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**WHICH IS THE EFFECT OF #BLACKLIVESMATTER BRAND  
ACTIVISM ON CORPORATE REPUTATION? A comparative analysis  
between “Ben & Jerry’s” and “Amazon” based on their activist background.**

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## **Introduction**

“I can’t breathe”. These were his last words. On May 25th, 2020, George Floyd, a 46-years-old black man, was killed by Derek Chauvin, a white police officer of the Minneapolis Police Department. While the ladder, surrounded by dozens of unbelieving people, was executing his victim, Darnella Frezier, a seventeen-years-old black lady, filmed the scene with her phone. The video left no room for doubts or uncertainties on Floyd’s death: he was suffocated for nearly ten minutes by the knee of the policer. Once at home, Darnella decided to post the video online on her Facebook profile, giving birth to an inconceivable reaction. The video went viral. It reached millions of people in less than 24 hours. An incessant series of protests and demonstrations started right from the following day. A week after Floyd’s death, people were demonstrating in almost every state in the country (US). What made the protests distinct from their predecessors was that they extended far beyond the Black community: people from all neighborhoods, cultures, and backgrounds left the safety and comfort of their homes to take to the streets and speak out against injustice.

The echo of this phenomenon was so huge that many global brands were called into question. Gradually, they started to stand up with protestants, to take sides of #BLM movement and to show their political and social commitment. Definitely, Floyd’s case gave birth to a fierce wave of brand activism.

## 1. THE POLITICAL BRAND ACTIVISM

### 1.1 Analysis of the phenomenon: what Political Brand Activism stands for

Philip Kotler and Christian Sarkar identified and created brand activism as a marketing and business management concept for the first time in 2018. It evolves from cause-related marketing and corporate social responsibility (CSR), as it is a society-driven idea (Figure 1). It is corporate philanthropy that is unrelated to the business model, whereas CSR is business self-regulation that is integrated into the business model and contributes to the



development of the company's image as part of the corporate ethic strategy<sup>1</sup>. Philip Kotler classifies Brand Activism into six distinct aspects. Social activism encompasses issues such as gender equality, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights, as well as racism and age discrimination. Additionally, it encompasses societal and communal concerns such as education, school funding, and so forth. Legal activism is concerned with policies and laws that affect businesses, such as tax, labor, and employment legislation. Rather than that, business activism focuses on governance issues such as corporate structure, CEO salary, worker compensation, and labor. Economic activism,

on the other hand, encompasses minimum wage and tax regulations that have an effect on income inequality and wealth redistribution. Then there is political activism, which encompasses lobbying, voting rights, and public policy. Finally, environmental activism encompasses laws and policies governing environmental, land-use, air, and water pollution. More broadly, brand activism is a growingly common business activity in which

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<sup>1</sup> [Business Ethics Integral to Corporate Strategy, says Stanford's Malhotra - CBS News](#)

companies adopt a voluntary position on what they believe is "good" for society and then make corresponding public remarks and, on occasion, modify their operations to promote their chosen social causes (Craddock, Boichuk, Cian, Parmar 2018). Brand activism is a natural development from values-driven Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) programs that are, frankly, too slow. Thus, brand activism is distinguished from other forms of activism by its commitment to justice and a sincere concern for society's most serious issues. It gives life to what it means to be a "values-driven" company<sup>2</sup>. Brand Activism is defined as company activities to support, obstruct, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stagnation with the goal of promoting or obstructing social reforms (Kotler, 2018). According to brand activism practices, corporations play a critical role in social change processes. Businesses who engage in brand activism exhibit a dedication to not only their own profitability, but also to the communities they serve and the economic, social, and environmental concerns they face. This way of operation enables organizations to create value for their customers and prospects through relationships. Kotler and Sarkar defined the phenomena as businesses attempting to solve global concerns affecting their future consumers and employees. In direct response to this, the majority of brand activism cases center on social or political issues, resulting in the emergence of social or political brand activism phenomenon. On the one hand, Bhagwat et al. (2020) define "sociopolitical activism" as a firm's public show of support for or opposition to a partisan issue (statements and/or actions). By contrast, "brand political activism" is defined as public speech or actions directed at partisan issues by or on behalf of a corporation that leverages its corporate or individual brand name (Moorman, 2020). Definitely, brand activism can acquire multiple shapes, by leveraging on one cause or another. What is sure is that before defining a brand as an active one, brands have to fight for that. The route from brand activism is not as easy as we think. It requires a devote and incessant attention towards the sustained cause. It demands coherence and consistency between the brand and the issue. To be actively engaged, a brand must respect its values before professing others. It must continuously give

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<sup>2</sup> [WHAT IS BRAND ACTIVISM? – ActivistBrands.com](https://www.activistbrands.com/what-is-brand-activism/)

proof of its devotion, and its practical commitment, to people. Every single brand action must be consistent with the nature of the supported matter.

Thus, at what point does a brand become socially or politically engaged? The first thing to check is the brand's real conduct. If the brand is not causing harm, the path toward advocacy can begin. At times, it's easy to lose sight of the fact that businesses are a part of society. As a result, businesses have an obligation to make a good difference in people's lives. This begins with brands paying taxes: an agreed-upon cost for conducting business and earning a profit. Corporate tax revenue is used to support critical health, education, and welfare services for a company's consumers and employees. Tax evasion can tarnish a company's reputation in the long run, as Starbucks, "Amazon," and Google have demonstrated in the past. In comparison, brands that pay their fair amount will almost certainly get popular support. Patagonia is an excellent example, having utilized \$10 million in tax savings in the United States to fight climate change. When Patagonia makes a commitment to preserving "our home planet," people take it seriously. Fulfilling its own responsibilities as a company provides a foundation for the brand's activism<sup>3</sup>.

After adhering to the "do no harm" concept, companies can begin to do good by adopting a collaborative mentality and a long-term strategy to problem solving. This approach is especially critical in today's environment, when the fallacy prevails that a company's ultimate goal is to maximize profits for its stockholders. Profit maximization, on the other hand, is not a goal; it is an outcome. A business's goal is to have a meaningful vision and then to carry it out profitably. Profitability, in this context, refers to long-term, sustainable returns. The purpose of a business has nothing to do with the strategy or tactics of the firm; both are only means to a goal. Additionally, purpose is unrelated to social responsibility, which is mostly used to manage one's reputation. Rather than that, purpose is a spiritual and moral call to action; it is the essence of who an individual or organization is. *"Companies need a purpose that transcends making money; they need sustainability strategies that recognize they can make money by doing good things"*<sup>4</sup>. These good things

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<sup>3</sup> [Environmental Activism - Patagonia](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Why Making Money Is Not Enough \(mit.edu\)](#)

should however be aligned to what consumers (and society) expect. Then, how can brands align their values with their customers, their employees, and society? One popular way to understand what issues matter to consumers is to do research and constantly strive to understand what matters most to them. Some argue that businesses should choose to engage on issues which are as much as possible aligned with their brands. This, however, is a short-sighted way of looking at issues, as it sees the world and reality within the enterprise. What is needed, now more than ever, is a mindset that looks at reality from the outside in. For today's organizations, it's not enough to have a noble purpose. Being purpose-driven means nothing if behaviors and vision are not aligned. What matters now is action: the brand's presence and behavior in the real world. Both action and lack of action are signals sent to consumers and the broader society. Businesses should learn to keep up with their customers. In *The concept of the Corporation* (1946), Peter Drucker affirmed that an industrial society founded on enterprises can function only if enterprises contribute to social stability and the achievement of the goals of society, regardless of the goodwill of the individuals who are part of its management. To limit oneself to make profits is no longer sufficient. Today's consumers, especially Millennials and Gen. Z, who are oriented towards evolution, are asking companies to be agents of change and to try to solve the most urgent problems that afflict society. Companies must take the side of society. According to Kotler, today's society, regardless of ethnicities and cultures, identifies and seeks to combat seven major ills that continue to afflict our daily lives: the climate change, inequality, extremism, education, migration, corruption and population growth. This is why people expect to see brands' commitment especially in these seven major problems. The struggle against these huge evils is absolutely not easy: it requires flexibility and control to brands. Drawing on this, Brand activism is not something static: like any strategic process, it is dynamic and fluid. Its specificity is to begin and end with the satisfaction of the needs of society outside the company. Companies that adopt brand activism must do so with a constant spirit of research and learning. Internal engagement must be even greater than the external one. Such companies must have a very specific mindset, organizational culture and style of leadership. Once these three key-points are verified, companies must generate a brand

activism strategy in order to create a concrete movement. According to Kotler, the steps to build a movement up are five. The first thing to do is defining a mission built on the common good. The second step is about imagining what the movement should provide and how to provide it. Then, the company must ask itself how to inspire people to be actively engaged in supporting the cause (and the brand). Step four deals with the practical commitment of those who took sides of the cause. And finally, the final step is about coordinating the action to generate an impact. A movement, to be defined as such, starts with a purpose and ends up with an action. That's why the two (purpose and action), one without the other, may lose their power by risking to not deliver any impact to society.

