communicate "core messages to disparate groups," which is an essential element of a social movement's success, but movement leaders themselves placed the ads (Dente Ross, 1998, p. 521).

**1:** A score of 1 will be awarded if the movement concerned had no agency over the message of the advertisement, or if no specific social movement is identified.

**2:** A score of 2 reflects partial agency, which includes evidence of consultation with movement leaders, with the identity group concerned, or some other tangible commitment to brand collaboration with movement stakeholders.

**3:** A score of 3 reflects the majority of message agency assigned to activists and movement stakeholders. This could include the voice or words of an activist, a visible partnership between the brand and the movement, or some other meaningful elevation of the movement's voice.

### *Stereotypes*

This score reflects the representation of identity groups in the advertising effort and is inspired by Murji's 2006 study: *Using racial stereotypes in anti-racist campaigns* explores a double bind of identity representation in advertising. Murji warns against depicting common stereotypes, even for anti-stereotyping purposes, because they perpetuate a harmful cultural narrative.

**1:** A score of 1 reflects the use of harmful stereotypes without any attempt to deconstruct or challenge those stereotypes: blatant co-optation of an identity group based on preconceived notions.

**2:** A score of 2 reflects advertisements that depict harmful stereotypes as a means of challenging or deconstructing them. It also reflects the use of neutral or non-derogatory stereotyping.

**3:** A score of 3 awards advertising depictions that avoid portrayals which stereotype the identity groups concerned.

### *Call to Action*

The most common academic critique of activist advertising is the way it appropriates inherently counter-hegemonic movements for the very hegemonic goal of product consumption. This thesis will not counter these critiques. Advertising is commercial speech, and will never be “true activism.” However, it is a large platform on which movements can achieve some level of communication success and advocacy. This dimension of the Brand Activism Spiderweb will address how successfully an advertisement contributed to the goals of a movement in addition to its business objectives through a call to action.

**1:** A score of 1 will reflect a call to action that is purely *commercial*. The call to action is a product purchase, and there is no reference to any external to further the goals of the social movement used.

**2:** A score of 2 will reflect a call to action that is *individual*. The brand and/or product is present, and a brand-related call to action may exist, but the viewer is also encouraged to take some kind of individual action related to the movement involved.

**3:** A score of 3 reflects a *social* call to action. The brand and/or product may or may not be present. The direct message of the communication is a tangible action connected to an identity-based social movement that extends beyond the viewer. This call to action is

counter-hegemonic and resists the frequent de-politicization of social movements in advertising.

### *Discourse*

This element of the Brand Activism Spiderweb also examines representation within an advertisement. This leg evaluates the way the advertisement *uses* the social movement: the way it depicts and talks about identity-based activism, and the extent to which that is meaningful and sincere.

**1:** A score of 1 is awarded to advertisements that use the *spectacle* of activism. They depict the glamorous or dramatic elements only, with no context, activist messaging, or meaningful symbolism. The focus is on action and drama, not ideology.

**2:** A score of 2 is awarded to advertisements that use the *symbols* of activism. They may use the flags, colors or movements associated with a specific movement with little context. This use is not harmful or demeaning, but is also not political or meaningful beyond general awareness.

**3:** A score of 3 is awarded to brands that use the *language* of activism. They utilize slogans, political talking points or messages that promote identity-based movements. The brand's message is explicitly connected with the movement's message through language.

### *Scale*

This dimension reflects an insight from Murji and Sender's analyses of race in advertising. Both scholars warn against expressing and representing racism as an issue of individual choice and prejudice. Meaningful communication frames it as a systemic social problem. This distinction can apply to the success of other identity-based social movements, as well. I will use Hallahan's notion of episodic and thematic framing to evaluate this leg of the model.

**1:** A score of 1 will be awarded to advertisements that use episodic framing to place the social movement involved in the context of a specific, individual problem. These ads focus on specific people and events only.

**2:** A score of 2 will be awarded to advertisements that use episodic framing, but in some way connect that storytelling to a broader systemic problem.

**3:** A score of 3 will be awarded to campaigns that use thematic framing to call attention to the systemic nature of the problems that identity-based social movements address.

### *Model Limitations*

This model is intended to be a baseline for comparison and analysis. Not all legs should be weighted equally, but a composite representation of all these dimensions allows for macro analysis of trends across brand activism efforts.

## **Study 1: Case Study Analysis**

### **Research Question**

How are social movements framed in advertising today, and how successful are those frames?

### **Methods**

I chose four case studies that fit the following criteria:

1. **Medium:** A video advertisement by a brand that offers a widely available consumer good or service.
2. **Audience:** Reached audience in the United States.
3. **Timing:** Ran for the first time no earlier than January 2016.
4. **Relevance:** Associates the brand with an identity-based social movement, as defined in this thesis.

I used the Brand Activism Spiderweb to evaluate and compare these examples.

### **Case Study 1: “The Talk”**

#### **Brand:**

Procter & Gamble (P&G), a consumer-goods corporation that includes brands like Always, Bounty and Dawn.

#### **Criteria:**

1. **Medium:** Two-minute video spot.
2. **Audience:** P&G is based in Cincinnati, OH. “The Talk” was posted on YouTube and was intended to reach American audiences. It was created by American advertising agency BBDO.
3. **Time:** July 2017.

4. Relevance: “The Talk” focuses on racialized harassment, police brutality and implicit racial bias: identity-based social concerns addressed by the Black Lives Matter movement.

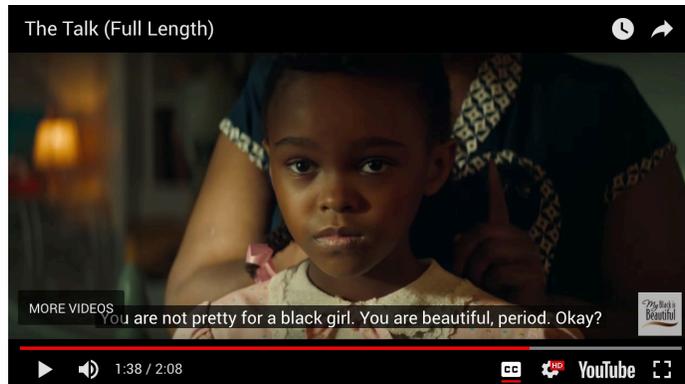


Figure 4: “The Talk”

## Description

“The Talk” (Figure 4) is a series of vignettes of black mothers having discussions with their children about forms of racism they encounter. The vignettes span decades, including a contemporary mother and her teenage daughter learning how to drive. The daughter insists that she is a “good driver.” The mother replies, “Baby, this is not about you getting a ticket. This is about you not coming home.”

At the end of the vignettes, the screen reads: “Let’s all talk about ‘The Talk.’ So we can end the need to have it.” After the P&G logo appears, the final image reads: “It’s time for everyone to #TalkAboutBias” and offers ways to engage with the brand’s “My Black is Beautiful” platform.

## Analysis

### *Context*

Procter & Gamble released “The Talk” in July 2017. The advertisement is linked to an internal group called My Black is Beautiful. According to the company

website, My Black is Beautiful was founded in 2007 by “visionary black women within P&G.” It was not a community created specifically for this video spot (*P&G*, 2017).

My Black is Beautiful’s mission is “to ignite and support a sustained national conversation by, for and about black women.” With its call to action and links at the end of the spot, Procter & Gamble directly connected the conversation-provoking content of “The Talk” with this sub-organization and its goals (*P&G*, 2017).

According to *Ad Week*, “The Talk” is meant to introduce a “relaunch” of My Black Is Beautiful, shifting the platform’s focus away from general “empowerment” and toward more political conversations like racial bias (Oster, 2017). Over six months later, the site does not reflect that intended shift. The link to “Learn more about P&G’s commitment to diversity & inclusion” leads to an error page. The error page does, however, link to an implicit bias tests and several videos about allyship (*P&G*, 2017).

In P&G’s 2016 “Citizenship Report,” released a few months before “The Talk” was launched, the company devotes a page to racial inclusion endeavors. Interestingly, it frames its efforts with this statement: “African Ancestry buying power is expected to reach \$1.2 trillion in 2016, and \$1.4 trillion by 2020.” Winning with these consumers is critical; it is integrated into who we are and how we go to market” (*P&G*, 2016, p. 29) Additionally, a marketing industry blog notes that P&G is a company that “pays attention to the nuances, needs, and perceptions of each cultural segment” in its advertising messages (Puri, 2015). Identity-based messaging is important to P&G, and it is lucrative.

Though P&G is the industry leader in consumer packaged goods, according to IBISWorld reports, its brands face tough competition from companies like Unilever

(2016). Some P&G brands, like Pantene, significantly underperform in African American markets, according to Simmons OneView data. Reaching this demographic specifically, through platforms like My Black Is Beautiful and advertisements like “The Talk,” makes good business sense.

This contextual information informs “The Talk”’s score on the Context dimension of the Brand Activism Spiderweb. This spot cannot receive a score of 3, which would indicate that its makers value justice and social good over self interest. My Black is Beautiful and “The Talk” are well-intended, but evidently rooted in consumer potential and call-to-purchase. That said, there are far more superficial ways to target black women as a consumer segment. Though not politically charged, the mission of this spot and the initiative it supports are admirable and potentially controversial—they certainly do not reflect pure self-interest, rules, laws, or fear. “The Talk” appears to be rooted in respect for the wellbeing and safety of black women and their experiences, albeit through a commercial lens.

**Score: 2.5**

*Agency*

“The Talk” was produced by New York advertising agency BBDO alongside Egami Consulting Group, a minority-owned and certified firm (Oster, 2017). Egami has been the communications agency of record for My Black is Beautiful for over eight years. According to a press release from BBDO and P&G, “Every aspect of [“The Talk”] included the essential contributions and guidance of creatives, producers, filmmakers, and clients of color.” On the other hand, both creative directors on the ad were white men, P&G’s chief brand building officer is a white man, and two leading

client-side directors of P&G My Black is Beautiful are non-black women (Oster, 2017). Though black women were given a spotlight in the ad, their role in its production was apparently a supporting one.

In its “present day” depictions, this advertisement addresses police brutality, an issue tackled by the Black Lives Matter movement. It appears that BBDO and Egami did not consult any prominent Black Lives Matter activists (Oster, 2017). Yet shortly after the ad’s release, a UK-based blogger noted that “The Talk” had received 71,000 views on YouTube...and over 4.5 million views re-posted on the Facebook page of African-American blogger, social justice commentator and Black Lives Matter activist Tamara McDaniel (*Verdict*, 2017). This suggests that the spot did reach its intended audience, and was deemed acceptable by at least some stakeholders in the Black Lives Matter movement.

Knowing this, I would assign this ad a score of 2 on the Agency dimension of the Brand Activism Spiderweb. There is evidence of consultation with the identity group concerned. Stakeholders in racial justice movements did not have as much agency as they could have, but it is ultimately their voice that takes precedent in this spot, not P&G’s.

**Score: 2**

### *Stereotypes*

Overall, “The Talk” is respectful toward its target audience. In some ways, it resists harmful stereotypes that demonize and belittle the black family structure by depicting powerful mother-child relationships and open, frank discussions.

Historically, the black matriarch has been unfairly criticized by patriarchal institutions. For example, the 1965 government report titled “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” better known as the Moynihan report, famously critiqued the matriarchal structure of many black families and was used by many to undermine the efforts of the Civil Rights Movement (Coates, 2015). In light of this, it is interesting that P&G did not include any father-son conversations— a choice that could be attributed to ingrained stereotypes, consumer trends, or both. At the same time, this advertisement embraces and glorifies the matriarchal role, a subtle rebuttal to Moynihan’s “findings.”

Journalist Ida Harris, writing for women’s publication *Dame* magazine, offered a tongue-in-cheek description of P&G’s portrayal of black mothers. In “The Talk,” she writes, “viewers witness archetypes of strong Black moms, shooting from the hip, telling it how it is, advising beautiful cocoa-complected children to appreciate their aesthetics, keep their heads up, and play it safe in a white-supremacist world that mostly harbors contempt for them” (Harris, 2017). Harris’ tone critiques the sanitized, dramatized portrayal of the situations depicted in this advertisement. She seems to suggest that this portrayal reinforces the way black people are expected to remain docile and passive in the face of systemic oppression, all while being targeted as both the victims and the cause of racism. Harris writes that “if Procter & Gamble were sincere in their effort to snuff racial bias, they should have redirected the focus of “The Talk” to its rightful audience: whiteness” (Harris, 2017).

Yet at the same time, “The Talk” is deft in its handling of racist behavior and stereotypes affecting black families. Without actually using the “n word,” the advertisement quite explicitly points to that slur, condemning its use in no uncertain

terms. Generally, the advertisement calls out the faults and behaviors of oppressors without excusing or qualifying those behaviors with any unusual action by the oppressed. For example, the comments made toward the little girl depicted were not made because she wore a new dress or said something in class. Rather, they are painted as everyday activities; the responsibility is on the instigator, not the victim. In identifying specific situations of oppression, such as phrases like “pretty for a black girl” and police violence in traffic stops, “The Talk” goes one step further than many vague “do good” campaigns.

Considering these successes, I award this advertisement a score of 3 on the Stereotypes dimension of the Brand Activism Spiderweb. This advertisement avoids harmful stereotypes, reframes actions to assign responsibility to the oppressor, and resists assumptions about black families that have permeated American discourse in the past.

**Score: 3**

#### *Call To Action*

Many response articles and think-pieces about “The Talk” note the advertisement’s lack of overt branding. While P&G certainly garnered publicity, there was no overt product placement or commercial call to action in this ad. Instead, the call to action reads: “It’s time for everyone to #TalkAboutBias” and offers ways to engage with My Black is Beautiful, a platform created by P&G.

The My Black is Beautiful homepage is full of links to articles and stories about the experience of black women. The stories are mostly about motherhood, marriage, and everyday routines that relate to P&G’s products. Titles include “How 10 Moms

Teach Their Daughters About Beauty,” “Finding My Beautiful with My Man,” and “5 Ways to De-Stress From the Noise of the World.” There are some exceptions to this heteronormative domesticity— the story of a queer woman and tips for handling micro-aggressions with co-workers, for example— but generally the site’s content relates to the products that P&G sells. Deeper in the site, this connection is more explicit. Clicking on links like “The Great Hair Debate: Team Natural or Team Relaxed” reveals banner ads and embedded links to P&G brands and products.

My Black is Beautiful’s “latest milestones” include a partnership with *Essence* magazine, a Spotify playlist and a video featuring singer-songwriter India Arie. While these accomplishments are in line with the organization’s mission to “ignite and support” conversation, they reveal some of the limitations of that mission. My Black is Beautiful is as apolitical as an identity-based advocacy platform could be. There is no element of financial contribution or action beyond buying P&G products, signing up with your email address, or downloading P&G coupons.

This is not to discredit the importance of positive, realistic black representation in the beauty industry. That is a conversation worth having, and My Black is Beautiful supports that conversation consistently. It is also heartening to know that the initiative has existed for over a decade; it is not a hollow creation hiding behind a single TV spot.

“The Talk” does not depict any specific products, brands or promotion. The call to action is not commercial, but it does not extend beyond individual perception change. Conversation is important, but activism is much more than that. Considering both these factors, I assign this advertisement a score of 2 on the Call to Action dimension of the Brand Activism Spiderweb.

**Score: 2**

*Discourse*

This advertisement does not invoke the spectacle of the movement represented. There are no depictions of protests, riots, sit-ins, or any other demonstrations associated with struggles for racial justice (including the Civil Rights Movement and Black Lives Matter). Similarly, there are no symbols present that directly connect the advertisement and company with these movements. Linguistically, the only element of the advertisement that connotes activism is the name of the connected platform: My Black is Beautiful. “Black is beautiful” was a rallying cry of the second-wave feminism and Civil Rights Movement. The phrase represents an assertion of black identity and power that was highly political at the time, but has since been widely commodified and arguably neutralized.

Though there are no symbolic representations and there is a linguistic connection, I will assign this advertisement a score of 2 on the Discourse dimension of the Brand Activism Spiderweb. The use of “black is beautiful” by this campaign is not harmful or demeaning, but it does not explicitly connect the ad with contemporary social movements like Black Lives Matter -- that is done through situations and framing, instead, a more symbolic connection.

**Score: 2**

*Scale*

“The Talk” uses thematic framing to address racial bias as a widespread, systemic issue. Though the advertisement depicts single, specific occurrences, the

vignettes span decades and “types” of oppression. The message is that this happens often, to many people, and in many different ways. Even the title is general and thematic, emphasizing that the scenes represented are just a few of many. On the Scale dimension of the Brand Activism Spiderweb, this advertisement earns a score of 3.

**Score: 3**

Figure 5 summarizes the Spiderweb evaluation for “The Talk.”

Case Study I:  
“The Talk” | P&G



Figure 5: “The Talk” Brand Activism Spiderweb

**Case Study 2: “Stress Test: Raise”**

**Brand:**

Secret Deodorant, a brand under the parent company Procter & Gamble (P&G), a consumer-goods corporation.

**Criteria:**

1. Medium: One minute video spot.
2. Audience: “Stress Test: Raise” is one video spot in a larger “Stress Test” campaign for Secret. The campaign was created by American agency Wieden and Kennedy and was intended for American audiences.

3. Time: April 2016.
4. Relevance: This commercial focuses on the gender wage gap that disadvantages women in the workplace.



Figure 6: “Stress Test: Raise”

**Description:**

“Stress Test: Raise” (Figure 6) depicts a young woman nervously preparing for a meeting with her boss. She adjusts her blazer, glasses and hair as she practices lines in the mirror. It becomes clear that she is vying for a raise. She tries several different tactics (pointing out her successes on a project, mentioning a male co-worker with less experience who makes more than her, etc) before she hears a flush from off-screen. The woman is mortified until the stall’s occupant, an older woman, walks up to her and offers a word of encouragement: “Do it.” The ad ends with the line: “At 3 o’clock, Lucy does her part to close the wage gap. Secret: Stress tested for women.”

**Analysis:**

*Context*

This advertisement for Secret launched in April 2016 as part of a larger (and ongoing) “Stress Test” campaign for Secret’s “Clinical Strength” deodorant formula.

(Jardine and Diaz, 2016). This campaign came at a time when the issue of the gender pay gap was more relevant than ever; Google Trends data shows the topic at an all-time peak of searches in April 2016. (*Google Trends*, 2018)

*Google News* archives suggest that this peak in interest was informed by changes in policy. On January 29, 2016, President Obama announced further legislation aimed at addressing gender wage disparities, echoing the very first piece of legislation he signed in the White House (Ortiz, 2016). Publications like *The Washington Post*, *Forbes*, *The Economist* and *The Atlantic*, companies like Amazon, and celebrities including Kristen Stewart and Emma Watson also weighed in in early 2016 with think-pieces and policy suggestions on the issue.

There was an opportunity, then, for Secret to join the conversation around the wage gap. Advertising trade publications, blogs and general news outlets covered the ad due to its timeliness, increasing the visibility of the campaign. Notably, this spike in cultural interest around the issue did not correlate with any new steps toward improvement. Rather, the boost in relevance was a reaction to Obama's policy change. Secret's contribution was a passive acknowledgement of an ongoing issue, not an active statement amid a tide of change.

Another element of context that informs the "Stress Test" campaign is Secret's iconic tagline of the past: "Strong enough for a man, but made for a woman." The slogan, developed in the early 1970s, propelled the brand to success, but garnered criticism from feminists. From a feminist perspective, "strong enough for a man" implicitly asserts that men possess superior strength and position with respect to women, and deserve higher-quality products. "Made for a woman" further emphasizes

the assumed gender differences in household products, something that has justified the phenomenon of the “pink tax” — differential pricing for products marketed to women.

“Stress Test” is a diversion from this message, but the tagline is still celebrated with a page on Secret’s website as a cherished part of the brand’s history. Secret has not tried to distance itself from sexist messaging in the past. Rather, according to Janet Militec, the brand director behind the campaign, this new campaign is aligned with “a 60-year history of bringing to life women's evolving role in society through its advertising.”

This disconnect between messaging, history and action raises another question about “Stress Test: Raise.” Beyond portraying a woman suffering from this systemic inequality, did Secret do anything about it? According to a report in *AdWeek* and the Secret website, the answer is no (Nudd, 2016). A spokesperson from Secret addressed this critique, saying that the campaign intends to give young women “the opportunity to support each other with honest and real stories” (Nudd, 2016). Secret makes it clear that the brand’s involvement in those stories will not go beyond telling them.

This product is more popular with women aged 20-40 and women who work full time than with the average consumer, according to data from Simmons OneView Market Research. It makes good business sense, then, to position Secret as a friendly partner in the struggle, where its consumers can “connect and share.” To do more may have been risky, given the relevance of the topic and the broad political views of the brand’s consumer base. Secret seeks to use women’s stress to gain publicity, but according to the company, women are solely responsible for doing something about that stress.

According to P&G’s 2016 Citizenship Report, the parent company is “committed to achieving gender balance at all levels of the company,” and is implementing programs to do so. Beyond that, however, neither Secret nor P&G are actively closing the wage gap or resolving the systemic issues that created it. That, they seem to suggest, is the job of the consumer— once they buy their product.

This contextual information informs “Stress Test: Raise”’s score on the Context dimension of the Brand Activism Spiderweb. This spot seems to reflect Kohlberg’s second level of moral development: a conformist mentality that values approval from others. Secret sought to address an issue that was relevant to their core demographic, but did so without any accompanying efforts or action.

Secret saw this campaign as an evolution of this brand’s sexist messaging in the past: an evolution driven by consumer pressure, not internal respect for the issue at hand. As a result, the brand received wide praise for its progressive stance. No brand activist efforts are truly altruistic, but Secret’s attempt appears to be more than a little bit superficial.

**Score: 1.5**

*Agency*

“Stress Test: Raise” was created by Portland-based advertising agency Wieden+Kennedy. According to *Ad Week*, the strategic planner, copywriter, producer and creative director on the project were all women and, evidently, women working in a professional setting: the very population that this ad seeks to represent. A statement by a representative for Secret indicates that this gender balance was intentional (Nudd, 2016).

Certain flaws in the framing of this advertisement's call to action suggest a lack of consultation with activists and a lack of basic research in feminist discourse. There are many organizations that focus on closing the wage gap, and Secret did not work with any of them. However, the brand's efforts to include women in the process of creating this message are commendable. The advertising industry is known for condoning the same toxic masculinity and bias that this campaign counters. Thankfully, in this case, the agency involved "walked the walk" and gave women who might be affected by this issue agency in the message's creation.

**Score: 2**

### *Stereotypes*

In some ways, "Stress Test: Raise" reproduces stereotypes ascribed to women in the workplace. Lucy shrugs and fidgets nervously throughout her monologue. She adjusts her tone of voice repeatedly. Sometimes she leans into feminine vocal tics such as "up-talking" and filler words, including "like."

These vocal variations are necessary to the humor and narrative of the commercial. Lucy's nerves emphasize the stress involved with talking to your boss — stress that is central to the need for Secret deodorant in this situation. However, they delegitimize the character's professionalism. Lucy's inability to articulate her own worth may actually call it into question for some viewers. In trying to keep this issue light-hearted, "Stress Test: Raise" trivializes the challenge of asking for equitable compensation, both for Lucy and for professional women in general.

In other ways, however, "Stress Test: Raise" refutes stereotypes about professional women. When Lucy hears the flushing noise from off-screen, she is

mortified. The viewer shares her embarrassment: no one wants to be overheard in a very vulnerable state of confidence-building. So when the woman in the stall encourages Lucy to “do it,” she is surprised, and so is the viewer. Patriarchal structures pit successful women against each other. This “twist” at the end of the video rejects stereotypes about women competing and bringing each other down in the workplace.

For these reasons, I assign this advertisement a score of 2 on the Stereotypes dimension of the Brand Activism Spiderweb. Though “Stress Test: Raise” does perpetuate some delegitimizing assumptions about women in the workplace, it also intentionally portrays a different kind of work culture: one in which women root for each other in the face of systemic inequity.

**Score: 2**

*Call to Action*

To assess how significantly “Stress Test: Raise” contributed to the goals of the gender pay equality movement while also achieving its commercial goals, it is helpful to examine the strategy behind the campaign. The “Stress Test” campaign is rooted in a generational insight connected to the product benefit. According to *Ad Week*, Secret Clinical Strength is designed to tackle “stress sweat,” which apparently requires a biologically different solution than normal sweat.

Wieden and Kennedy, then, decided to create a campaign concept that addresses the unique stressors that affect women today. They cast a broad net to include stress caused by systems and inequity: for example, the gender pay gap.

Through this strategy, Secret is not a solution to the social issue presented, but an ally to the people affected by it. Though this advertisement depicts a product use and

connects to a product benefit, it does not substitute activist action with product purchase: a particularly harmful form of brand co-optation.

Many people, including Leila Gowland, an entrepreneur who consults with women about negotiating pay, critiqued Secret for their lack of follow-up and action beyond that product connection. Gowland writes on the blog *Think Progress* that Procter & Gamble “missed a huge opportunity” by not attaching an initiative to this campaign (Gowland, 2016).

It would have improved Secret’s credibility and call to action if they had produced a platform for action around wage inequality. This would have made their call to action more social than individual, and arguably more impactful on a larger scale. Their call to action was not explicitly commercial, but the brand’s commitment to social change appears limited. For this reason, this advertisement receives a score of 1 on the Call to Action dimension of the Brand Activism Spiderweb.

**Score: 1**

*Discourse*

This dimension explores the extent to which “Stress Test: Raise” meaningfully and sincerely depicts a social movement. In multiple trade publication articles about this campaign, the writers describe the use of the gender pay gap in this advertisement as a “creative hook.” The pay gap is relevant here because it is stressful to women, and Secret Clinical Strength is marketed toward women who experience stress.

This weak connection to the goals of pay equity activism is evident in the way the movement is depicted in this advertisement. The final line on the screen is “At 3

o'clock, Lucy does her part to close the wage gap." Advocates for gender wage equality would never use this kind of language.

To say that in confronting her boss, Lucy "does her part" assigns the responsibility for pay inequity to women, not to the systemic forces that devalue their work and push them out of high paying jobs. The wage gap represents a complex combination of gendered and racial biases, motherhood responsibilities, and marketplace norms regarding paid leave and other benefits. As Gowland puts it in her *Think Progress* article, "There are many reasons the wage gap exists, but the fact that women don't ask isn't top among them" (2016). Assigning the responsibility of fixing it to women alone is wrong, yet that is what the copy of this advertisement implies.

"Stress Test: Raise" latches onto an element of action related to wage inequality. The stress of negotiation is dramatic and interesting. It lends itself to a narrative arc. Yet it mischaracterizes the nature of this social issue. All that considered, I assign this advertisement a score of 1 on the Discourse dimension of the Brand Activism Spiderweb. It focuses on action, not ideology, mitigating symptoms instead of the real problem, which may be detrimental to this movement's goals.

**Score: 1**

*Scale*

"Stress Test: Raise" uses episodic framing in that it depicts a single instance of wage inequality. In referring to "the wage gap" at the end of the advertisement, however, it acknowledges the broader issue and movement. Though it illustrates just one person's experience and that framing dominates the message, the viewer walks

away with a sense of a bigger picture. On the Scale dimension of the Brand Activism Spiderweb, this advertisement receives a score of 2.

**Score: 2**

Figure 7 summarizes the Spiderweb evaluation for “Stress Test: Raise.”



Figure 7: “Stress Test: Raise” Brand Activism Spiderweb

### Case Study 3: “This Land”

#### Brand:

Johnnie Walker, a brand of Scotch whiskey owned by British alcoholic beverage company Diageo.

#### Criteria:

1. Medium: 90-second video spot.
2. Audience: First aired nationally in the United States on the TBS show “Full Frontal with Samantha Bee.” Created by American advertising agency Anomaly.
3. Time: November 2016.
4. Relevance: This commercial implicitly condemns racist rhetoric around the presence of Mexican immigrants in the United States, both

documented and undocumented. It conveys a message of support for those immigrants.



Figure 8: "This Land"

### **Description:**

As "This Land" opens (Figure 8), words appear on the screen: "Only look back to see how far you've come." The shot cuts to a young man working on his computer (a glass of Johnnie Walker sits nearby) and the voice-over begins to recite the lyrics to Woody Guthrie's famous 1940 folk song, "This Land is Your Land." The first few sentences are a phrase in the song that we don't often hear: "As I went walking, I saw a sign /And on the sign it said 'No Trespassing.'/ And on the other side it said nothing/That side was made for you and me."

The voiceover actor, Rommel Molina, speaks in slightly accented English over somber, emotional music and a documentary-style montage of multicultural Americans living their everyday lives. He speaks the last few phrases of the song in Spanish. As the music fades, the final screens read "Keep Walking America," and "Here's to the road ahead," followed by the Johnnie Walker logo.

## Analysis:

### *Context*

This campaign promotes Johnnie Walker, a brand of Scotch whiskey founded in Scotland in the early 19th century. The brand flourished in the industrial revolution and is now the biggest scotch brand in the world. Johnnie Walker is owned by Diageo, a global alcoholic beverage company that also owns brands like Guinness and Smirnoff (Johnnie Walker, 2018).

Johnnie Walker's iconic slogan, "Keep Walking," and striding gentleman logo (Figure 9) refer to the brand's history of growth and global reach. These assets also contribute to a longtime marketing position as "progressive" and "forward-thinking:" for example, in the 1990s the striding man changed directions to indicate the brand's readiness to enter the new millennium (Vine Pair, 2017).