## **1.2 The relevance**

Today, an increasing number of businesses are seizing the chance to demonstrate their social and environmental stewardship. And with reason: the public wants it that way. Businesses are expected to be change agents in the modern day. Consumers, by their purchases, determine the fate of brands. And, when all other factors are equal, they will opt for a brand that is making a positive difference. In the twenty-first century, doing good has become the ultimate competitive advantage for brands. In an increasingly crowded marketplace, a brand's contribution to society is becoming a key differentiator for consumers. According to a survey<sup>5</sup>, Consumers believe brands should take a statement on social, environmental, and political problems in 74% of cases. Even though speaking up on vital political issues, such as Black Lives Matter, is politically controversial, the majority of Americans feel that saying nothing is worse than saying nothing at all. Consumers expect brands to take a firm stance. These latter are envisioned as powerful social actors who embody critical societal concepts and meanings. Thus, they are placed in a position of authority and "responsibility" by virtue of this role (Doug Holt 2002). In multiple circumstances, it is necessary for organizations to define their roles in society (Lindgreen and Swaen, 2010). Brands can act like educators, and so use their marketing prowess to move consumers in a direction that is better for society, or, if they are

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<sup>5</sup> WE, Brands in Motion, 2019 [brands-in-motion-2019-whitepaper.pdf \(stackpathdns.com\)](https://stackpathdns.com/brands-in-motion-2019-whitepaper.pdf)



inextricably linked to social change, they can deliver products and services to create a change in the world (Moorman, 2020). Consumers want companies to speak up because they feel brands have the potential to make a significant difference. According to Sprout Social's 2019 study, 66% of consumers think that organizations that speak out can influence genuine change, and 67% believe that businesses who use their platforms, particularly social, effectively raise awareness of issues<sup>6</sup>. Consumers are increasingly selecting items based on their environmental sustainability, workplace equality, or the political parties to which the creators donate. They choose according to their own brands trust. A 2019 Edelman survey<sup>7</sup> found that 81 percent of 16,000 respondents, describe brand trust as a deciding factor in their purchasing decisions. Trust in a brand is founded not just on the product or service itself, but also on the company's ethics and principles. Usually, brand trust is made of three pillars: competence, benevolence and integrity. *Competence* means consumers believe “the people who own the brand and run the brand have the skills to do the job,” Grayson<sup>8</sup> said, “and can meet or exceed expectations in terms of those [raw] skills”. Then, *Benevolence* means that when the brand’s leaders and employees make decisions, they take customer interests into account in a “tangible and legitimate way.” And finally, *Integrity* means the brand and its employees make statements that “match with reality,” and that “they tell the truth and keep their promises” as Grayson affirmed. So, when customers perceive all these three components in a brand, it means they have the highest form of trust in it. Obviously, brand trust is subjective: what could seem extremely fair and trustworthy for someone couldn’t look the same to someone else.

As a consequence, consumers develop expectations based on their construal about what motivates the company and how it interacts with others in its environment (Brickson, 2007). Customer expectations, in general, are a collection of preconceived notions about a product, service, or brand held by customers. Customers expect these expectations to be met in order to be satisfied with both the customer service and the product they purchased.

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<sup>6</sup> [Sprout Social - News Releases](#)

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2019-07/2019\\_edelman\\_trust\\_barometer\\_special\\_report\\_in\\_brands\\_we\\_trust.pdf](https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2019-07/2019_edelman_trust_barometer_special_report_in_brands_we_trust.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> [How To Build Brand Trust | Built In](#)

Businesses, on the other hand, desire to meet these expectations because customers are likely to spend an additional 140 percent following a positive encounter<sup>9</sup>. Drawing on this, companies need to deeply understand, to focus on, and sometimes to anticipate, their customers' expectations in order to be in line with changing of times. Indeed, customer expectations continue to evolve over time for a number of reasons. Consumers, especially among the millennial generation, tend to ask for an always higher level of customer service. According to Microsoft, 54% of customers have higher expectations for customer service today compared to one year ago<sup>10</sup>. Despite this, another consumer trend is to claim to have more authority over businesses. With increased competition in each field, businesses must place a premium on customer retention. As a result of the consumer's increased power and an expanding market, Accenture reports that 48% of consumers demand personalized treatment for being a good client<sup>11</sup>. Finally, technology advancement has altered the way customers live their lives. Today's digital experience is enabled by more affordable and widely available technologies. Everything appears to have been digitalized. The market has shifted online, and businesses are adapting to sell their products and services via a variety of platforms. Customer expectations are continuously evolving, and organizations must develop an understanding of their customers' requirements and desires. This strenuous process puts businesses to the test at every stage of their continuous engagement with clients. Indeed, expectations are built throughout the consumer journey. One of the first critical moments is when the customer experience is delivered. As a result, 81% of businesses regard customer experience as a means of gaining a competitive advantage<sup>12</sup>. Another main topic, responsible of forming customers' expectations, is what people say about the brand: the, so called, Word of Mouth. The term "word of mouth" refers to the oral transmission of knowledge from one person to another. It is part of our daily life and companies know it very well. Customers firmly trust what is told by peers. They have confidence in what is recommended, or not, by other people. And, moreover, they are

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<sup>9</sup> [us-cons-the-true-value-of-customer-experiences.pdf \(deloitte.com\)](#)

<sup>10</sup> [EN-CNTNT-Report-DynService-2017-global-state-customer-service.pdf \(microsoft.com\)](#)

<sup>11</sup> [Put Your Trust in Hyper-Relevance | Accenture](#)

<sup>12</sup> [New Research from Dimension Data Reveals Uncomfortable CX Truths \(prnewswire.com\)](#)

naturally brought to review what happens to them, by telling others their own opinion on brands. So, to come back to how the expectations are formed under a process of WOM (word of mouth), companies need to pay attention to what they vehiculate via products, commercials, and general brand communication to people. Each move is registered and stored in consumers' mind. The world is witnessing the rise of the reputational economy. Reputation is now the currency on which everything else depends. At the corporate level, reputation generates positive buzz. At the personal level, it defines people's jobs and careers. Reputation is all around markets and drives human behavior. For this reason, companies need to be sure to deliver what they are asked for. The most frequent customer expectations that businesses must address in order to deliver an exceptional customer experience are personalization, high-quality service, omnichannel availability, low-effort experiences, and latest information. Among these unavoidable "requests", customers have been started to pretend something else. Not a specific product feature, not even a matter of pricing. They have been started to ask for a sensible approach to ethics, sustainability, human rights. Clearly, consumer perception of a company is not just about the brand, but also about its social responsibility, since people demand businesses to act ethically and contribute to society (Creyer & Ross, 1997). Thus, the rules for survival in today's market environment have shifted away from economic maximization and toward responsible behavior as well (Waddock, 2008). The European Commission (2011, p.6) defined CSR as an enterprise's responsibility for its impact on society in 2001. This includes taking a proactive role in promoting environmental, social, ethical, human, and labor rights stewardship throughout all company activities. CSR is concerned with meeting and surpassing customer expectations in terms of social responsibilities and policies (Podnar & Golob, 2007). Consumer research on CSR expectations indicates that while consumers generally have high expectations of businesses' CSR activities, consumer expectations are higher for more visible organizations, often larger corporations, to actively implement CSR (Bertels & Peloza, 2008; Golob et al., 2008). The most frequently cited reasons why consumers have higher expectations of larger companies are that they have a greater impact and thus should bear a greater share of responsibility, they have a greater opportunity to

influence their environment due to their greater resources, and they have experience and experts in the field (Berndtros & Mårtensson 2014).

Although this general overview shows how consumers started to change their expectations on brands since last decade, it is worth mentioning what is happening right now in terms of customers expectations' evolution. The Covid-19 pandemic has been impacting our lives for more than one year, but the world and its consumers have adapted to this new reality. The impact of the Coronavirus, as well as economic, social and political upheaval around the world, heralds a new era of corporate social responsibility. CSR has evolved over the past few years, but current events are leading to rapid change and heightened consumer expectations. People have begun to apply their new preferences to their thinking and shopping. According to James Brumley<sup>13</sup>, one of the four trends to be examined is the renovate interest for Corporate Social Responsibility. The public has historically been vigilant about business activity. However, in the aftermath of this year's social and political upheaval, consumers are acutely aware that some businesses are wreaking havoc on the planet. Additionally, recent calls for racial justice serve as further evidence that CSR must permeate all levels of your firm. Consumers and employees see through platitudes and hold businesses accountable when their professed principles and behaviors contradict one another<sup>14</sup>. Starting from this assumption, many companies decided to strongly support relevant causes, by trespassing the borders of CSR and directly landing in Brand Activism territories. The reasons why it happened may be linked to Brand Activism's relevance. Businesses recognized that actively advocating for something may result in increased equity. Being synonymous with a cause may be a more sustainable method to establish distinct brands than focusing on product benefits differences. This is especially true in categories where differentiation is difficult. Additionally, a well-supported cause might serve as an unintentional guideline for the team. In complicated organizations and markets, having a strong shared value compass can assist employees at all levels in making more consistent and informed decisions and adhering to a shared flow. Brand Activism can also

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<sup>13</sup> [Here Are the 4 Biggest Consumer Trends to Look For in 2021 | The Motley Fool](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Is Your Company Actually Fighting Racism, or Just Talking About It? \(hbr.org\)](#)

be cost-effective: if the issue resonates with the target customer, the brand can attain fame 'organically' via social media with little or no media spend, generating a large wave of e-WOM (electronic Word of Mouth) in the process. Finally, Brand Activism can have positive impacts on talent acquisition. A purpose beyond profit matters much more to today's employees and it can be a part of the non-monetary benefits package. To conclude, real, engaged and progressist Brand Activism can lead to positive outcomes for customers, employees, the company, but especially for the society in general.

Indeed, now more than ever, businesses, employees, and customers are paying careful attention to how corporate leaders navigate today's most contentious problems. In this regard, it is interesting to mention how the role of CEOs can be merged with the one of leader in Brand Activism practices. Weber Shandwick<sup>15</sup> and KRC Research published a deep research on this topic in 2017. According to *CEO Activism in 2017: High Noon in the C-Suite*<sup>16</sup>, opinions on CEO activism vary by age group. Half of Millennials say CEOs have a responsibility to speak out about important social issues and are more inclined to purchase products from a company whose CEO campaigns for pressing concerns. Among adults and based on a new report from Morning Consult<sup>17</sup>, more than two-thirds (68%) of respondents feel that it's important for CEOs to address racial inequality in the US. For these reasons, the social role of CEOs has been rediscussed across the years. Today, CEOs help brands in their built and growth, they are custodian of brands' value, and at the same time they design their future. The culture of a company is the direct reflection of the character of the CEO imprinted to the company (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018). According to another survey<sup>18</sup>, made by BRANDfog and McPherson Strategies, 93% of respondents think CEOs can be agents of change. Then, 86% of respondents consider CEOs, who stand for urgent social problems, as great influential leaders.