Figure 9: Johnnie Walker logo

In 2016, "This Land" launched a new U.S. campaign for Johnnie Walker called *Keep Walking America*. Like past marketing work for the brand, *Keep Walking America* focuses on progress and growth. It is the first work from the brand, however, to address Americans specifically. *Keep Walking America* is also unique in its more specific, political take on "progress" and "moving forward:" in the past, the brand has interpreted

these ideals in the literal sense of travel and growth. This new campaign speaks to social and cultural progress (Rittenhouse, 2017).

The *Keep Walking America* campaign includes other elements that have launched since this first video spot. One digital video execution showed an immigrant passing a citizenship test, then quizzing his (presumably citizen) friends on the questions over glasses of Johnnie Walker. The spot celebrates the effort immigrants put into achieving citizenship (Rittenhouse, 2017). The brand also staged a surprise party outside a naturalization ceremony in Los Angeles in 2017, complete with an impromptu photo shoot and a cover of “This Land is Your Land” by a latino funk band (Schultz, 2017). It is important to consider “This Land” in the context of these other campaign efforts, as the spot was intended to launch this new direction for Johnnie Walker.

Another important contextual detail that informs analysis of “This Land” is the circumstance of its launch. The spot aired the day before the 2016 United States presidential election (Gianatasio, 2016). The phrase “Here’s to the road ahead” may refer to the uncertain future of the country’s leadership at the time. As a candidate, President Donald Trump made famous derogatory statements toward immigrants in the United States, particularly those from Mexico. His policy proposals on the campaign trail included promises to build a wall between the United States and Mexico and a pledge to repeal the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program for undocumented immigrants. This campaign’s use of the Spanish language and images of Latinx people combined with the circumstances of its launch suggest that it was meant as a counter to Trump’s racist anti-Mexican rhetoric.

Additionally, “This Land” premiered on a broadcast of TBS network’s *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee* (Diaz, 2016) . This media placement further supports the notion that this spot was an implicit political statement. Samantha Bee’s comedy late night show saw a notable spike in ratings over the course of Trump’s campaign and subsequent election — more than any other late night show (Nededog, 2017). Bee is an outspoken critic of Trump and his policies.

Bee’s show is also very popular with the coveted 21-34 demographic. According to data from Simmons Research, Johnnie Walker under-indexes with young adults; this campaign could be an attempt to connect with their political values and spark a new generation of loyal scotch drinkers. The brand also over-indexes with Hispanic families. Johnnie Walker’s stance on immigration and use of the Spanish language could be a show of support to a loyal customer base.

Johnnie Walker’s VP of marketing told *AdWeek* that the brand “felt strongly that the spoken lyrics of our anthem should be powerfully delivered, distinct and an authentic representation of America’s cultural diversity” (Diaz, 2016). “Keep Walking America” is a twist on the brand’s classic interpretation of “progressive” that affirms its existing consumer base and attracts a new generation.

Knowing that context, I assign this advertisement a score of 2.5 on the Context dimension of the Brand Activism Spiderweb. “This Land” does not adopt a conformist mentality that seeks approval -- the repurposing of a classic American folk song is non-conformist. The advertisement also does not appear to be driven by rules or laws. In fact, it challenges the rules proposed by a presidential candidate in a very timely manner. Though Johnnie Walker’s “Keep Walking America” campaign does not go

beyond a statement of support, that statement is a powerful one enhanced by the time and location of its launch. This branding shift appears to be a statement motivated by respect for their existing consumer base and knowledge of the progressive ideals of younger, affluent potential consumers.

**Score: 2.5**

*Agency*

“This Land” was created by New York digital advertising agency Anomaly. *Adweek* offers a limited list of the team who worked on the spot, including director Chris Sargent and Johnnie Walker VP Marketing Stephanie Jacoby (Giantasio, 2016). None of those people listed are people of color aside from the voiceover actor, Rommel Molina.

Though it is unclear if the creative decision-makers on this advertisement are immigrants, the implicit agency in assigning the voiceover part to a Latino man of color and in using the Spanish language are worth considering. Using Spanish in a classic American folk song suggests that immigrants, too, have ownership in what it means to be American, and counters the dominant cultural narrative that English is the only language of the American experience. Jacoby told *Adweek*, “We are proud that the lyrics are read in both English and Spanish, reflecting the mix of languages spoken daily in our communities.” (Giantasio, 2016).

Symbolically, Johnnie Walker gives most of the voice in this spot to the people it is supporting. Using an Spanish-accented voice instead of Scottish, and limiting the slogan and brand connections to visual, not spoken words and symbols creates the

impression that this advertisement is a platform for the American immigrant story, not Johnnie Walker's brand voice regurgitating that message.

For that reason, I assign "This Land" a score of 2 on the Agency dimension of the Brand Activism Spiderweb. It is unclear if immigrants played any role in the creative decisions made in this spot and no activist groups were consulted, but the decisions that were made give Americans from different backgrounds a literal voice.

**Score: 2**

### *Stereotypes*

"This Land" depicts a variety of Americans, including rural cattle workers, urban residents, families, individuals, veterans, doctors and artists. Through this, the advertisement generally avoids dominant stereotypes. People of color are broadly represented and there are no clichéd appeals to classic "Americana" (American flags, fireworks, etc).

The situations and occupations depicted in this advertisement are familiar scenes, but in popular culture, they are often portrayed with white men. In this ad, the cattle worker depicted is a man of color, the emergency room doctor is a woman of color, and the veteran returning home is also a person of color. "This Land" presents and celebrates immigrants across class, gender and racial spectra, and counters the whitewashed media portrayals of America. For this reason, I assign "This Land" a score of 3 on the Stereotypes dimension of the Brand Activism Spiderweb.

**Score: 3**

### *Call to Action*

The explicit call to action in this advertisement is vague: “Keep Walking America.” The text of the voiceover is hopeful, but the overall tone of the spot is muted and somber, suggesting a possibly difficult path forward. Where, then, does Johnnie Walker fit in?

The product shots throughout the montage in “This Land” show Johnnie Walker in a variety of settings. A bottle sits by the laptop of a student hard at work. A family celebrates a veteran’s return with a toast. These subtle framing devices suggest that the story’s connection to the product is less a call to purchase, and more a statement of support. The brand is a supporting character. The American immigrant is the protagonist.

“This Land” subtly positions Johnnie Walker as a partner in the immigrant American experience. As a brand representative put it, the spot “reinforces the brand’s role as an icon of progress” (Diaz, 2016). The other efforts of the “Keep Walking America” campaign described earlier follow a similar strategy.

The call to action in this campaign, then, is not purely commercial, but it is more individual than social. With the “Keep Walking America” campaign, Johnnie Walker seeks to elevate and acknowledge the personal stories of immigrants, but the campaign does not step into the larger social and political sphere of immigrant rights advocacy. Elements of “This Land, such as the media placement of the campaign launch, are arguably counter-hegemonic, but the objective of the larger brand effort fall under the score of 2 on the Call to Action dimension of the Brand Activism Spiderweb.

**Score: 2**

### *Discourse*

“This Land” does not use the spectacle of activism. There are no glamorized protests, strikes or rallies recalling the struggles for immigrant rights. This advertisement also avoids the use of overt political symbols. For example, the American flag does not make an appearance.

There are some counter-hegemonic discursive choices in “This Land.” One of the first shots in the advertisement is of a barbed wire fence, shown while the voice over talks about a sign that “said ‘No Trespassing.’” This fence could be read as an allusion to Trump’s U.S-Mexican border wall proposal, an ubiquitous feature of the 2016 presidential campaign. The montage of video shots also lingers on neighborhood fences, rivers, and other symbolic representations of borders and border crossings.

“This Land” also uses language in a subversive way. In using the song “This Land Was Made For You and Me,” the campaign applies the tradition of American folk culture to a “new kind of America.” The campaign opens with an often-ignored verse of the song, and presents some of the lyrics in Spanish; it reimagines an anthem of national appreciation to include all kinds of Americans. Because of this creative challenge to social norms through symbols and language, not spectacle, I award “This Land” a score of 3 on the Brand Activism Spiderweb.

**Score: 3**

### *Scale*

“This Land” uses thematic framing to tell the story of many different American immigrants. The documentary-style montage privileges the larger, progressive narrative about acceptance of immigrant Americans over their individual stories. The

“characters” in “This Land” do not have names, dialogue or other identification. They are simply connected by the message of the voiceover to tell a broader story with political implications. I assign this advertisement a score of 3 on the Brand Activism Spiderweb.

**Score: 3**

Figure 10 summarizes the Spiderweb evaluation for “This Land.”

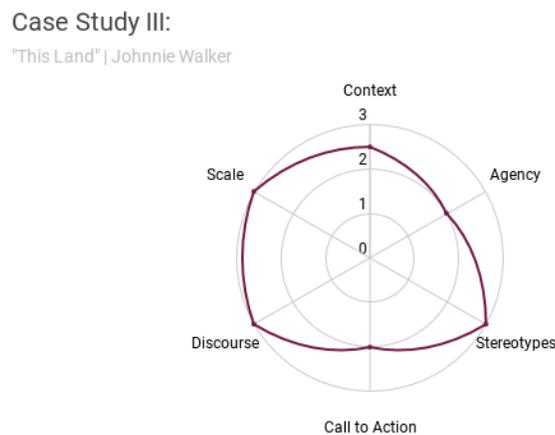


Figure 10: “This Land” Brand Activism Spiderweb

#### **Case Study 4: “LGBTQAlphabet”**

**Brand:**

Equinox, a line of luxury gyms.

**Criteria:**

1. Medium: Five-minute video spot.
2. Audience: Equinox was founded in Manhattan and its primary audience is U.S. consumers. This digital spot was posted on YouTube and shared with an American audience on social media. The video was created by U.S. advertising agency Wieden and Kennedy New York.
3. Time: June 2017.

4. Relevance: Now that marriage equality is the law of the land, queer activists fight for wider recognition of the wide spectrum of identities in the community. This advertisement addresses that “next frontier” of LGBTQ+ activism.



Figure 11: “LGBTQAlphabet”

### **Description:**

“LGBTQAlphabet” (Figure 11) is at the heart of a digital video campaign for Equinox celebrating Pride Month. The five-minute video highlights a cast of dancers as they illustrate 26 terms related to the queer community with movement. The video opens with the copy: “LGBTQA. Six letters will never be enough. Equinox and the LGBT Community Center present: The LBGTQAlphabet.”

For each letter of the alphabet, a group of dancers embody its assigned word with movement under a voiceover from someone who personally identifies with the term. The entire film is shot in a large, open warehouse space, and the dancers wear a variety of colorful attire: a subtle nod to the LGBTQ+ Pride flag. The terms represented in “LGBTQAlphabet” are:

- |                   |                    |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| A – Ally          | H – Heteroflexible |
| B – Bisexual      | I – Intersex       |
| C – Coming out    | J – Justified      |
| D – Drag          | K – Kink           |
| E – Exhibitionist | L – Lesbian        |
| F – Femme         | M – Masc           |
| G – Gay           | N – Non-binary     |

O – Out  
P – Pansexual  
Q – Queer  
R – Real  
S – S & M  
T – Trans

U – Undecided  
V – Vogue  
W – Womxn  
X – Xtravagant  
Y – You  
Z – Ze | Zir

After defining the last letter, the voiceovers briefly speak to the nature of the queer community at large. As the dancers relax from their final pose and congratulate each other, the voiceover reads: “Without the community, I don’t know where I would be. I have a huge number of people behind me. And they’re all fucking fabulous.”

Credits flash at the bottom, followed finally by the LGBT Community Center logo, then the Equinox logo.

## **Analysis:**

### *Context*

“LGBTQAlphabet” was released in June 2017 for Equinox, a Manhattan-based chain of luxury gyms. The short film was the flagship execution for a larger #PoweredByPride campaign. The brand has 88 gym locations across major U.S. and international cities. Equinox positions itself as a “high performance lifestyle leader,” and has explored other expressions of identity in its recent advertising, using the tagline “Commit to Something.”

Equinox cites its “Commit to Something” campaign and dedication to the concept of identity as the motivator for “LGBTQAlphabet,” but it is also worth noting that Equinox locations, particularly SoHo and Greenwich Avenue, regularly appear on lists of “gay gyms” in New York City. (Wellfellow, n.d.). The Equinox on Sunset Blvd

in Los Angeles has a similar reputation (Hommemaker, 2013). The gym's executive creative director Liz Nolan commented on the importance of the LGBTQ+ community in a Fast Company article: "Knowing that our community and our membership base at Equinox is so diverse, we feel like this is an area where we do have some credibility" (Ifeanyi, 2017). Exercise and physique are important parts of queer culture, and gay men in particular have been found to have lower body satisfaction and "distorted cognitions about the importance of having an ideal physique" (Kaminski et al., 2005). Affluent queer people — already a coveted "double income no kids" consumer market — are an important target for Equinox.

This is not Equinox's first campaign to celebrate and tangibly contribute to the LGBTQ+ community. In June 2015, the gym donated \$1 million to the Hetrick-Martin Institute's Harvey Milk High School in New York and the London charity Pillion trust through a social media campaign (Coffee, 2015). In June 2016, the brand ran a #PoweredByPride campaign called "Partners in Pride," where five gyms across the country created fusions of fitness classes to celebrate Pride month. They pledged donations to New York City's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center through partnerships with other brands and a social media campaign. The "LGBTQAlphabet" spot was also part of a larger campaign; Equinox held #PoweredByPride events across the country and donated to New York's LBGT Community Center.

Though supporting the LGBTQ+ community is in Equinox's best interest and garnered the brand media coverage and approval from others, the context behind the "LGBTQAlphabet" suggests post-conventional moral development: "choices made out

of respect of others' wellbeing and safety." This campaign is part of a sustained effort to celebrate the LGBTQ+ community and included a donation to a center that offers resources for the queer community, earning it a score of 2.5 on the Context dimension of the Brand Activism Spiderweb.

**Score: 2.5**

*Agency*

"LGBTQAlphabet" was produced by Equinox's agency of record: Wieden+Kennedy New York. The brand and agency teamed up with the The Center, also known as New York City's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center, to create this part of the campaign. The Center describes itself as "the cornerstone" of New York City's LGBTQ+ community. It boasts a roster of corporate partners that includes Pepsico and Viacom, and has been hosting a variety of health, wellness, culture, and advocacy groups for the community since 1983. The extent to which people from The Center participated in the creative development of this ad is unclear, but the video's voice overs are from people in the LGBTQ+ community.

Unlike other examples of brand activism produced in consultation with identity groups, "LGBTQAlphabet" explicitly credits The Center before and after the advertisement. It serves as much an awareness piece for The Center as it does for Equinox, though Equinox paid for the production and creative work. This collaborative spirit and elevation of LGBTQ+ voices earns this advertisement a score of 3 on the Agency dimension of the Brand Activism Spiderweb.

**Score: 3**

## *Stereotypes*

This campaign's concept resists stereotypes by exhibiting the vast spectrum of queer identities that exist. The video features the inclusive term "womxn," the gender-neutral pronouns ze and zir, and identifications like non-binary and intersex. Some of the chosen terms, however, have sparked conversation in the community and been criticized for reproducing LGBTQ+ stereotypes.

For example, in the LGBTQAlphabet, the letter K stands for "kink" and the letter S stands for "S&M." From the perspective of the queer "old guard," this representation perpetuates the notion that gay people are perverts and pedophiles. That stereotype was one of the first hurdles to tackle in the struggle for queer liberation; in the eyes of many early activists, including kink communities under the umbrella of LGBTQ+ identity promotes a harmful stereotype of sexual deviance and defines the community through "non-normative sex," not personal identity. More contemporary activists also argue that kink and S&M communities do not experience the same kind of systemic inequities as other queer identities (Yates, 2017).

On the other hand, leather and kink subcultures have historically been a part of Pride celebrations and other queer spaces, and many (occasionally heterosexual) kink community members have argued for inclusion (Baume, 2017). Blogger Jillian Keenan argued in *Slate* that "orientation is any sexual identity that is so fixed and unshakable that it defies choice, reason, and even, at times, simple evolutionary explanation," and so her kink preferences should qualify as an queer identity-- despite the fact that she is cisgender and heterosexual (2014). The use of kink and S&M in the LGBTQAlphabet is certainly controversial, but not necessarily harmful. Though some may argue that the

representation of these communities perpetuates stereotypes about “sexual deviance” and dilutes the meaning of queerness, they are also arguably marginalized and fighting for a place in the ever-expanding definition of LGBTQ+.

Another debate emerged around the term assigned to the letter A: ally, rather than asexual, agender or aromantic. Buzzfeed reported on this ad with the title “Equinox Gym Released A Video For Pride And People Are Not Happy With It,” reflecting responses to the video on Twitter. Some members of the queer community replied to Equinox’s video with comments like “if the A is for Ally, then you should have made the E stand for Erasure.”

The erasure of a very vocal and important part of the queer community is a misrepresentation worth considering. The aim of the brand activism behind the LGBTQAlphabet was to expand the definition of queer and LGBTQ+. Forgetting a key element of that definition reinforces existing cultural erasure and detracts from the goals of this campaign.

“LGBTQAlphabet”’s use of stereotypes is complex and contested. I award this advertisement a score of 2 on the Brand Activism Spiderweb: though there are significant attempts made to deconstruct limiting and harmful notions about the queer community, the advertisement does not entirely avoid problematic portrayals.

**Score: 2**

### *Call To Action*

The explicit message of this advertisement, “Six letters will never be enough,” is decidedly removed from Equinox’s corporate goals. “LGBTQAlphabet”’s expansion of the queer acronym is a clear push against the dominant cultural narrative asserting that

the queer community has become too complicated and multi-faceted to understand. The many identities represented in this video reflect the priorities of the queer liberation movement today; with same-sex marriage equality achieved, organizations and advocates are striving for broader cultural inclusion and wider understanding of the many different ways to be queer. This video spot is decidedly intersectional: a more bold statement than just celebration or acceptance.

Equinox’s logo does not appear in this video until after the credits and the logo of The Center. The video was shot in a warehouse space, not an Equinox gym, and there are no “product shots.” The direct message of this video is a specific change in mindset connected to queer liberation that extends beyond the viewer. It is counter-hegemonic and resists the frequent de-politicization of social movements in advertising – something that many other brands leverage during Pride month. This ad stands out in a sea of rainbow flag logos and vague acceptance messages run in June. For these reasons, I award “LGBTQAlphabet” a score of 3 on the Call To Action dimension of the Brand Activism Spiderweb.

**Score: 3**

*Discourse*

“LGBTQAlphabet” avoids cliched depictions of Pride celebrations and symbols. There are no Pride parades, marches or demonstrations. The dancers’ colorful costuming nods to the iconic rainbow Pride flag, but doesn’t simply reproduce it. Instead, this advertisement presents a visually deconstructed version of the movement’s symbols in order to illustrate its discourse. “LGBTQAlphabet” re-interprets the symbols of queer activism to share its language, creating a contemporary story about the modern

goals of the movement and earning a score of 3 on the Discourse dimension of the Brand Activism Spiderweb.

**Score: 3**

*Scale*

Though the voice-overs occasionally reveal individual stories and experiences, the “LGBTQAlphabet” uses thematic framing to tell a story about the state of the queer movement and community. There are no names or characters: the dancers cast in the advertisement represent themes, concepts, and broad identities. On the Scale dimension of the Brand Activism Spiderweb, this advertisement receives a score of 3.

**Score: 3**

Figure 12 summarizes the Spiderweb evaluation for “LGBTQAlphabet.”

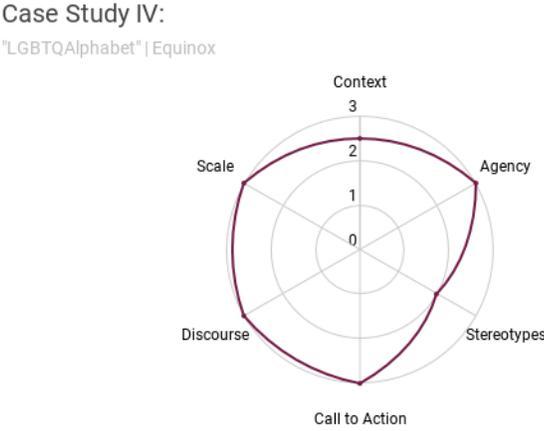


Figure 12: “LGBTQAlphabet” Brand Activism Spiderweb

**Comparison**

These four case studies do not represent the vast spectrum of brand activism attempts that have emerged in recent years, and cannot be analyzed as such. The Brand Activism Spiderweb does, however, allow us to compare the strengths and weaknesses

of these particular examples, from which we can extrapolate to advise future advertising efforts. Figure 13 compares the Brand Activism Spiderwebs of all four case studies.

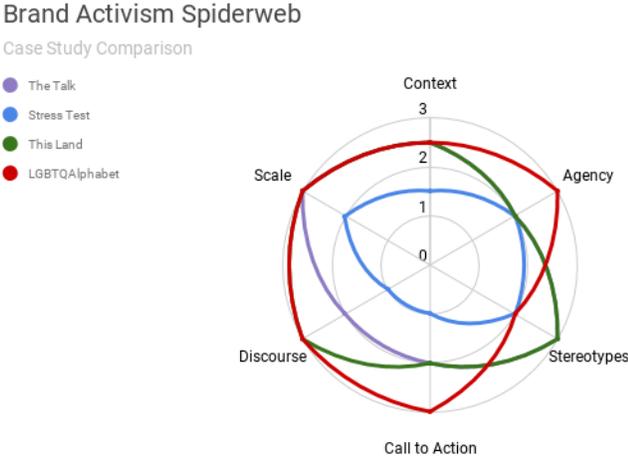


Figure 13: Brand Activism Spiderweb Comparison

All four examples share a strength: the Scale dimension. Three of the four advertisements analyzed used thematic framing in their storytelling, and the fourth invoked the larger context of the social movement at the end of the spot. It makes sense that this is a common success: advertisers seek to reach broad audiences and be accepted into cultural discourse. They speak for large brands, and their messaging reflects that. The Scale dimension is important, but a relatively easy threshold for successful brand activism.

The advertisements analyzed were less successful in the Agency and Call to Action dimensions of the Spiderweb. Only one case study— “LGBTQAlphabet”— included meaningful consultation with the movement involved and a call to action beyond individual action or purchase. Other examples hovered in the middle of the road, with partial agency for social movements and individual, but not commercial calls to action. This trend warrants deeper, more nuanced analysis than a three-point scale,

and is a possible area for growth in the advertising industry's embrace of brand activism.

The Context dimension presents another opportunity for improvement. This dimension was the most complex of the six, with six possible scores based on Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development. The scores of the four advertisements were similar (three at 2.5 and one at 1.5), but the roads to those scores were very different. Some earned their score through a long-term commitment to the movement in question, and some through a broader campaign with tangible contributions.

This dimension was challenging to evaluate, as so much necessary contextual information cannot be found through online research, and could not be shared through other research methods due to agency non-disclosure agreements. These scores lean heavily on educated guesses. The research that went into forming those guesses, however, was relevant in evaluating the other dimensions, as well. Context is so important to the evaluation of brand activism success that it almost does not belong in its own dimension of the model: it is integrated in every other evaluation category.

The research question guiding this portion of this thesis was: How are social movements framed in advertising today, and how successful are those frames? This analysis reveals that today, advertisements frame social movements thematically, with relatively unproblematic representations of stereotypes. Most, but not all, avoid the spectacle of activism, but few go further than representing the familiar symbols of movements. These current framing strategies are successful at garnering press coverage and sales increases, but fall short of positive social impact when they lack contextual commitment, activist consultation, and a pro-social call to action.

## **Study 2: In-depth Interviews**

### **Research Question**

To complement the case study analyses in Study 1, I completed a second study that focused on the processes by which brand activist ads are created. This study sought to answer my third research question: How can advertising professionals leverage successful framing strategies to address social movements in their work?

### **Methods**

I explored this question through a series of in-depth interviews.

#### *Subject Recruitment*

My research population was advertising professionals currently working in the industry. I recruited participants using a snowball sampling method over email in order to respect the limited schedules of professional participants and leverage interpersonal connections for successful recruitment. See Appendix 1 for the email recruitment script.

Participants did not receive compensation for participation, and given that I was drawing from a fairly limited pool, I did not include exclusion criteria in my participant selection. I recruited and interviewed 14 professionals for this study. Figure 14 summarizes my interview participants:

|   | Gender | Age   | Job Title             | Location          |
|---|--------|-------|-----------------------|-------------------|
| A | Man    | 30-35 | Freelance Creative    | Portland, OR      |
| B | Man    | 20-25 | Strategist            | Los Angeles, CA   |
| C | Woman  | 20-25 | Junior Strategist     | Los Angeles, CA   |
| D | Man    | 40-45 | Editor in Chief       | Portland, OR      |
| E | Woman  | 25-30 | Strategist            | New York, NY      |
| F | Woman  | 25-30 | Freelance Creative    | Portland, OR      |
| G | Woman  | 25-30 | Freelance Creative    | New York, NY      |
| H | Man    | 45-50 | Global Director       | Los Angeles, CA   |
| I | Woman  | 30-35 | Freelance Creative    | San Francisco, CA |
| J | Man    | 25-30 | Account Manager       | New York, NY      |
| K | Woman  | 30-35 | Senior Strategist     | Portland, OR      |
| L | Man    | 35-40 | Senior Strategist     | Portland, OR      |
| M | Man    | 40-45 | Global Vice President | Los Angeles, CA   |
| N | Woman  | 35-40 | Senior Strategist     | New York, NY      |

Figure 14: Interview Participants

### *Interview Methods*

I began interviews by defining the terms *brand activism* and *identity based social movements* to ensure participants understood all the questions. I defined *brand activism* as advertising efforts in which brands adopt the voice of a social justice activist, a growing trend in the advertising industry. I defined *identity-based social movements* as social movements focused on improving the conditions of a social group based on a demographic quality, such as gender or sexual orientation.

After the definitions, I began the semi-structured interview using the question bank in Appendix 2. After our conversation, I thanked participants and asked them if they would be interested in receiving a copy of the best practices guide.

## **Findings**

I organized my interview findings thematically using the dimensions of the Brand Activism Spiderweb as a starting point for open coding. For each theme, I identify opportunities for the advertising industry to improve the way it approaches and creates brand activism. These opportunities informed the recommendations in my conclusion.

### *Context and Brand-Building*

In most interviews, advertising professionals insisted that brands should “be good,” not just “do good” with their messaging. They see the contextual struggles of activist ads as a problem that extends beyond the traditional role of advertising agencies.

Many interview subjects distinguished between advertising and macro-level brand building-- the process of building a business identity that means something to people. Sometimes, activist advertising does not “fit” with a brand’s purpose and identity, and so it feels appropriative. Communications and actions are not the same thing, and advertising does not always have the power to affect both those dimensions of a brand’s identity.

After identifying this common disconnect, conversations often moved to considering the role an agency does play in bridging that gap between actions and words. Some interviewees suggested strategies for matching clients with appropriate causes, such as a “militant dedication to authenticity” or a dialogue about long-term commitment to a cause (Participants K and H).

Others pointed to specific product categories that should or shouldn't consider pro-social messaging. These professionals mentioned industry catch phrases like "brand DNA," invoking a metaphorically biological predisposition to activist failure for some brands. For example, participant B commented, "fast food, not in a million years, no. Tech, yes, because it's something that actually fits. It comes down to what, genetically, is in the brand's DNA." From this perspective, there are some brands that should avoid activist advertising altogether.

Some other professionals had a more forgiving perspective, suggesting that when the context and action are missing, it is possibly because the brand just chose the wrong cause to champion. From this point of view, there is a problem within the reach of agencies to solve: to choose the right cause and resist "clumsiness" when supporting it, to use the words of Participant G.

Participant B, a strategist, suggested pursuing brand activism only with the "perfect storm" and "holy trinity" consisting of a client, an agency and a consumer base who are all on board with a particular movement. Pursuing activist ads only when this kind of agreement exists makes sense, but also sets up a future in which brands only ever preach to the converted, which many would argue is not activism after all.

Above all, the focus in this dimension was on building brand purpose and identity beyond advertising campaigns: a concept outside the scope of my previous research and traditional advertising, but one that is becoming more relevant in the industry. Brand-side solutions include a sustained commitment to an issue and, ultimately, business practices rooted in social good. The best brand activism is a long-term investment in identity, not a one-off campaign.

Though brand activism as defined in this thesis has a place in the advertising industry and will continue to pass through agencies, these interviews revealed that *activist brands* might be the real emerging force for good and the most holistic way to approach the dimension of context and activist action in a business sphere.

### *Context and Client Relations*

Regardless of brand activism strategy, most professionals stressed the importance of client relations. Many mentioned that it is often in the client-agency relationship that brand activism goes wrong. Clients can sometimes get an “inflated sense of what they can credibly stand for” and struggle to acknowledge problems with their brand. Agencies that establish a frank and trusting relationship with the brands they work with find challenging projects like brand activism easier to tackle.

Many interviewees presented potential areas for improvement, including a need for agency leaders to challenge bad takes on brand activism from the beginning of a brand-agency relationship, and throughout the strategic process. If that doesn’t happen, Participant B suggested that agencies take it upon themselves to educate their clients and provide added value by identifying a better business solution than the misplaced activist attempt. According to Participant E, “that does not happen enough, and it needs to happen more... We can challenge them and say: this is what your challenge really is. This is what you really can stand for.”