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<sup>15</sup> Weber Shandwick is one of the world's leading global public relations firms with offices in major media, business and government capitals around the world.

<sup>16</sup> [ceo-activism-in-2017-high-noon-in-the-c-suite.pdf \(webershandwick.com\)](https://www.webershandwick.com/ceo-activism-in-2017-high-noon-in-the-c-suite.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> [Download CEO Reputation and Roles Report | Morning Consult](#)

<sup>18</sup> [Brandfog speaking 2018 v7](#)

### **1.3 A magnifying glass on how the Covid-19 Pandemic impacted the phenomenon**

According to the World Health Organization, the COVID-19 epidemic has claimed a significant number of lives worldwide and created unprecedented difficulties to public health, food systems, and the workplace. Thousands of enterprises faced extinction. Almost half of the world's 3.3 billion workers was at danger of losing their jobs. Economically speaking, the COVID-19 pandemic had far-reaching economic consequences that reached beyond the disease's spread and containment efforts. It was the catalyst for the world's largest recession in recorded history, placing more than a third of the world's population on lockdown at the time (Kaplan et al. 2020). It altered the course of our life. Everybody is included. In terms of the economy, the pandemic had a significant influence on marketing as well. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, marketers have been forced to rethink or adapt a number of their methods. According to a survey conducted by LinkedIn and Vision Critical, the four most significant influences on the marketing sector were highlighted. The first is about fiscal restraints. Three-quarters (76%) of the 450 marketers surveyed stated that being forced to shift marketing priorities was one of their top challenges, while others cited issues with advertising investment and planning (69%), transitioning from in-person to virtual events (69%), and tactical campaign execution (67%). The second issue examines the pandemic's impact on marketing campaigns/strategies. While only 18% of respondents indicated that COVID-19 had a significant impact on their campaign strategy, the majority (67%) indicated that it had some effect, with some campaigns requiring repositioning or pausing. On the one hand, one sector of marketing that was particularly badly impacted by the viral spread and left marketers scurrying for alternatives was live events. On the other hand, another sector that witnessed an increase in investment as a result of the epidemic was social media. Because people began working remotely and limiting their travel, consumers' internet time rose. As a result, marketers sought to increase their advertising on social media and digital channels. Additionally, they needed to bear in mind that, as people became increasingly active on social media and other platforms while sequestered, the demand to create more digital content became extremely great. Businesses needed to guarantee they developed a large amount of high-quality content in order to remain relevant during the pandemic. The period

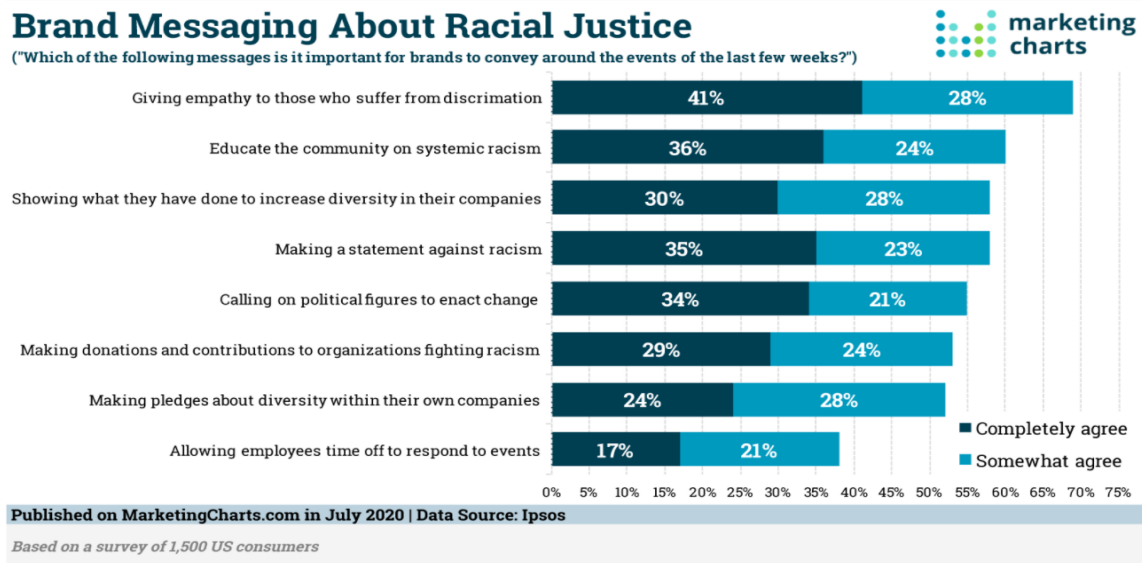
saw a dramatic surge in labor for marketers, as people stayed at home and claimed to consume ever-increasing amounts of content while maintaining a high standard of quality. Thus, marketers were required to meet consumer expectations for both quality and quantity of information. Over half (56%) of marketers polled raised their investment in organic social, while nearly two-fifths (39%) increased their spend on paid social. The third major effect was felt on the funnel and targeting priorities. Marketers generally noticed a shift in the audiences they were targeting. 43% of responders began targeting consumers whose requirements had shifted as a result of COVID-19. Additionally, a smaller fraction targeted new audiences (16%) or new industries (13%) while others targeted the same audiences but in new or different geographies (23%). Clearly, the proliferation of COVID-19 altered consumer behavior, resulting in the emergence of new clusters of customers with novel requirements. Previously targeted groups have ceased to exist. To summarize, the fourth significant impact relates to content strategies. Around two-thirds (64 %) of marketers stated that developing appropriate content, messaging, and tone has been one of their primary issues since COVID-19. Nearly half (47%) believe marketing content has become more emotive, compared to 31% who believe it has become more rational. Additionally, in response to customer demand for businesses to respond to the pandemic and recent racial justice marches, marketers upped their content strategy for corporate social responsibility (46 percent). Although fights for racial justice and equality have existed for centuries around the world, the recent Black Lives Matter movement, bolstered by the death of G. Floyd and the resulting demonstrations (the largest in US history), heightened the national conversation on racial justice.

According to a report from Ipsos (2020)<sup>19</sup>, always more people are considering equality as one of their top factors when thinking about purchasing from a brand (Figure 2). The percentage who takes this into consideration is higher for young adults aged 18-34-years-old (22%), those that live in urban areas (23%) and for Black Americans (24%). The majority of respondents, out of 1500 people, agree that they want to see brands show empathy to those who suffer from discrimination (69%), while the 60% of people wants

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<sup>19</sup> [Présentation PowerPoint \(ipsos-na.com\)](https://www.ipsos-na.com/presentation-powerpoint)

brand messaging to educate the community about systemic racism. More than a half of respondents believe that brands should make statements against racism and, also, possibly



call political figures to enact the change. Furthermore, a good percentage (53%) of interviewed people think it's important for brands to make donations and contributions to organizations fighting racism. After the episode of Floyd's murder, race has (re-)started to play a significant role when it came to the expectation of messaging from brands. Definitely, the racial justice events had massive and broad impact on consumers to such an extent that they sided with all those brands who strongly took positions against systemic racism.

In particular, this situation was exacerbated by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020, the pandemic significantly impacted numerous areas of civic engagement and brand activism: the majority of political conventions went virtual, long-planned rallies were canceled, and communities of activists promoting a range of topics coalesced around online platforms. According to Dominik Stecula<sup>20</sup>, professor at Colorado State University, *"Before the COVID-19 pandemic, activism took many forms, often involving large demonstrations, door-to-door canvassing, or asking strangers for signatures on petitions. But the arrival of the novel virus shifted a lot of these traditional practices away from in-*

<sup>20</sup> [Dominik Stecula, Assistant Professor - Political Science | Colorado State University \(colostate.edu\)](https://colostate.edu/)



*person contact. The pandemic changed a lot about how activism was practiced. Although the virus shifted the landscape of engagement, it did not dampen enthusiasm around it. And the past year (2020), despite of, or perhaps even because of, the pandemic, more people than ever seemed to be paying attention and even getting involved. They started to feel a greater sense of urgency than in the previous years, whether the issue was racial justice, public health, financial insecurity, or climate change”.* Activism has always been present, but the COVID-19 pandemic significantly increased its visibility and consciousness. Apart from raising awareness, the epidemic impacted how people expressed their support for a cause. According to a June 2020 Pew Research Center study of US adults<sup>21</sup>, more than half of respondents (18-29 years old) utilized social media to learn about #BlackLivesMatter rallies (compared with about a third of 30-49 y.o respondents). Additionally, people under the age of 30 were more likely to have "used a hashtag related to a political or social problem and encouraged others to act on causes that are important to them." Additionally, activism has begun to spread to online gaming platforms such as Animal Crossing. The virtual protest on Animal Crossing garnered international attention, with thousands of players posting the messages on social media in an effort to raise awareness about racial atrocities. From another angle, the pandemic altered how people approached activism. Staying at home and having more time to participate actively lead people to renovate their commitment in some social or political causes. Simultaneously, the epidemic increased people's sense of isolation and, in many respects, diminished their influence over their lives. People became aware of their great vulnerability and, as a result, they started feeling a new for integration. Indeed, the epidemic provided the ideal conditions for mobilizing additional people into a shared storm of activism. Participating became a necessary balm and source of connection during these recent difficult times, even if exchanges were virtual or took place far. People began developing relationships and cooperating with one another on the basis of newly shared values.