Many participants also suggested that agencies further emphasize the importance of activist action in client relations. Currently, actions that move a campaign beyond just messaging are presented to clients as an after-thought. Participant I

implored agencies to set an example of action and commitment to their client in pitches and meetings:

“I’m not saying that agencies don’t pitch stuff to them about [action behind their messages]. But it’s like, we’re going to tag this on to the end of the deck and no one’s going to take this seriously, client or agency side.” –Participant I

Participant A noticed that when a brand has built its business targeting a specific subculture, it feels it can join the conversation when that subculture becomes a stakeholder in a social movement. He suggested that in these cases, it is the responsibility of agency to give the client a reality check. Agencies should look critically at the role of brands in a particular culture shift to avoid a contextual disconnect. Then, with trust established, agencies can offer ideas about strategic communication that can make a difference for the brand and impact a social movement positively.

### *Agency and Advocacy*

The in-depth interviews included several questions designed to elucidate if the structure of advertising agencies currently considers the Agency dimension of the Brand Activism Spiderweb: that is, the extent to which participants in the social movements being represented were given a voice in the development of activist ads.

Generally, the answer to this question was “no.” Many interviewees, however, suggested activist consultation as a step toward better brand activism, and most indicated that at least some level of research takes place when a brand adopts a social movement in its messaging. Participant B reported that agencies “are often not calling

[activists] up directly. We're reading whatever they've written online, and articles about them."

Though there was generally a lack of agency for activists outside the industry, a different element of the Agency dimension emerged in interviews: advertising employees' agency over the message they're being paid to create. For example, one interviewee described an example in which he had a meaningful consultation with a stakeholder in an identity-based issue:

"I wrote it as true as I could. And when I went to talk to him -- and this is where honesty in the process comes in-- the first thing I said was: listen. I am a white guy... if any of this feels false to you, if any of this feels not you, first of all I'm very sorry. And second of all let's work on it until it feels like something that's authentic and true to you." –Participant A

This kind of thoughtful reworking was only possible because the creative in this example was a well-established freelancer. As his own boss, he enjoys a the professional privilege to be discerning in his representation of social issues.

Other interviewees expressed frustration in their inability to do this, often because of pressure from creative leadership to address activist issues, regardless of their employees' personal misgivings. Many female participants were frustrated with male creative directors saying things that are "kind of offensive" when it came to feminist advertising. Participant I asserted that faulty brand activism is "99% always coming from creative leadership," most of which is male. Participants F and G echoed her claim.

Some of the professionals felt more comfortable than others challenging those pressures, and recognized that some members of disenfranchised groups are being saddled by the industry with the responsibility of calling out harmful approaches to

brand activism. Participant I also suggested that minorities in the agency world are expected to be the ones to call out offensive takes on brand activism, an unfair expectation.

Several interviewees suggested the simplest step for improving industry practice in this dimension: consulting with activists. Because of structural barriers like gender divides in leadership, however, this is easier said than done. Participant F offered a slightly different suggestion: combining projects for large-scale brands with pro-bono work for activist organizations. She recalled an example of this that involved two (non-activist) clients, explaining that “they had two different briefs, and someone at the agency was just like: what if we combine these two briefs, create this partnership, and double the budget.”

In this situation, the activist group and the brand would have equal stake in the messaging, and the brand would be using its resources to elevate a cause-- arguably, brand activism at its best, and in the words of the professional, “authentic, actual synergy between the groups.” What structural barriers might exist for this solution remain to be seen, but it is an innovative approach that goes beyond basic consultation and plays within the existing structure of advertising agencies.

The last solution is one inferred from the accounts of female creatives pressured to make activist ads they did not agree with. Deconstructing professional privilege and empowering employees at all levels to call out harmful representation is an imperative step toward better brand activism. Every level of leadership should be aware of what perspectives are missing from the table and should take steps to remedy those gaps.

### *Stereotypes*

Some of the interviewees addressed the way they navigate identity stereotypes in their brand activism. Generally, people seemed to see stereotypes as more of an opportunity than a pitfall. Participant B, a strategist, suggested using stereotypes as a form of creative “tension” to drive provocative messaging. He sees stereotypes as a way to create provocative messaging that people notice and think about. This strategy, however, recalls the double bind Murji identified: when you use stereotypes, even with good intentions, you run the risk of perpetuating them.

Responses revealed an opportunity within the pipeline of creative development: brand strategists. Brand strategists (also called account planners, strategists, or brand planners) are employees in an advertising agency who are responsible for research and consultation with the creative team. A deeper understanding of the cultural fine line between using and abusing stereotypes could enhance their role as the “consumer expert” in the room.

Strategists have a responsibility to work with creatives and avoid harmful stereotypes throughout the process: a necessary step for more pro-social brand activism, and content that resonates better with the conscious consumers brands are trying to engage.

### *Call to Action and Depoliticization*

Conversations mostly focused on when advertisers should and shouldn't attempt brand activism at all, but some professionals did address the depoliticization and misrepresentation of movements that occurs even when the campaign and movement “fit” the client. Participant C mentioned that “a lot of the times [brand activism] gets

watered down.” On one project, she “started off with immigration and feminism and racism, and they decided that those were too touchy.” She also mentioned that agency and client-side PR teams get very concerned about brand activism campaigns because of their high risk for bad press.

I expected this barrier to come up in conversation, as corporate clients are notoriously conservative and risk-averse. However, I did not expect the level of cynicism about advertising even attempting to take a political stance from within the industry. Some professionals struggled with the idea at its root. As I address earlier in this thesis, the disconnect between advertising’s corporate goals and activism’s counterhegemonic roots is irreconcilable. Still, potential avenues for improvement did emerge.

Many interview subjects identified a common weakness in “lazy strategy:” arbitrarily assigning a movement to an advertising campaign just to get cultural attention. Again, context is key. Even the most cynical professionals were more in favor of brand activism that reinforced its messaging with meaningful action. Participant K urged the advertising industry to be more self-aware of its role as a vehicle to sell goods and services to avoid becoming patronizing.

This last insight is interesting when held in contrast to the Call to Action dimension of the Brand Activism Spiderweb. My analysis framework deemed brands successful when they avoided explicitly corporate language. On the other hand, when brands obscure their true intentions, they are straying away from the standard of authenticity that modern consumers demand.

In this case, the best practice is not crystal clear. Perhaps these two dimensions - self-awareness and de-commercialization-- can be reconciled in some cases, but the solution likely depends on the combination of client, agency, and movement at hand.

### *Discourse and Scale*

The Discourse and Scale dimensions of the Brand Activism Spiderweb interrogate the way movements are framed and communicated within the actual body of the advertising message. They are guidelines for a close reading of the work itself. Conversations about this with professionals mirrored conversations about the Agency dimension in that they also lamented the lack of outside voices and perspectives. Participant E worried that a lot of agencies are “stuck in their own biases” about who consumers are and what they should be doing.

Participant E suggested that brands should take a more collaborative approach to creative development when they choose to work with social movements. She cited an example in which Nike worked with queer vogue dancer Naomi Maldonado as an influencer, but allowed Maldonado to create the advertising content herself -- an unprecedented relinquishing of creative agency:

“It was a collaboration in many ways. The brand was willing to give up some of their creative control in order to really tell a story that would be resonant, not only with Nike’s target, but also with that community that knows and respects [the talent]. Brands are starting to realize that they can’t just tell, they have to listen to these communities.” –Participant E

The use of influencers not just for their following but for their unique voices is a possible avenue for brand activism to retain the authenticity of a grassroots movement and tangibly support voices that actually contribute to those movements. This is a

promising opportunity, but it was clear in the interviews that the advertising industry needs more thinking here.

Most people had strong opinions and suggestions about how to choose what brands and movements should interact, but few knew what to do once a partnership is established. Critical discourse around the creative choices in brand activism is limited and should be explored further.

### *Industry Dynamics*

Nearly all the professionals were in agreement: brand activism campaigns can get their start anywhere in the business. Sometimes clients approach agencies asking for a pro-social spin or work that addresses a movement. Sometimes creative leadership provides the impetus, and sometimes strategists identify an opportunity in their research.

Regardless of where they begin or how responsible they are, brand activism ideas face barriers in the industry. Leaders who want to stick to time-tested traditional marketing and slow-moving corporate culture make genuine brand activism difficult to achieve. Participants expressed frustration with leaders who are “of a different generation” (Participant A) and fear apprehension (Participant J).

Advertising agencies do have the potential, however, to challenge that fear. Campaigns are clear, specific actions. When agencies pitch strong, compelling campaign ideas, they can sometimes inspire clients to be braver with their messaging as well as the actions behind those messages. Additionally, if agencies invest in thoughtful brand activism, they can also position themselves as experts in risk-averse social good.

Well-researched, responsible brand activism efforts are far less likely to inspire widespread public backlash.

Agencies are also incentivized to create brand activism in several ways. Cannes, an esteemed creative award show now has an entire award category called the “Glass Lions,” which rewards advertising with a social impact. Some professionals were more cynical of this incentive than others. Participant F called it “gross,” and Participant I worried that these awards are “crafting this artificial category for that is this negative feedback loop that essentially devalues the legitimacy of any of these kinds of bold claims by brands.”

Other interviewees spoke to other, less materialistic, incentives, such as the community of the industry celebrating work that makes an impact. These emerged in off-hand comments and tangential thoughts, representing uncharted territory for encouraging social good in the advertising industry.

Advertising is an industry that prides itself on cultural relevance and occupying the space between art and commerce. Participant G commented, “when you hear the backstories of these campaigns, it’s actually way more palatable than when they actually live in the world.” Employees in advertising are encouraged to cultivate their personal voice and creative spirit. This culture, in some ways, contributes to the trend of brand activism. Yet even activist campaigns with the best intentions can be harmful without training and critical discourse. Agencies can satisfy their creative employees with activist ambitions by giving them opportunities to channel their energy beyond just client work.

“It’s like this dirty secret that no one talks about in advertising which is the fact that we sell stuff to people which might not be good to them, which they might not want. So when we do get the opportunity to do a social good brief that on a surface level might be good for culture, people feel really good about that.” –Participant E

This industry opportunity, partnered with critical media training, might curb some of the more inappropriate attempts at brand activism while also inspiring further collaboration with clients. In an industry that is increasingly threatened by artificial intelligence, swathes of data, privacy scandals, and shifting business models, agencies that have an brand built on genuine activism in their own right may be able to present unique value to clients in the future.

### *A Cultural Shift*

Interview subjects universally agreed that activist advertising is not a fleeting trend, but rather part of a shift in the way today’s brands approach their business messaging. The cause of that shift is less clear. Some cited a significant change in the way American culture perceives activism in general, suggesting that as activism becomes more mainstream, brands feel more empowered to enter the cultural conversation around social movements. Participant H called activism from all sides “the new norm,” and said that brands are “asking for help” in this cultural shift that they are not leading, but following. Participant M made similar comments: as C-suite leaders, they see a broad trend that is important for brands to capitalize on.

Other participants mentioned an increased demand by young consumers for corporate transparency and accountability. Most commonly, professionals pointed to the rising economic power of younger generations. But as much as Millennials seem to demand brand activism, they are also the biggest critic of such agency actions.

Repetitive answers recycled the same industry jargon: Millennials and Generation Z “wanting” and “demanding” more from brands.

This insight may be true for some, but it also raises a red flag for brand activist efforts. The average consumer thinks about a brand a lot less than a brand manager or agency employee. Especially if there is a larger cultural shift toward grassroots activism, brand preference may be less important to young people than ever.

Responsible advertisers should avoid Millennial scorn and elevate their brand activism attempts by researching if they are really needed and wanted. They should avoid repackaging business jargon and selling it back to young people who are more interested in what tangible change they can create.

#### *Future of Brand Activism*

Advertisers have varying outlooks on the future of brand activism. Some are cynical about the relationship between social movements and advertising at its root, and don't see much opportunity for change. Participant K worries that “when brands become the moral compass, and the voice of progressive dialogue, when that message has to come from brands, and is ultimately in service of having the consumer buy the brand's products, the message feels dirty.” Participant A calls disingenuous brand activism a “tale as old as advertising.” They were just two of many participants who wondered why the onus for activism should be coming from corporations and advertisements.

Interestingly, almost all the subjects who expressed this kind of frustration and cynicism were women, perhaps disheartened by years of unsatisfying

“femvertising.” Yet others, particularly younger interviewees, maintain a desperate optimism for the potential of activist brands.

Those optimists see the sheer power of brands as an under-tapped resource for positive change. They recognize the problems with current attempts at brand activism, but insist that attempts should continue into the future because brands hold immense financial and cultural power.

Most people, at least, called for a “better process.” There is certainly apathy in ad agencies, and not everyone will be committed to improving the way brands interact with social movements. But if the industry as a whole can be motivated to improve its client relations, empower its employees in new ways, and get ahead of a cultural shift toward activism that is already happening, it may be able to improve its reputation for mishandling cultural moments.

## Discussion

The concept of brand activism continues to change rapidly. Advertising is a field of communication that must reflect and respond to consumer culture to survive. “Consumer culture” shifts and moves faster than ever before. To study something like brand activism over time requires a sense of how the culture around those brands has changed. Changes in American political culture and activism have been profound in recent years: something I didn’t foresee when I began this project, but that emerged as I answered my research questions.

With my first research question, I sought to learn from the past and from critical scholarship by exploring how identity-based social movements have been framed in past messages. The scholarship I reviewed focused on the disconnect between the corporate motives of advertising and the counter-hegemonic roots of social movements. Scholars used interdisciplinary theory to uncover moral friction between capitalism and activism. They also explored the potential impacts of reproducing identity-based stereotypes in the name of challenging them, the importance of activist agency in message creation, and other themes which I summarized in the Brand Activism Spiderweb.

I then used the Brand Activism Spiderweb to help answer my second research question: How are social movements framed in advertising today, and how successful are those frames? I analyzed four advertisements as case studies. The Brand Activism Spiderweb diagrams for these case studies did reveal some consistent strengths and weaknesses in contemporary brand activism. Generally, brands succeed at framing movements as solutions to systemic, not individual problems and avoid portraying

social movements as empty spectacles of activism. The case studies suggested that advertisers are at least attempting to contribute to conversations and make a real difference. My case study brands, however, often failed to give agency to real activists working on the movements represented, and some of the attempts at “joining the conversation” felt empty.

This is where the Brand Activism Spiderweb fell short in answering my second research question. As I chose case studies and researched each dimension identified in the literature, I struggled to fit my analysis to the three point scales on the Spiderweb. The distinctions between the examples were more nuanced than a three point score could capture, but it was challenging to quantify and verify the complexity that I instinctively identified.

For example, I chose to evaluate the context behind each case study using Kohlberg’s Theory of Moral Development. I tied the scores on this dimension to Kohlberg’s three tiers of morality, which prioritize altruism and self-sacrificial decisions. As I engaged in the research, I realized that Kohlberg’s theory does not neatly describe the “good” or “bad” behavior of brands and corporations. No brands are truly self-serving, and were I to adhere strictly to Kohlberg’s guidelines, all the case studies would likely score on the first, pre-conventional level of moral development, where decisions are guided by self-interest. Yet I felt that some case studies did reflect more significant commitments to the context of the social movement addressed. My model did not accurately capture forms of “good” that I found in the industry. Though it helped me identify some current opportunities for improvement, it did not quite fit the reality of brand activism today.

Answering my third research question addressed some of the incomplete conclusions from the literature review and case studies. The in-depth interviews offered varied perspectives that added much-needed nuance to my understanding of the case studies and how they fit into larger themes addressed in past literature. Taken together with my previous research, the professionals' many suggestions and recommendations crystallized into some general themes for improvement.

Advertisers today can leverage successful framing strategies to address social movements in their work by extending existing critical conversations about brand activism beyond large-scale strategy and into the message creation process. They can also succeed by giving their brand activism the context of tangible action and responsibly researching the audience they seek to reach with their messaging.

Interviewees had many ideas and perspectives on what brands should or should not approach social movements at all. Many offered strategic suggestions about long-term alignment with social issues or macro-level brand building. Conversations did not often delve into message framing or specific communication tactics. Interestingly, message-level analysis dominates academic literature on this subject, while "brand-building" at the root of a company is acknowledged less frequently. Agencies already use brand strategists to bring critical, research-based perspectives into their creative processes. Those strategists can become experts on the nuances of brand activism, pushing critical discourse out of the C-Suite and into the creative concepting room: an essential step for better brand activism.

Additionally, the need for actions to accompany activist messages came up repeatedly in interviews. When agencies work with brands who want to engage with

social movements, they can foster stronger agency-client relationships that push brands to take their activism beyond a one-off campaign.

Finally, current iterations of activist advertising are often explained, and sometimes excused, through insights pointing to a younger generation passionate about change. That perception is sometimes incomplete. Young people demand change and action, but they are conscious consumers of that change. Their desperate hope for a better world and ever-fragmented perceptions of identity mean that they seek authenticity, not lip service. Even over the course of this project, there were changes in youth activist culture and the research surrounding it.

In early spring 2018, global advertising agency TBWA and brand research consultancy Hall & Partners published a report titled *Pan-Activism: A New Era of American Activism*. The report, which drew from a quantitative study, a series of interviews, and an ethnographic mini-documentary, found that in just the past few years, “activism” has taken on new meaning in American culture. 2017 saw record donations to charities, often from small crowd-sourcing contributions. Public figures with a neutral stance can be targeted as complicit figures in situations of injustice. The report calls this contemporary activist culture “pan-activism:” the phenomenon of advocating for many different causes in many small ways every day.

Pan-activism is “what happens when plurality and polarization collide.” On both sides of the political spectrum, “everybody feels like their values are under attack.” People are taking action by compelling others to donate, expressing their anger on social media platforms, connecting with the ‘other side,’ or actively preserving their

identities and ways of life. Today, every action has an implied stance and brands feel that pressure.

Advertising is no longer borrowing from and co-opting a sub-culture when it engages with social movements. It is reflecting a larger shift in culture-- something that past academic literature does not address. If activism itself means something different, brand activism must take on new meaning, as well.

Reports like *Pan-Activism* reflect the limitations of my small study, but they also identify a need for future research into this topic. TBWA's report came from within the advertising industry itself. There is a demand for critical thought and further action around brand activism.

Brand activism is a living concept developing at the speed of the culture it reflects. The conclusions of my research questions are initial insights that point in the same direction: creative advertisers and critical media scholars alike believe that the communications industry needs a better process for engaging the brands they represent with the social movements shifting culture.

## Recommendations

The brands and agencies who will truly benefit from brand activism will forge tangible and discursive connections between causes and corporate platforms.

Practically, creating those connections can build an agency's unique value to clients, earn industry awards, and satisfy young creative talent.

To help guide this change that I hope to create and to take advantage of this opportunity identified in my research, I created a best practices guide, which I plan to distribute among advertising professionals. This guide takes the form of a “toolbox” of strategies for better brand activism listed here:

### *Industry Recommendations*

- Encourage campaign strategists to become “activist literate” and encourage them to avoid lazy, surface-level connections with movements.
- Acknowledge the role advertising can play in the larger trajectory of a social movement. Strive to create work that promotes awareness of elements of a movement in a way that is authentic to the brand represented.
- Continue to pursue more diversity in hiring processes.
- Avoid industry jargon and do research to better understand if audiences want and need brand activism efforts on a case-by-case basis.

### *Agency Recommendations*

- Challenge misguided brand activism from the beginning of the process: the very first meetings and briefings.
- Emphasize action and context behind brand activism campaigns in client pitches and relations.
- Consult directly with activists when developing a campaign.

- Relinquish some creative control to influencers with stakes in the social movements brands seek to partner with.
- Combine high-budget brand projects with pro-bono activism projects to maximize resources and create mutually beneficial brand activism.
- Train employees in personal advocacy and professional privilege to empower all people to assert their perspectives on these projects.
- Embrace activism within the agency's brand and encourage employees to use company resources to pursue projects.

#### *Client Recommendations*

- Establish long-term strategic commitments to a social cause that makes sense for their brand's purpose.
- Support new brands that have activist purposes and pro-social practices.

This toolbox should be seen as a platform for discussion and decision-making. It is a living document that I hope can reflect the complexity and dynamic nature of this industry and topic over time. See Appendix 3 for the industry-facing form of the best practices guide.

## **Conclusion**

With this thesis research, I sought to bring a segment of academia together with an industry interested in the topic, but I struggled to reconcile both perspectives. Both scholars and advertisers offer insights into brand activism, but my research left me wondering if intellectual rigor can keep up with the speed of business and culture.

Despite that challenge, I end my research with a hopeful outlook. There are certainly people in the advertising industry who are smart, critical and motivated to create work that actually makes a difference. But they need guidelines, research and a process. This project is the beginning of an opportunity to bring those things to life.

## **Appendix 1: Email Recruitment Script**

### **Recruitment Email**

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Rachel Benner and I am a student from the School of Journalism and Communication at the University of Oregon. I am writing to invite you to participate in my research study about advertising campaigns in which brands adopt the voice of a social justice activist – a growing trend in the advertising industry. You're eligible to be in this study because you are an advertising professional working in strategy or creative. I obtained your contact information from \_\_\_\_\_.

If you decide to participate in this study, you will participate in a 30-minute semi-structured interview with me over a video chat platform like Skype. I would like to audio record your responses for my research, but any information used will be used anonymously. Your identity will remain confidential throughout the project.

I will use the information I gather to make macro-level claims about the advertising industry. I hope to understand the industry perspective on activist-minded advertising. What are the practical barriers to brave, smart work around social movements? How can brands go wrong? Where do we go from here?

Remember, this is completely voluntary. You can choose to be in the study or not. If you'd like to participate or have any questions about the study, please email or contact me at [rbenner@uoregon.edu](mailto:rbenner@uoregon.edu).

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Rachel Benner

## Appendix 2: Interview Question Bank

### *Openers*

When I say “brand activism,” what comes to mind?

Would you consider this to be a temporary trend or a serious shift in the advertising industry?

Have you personally contributed to it?

What are the barriers to these kind of ads getting produced?

As a {strategist/creative/etc}, what role do you play in creating an activist-minded advertisement?

### *Context*

In your experience, what kind of clients choose to create activist-minded advertising? If so, why do you think they’re interested in this kind of advertising?

Do clients ever approach an agency asking for a pro-social spin on their brand campaign, or is that more agency driven?

In your opinion, is this trend emerging from brand-side CSR strategy or agency-side incentive?

To what extent does an agency control who it works with and what kind of advertisements it makes?

### *Agency*

How do agencies communicate with the identity groups involved in the movement they’re addressing, if at all? Do you have any suggestions for how they might do better?

How do agencies get the perspective of an identity group when no one from that identity group is on the team, or in the agency at all?

What are some barriers to giving movements agency in their framing in advertising messages?

### *Stereotypes*

How do you navigate the use of stereotypes in advertising? To what extent do you consider stereotypes when {writing a character, writing an audience into a brief, planning visuals}

To you, what is the difference between targeting a sub-audience and stereotyping them?

How do you approach that grey area?

What is an example of an ad that you think addressed stereotyping well?

### *Call to Action*

“Economic inequality can only “be sold in ads or made shiny and interesting when it’s called ‘opportunity’ or female empowerment. That’s because, of course, ads are ultimately manipulating us to spend, not to set our political imaginations free.” – Sarah Banet-Weiser. Do you agree? To what extent do you think ads can do more than manipulate us to spend?

In your opinion, should advertising address social issues through brand work? If so, how can it do so meaningfully?

When developing an advertisement, does the client specify the call to action you need to create? To what extent might a client be willing to abandon that in favor of a pro-social call to action?

### *Discourse*

“[Brands] are entering a complex conversation they have no right to be in, yet they are forcing their way in. These creatives are trying to make their toilet paper save the world” –Rob Baiocco, creative executive. Do you agree? How would you respond to Baiocco?\*

When talking about social movements, what elements do advertisers focus on? The people affected? The perpetrators of oppression? Actions and events like protests? Why do you think that is? What factors inform those decisions?

### *Scale*

Scholars warn against depicting issues like racism as an individual choice or mindset. Rather, they should be framed as larger, systemic issues. Do you think there is potential for advertising to make this distinction? Why or why not? Who on an agency team might be responsible for that?\*\*\*

### *Practical/Industry Considerations*

Where, in your opinion, does change begin in the advertising industry?

Are advertising agencies incentivized to create pro-social work? Under what circumstances?

How do agencies measure the success/impact of their work?

How do you approach a new client or brief? When might identity-based social movements enter the equation?

What are some challenges you have faced when working on projects that are associated with identity-based social issues?

On a larger scale: what changes are taking place in the advertising industry? What business-level changes might indirectly affect this trend?

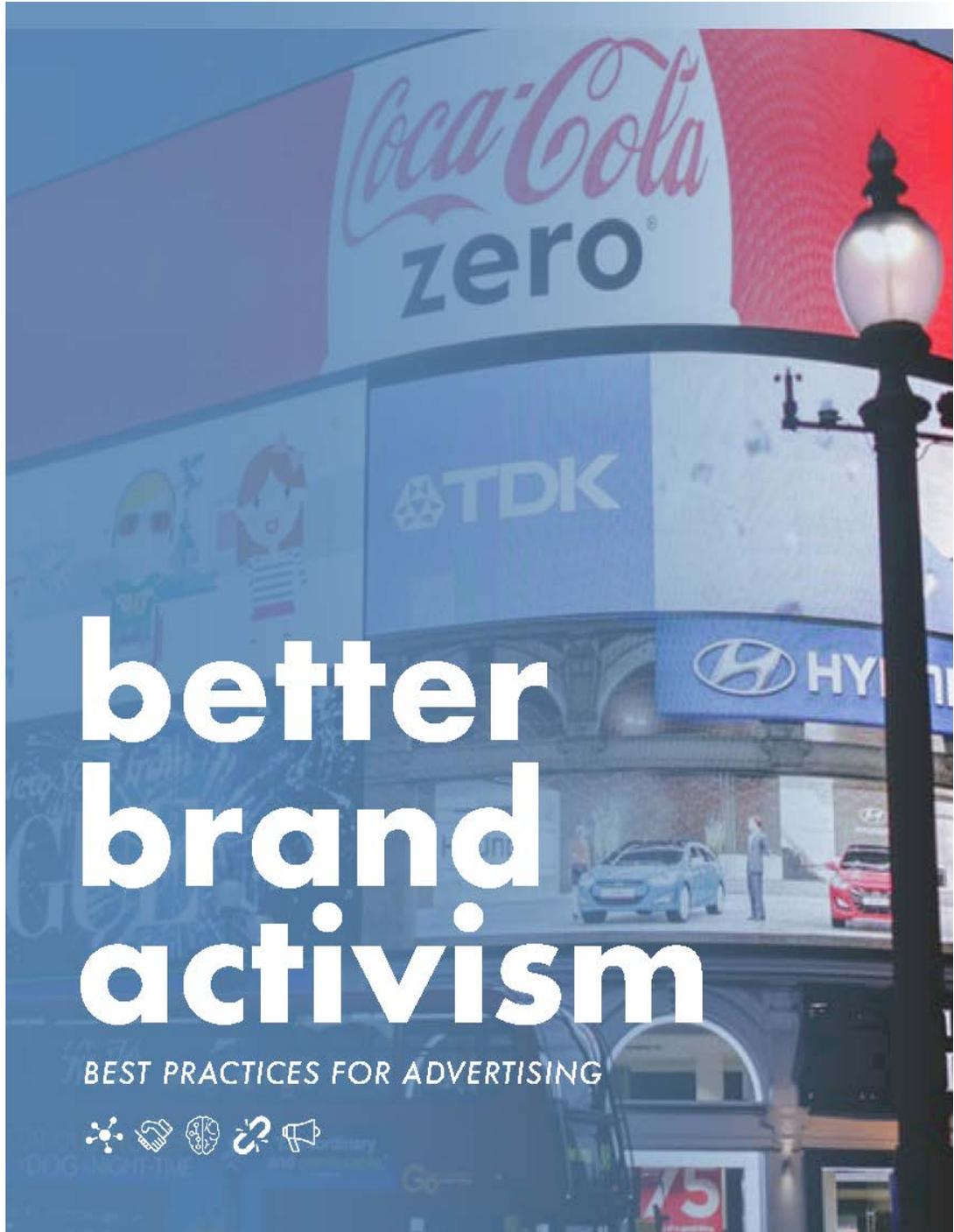
What is your favorite example of brand activism? Why?

What do you see as the future of brand activism?

### **Appendix 3: Best Practices Guide**

The following pages display the Best Practices Guide I created for the advertising industry. The pages attached here form a .pdf white paper document easily distributed among professionals.

The Guide also takes the form of a one-page takeaway sheet and a series of articles on blogging site Medium. Through these different platforms I hope to reach multiple sub-audiences within the industry with my research and insights.



# better brand activism

BEST PRACTICES FOR ADVERTISING



# table of contents

|                                    |    |
|------------------------------------|----|
| <b>INTRODUCTION</b>                | 01 |
| <b>DEFINING BRAND ACTIVISM</b>     | 02 |
| <i>The State of Brand Activism</i> | 02 |
| <i>The Opportunity</i>             | 03 |
| <i>About This Study</i>            | 04 |
| <b>BEST PRACTICES</b>              | 05 |
| <i>Brands: The Bigger Picture</i>  | 06 |
| <i>Building Relationships</i>      | 07 |
| <i>Breaking the Bubble</i>         | 08 |
| <i>Becoming Experts</i>            | 09 |
| <i>Bringing Activism In</i>        | 10 |
| <b>ON THE FUTURE</b>               | 11 |
| <i>A Spectrum of Outlooks</i>      | 11 |
| <b>FURTHER RESOURCES</b>           | 11 |





# introduction

Advertising has a long history of incorporating the imagery and slogans of social movements with powerful results. But today the intersection of brands and activism is more than rainbow flags and girl power anthems. Recent trend reports note a rise in brands adopting the voice of activists, integrating timely issues into their campaigns, and aligning themselves with the aims of progressive movements.