On the brand side, COVID-19 emphasized each business's social effect and shone a focus on the nature of corporations and brands. For instance, purpose was already gaining

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<sup>21</sup> [Americans' activism on social media differs by race, age, party | Pew Research Center](#)

prominence. However, with the spread of the virus, it is more critical than ever. The epidemic put brands and consumer values to the test. It united us all around a similar goal, elevating the fundamental concept of a company's "mission." Brands have long strived to be relevant to their customers in this regard. However, the challenge now is how brands can maintain relevance in such a challenging and uncertain age. Brands that are relevant are founded in human purpose. What is expected/required is a genuine paradigm change. A brand's mission is meaningful only if it fits inside the context of people's own purposes, not the other way around. Businesses must take their values off the wall and use them as a guide on a daily basis. The new focal point must be purpose driven. Simultaneously, marketers must contend with the proliferation of new digital behaviors. Adoption of digital technologies has become a must for survival. Businesses must plan for a future that is not just about digital payments, but also about digital engagement that speeds the development of client relationships.

According to Dawn Anderson (Senior Managing Director in Accenture), *“We’ve witnessed stunning shifts in customer interaction volume, types and transactions. As customers navigate these uncertain times, demonstrating empathy through digital channels has become the new standard of engagement”*<sup>22</sup>. Certainly, marketers are wrestling with the notion that brand purpose is no more a 'nice to have,' but is increasingly viewed as a moral and social obligation by consumers and even by their own staff in these turbulent times. When it comes to purpose, companies cannot afford to ignore concrete, measurable change: the time for talking is passed, and it is time for brands to step up and act. Consumers will undoubtedly pay close attention to firms' activist actions. It is apparent that marketing is no longer solely about selling products, as previous brand activism actions demonstrated. Following George Floyd's horrible murder, the number of corporations taking significant steps to confront racism in reaction to Black Lives Matter skyrocketed. Previously, mainly Nike and P&G were prepared to combat racial discrimination directly, but in 2020, additional businesses began to step up. Minneapolis' racist crime sent shockwaves through consumers and even more so via corporations. A handful of "new" brands took a stand for

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<sup>22</sup> [COVID-19: Impact on Customer Engagement | Accenture](#)

justice by making public pledges and promises to solidarity and action for the first time. In June 2020, about 100 firms ranging in age from 100 years to ten years, from Levi Strauss to Peloton, reiterated the value of Black life, culture, and the necessity of addressing BLM organizationally. They felt a sense of urgency, together with agencies and the media, to portray how reality was changing. Naturally, this courageous effort was bolstered by customer expectations as well. They developed a strong expectation that brands would not remain silent in a hyper-media-saturated world. Thus, brands were “socially” obliged to polarize their stances in favor of destroying white privileges and addressing racial inequities. Black Lives Matter movement was bigger than messaging, affecting how brands operated internally and externally: *“Addressing racial injustice became the new business imperative of 2020”<sup>23</sup>*.

#### 1.4 An excerpt of key cases

Based on a Morning Consult survey<sup>24</sup> (2020), run among 1,990 U.S. adults, almost the 70% believe it is important to reference George Floyd's death in firm responses to the protests, and approximately two-thirds believe it is appropriate for CEOs (68 %) and executives (65



%) to speak about and produce statements on the demonstration. In response to consumers' demands for tangible action, a large number of businesses, including household names, joined the demonstrators following George Floyd's assassination.

L'Oréal is a prime example of this. In 2017, the design house severed connections with Munroe Bergdorf, a British black model who had worked for the Maison for years, after she allegedly posted on Facebook about "white people's racist brutality." In 2020, she accused

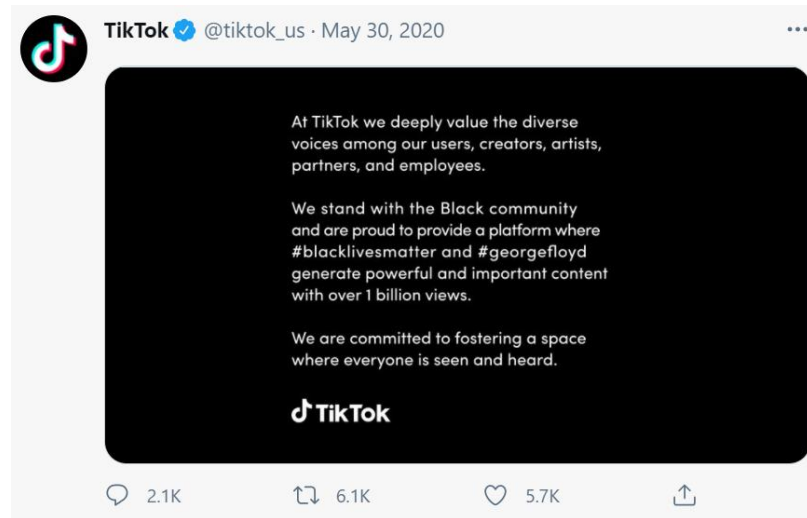
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<sup>23</sup> [Brand activism in the Black Lives Matter era | WARC](#)

<sup>24</sup> [Brands Are Speaking Out on Black Lives Matter. How Are Consumers Going to Respond? \(morningconsult.com\)](#)

L'Oréal of hypocrisy after the company's flagship retail brand, L'Oréal Paris, put a message on its Instagram social media pages following George Floyd's murder, stating that "speaking up is worth it" (Figure 3). The caption affirmed "*L'Oréal Paris stands in solidarity with the Black community, and against injustice of any kind. We are making a commitment to the @naacp<sup>25</sup> to support progress in the fight for justice. #BlackLivesMatter*"<sup>26</sup>. At that point, to not lose credibility and reliability, L'Oréal decided to make public excuses to Miss Bergdorf and to reconcile with her. After her renewed recruitment, L'Oréal Paris brand president Delphine Viguié said, "We support Munroe's fight against systemic racism and as a company we are committed to work to dismantle such systems"<sup>27</sup>. The reconciliation exemplified how protests caused by Floyd's death compelled businesses to rethink their policies.

Another form of brand activism appeared on Twitter, where three giants of the contemporary economy demonstrated their devotion to the cause via some posts. "Amazon" defined the treatment of Black people in USA as "inequitable and brutal". TikTok (Figure 4) put emphasis on the possibility for everyone to be heard and seen on its



platform. It also highlighted the big amount of views it got with hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter and #GeorgeFloyd. Netflix (Figure 5) just tweeted a statement in favor of Black people. It focused on the value of the

silence, intended as synonymous of complicity. And finally, Twitter itself took sides of

<sup>25</sup> NAACP is the nation's first and largest grassroots-based civil rights organizations.

<sup>26</sup> [L'Oreal faces backlash for Black Lives Matter post | Marketing | Campaign Asia](#)

<sup>27</sup> [Munroe Bergdorf rehired by L'Oreal, three years after being dropped for comments on systemic racism - CNN](#)



**Netflix**  @netflix · May 30, 2020

To be silent is to be complicit.  
Black lives matter.

We have a platform, and we have a duty to our Black members, employees, creators and talent to speak up.

 8.1K

 216.9K

 1M

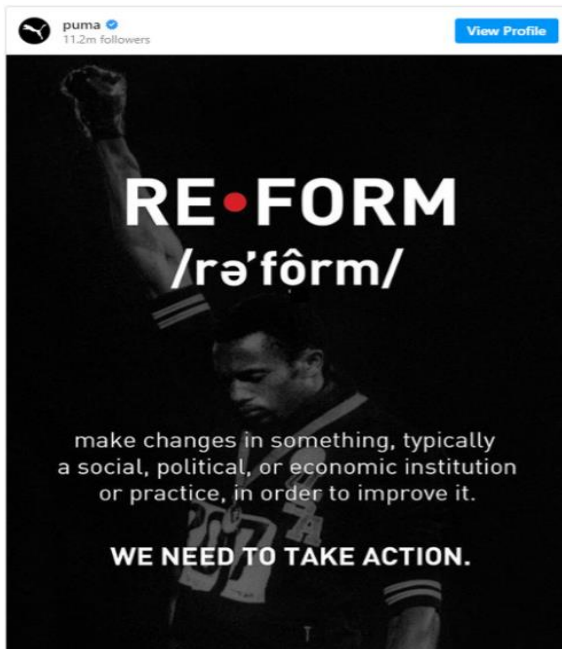


protestants too. Twitter Inc. altered the logo on its profile image to black, the header banner to black, and its bio to include the slogan #BlackLivesMatter.

Then Nike provided an illustrative and incredibly strong example. It created a new advertisement with the motto "*Don't Do It*" in reaction to the Black Lives Matter rallies. The phrase is a play on the sportswear brand's distinctive catchphrase, "*Just Do It*", and refers to the fight against racism in the aftermath of George Floyd's death. Nike announced the launch of their new slogan on Instagram.. The video begins with the words, "*For once, Don't Do It*" written in white text against a black background. It continues: "*Don't pretend there's not a problem in America. Don't turn your back on racism. Don't accept innocent lives being taken from us. Don't make any more excuses. Don't think this doesn't affect you. Don't sit back and be silent. Don't think you can't be part of the change. Let's all be part of the change.*"<sup>28</sup> The video was accompanied by an evocative caption where it was only written "*Let's all be part of the change. #UntilWeAllWin*". The power of the spot was so great that, after Nike posted it on Twitter too, it was retweeted by its major rival Adidas. Nike announced a \$40 million USD commitment to support the black community in the United States of America following the dramatic "*Don't Do It*" film, which blasted racism and called for systemic change. The money was intended to benefit a diverse range of groups that promote social justice, combat racial inequality, and educate citizens, thanks to a collaborative effort by Swoosh, Jordan Brand, and Converse.

To follow up with sport brands, Puma shared a suggestive post dealing with the meaning of *reform* on its IG profile (Figure 6). The sportswear firm also included an iconic image in its post: one of African American athlete Tommie Smith raising his fist in a Black Power

<sup>28</sup> [For once, Don't Do It | Nike - YouTube](#)

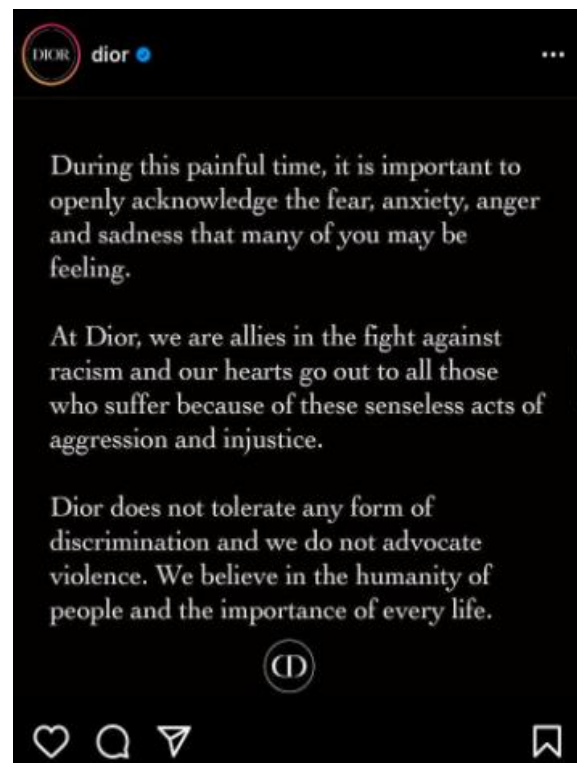
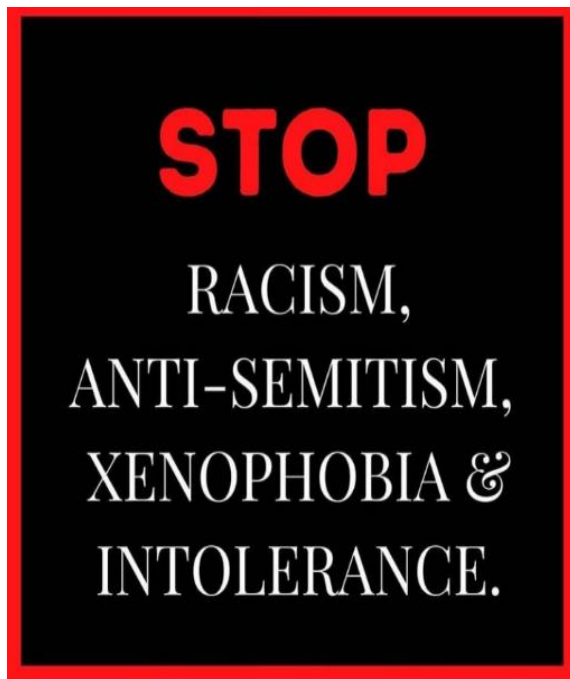


salute during the 1968 Olympics, sans his Puma sneakers. In the caption the brand wrote “*We need to take action together. We are choosing to support the Minnesota Freedom Fund #justiceforgeorgefloyd @mnfreedomfund*”<sup>29</sup>. As previously disclosed, Puma made a significant donation to the Minnesota Freedom Fund, a nonprofit organization dedicated to reducing the consequences of incarceration by paying bail for low-income individuals who cannot afford it.

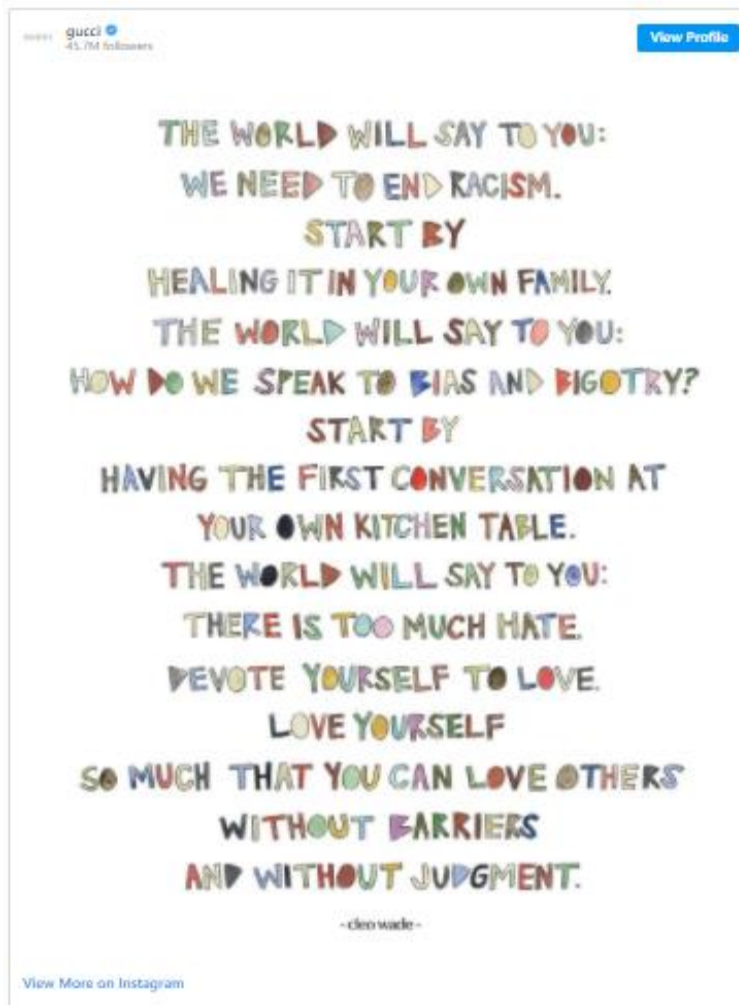
YouTube was another amazing example of a brand that generously donated to Black communities. It pledged a \$1 million donation to social justice projects. And again, according to the Morning Consult survey<sup>30</sup>, half of all adults stated that donations to social justice organizations boost their perception of a brand's favorability. The shockwave was so strong that even luxury brands, and fashion icons, decided to adhere to the movement by sharing posts on their official Instagram profiles. As main examples, Anna Fendi opted for a general condemnation of racism, ant-Semitism, xenophobia and intolerance (Figure 7). Pier Paolo Piccioli on Valentino official page disclaimed its support for the black movement (figure 8). YSL (Figure 9) and Dior (Figure 10) opted for clear black-on-white messages. Finally, Gucci came out with an interesting and colorful statement, dealing with love for others (Figure 11). In conclusion, many felt the need to stand up in a social and digital common adhesion to the fight against the white privilege abuse and racism. Many felt the urgency of doing something. Even sharing a post. Writing down some words via

<sup>29</sup> [PUMA on Instagram: “We need to take action together. We are choosing to support the Minnesota Freedom Fund. Donate to the MN Freedom Fund at link in bio &...”](#)

<sup>30</sup> [Brands Are Speaking Out on Black Lives Matter. How Are Consumers Going to Respond? \(morningconsult.com\)](#)







social media. Warning people of their commitment. Many took sides of G. Floyd. But some of these made a step further.

Procter & Gamble, for example, decided to open a new section dedicated to racial inequality on its official website. Publicly known as a socially committed company, P&G affirms “*Racial inequality is the inescapable reality of America. It didn’t begin with us, but it can end with us. If we choose to act [...] Together we can make real lasting change when we*

*actively work to prevent, address, and rectify it—individually and collectively. Let’s get started*<sup>31</sup>.” The company puts emphasis on the need of a common action. On the strength of collectivity towards the isolated brutal cases of racism. On occasion of Floyd’s murder P&G shared a strongly emotional video, called *The choice*<sup>32</sup>. This is another example of a thought-provoking film produced by P&G to emphasize the importance of fighting evil. It is an appeal to the often-silent majority to join the fight against racial inequity as partners, advocates, and activists. Individuals are inspired to take action to create the world we all

<sup>31</sup> [Choose Action | P&G \(pg.com\)](#)

<sup>32</sup> [The Choice - YouTube](#)



want to live in by being challenged to step outside their comfort zones and Read, Listen, Donate, Plan, March, Vote, Speak Out, Step In, and Step Up.

To follow up with the commitment through official websites, McDonald adopted this strategy too. In its dedicated section, it affirms: *“Our global aspiration is that no matter where you are in the world, when you interact with McDonald’s inclusion and equity are as evident and familiar as the Arches themselves. Our goal is to ensure at every interaction, all are welcome, comfortable and safe”*<sup>33</sup>. A long explanation of the company’s values follows. McDonald’s is engaged in representing the diverse communities in which it operates, accelerating culture of inclusion and belonging and dismantling barriers to economic opportunities. On the occasion of Floyd tragedy, the company shared a powerful video on social media<sup>34</sup>. All the enounced victims are told to be part of McDonald’s itself. For this reason, the company decided to pledge \$1 million to NAACP, to give support to black community, to demonstrate its true engagement in the fight against systemic oppression.

Another strong message was delivered through the official Twitter account of Yorkshire Tea, the most popular traditional black tea brand sold in the UK. Right after the horrible death of G. Floyds, the brand shared a shocking post on its Twitter. It showed its support for the #BLM movement by telling a right-wing YouTuber *“please don’t buy our tea again”* (Figure 12, next page). With the hashtag #solidaritea and #BlackLivesMatter the brand declared it needed some time to educate itself on the happening<sup>35</sup>.