Today's culture of political unrest, protest and populist sentiment is prime opportunity for advertisers to reach audiences in new ways. Blogs, think tanks and newspapers are noting this rise in progressive, opinionated branded content. Brand activism is here to stay, and its messages are far more political and specific than advertising's past loose alliances with "empowerment," "peace," and "freedom."

The reward of being relevant is high, but so is the risk. Many are asking the same questions: is brand activism helpful or hurtful? How do we make these kinds of ads? No one has an answer, and many don't even have a plan of action.

With these recommendations, advertisers can address critical discourse around activism and brands, leading to industry success and allyship with social movements. As the advertising industry shifts dramatically and culture continues to polarize, the most successful agencies will be the experts on taking a stand responsibly.

# the state of brand activism

## IN THE INDUSTRY

Brands and advertisers today are increasingly interested in integrating corporate social responsibility (CSR) and brand citizenship efforts with their advertising messaging.

In 2015, 72andSunny hired a non-profit executive as the head of the agency's new "brand citizenship practice." A Fast Company article reported that 72andSunny's move "aims to take 'good' out of its CSR silo and make it a core marketing concern." At the agency, social and environmental causes are written into client creative briefs from the beginning of a campaign process. Other agencies have introduced similar efforts to combine causes with their messaging.

These initiatives are not entirely altruistic. According to the American Marketing Association, 70% of the millennial generation, a coveted market with significant spending power, will spend more on brands and products that support causes they care about. CSR and brand citizenship are industry trends for a reason: they help the bottom line for both advertising agencies and the companies they serve. Advertising that is tied to social movements is proven to be provocative and effective – plus, it routinely garners coveted awards for the advertising agencies itself. The advertising industry wants to make activist ads, and it is in their best interest to make them well.

Arguably, CSR and brand citizenship represent the next phase of advertising's evolution. As advertising continues to synthesize marketing data, creativity and social movements, knowledge and guidelines about this process will be essential to maintaining the "win-win" dynamic of brand-movement partnerships.

This industry is well versed in creativity and market segmentation. Now, it can begin to address those markets through the lens of social good.

THIS GUIDE FOCUSES SPECIFICALLY ON WHEN CAMPAIGNS ATTACH BRANDS TO SOCIAL MOVEMENTS THAT FOCUS ON IDENTITY. THESE INCLUDE FEMINISM, QUEER LIBERATION, AND RACIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENTS LIKE BLACK LIVES MATTER.

## key terms

### *brand activism:*

Advertising efforts in which brands adopt the voice of a social justice activist, a growing trend in the advertising industry.

### *identity-based social movements:*

Social movements focused on improving the conditions of a group based on demographics, such as gender or sexual orientation.

# the opportunity

## CREATIVE POTENTIAL FOR IMPACT

A poorly handled brand activism campaign can backfire, causing damage to the brand and agency involved.

Researchers have explored many cases of advertising adopting and co-opting social movements. The high visibility of advertising provides a valuable platform for movement awareness. Some scholars even see advertising as a force for normalization: when people start to see marginalized identity groups in the context of advertising, they find those groups easier to accept.

But often, movements have no agency in the creation of advertising messages about and for them. This can lead to counterproductive messaging or empty messages from companies that actually work against the movements in question. Commercial speech has also reinforced harmful stereotypes, and many scholars note a fundamental disconnect between the commercial goals of advertising and the social goals of a movement.

Advertising has the potential to be a change agent in a world of activism from all sides. It can be dangerous ground to tread, but the creative industry has a responsibility: to use our communication power for good.

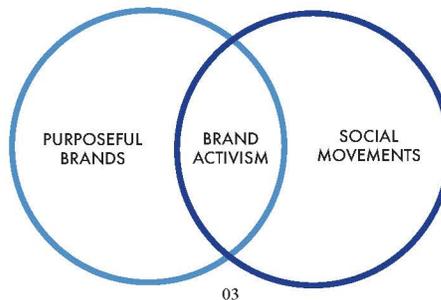
**With great power comes great responsibility.**

*How can advertising bring brands and social movements together effectively and responsibly?*

## PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER

Advertising is no longer borrowing from and co-opting a sub-culture when it engages with social movements. It is reflecting a larger shift in mainstream culture. If activism itself means something different, brand activism must take on new meaning, as well.

Brand activism is a living concept developing at the speed of the culture it reflects. Researchers and creative professionals are having conversations about this phenomenon, but no one has brought those two fields together. That's where these recommendations come in. To help brand activism benefit both brands and social movements, communicators must consider many different perspectives.



# about this study

## RESEARCH METHODS

The in-depth interviews that informed this report drew from a research population of advertising professionals currently working in the industry. Interviews were semi-structured, drawing from questions like the one featured below. I would like to acknowledge and thank all participants for their time and perspectives.

Interview participants offered valuable insights on this topic that informed all the following recommendations. Existing think-pieces, academic literature, and current trend reports were also considered in formulating the recommendations. See page 12 for further resources and other viewpoints, many of which were also suggested by interview participants.

*In your opinion, should advertising address social issues through brands?*

*Would you consider this to be a trend or a serious shift in the industry?*

*Where, in your opinion, does change begin in the advertising industry?*

*What elements of movements do advertisers focus on?*

*What is an ad that you think addressed stereotyping well? Why?*

*Is brand activism driven more by the client or the advertising agency?*

The following recommendations should be seen as a platform for discussion and decision-making. This is a living document that I hope can reflect the complexity and dynamic nature of this industry and topic over time.

ACADEMIC LITERATURE  
& SECONDARY RESEARCH

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS  
WITH PROFESSIONALS

RECOMMENDATIONS  
FOR BRAND ACTIVISM

# best practices

## SO, WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Advertisers today can extend existing critical conversations about brand activism beyond large-scale strategy and into the message creation process. They can also succeed by giving their brand activism the context of tangible action and responsibly researching the audience they seek to reach with their messaging. These five themes form a “toolbox” of different strategies for better brand activism that are mutually beneficial to advertising agencies and identity-based social movements.



**BIGGER PICTURE BRANDS**



**BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS**



**BECOMING THE EXPERTS**



**BREAKING THE BUBBLE**



**BRINGING ACTIVISM IN**



## BIGGER PICTURE BRANDS

*Though brand activism as defined in this report has a place in the advertising industry and will continue to pass through agencies, these interviews revealed that activist brands might be the real emerging force for good and the most holistic way to approach activist action in a business sphere.*

Encourage brands to establish long-term commitments to social causes that make sense for their purpose.

In most interviews, advertising professionals insisted that brands should “be good,” not just “do good” with their messaging. They see the contextual struggles of activist ads as a problem that extends beyond the traditional role of advertising agencies.

Many interview subjects distinguished between advertising and macro-level brand building-- the process of building a business identity that means something to people. Sometimes, activist advertising does not “fit” with a brand’s purpose and identity, and so it feels appropriative.

There is a brand activism problem within the reach of agencies to solve: to choose the right cause and resist “clumsiness” when supporting it.

Support new brands that have activist purposes and pro-social practices.

Above all, interview subjects focused on building brand purpose and identity beyond advertising campaigns: a concept outside the scope of my previous research and traditional advertising, but one that is becoming more relevant in the industry.

Brand-side solutions ultimately include business practices rooted in social good. The best brand activism is a long-term investment in identity and structure, not a one-off campaign.



## BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

*Many professionals mentioned that it is often in the client-agency relationship that brand activism goes wrong. Agencies that establish a frank and trusting relationship with the brands they work with find challenging projects like brand activism easier to tackle.*

### 1. Emphasize action and context behind brand activism campaigns in client pitches and relations.

Many suggested that agencies further emphasize the importance of activist action in client relations. Currently, actions that move a campaign beyond just messaging are presented to clients as an afterthought.

Agencies should set an example of action and commitment to their client in pitches and meetings. One professional noted that agencies do sometimes pitch things about activist action related to social good campaigns, but often tack those ideas onto the end of presentations, and neither client nor agency takes them seriously.

### 2. Challenge misguided brand activism from the beginning of the process: the very first meetings and briefings.

Interviewees presented potential areas for improvement, including a need for agency leaders to challenge bad takes on brand activism from the beginning of a brand-agency relationship, and throughout the strategic process.

Some participants suggested that agencies take it upon themselves to educate their clients and provide added value by identifying a better business solution than the misplaced activist attempt. According to one participant, “that does not happen enough, and it needs to happen more... We can challenge them and say: this is what your challenge really is. This is what you really can stand for.”



## BECOMING THE EXPERTS

*There are some specific improvements agencies can make within the existing structure of the industry. To assert their unique value in a changing business landscape, advertisers can arm their employees with critical knowledge and push on widely-held assumptions about activism and who cares about it.*

1. Encourage campaign strategists to become “activist literate” and avoid surface-level connections with movements.

Responses revealed an opportunity within the pipeline of creative development: brand strategists. A deeper understanding of the cultural fine line between using and abusing stereotypes could enhance strategists’ role as the “consumer expert” in the room.

Strategists have a responsibility to work with creatives and avoid harmful stereotypes throughout the process: a necessary step for more pro-social brand activism, and content that resonates better with the conscious consumers brands are trying to engage.

3. Avoid industry jargon and do research to better understand if audiences want and need brand activism efforts.

As much as Millennials seem to demand brand activism, they are also the biggest critic of such agency actions. Repetitive answers recycled the same industry jargon: Millennials and Generation Z “wanting” and “demanding” more from brands.

Responsible advertisers should avoid Millennial scorn and elevate their brand activism attempts by researching if they are really needed and wanted.

2. Acknowledge the role advertising can play in the larger trajectory of a social movement.

Advertisers can strive to create work that promotes awareness of elements of a movement in a way that is authentic to the brand represented. As commercial speech, advertising can never do the job of true activism. It does, however, offer social movements a massive platform for awareness and persuasion.

When working with social movements and connecting them to brands, advertising should see itself as an early stage in a funnel toward change. Campaigns that educate or raise awareness of a problem are more responsible than those that equate purchases with liberation or activism.

## BREAKING THE BUBBLE

*Other more innovative solutions emerged from this study. There are ways advertisers can shift the way the industry functions to create better brand activism, from new forms of partnership to cultural shifts toward empowerment.*

1. Combine brand projects with pro-bono activism projects to maximize resources and create mutually beneficial brand activism.

One professional offered an interesting suggestion: combining projects for large-scale brands with pro-bono work for activist organizations. She recalled an example of this that involved two (non-activist) clients, explaining that “they had two different briefs, and someone at the agency was just like: what if we combine these two briefs, create this partnership, and double the budget.”

In this situation, the activist group and the brand would have equal stake in the messaging, and the brand would be using its resources to elevate a cause, creating “authentic, actual synergy between the groups.”

3. Consult directly with activists when developing a campaign.

Agencies can view social movements as partners to the brands they represent, not objects or concepts to be used. They can treat activists with the respect that kind of relationship requires.

By working directly with activist organizations, advertisers can boost their brand activism credibility and gain valuable insights on the cultural moment concerned.

2. Relinquish some creative control to influencers with stakes in the social movements brands seek to partner with.

Many suggested that brands should take a more collaborative approach to creative development when they choose to work with social movements.

One participant cited an example in which Nike worked with queer vogue dancer Naomi Maldonado as an influencer, but allowed Maldonado to create the advertising content herself -- an unprecedented relinquishing of creative agency:

The use of influencers not just for their following but for their unique voices is a possible avenue for brand activism to retain the authenticity of a grassroots movement and tangibly support voices that actually contribute to those movements.



## BRINGING ACTIVISM IN

*Agencies are aware that they need diverse employees who bring different backgrounds and perspectives to the table. In the case of brand activism, however, diversity is not enough. Agencies can bring the spirit of social movements into their culture, inspiring better work beyond just activist ad campaigns.*

1. Embrace activism with an agency's own brand and encourage employees to pursue projects.

Advertising is an industry that prides itself on cultural relevance and occupying the space between art and commerce. Employees in advertising are encouraged to cultivate their personal voice and creative spirit.

This culture, in some ways, contributes to the trend of brand activism. Yet even activist campaigns with the best intentions can be harmful without training and critical discourse. Agencies can satisfy their creative employees with activist ambitions by giving them opportunities to channel their energy beyond just client work.

This industry opportunity, partnered with critical media training, might curb some of the more inappropriate attempts at brand activism while also inspiring further collaboration with clients.

2. Empower all people in an agency to assert their perspectives on these projects. Train on professional privilege.

Professional advertisers don't always have agency over the messages they're being paid to create. Some expressed frustration over pressure from creative leadership to address activist issues. Many female participants were frustrated with male creative directors saying things that are "kind of offensive" when it came to feminist advertising.

Some of the people interviewed felt more comfortable than others challenging those pressures, and recognized that some members of disenfranchised groups are being saddled by the industry with the responsibility of calling out harmful approaches to brand activism.

With meaningful training and steps toward culture change, agencies can recognize and address this problem.

# on the future

## A SPECTRUM OF OUTLOOKS

Brand activism isn't a fleeting trend. It's part of a larger shift in the ways companies approach communication.

Some are cynical about the relationship between social movements and advertising at its root, and don't see much opportunity for change, calling disingenuous brand activism a "tale as old as advertising." It's a fair question: why should the onus for activism should be coming from corporations and advertisements?

Some people, however, maintain a desperate optimism for the potential of activist brands. Those optimists see the sheer power of brands as an under-tapped resource for positive change. They recognize the problems with current attempts at brand activism, but insist that attempts should continue into the future because brands hold immense financial and cultural power.

There is certainly apathy in ad agencies, and not everyone will be committed to improving the way brands interact with social movements. But if the industry as a whole can be motivated to improve its client relations and empower its employees in new ways, it might just get ahead of a cultural shift toward activism that is already happening.

The brands and agencies who will truly benefit from brand activism will forge connections between causes and corporate platforms. Practically, creating those connections can build an agency's unique value to clients, earn industry awards, and satisfy young creative talent. That is a future of advertising worth pursuing.

THIS GUIDE IS JUST THE BEGINNING OF A LARGER DIALOGUE ABOUT HOW WE CAN BRING BETTER BRAND ACTIVISM TO LIFE.

ANY EFFORT, BIG OR SMALL, IS A STEP TOWARD A BETTER FUTURE FOR CREATIVE COMMUNICATIONS AND ADVOCACY.



### further resources

[Pan Activism: A New Era of American Activism](#)

TBWA Backlash x Hall & Partners

An insightful research report on how activism is shaping American culture

[Brand Citizenship Playbook](#)

72andSunny

A plan of action in which the agency embraces the mission of expanding the creative class.