Many other cases could be cited. The brands who adhered to the movement were thousands and thousands all over the world. Each one reacted in such a personal way. This is not the occasion to examine the “truth” of the statements. It is not the place to assess if they actively took actions or not. If they limited themselves to delivering an “expected” image of their devotion to people, or if they were devoted for real. Each case should be analyzed with

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<sup>33</sup> [Diversity, Equity & Inclusion \(mcdonalds.com\)](https://www.mcdonalds.com/global/en/commitment-to-diversity)

<sup>34</sup> [McDonald’s<sup>7</sup> on Instagram: “They were one of us: Trayvon Martin. Michael Brown. Alton Sterling. Botham Jean. Atatiana Jefferson. Ahmaud Arbery. George Floyd.”](https://www.instagram.com/mcdonalds/p/CD8vZ8ZC8vZ/)

<sup>35</sup> [Yorkshire Tea’s shocking response to Black Lives Matter comment on Twitter | UK | News | Express.co.uk](https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/1184848/yorkshire-tea-black-lives-matter)

multiple approaches. Each brand activism act should be read through a social, and a marketing, perspective. Each post should be read after having deeply understood the roots



of brands: their social commitment, their political actions, their concrete engagements in struggles as heavy as the one against the systemic racism. What is important so far, it's the understanding of the huge echo produced by Floyd's murder. The analysis of these key cases was meant to demonstrate the multiple shapes of brand activism. It was meant to summarize just few exemplary statements/videos/posts which were fully dedicated to the fight against racial inequality, and which can simply resume how brands demonstrated their activism on a digital side.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

In the first chapter we gave a comprehensive overview of the rising phenomenon of Brand Political Activism, showing how current times are impacting it by giving birth to a fiercer and stronger wave of brands' actions.

Covid-19 Pandemic, as well as George Floyd's murder and all the other recent racist acts, brought brands to feel challenged, and consumers to unconsciously develop new expectations towards companies. These tragic events showed the brand world in a completely new light. New priorities appeared. New needs. Renovate values. A big process of changes started involving brands, marketing, consumers' minds, purchases. Nobody excluded.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an intense review of the literature on the main underlying topics, starting from analyzing the corporate reputation, as one of the prerequisites for Brand Activism. As G. Floyd's death had a so strong effect also due to the instantaneous spread of its video, the review will continue with the analysis of Word of Mouth. From the phenomenon itself to its specific engagement in Floyd's case, a focus on the Electronic Word of Mouth will follow. The ladder will directly bring us to an examination of the topic of virality. We will try to understand how virality, linked to the video's paths, played a fundamental role in this vicissitude and impacted Brand Activism demonstrations. Finally, we will move to the sphere of Brand Activism consequences to deepen into two opposite consumer behaviors: the boycotting and the buycotting.

By providing a broad literature review we will make the groundwork to properly define our research study and then proceed with our analysis.

### **2.1 The Corporate Reputation**

If a company wants to be successful in the first place, then it will need a great reputation. When you think of tech big-name companies, like Apple for example, you immediately jump to the technology, reliability, and usability of its products. Apple did not build up its reputation overnight. It was the product of consumers' expectations, and, more importantly, of how Apple continuously met them. At its most fundamental level, corporate reputation

is the result of what a corporation says it will do versus how frequently that organization keeps its commitments<sup>36</sup>. Veh, Gobel & Vogel (2019) note “*there is no agreement on one definition*” of corporate reputation. However, it can be commonly defined as the overall estimation of the organization that is held by the stakeholders of the internal/external market and based on its past actions and probability of its future behavior. In other words, “*a company’s corporate reputation is the sum of all the views and beliefs held about the company based on its history and its future prospects, in comparison to close competitors*”<sup>37</sup>. Thus, Corporate reputation plays a crucial role within organizations. It is so important because it has the power to influence all the assets that have direct/indirect impacts on companies’ future. According to a research published in the Harvard Business Review, between 70% and 80% of a company's market value is derived from challenging intangible assets such as brand equity, intellectual capital, and goodwill. The company's reputation is incorporated into these "intangible" assets.

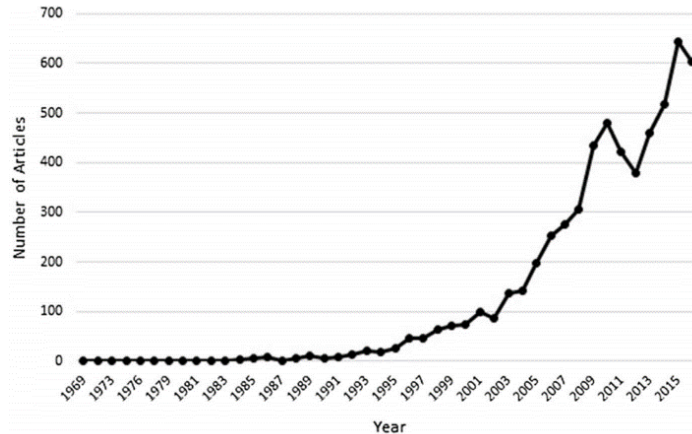
While reputation is an ethereal term, research consistently demonstrates that a positive reputation boosts a company's value and delivers lasting competitive benefits.

By focusing exclusively on the corporate reputation publication cluster, we may learn about the concept's origins in economics, organizational studies, and marketing, as well as related theoretical and methodological debates (Veh, et al. 2018). Since the 1990s, management research has laid great emphasis on business reputation (Rindova et al. 2010). The increasing number of publications, citations, and articles on corporate reputation demonstrates the critical nature of reputation management. Figure 13 (on the next page) shows an interesting outcome, obtained by Veh, et al. (2019) by digitizing the term “reputation”. The ensuing development curve for scholarly papers on reputation demonstrates the concept's popularity, but also highlights the increasing difficulty of gaining a comprehensive overview of the literature. The researchers admit that “the concept of business reputation remains ill-defined”. (Chun 2005) and is at the same time "simple and sophisticated" (Lange et al. 2011). In simple words, reputation means different

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<sup>36</sup> <https://blog.reputationx.com/corporate-reputation-guide>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.freshbusinessthinking.com/>



things for different researchers and seems to be a ‘moving target’. Not unexpectedly, the notion has been repeatedly challenged for its lack of a standardized definition and operationalization

(Dowling 2016). What is obvious is that corporate reputation is an interdisciplinary subject that straddles multiple academic disciplines. It garners interest from marketers, organizational behaviorists, strategic managers, economists, and sociologists (Alniacik et al. 2012). According to Fombrun and Shanley (1990), corporate reputations are cumulative public perceptions of enterprises over time that are dependent on the firm's relative effectiveness in meeting the expectations of a diverse set of stakeholders. Thus, reputation is a composite of all earlier transactions over the span of an entity's existence and requires consistency in an entity's activities across time (Herbig and Milewicz 1993). Without a doubt, Corporate Reputation is a multilayered construct comprised of numerous components, each unique in its own way but all necessary to construct this complicated issue. Fombrun et al. (2000) assumed that corporate reputation could be explained by the following six dimensions that influence various stakeholders, including employees, consumers, and investors:

1. Emotional Appeal: How well-liked, revered, and respected the firm is by diverse publics.
2. Products and Services: Perceptions of the company's product and service quality, innovation, value, and reliability.
3. Vision & Leadership: The extent to which the business exhibits a clear vision and strong leadership, as well as its management effectiveness.

4. Workplace Environment: Attitudes toward the company's suitability as a place to work and the quality of its workers.
5. Social and Environmental Responsibility: Perceptions of the business as a responsible citizen in its interactions with communities, employees, and the environment.
6. Financial Performance: An organization's profitability, prospects, and risk perceptions.

Correspondingly, UK public relations industry leader Adrian Wheeler<sup>38</sup>, taking cognizance of market research, proposed six main statements to achieve a good corporate reputation. He also commented that 'corporate reputation is a slow-build proposition' (Wheeler, 2001). His six reputation component statements, aimed at guiding corporate leaders, were:

- Be obsessive about your product or service: Nothing beats exceptional product quality in terms of influencing how people perceive your firm.
- Deserve confidence: Take the initiative and earn the trust of colleagues and consumers.
- Be accessible: Avoid concealing yourself behind a wall of intermediate managers and advisers. Establish rapport with consumers, staff, and suppliers.
- Acknowledge errors: If errors are made, acknowledge them immediately and take corrective action.
- Activate public interest: For CEOs and businesses, taking up a public cause distinguishes you or your organization from the competition. Engage the entire workforce.
- Make a point: The majority of people believe business is uninteresting, so make it exciting and human. CEOs may communicate with impact and color by utilizing their own and the business's personalities.

Deducing from above, Corporate Reputation management is a complex practice for corporate leaders. According to David Finn, Doug Newsom, and others<sup>39</sup>, concepts such as

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<sup>38</sup> [Chapter 13 Reputation Management; Corporate Image and Communication \(bournemouth.ac.uk\)](http://www.bournemouth.ac.uk)

<sup>39</sup> These Days There's More to PR Work than Just Writing News Releases and Answering Questions, Fort Worth Star-Telegram (April 21, 1997), p. 16.

“reputation” and “image” are not generally something that can be directly managed. Instead, they are omnipresent, and they can be considered as the global result of a firm’s or individual’s behavior. Managing one's reputation may be compared to managing one's own popularity. In general, when dealing with intangible yet significant notions such as brand image/equity/reputation, we must pay close attention to the definitions we provide. We can suppose that image is composed of perceptions and impressions about the institution. All signals have an effect on the image, which in turn defines the company reputation's direction. In this aspect, corporate reputation is said to be long-lasting and difficult to ruin or alter. On the other hand, each corporation or institution's image develops a reputation through time. Never forget that a positive image, and hence favorable perceptions of both the organization and the individual, is the first step toward reputation. The two are inextricably linked: one has a direct effect on the other and vice versa.

Another school of thought invests risk management with the authority to manage business reputation. Numerous consulting firms (e.g., Deloitte, Ernst & Young, and PwC) recommended that corporate reputation be managed through enterprise risk management (ERM) systems. The more effective the ERM system, the fewer crises a business will experience and the lower the likelihood of a company's corporate reputation being ruined (Bundy, Pfarrer, Short and Coombs, 2017). As a result, an efficient and timely ERM system can assist in pleasing stakeholders and therefore consolidating the essence of a company's reputation. Corporate reputation acts as a dependable signal to stakeholders because if a business does not perform in accordance with its corporate reputation, it starts losing the capital invested in this asset. The credibility of a company's corporate reputation is established by its vulnerability, or the juxtaposition between its gradual development and abrupt destruction (Hall 1992). According to some experts, this vulnerability is defined as reputational risk, or the likelihood that a company's corporate reputation would degrade (Dowling, 2006). The difference between stakeholders' expectations of how a firm should behave and the organization's actual behavior creates reputational risk. In this sense, an ERM system contributes to reducing the likelihood of reputational risk, and thus reputational damage, by maintaining a balanced risk appetite across the organization,

lowering the likelihood that a risk will drive the organization into a crisis, and narrowing the gap between stakeholders' expectations and firm performance (Perez-Cornejo et al., 2019).

As it is clear, the construct of Corporate reputation can be examined through different approaches. Each discipline has its own lens, and what is interesting to notice is that Corporate Reputation can be even looked at from opposite perspectives, but it will continue to have sense anyway. The extreme flexibility of the concept brings Corporate Reputation to be analyzed in Economics, Marketing, Social studies, Communication, Psychology and so on and so forth. Its moldable nature allows it to appear, as one of the main concepts, in all these subjects, adapting to each scenario in a different and sensible way.

Despite everything, firstly as the diversity in construct definition and the engagement in multiple spheres, researchers concur on the positive consequences of a strong reputation. According to Caminiti<sup>40</sup>, A good business reputation aids in the talent acquisition process and promotes staff retention. Stigler (1962) also emphasizes lowering unit production costs in this context. Concerning clients, studies discovered that a positive business reputation boosts customers' trust in products and services, advertising claims, and the purchasing choice. Firms can earn price premiums and higher purchase rates by improving client retention. Additionally, Roberts and Dowling (2002) demonstrate that business reputation helps sustain above-average revenues over time. Additionally, one could argue that developing a good corporate reputation generates market barriers in Porter's meaning, so bolstering the company's strategic position in the marketplace (Schwaigerm 2004).

To conclude, corporate reputation is undoubtedly an intangible and delicate asset, but at the same time it plays a powerful and characterizing role for companies. To such purpose, Corporate Reputation is one of the most appropriate strategic tools to gain competitive advantages over competitors. Developing a good reputation takes its time and requires long periods to become visible, but then companies can rest assured: if they correctly manage it, they will probably skyrocket their business.

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<sup>40</sup> Caminiti, S. (1992), The Payoff from a Good Reputation, in: *Fortune*, Vol. 125, No. 3, pp. 49–53.



## **2. The Word of Mouth**

Once posted online, the video of George Floyd's death spread like wildfire. It was shared worldwide. Even if far away, it was received, watched, and resent to almost everyone. People started talking about it. Comments, recommendations, opinions. In few hours, that isolated event had toured the world to arrive in time on everyone's lips. This huge act of information-sharing brought to concrete actions on consumers and brands' side. Protest spread all around the world as well as brand activism demonstrations.

So, drawing directly on this, how was it possible, that from Minneapolis an information run so fast/far? The information was a rapid globetrotter because of people, who shared what they just discovered with other people. What's happened can be examined through the lens of a key-concept: The Word of Mouth.

People have a natural tendency to share information with others. They talk about clichés, gossip about other people's lives. They share vital information. They give opinions on politics and current events. They criticize the system. They recommend things and advise against others. They encourage friends to visit one place rather than another. They talk about brands, products, and services. In short, they always want to have their say, but at the same time they expect others to share. Interpersonal communication can be defined as "informal communications oriented at other consumers regarding the ownership, use, or characteristics of goods and services or their sellers" (Westbrook, 1987). Ways of sharing can be different one from the other but generally WOM (word of mouth) include literal word of mouth, face-to-face discussions, and obviously it can evolve into all the digital/online word of mouth, tags, mentions and posts. The question is: why do people talk of certain topics in specific situations rather than others? Drawing directly on that, research confirms that the prevalence of different topics changed according to the situation. So, it is clear that environments and circumstances have impact on the choice of topics, but the previous finding does not respond to the reason why. Why do people share information? Which are the underlying drivers of their chitchatting? According to Berger (2014) word of mouth serves five key functions: Impression Management, Emotion Regulation, Information Acquisition, Social Bonding, and Persuading Others (Figure 14). The first motivation to be analyzed is impression management. Basically, people communicate and

Function	Components		Effects On Sharing
<b>Impression-Management</b>	Self-Enhancement	➡	+ Entertaining content + Useful information + Self-Concept relevant things + High status things + Unique and special things + Common ground + Accessible things + When aroused Shapes content valence
	Identity-Signaling		
	Filling Conversational Space		
<b>Emotion Regulation</b>	Generating Social Support	➡	+ Emotional Content + Arousing Content Shapes content valence
	Venting		
	Facilitating Sense Making		
	Reducing Dissonance		
	Taking Vengeance		
	Encouraging Rehearsal		
<b>Information Acquisition</b>	Seeking Advice	➡	+ Sharing when decisions are important or uncertain + Sharing when alternative info is unavailable or untrustworthy
	Resolving Problems		
<b>Social Bonding</b>	Reinforcing Shared Views	➡	+ Common Ground Content + Emotional Content
	Reducing Loneliness and Social Exclusion		
<b>Persuasion</b>	Persuading Others	➡	+ Polarized Content + Arousing Content

choose to share certain information to impress their listeners. Based on what the father of social studies (Goffman) theorized, people live as a function of others. They behave in a certain way to be noticed, to make others have a certain image of them. As human beings, we want to convey a very specific image, making others perceive only what we want them to perceive. Essentially, we select content to appear as people expect us to appear. So, following Berger's conceptualization, people

achieve impression management through three different ways: the self-enhancement, the identity-signaling and by filling conversational spaces. Self-enhancement is as natural as breathing. People like to convey positive impressions to others. By doing so, they not only enhance themselves, but tend to stand out in the crowd. As a result, we all tend to share a lot more good things than bad things about ourselves. This is because what we say affects how others perceive our being. The second way to get impression management is identity-signaling. By following the previous principle, people also want to deliver a specific and insightful idea of themselves. When a person only talks about travels, he obviously wants others to think he is a globetrotter, a free soul. Thus, people may discuss subject areas or ideas not only to boost their own self-esteem, but also to prove that they retain specific

characteristics, knowledge, or expertise in a particular field (Chung and Darke, 2006). For the same reason, some people tend to tell everything about a certain topic. This is especially the case when the person, an expert in a certain field, wants to show others that he or she is knowledgeable about everything, that he or she knows more than others. The third driver is finally the need/desire of fulfilling conversational spaces. When moments of silence are created, some people expect others to do the talking. If they do not speak, they may be conveying negative perceptions about themselves. To avoid this, some individuals tend to fill in any empty space, by avoiding any kind of silence. In conclusion, these three ways of achieving impression management lead people to share a specific “category” of content. When they want to (generally) impress their audience, people tend to share entertaining, useful, self-concept relevant, unique, status-quo related and common and accessible contents.

Another main driver that pushes people to share information is emotion regulation. Essentially, it entails sharing specific content with others in order to amplify, reveal, repress, or actualize one's emotional condition. Emotion management can be "done" in a variety of ways, including providing social support, venting, lowering cognitive dissonance, enabling sense making, exacting vengeance, or encouraging rehearsing. Thus, one type of interpersonal communication that should aid in mood control is offering assistance and support to others. The researchers discovered that conversing with others following a negative emotional event improved well-being by increasing perceived social support (Buechel & Berger, 2012). In terms of venting, conversing with others can assist individuals in coping with terrible situations and provide catharsis, which aids in lessening the emotional impact of the unfavorable occurrence. Additionally, sharing should aid in mood control by allowing individuals to lessen cognitive dissonance. All the human beings tend to share opinions and information that confirm their own previous beliefs. At the same way, by sharing this kind of content, people hope others will confirm their judgements and thoughts. Another way to achieve emotional regulation is communicating to facilitate sense making processes. Sometimes, people feel particular emotions, but they are not sure why. Communicating with others can assist individuals in determining how they feel and why.

It could help them to find a sense to what happened. Then, similar to venting, after a negative brand experience, people have the natural tendency to negatively talk about that brand. This mechanism makes people feel better because they have the perception of taking vengeance. Finally, sharing may help people regulate their emotions by allowing them to remember pleasant emotional experiences from the past (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004; Rimé, 2009). Recalling earlier emotional events should boost associated feelings, and as a result, people enjoy discussing pleasant memories since they generate enjoyable and positive feelings. All of these underlying aspects work in concert to shape the content shared in order to achieve emotion management. According to this, people communicate more emotional content; they adjust the valence of that information; and finally, they share emotional content that elicits arousal in the audience.

The third reason-why that can explain our need of sharing is information acquisition. We often use word of mouth to actively get new information. To obtain information, people can seek advices or resolve problems. On many occasions, people feel unsure of what to do. They seek advice from others in order to gain confidence, to be more decisive and to get an outside opinion on the topic in question. Then, another way that word of mouth appears to aid information acquisition is by assisting individuals in resolving problems (Sundaram et al., 1998). In this scenario, individuals seek knowledge from others in order to solve, or attempt to solve, an issue. Thus, knowledge gained from others can benefit one's own cause, and the information gathered can become the solution to any problem. As a result, information acquisition impacts what individuals discuss: risky and consequential judgments, followed by decisions requiring (trustworthy) information. Obviously, the riskier the decision, the greater the scarcity of knowledge, and the greater the necessity for people to acquire relevant stuff from others.

According to Berger and Rimé (2009), the fourth function of word of mouth is to be connected with others (also called social bonding). Acts of information-sharing allow humans to reinforce bonds and keep in touch with other people quickly and easily. One of primordial humans' needs is precisely that of building interpersonal relationships with other individuals. To this end, the act of sharing information contributes to underline the

social nature of all the human being. By and large, sharing appears to promote social bonding by reinforcing shared beliefs and alleviating loneliness and social exclusion. According to the first case, people tend to share information that they know will be welcomed by others. More specifically, they prefer to talk about common topics that reinforce a connection with their audience. As for the second case, individuals often need to share content with others to avoid feeling alone or excluded in a given circumstance. Consequently, the goal of social bonding lead people to share extremely emotional content and common ground topics.