## References

- Ames, T. (2015). Millennial Demand for Corporate Social Responsibility Drives Change in Brand Strategies. *American Marketing Association* Retrieved May 20, 2017, from <https://www.ama.org/publications/MarketingNews/Pages/millennial-demand-for-social-responsibility-changes-brand-strategies.aspx>
- Baume, M. (2017, August 18). Inside The Changing Leather Scene. *Rolling Stone*. Retrieved March 4, 2018, from <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/bdsm-inside-changing-leather-kink-scene-w496283>
- Bendix, T. (2017, June 7). Equinox Explores The LGBT Alphabet In Colorful Pride Themed Short Film. *NewNowNext*. Retrieved March 4, 2018, from <http://www.newnownext.com/equinox-pride-short-film/06/2017/>
- Bluhm, J. (2017, June 21). Are “Woke” Ads Helpful Or Hurtful? Retrieved September 10, 2017, from <http://thelala.com/woke-ads-helpful-hurtful/>
- Brunsmann, B. (2017, August 10). *P&G Ad on Race Relations Generates Massive Views*. Retrieved January 20, 2018, from <https://www.bizjournals.com/cincinnati/news/2017/08/04/p-g-ad-on-race-relations-generates-massive-views.html>
- Cartier, A. (2017, January 13). *The Great Hair Debate: Team Natural or Team Relaxed*. Retrieved January 20, 2018, from <https://www.pgeveryday.com/beauty/hair/article/the-great-hair-debate-team-natural-or-team-relaxed>
- Coates, T. (2015, October). The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved January 20, 2018, from <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/10/the-black-family-in-the-age-of-mass-incarceration/403246/>
- Coffee, P. (2015, June 18). W+K New York and Equinox are #PoweredByPride. *AgencySpy*. Retrieved March 4, 2018, from <http://www.adweek.com/agencyspy/wk-new-york-and-equinox-are-poweredbypride/88393>
- Cross, G. (2009). A New Consumerism, 1960-1980. In *The Advertising and Consumer Culture Reader* (pp. 339-345). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Dente Ross, S. (1998). "Their rising voices": A study of civil rights, social movements, and advertising in the New York Times. *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, 75(3), 518-534.

- Douglas, S. J. (1995). *Where the girls are: Growing up female with the mass media*. Three Rivers Press.
- Diaz, A. (2016, November 7). Johnnie Walker Keeps Walking To American Classic Folk Tune 'This Land Is Your Land.' *Ad Age*. Retrieved February 20, 2018, from <http://creativity-online.com/work/johnnie-walker-keep-walking-america/49836>
- Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of communication*, 43(4), 51-58.
- Gianatasio, D. (2016, November 7). Ad of the Day: Johnnie Walker Has a Simple Message for America on the Eve of Election Day. *AdWeek*. Retrieved February 20, 2018, from <http://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/ad-day-johnnie-walker-has-simple-message-america-eve-election-day-174484/>
- Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: An essay on the organization of experience*. Harvard University Press.
- Goldman, R., Heath, D., & Smith, S. (1991). Commodity Feminism. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 8(3), 333-351.
- Google News. Search. Retrieved February 11, 2018, from [https://www.google.com/search?biw=1171&bih=568&tbs=cd:3A1%2Ccd\\_min%3A1%2F1%2F2016%2Ccd\\_max%3A4%2F1%2F2016&tbm=nws&ei=5xFyWuLiB46kpwPRioKwBA&q=gender+pay+gap&oq=gender+pay+gap&gs\\_l=psy-ab.3..0l10.8602.11611.0.12088.16.4.1.2.2.0.200.433.3j0j1.4.0...0...1c.1.64.psy-ab..9.6.420....0.1ybXO8xvXBE](https://www.google.com/search?biw=1171&bih=568&tbs=cd:3A1%2Ccd_min%3A1%2F1%2F2016%2Ccd_max%3A4%2F1%2F2016&tbm=nws&ei=5xFyWuLiB46kpwPRioKwBA&q=gender+pay+gap&oq=gender+pay+gap&gs_l=psy-ab.3..0l10.8602.11611.0.12088.16.4.1.2.2.0.200.433.3j0j1.4.0...0...1c.1.64.psy-ab..9.6.420....0.1ybXO8xvXBE)
- Google Trends. Search. Retrieved February 11, 2018, from <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&geo=US&q=%2Fm%2F05ymls>
- Gowland, L. (2016, May 6). *Secret Deodorant Tried (And Failed) To Explain The Wage Gap*. Retrieved February 11, 2018, from <https://thinkprogress.org/secret-deodorant-tried-and-failed-to-explain-the-wage-gap-d07f5c39e01d/>
- Hallahan, K. (1999). Seven models of framing: Implications for public relations. *Journal of public relations research*, 11(3), 205-242.
- Harris, I. (2017, August 7). "The Talk" Is Selling Soap, Not Social Justice Retrieved January 20, 2018, from <https://www.damemagazine.com/2017/08/07/talk-selling-soap-not-social-justice/>
- History: 1960s. (2003, September 15). *Ad Age*. Retrieved May 20, 2017, from <http://adage.com/article/adage-encyclopedia/history-1960s/98702/>

- Hornshaw, P. (2017, April 05). 12 Brands That Tried to Make ‘Woke’ Ads — And Failed (Photos). Retrieved September 10, 2017, from <http://www.thewrap.com/12-brands-woke-ads-failures/>
- Howard, E. (2010). PINK TRUCK ADS: Second-wave feminism and gendered marketing. *Journal of Women's History*, 22(4), 137-161,328.
- Iezzi, T. (2015, June 09). 72andSunny Takes An Integrated Approach With New Brand Citizenship Practice. *Fast Company*. Retrieved May 20, 2017, from <https://www.fastcompany.com/3044014/72andsunny-takes-an-integrated-approach-with-new-brand-citizenship-practice>
- Ifeanyi, K. (2017, June 5). Equinox Just Added 20 More Letters To The LGBTQA Community. *Fast Company*. Retrieved March 4, 2018, from <https://www.fastcompany.com/40427554/equinox-just-added-20-more-letters-to-the-lgbtqa-community>
- Infoscout. (2017). *Pantene Consumer Insights*. Retrieved January 20, 2018, from <https://infoscout.co/brand/pantene>
- Jardine, A. (2016, April 11). Secret Makes A Point About Equal Pay In Ads About Staying Fresh. *Ad Age*. Retrieved February 11, 2018, from <http://creativity-online.com/work/secret-raise-stresstest/46381>
- Johnnie Walker. (2017). *Keep Walking America*. Retrieved February 20, 2018, from <https://www.johnniewalker.com/en-us/keepwalkingamerica/>
- Kaminski, P. L., Chapman, B. P., Haynes, S. D., & Own, L. (2005). Body image, eating behaviors, and attitudes toward exercise among gay and straight men. *Eating behaviors*, 6(3), 179-187.
- Keenan, J. (2014, August 18). Is Kink a Sexual Orientation? *Slate*. Retrieved March 4, 2018, from [http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2014/08/18/is\\_kink\\_a\\_sexual\\_orientation.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2014/08/18/is_kink_a_sexual_orientation.html)
- Lirtsman, A. (2017). Brand activism, built on purpose. Retrieved September 10, 2017, from <http://interbrand.com/best-brands/interbrand-breakthrough-brands/2017/articles/brand-activism-built-on-purpose/>
- Luckwaldt, J. (2016, May 9). *Secret Deodorant Commercial: The Gender Pay Gap Still Makes Us Sweat*. Retrieved February 11, 2018, from <https://www.payscale.com/career-news/2016/05/secret-deodorant-commercial-gender-pay-gap-still-makes-us-sweat>
- McCombs, M. (2004). *Setting the agenda: The mass media and public opinion*. John Wiley & Sons.

- Murji, K. (2006). Using racial stereotypes in anti-racist campaigns. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 29(2), 260-280.
- My Black is Beautiful*. Retrieved January 20, 2018, from <https://www.pgeveryday.com/tag/my-black-is-beautiful>
- My Black is Beautiful: About Us*. Retrieved January 20, 2018, from <https://www.pgeveryday.com/tag/mbib-about-us>
- Natividad, A. (2017, June 7). Equinox Extends LGBTQA from A to Z With a New Alphabet for Pride Month. *AdWeek*. Retrieved March 4, 2018, from <http://www.adweek.com/creativity/equinox-extends-lgbtqa-from-a-to-z-with-a-new-alphabet-for-pride-month/>
- Nededog, J. (2017, March 10). Who's winning and losing late-night TV under Trump. *Business Insider*. Retrieved February 20, 2018, from <http://www.businessinsider.com/late-night-show-tv-ratings-under-trump-2017-3>
- Nudd, T. (2016, April 12). P&G's Secret Takes on Young Women's Stresses, Beginning with the Wage Gap. *AdWeek*. Retrieved February 11, 2018, from <http://www.adweek.com/creativity/pgs-secret-takes-young-womens-stresses-beginning-wage-gap-170762/>
- Ortiz, E. (2016, January 26). *President Obama Announces Rules for Closing Gender Pay Gap*. Retrieved February 11, 2018, from <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/obama-announce-new-rules-closing-gender-pay-gap-n506941>
- Oster, A. (2017, July 25). *Parents Have 'the Talk' in Powerful 'My Black is Beautiful' Campaign from P&G*. Retrieved January 20, 2018, from <http://www.adweek.com/brand-marketing/parents-have-the-talk-in-powerful-my-black-is-beautiful-campaign-from-pg/>
- Pathak, A. (2017, June 16). The age of the woke CMO. Retrieved September 10, 2017, from <https://digiday.com/marketing/age-woke-cmo/>
- Powered By Pride*. Equinox. Retrieved March 4, 2018, from <https://www.equinox.com/poweredbypride>
- Procter & Gamble. (2016). *P&G 2016 Citizenship Report*. Retrieved January 20, 2018, from file:///Users/rachelbenner/Downloads/PG2016CitizenshipReport.pdf
- Puri, R. (2015, June 22). *What's Your Multi-cultural Brand Strategy as U.S. Demographics Shift?* Retrieved January 20, 2018, from <https://blog.percolate.com/2015/06/whats-your-multi-cultural-brand-strategy-as-demographics-shift/>

- Quart, A. (2017, June 06). Faking 'wokeness': how advertising targets millennial liberals for profit. Retrieved September 10, 2017, from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jun/06/progressive-advertising-fake-woke>
- Rappaport, A. (2017, June 5). Equinox Debuts Short Film “LGBTQAlphabet: Six Letters Will Never Be Enough.” [press release] Retrieved March 4, 2018, from <https://www.equinox.com/presscenter/equinox-debuts-short-film-lgbtqalphabet>
- Rappaport, A. (2016, June 15). Equinox Demonstrates Ongoing Support of LGBTQA Community With Global #PoweredByPride 2016 Events. [press release] Retrieved March 4, 2018, from <https://www.equinox.com/presscenter/equinox-demonstrates-ongoing-support-of-lgbtqa-community-with-global-poweredbypride-2016-events>
- Rittenhouse, R. (2017, October 26). Johnnie Walker’s New Spot Toasts Immigrants and Their Grueling Path Toward Citizenship. *AdWeek*. Retrieved February 20, 2018, from <http://www.adweek.com/agencies/johnnie-walkers-new-spot-toasts-immigrants-and-their-grueling-path-toward-citizenship/>
- Schuldt, J. P., & Roh, S. (2014). Media frames and cognitive accessibility: what do “global warming” and “climate change” evoke in partisan minds?. *Environmental Communication*, 8(4), 529-548.
- Schultz, E. (2017, October 25). Watch: Johnnie Walker’s Pro-Immigrant ‘Citizenship’ Ad. *Ad Age*. Retrieved February 20, 2018, from <http://adage.com/article/cmo-strategy/johnnie-walker-s-pro-immigrant-citizenship-ad/311027/>
- Sender, K. (2012). *Business, not politics: The making of the gay market*. Columbia University Press.
- Statista. (2017). *Procter & Gamble - Statistics & Facts*. Retrieved January 20, 2018, from <https://www.statista.com/topics/1625/procter-and-gamble/>
- Strunk, D. (2017, June 7). Equinox Gym Released A Video For Pride And People Are Not Happy With It. *BuzzFeed*. Retrieved March 4, 2018, from [https://www.buzzfeed.com/delaneystrunk/people-are-not-happy-with-this-pride-ad?utm\\_term=.mqnPLIEz70#.nqLmyx4652](https://www.buzzfeed.com/delaneystrunk/people-are-not-happy-with-this-pride-ad?utm_term=.mqnPLIEz70#.nqLmyx4652)
- Truong, K. (2017, June 5). The “LGBTQAlphabet” Shows How Diverse The LGBTQ Community Is. *Refinery29*. Retrieved March 4, 2018, from <https://www.refinery29.com/2017/06/157609/pride-month-equinox-video?bucketed=true>
- The Center*. Retrieved March 4, 2018, from <https://gaycenter.org/about>
- The Talk*. Retrieved January 20, 2018, from <https://www.pgeveryday.com/tag/mbib-the-talk>

- This Land: Anomaly. *AdForum*. Retrieved February 20, 2018, from <https://www.adforum.com/agency/21653/creative-work/34538418/this-land/johnnie-walker>
- Turow, J. and McAllister, M. (2009). General Introduction: Thinking Critically about Advertising and Consumer Culture. In *The Advertising and Consumer Culture Reader* (pp. 1-8). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Verdict UK. (2017, August 15). *Procter & Gamble's new ad goes beyond selling toothpaste and shampoo, but will the gamble pay off?* Retrieved January 20, 2018, from <https://www.verdict.co.uk/pgs-ad-the-talk-has-raised-eyebrows-but-will-the-gamble-pay-off/>
- VinePair Staff. (2017, July 17). *A Visual History of Johnnie Walker's Striding Man Logo*. Retrieved February 20, 2018, from <https://vinepair.com/wine-blog/a-visual-history-of-johnnie-walkers-striding-man-logo/>
- Vozzola, E. (2014). *Moral Development*. New York: Routledge.
- What is CSR? (2007). *United Nations Industrial Development Organization*. Retrieved May 20, 2017, from <http://www.unido.org/csr/o72054.html>
- Wong, C. (2017, June 7). Equinox Explores The Fundamentals of LGBTQ Life In Stunning New Pride Video. *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved March 4, 2018, from [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/equinox-lgbtq-alphabet\\_us\\_59385e44e4b00610547ed993](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/equinox-lgbtq-alphabet_us_59385e44e4b00610547ed993)
- Yates, C. (2017, April 5). Being Kinky Doesn't Make You Queer. *Autostraddle*. Retrieved March 4, 2018, from <https://www.autostraddle.com/kink-is-not-queer-374216/>
- Zeisler, A. (2016). *We were feminists once: From Riot Grrrl to CoverGirl, the buying and selling of a political movement*. Public Affairs.
- (2013, February 19). The Dos and Don'ts of the Gay Gym. *HommeMaker*. Retrieved March 4, 2018, from <http://www.hommemaker.com/2013/02/19/the-dos-and-donts-of-the-gay-gym/>
- @Equinox Tweet Responses. (2017, June 5). Retrieved March 4, 2018, from <https://twitter.com/spaltor/status/872210735354478592>