Finally, the last reason-why is persuading others. We all often need to convince others in what we believe. This happens because we seek confirmation and "approval" from others. By persuading them, we are then sure that others will see things as we do. So, how do we try to persuade others? By sharing polarized valence content (extremely negative or positive) and excitement/involvement inducing information. Ultimately, what has just been described is not intended to limit the complex scope of the WOM. The reasons-why people share content are many and could not be summarized very easily. The analysis by Berger here, however, provides an effective overview of the topic. Certainly, there would be much more to say. The audience also has an effect on word of mouth. For instance, research establishes a distinction between strong and weak relationships. There is a significant difference between people we know well, trust, and communicate with frequently and strangers with whom we do not feel as connected. As a result, each of the reasons mentioned is unique to the relationship that individuals have with their audience. Another factor to consider is the size of the audience. Each of the reasons-why outlined above is significantly influenced by the amount of listeners. As a simple example, as individuals communicate with larger groups, impression management motivations should have a stronger impact (Barasch & Berger, 2014). Finally, another crucial aspect to be considered in any form of word of mouth is undoubtedly the channel through which communication takes place. Written or oral. Mass or niche-communication. If it is aimed at a specific activity or not. Each channel characteristic shapes and influences the way people share information with others. Definitely, the WOM cannot be considered out of context.

In the matter of relevance, the WOM is one the main driving force for the spread of information. Definitely, Word of mouth is one of the most ancient and effective mechanisms of communication in the history of human society (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). What we share by word of mouth takes on greater importance and relevance in the eyes of our listeners. The fact of sharing an information with someone close to us contributes to increase its credibility.

If then, in terms of credibility, as for the case of George Floyd, the information is accompanied by a shocking amatorial video, the listener has no choice to believe it or not. He receives the information and, if “necessary”, he shares it again.

### **2.3 How WOM evolves in e-WOM: a focus on virality**

We understood the power of word of mouth as a credible and fast means of dissemination. In the specifics of the Floyd case though, what happened? George Floyd is suffocated, and then killed, by a police officer in the heart of the city of Minneapolis. Darnella Frazier, a 17-year-old girl passing through, captures the incident on her smartphone. Once at home, without thinking twice about it, she decides to let everyone in on what she had just seen. She posts the video on Facebook. In a few hours the video is shared and posted millions of times. The video goes around the web, and the world, in a "record" time. It is re-shared by digital platforms, shown during the news, retweeted, streamed, sent privately. Those who prefer not to send it to others, given the sensitive content shown, simply talk about it. This creates an untiring chain of sharing thanks to online and offline word of mouth. The news reaches almost everyone. Brands included. The latter in fact strongly contributed to the spread of information, by feeding the word of mouth. At the same time, however, they gave rise to a further form of word of mouth. The majority of brands did not remain silent and watch. They did not leave the stage to "ordinary people". Or rather, they lined up alongside them. They embodied information internally, and then repurposed it in a social (and commercial) key. In fact, all the brands that took part in the affair took the field as activists. Siding in favor of George Floyd, they started a wave of activist practical actions (posts, tweets, advertisements, spots, collaborations, donations), both on the web and in the offline

world. They took sides to boycott systemic racism by sharing new, or renewed, values. They incited their consumers to do the same. To side with either one side or the other. To join the activist movement, sharing the values of the brand, or to move away from it. They did this through every possible channel of communication. Especially through the online ones. And as a result, what happened in this case too? They gave birth to a new wave of word of mouth. Much offline content was posted online. They kicked off an unprecedented amount of media sharing. This time focused, not so much on the event itself, but on brands' reaction to it. Definitely, online word-of-mouth played a fundamental role in the affair and now, it is therefore worth to analyze its main characteristics.

With the advent of interactive and social media, the patterns, function, and influence of word of mouth have altered, as have new forms of online communities. These changes have impacted how businesses may harness the power of word-of-mouth for marketing objectives and, conversely, how businesses can leverage the power of word-of-mouth. However, let us do it step by step. The internet has altered how we look for information, engage with others, and, most importantly, how we shop. As a result, classic word-of-mouth (WOM) behavior now incorporates an electronic component, generating a sizable study stream on electronic WOM (King et al., 2014). eWOM is described as "any good or negative statement made about a product or firm by potential, actual, or past customers that is made available to a large number of individuals and institutions over the Internet" (Hennig-Thurau et al. 2004). Whereas traditional word-of-mouth occurs most frequently in face-to-face/one-on-one circumstances, eWOM occurs in a more sophisticated computer-mediated environment. Participants in conventional WOM are physically close and can draw on a multitude of social and contextual information. If offline word of mouth occurs mostly in private circumstances, online word of mouth occurs when individuals communicate with a network of people (Kozinets et al. 2010) in more visible online groups. These communities are typically, if not always, comprised of individuals who share similar values, hobbies, or points of view but are unfamiliar with one another. These types of relationships exist to facilitate the sharing of content. The strength of social relationships is determined by a person's devotion/interest in a certain subject. According to R.A King

et al. (2014), eWOM can be defined through 6 unique features which distinguish it from traditional WOM and, in a sense, represent the evolution of the ladder into the electronic WOM.

1. The first undeniable characteristic of eWOM is its enhanced volume. eWOM conversations are able to reach a vast number of people in a short period of time. It happens because of the huge number of options which are available for senders and receivers. Several channels can be used to reach multiple audiences at the same time. A message can be delivered through a multitude of platforms, media, and digital shortcuts. Some of them even allow to spread a single tweet/tag/content with thousands (if not millions) of people, by highlighting a substantial difference with traditional WOM.
2. Drawing directly on the above-mentioned feature, another recognizable trait of eWOM is its high level of dispersion. Because of the multitude of online communities, which in their turns give birth to a multitude of online conversations, content is usually dispersed. It passes across platforms, jumping from “a host” to another one. In doing so, eWOM distribution and impact are significantly impacted (in their turn) by this dispersing mechanism.
3. *Verba volant, scripta manent*. Most of eWOM content is transmitted via written form. It means that an opinion, once shared, remains public. Data erasure is possible, but it is not easy to achieve it when the content has been posted online. eWOM content is definitely persistent and observable by a myriad of people for indeterminate times. These two features allow people to make inferences of what is written, where and why. People pay attention to the source of information because it can reveal the valence and truth of contents. According to research, past conversations, and ratings impact future WOM (Bowman and Narayandas 2001).
4. How many times do people find information on the internet which does not disclose the source? Several times. When content is anonymous, even the most appealing information loses part of its credibility. Especially now, due to the huge amount of information published online, people are learning to trust some at the expense of



others. This selective mechanism often comes from the disclosure, or not, of the source.

5. Do confirmation biases exist online? Obviously, they do. When people look for some information to support or confirm their thoughts, they hope to find exactly what they think. According to that, the valence of online-posted content tends to be exasperated in one way or the other one. Extremely positive, or negative, information has a higher salience than neutral ones.
6. What is the major asset of eWOM? It is surely its capacity of creating communities where people, and so consumers, feel deeply engaged in. Commercially speaking when a customer is engaged, he/she will probably spend more at the end. More generally, a community makes people feel part of a unique ensemble where all the other members support and believe in the same cause. People, surrounded by supporters, have the natural tendency to sustain what others say and to share more information with them.

After defining its essential components, we propose three critical steps for eWOM: creation, exposure, and evaluation. To have an impact on the marketplace or on a larger community, eWOM must first be built. Consumer contributions to original content can be brief, such as one-time product reviews, or ongoing, such as sustained involvement in online forums and spreading the material of other customers or companies, such as retweeting (Gong et al. 2017). Additionally, the ability of consumers to access critical resources (knowledge, competence, and skill) to produce eWOM shapes its creation. Then, customers must be exposed to it, as unnoticed eWOM will have no effect. It would be like though people were conversing with the wind. Consumers' incentives to seek eWOM (and thus be exposed to it) are impacted by their individual characteristics (e.g., cognitive need, perceived competence, market mavenism) and goals throughout their decision-making process. Despite this, customers are exposed to eWOM not just as a result of their active search behavior related to purchase, but also as a result of inadvertent exposure (Hildebrand and Schlager 2019). This occurs as a result of customers' time spent on social media, watching online videos, or surfing the Internet. Certain contextual elements, such as

Internet penetration, available time, platform features, and network-related factors, all influence consumers' exposure to eWOM. Finally, consumers must analyze the eWOM message and incorporate it into their decision-making process in order to move it from theory to practice. This third stage is significantly influenced by customers' readiness, interest, desire, and willingness to process electronic word of mouth. Additionally, research has established a strong correlation between engagement and eWOM processing: when consumers' participation grows, they are more driven to comprehend salient information, according to Lee et al. (2012). Throughout these three stages consumers can play, sometimes at the same time, two different roles: when they are eWOM creators they are also the senders of information, and when they are exposed or evaluating, they are eWOM receivers. Concludingly, according to King et al. (2014), another further step should be made in order to fully understand the phenomenon and the evolution of eWOM. Both senders and receivers are indeed impacted by their antecedents. A sender (or a receiver) should not be considered as a detached-from-outside reality. He is rather a complex and open dimension with his own traits and peculiarities. Besides that, also the brand and the contextual cues need to be examined in lights of their antecedents. Every single antecedent has a unique and unrepeatable effect on shaping eWOM content.

To come back to our initial assumptions, We can assert that a distinguishing aspect of online digital material is the ease with which customers may share what they enjoy with others. Such sharing has a compounding effect on the overall number of views and the extent to which digital material gets viral. However, what does it mean when something "goes viral"? What is virality? Today, the term "virality" refers to a new video, tool, app, content, product, software program, game, or other online-based item that generates thousands or millions of views from users of the product or service. Because these forms of online sensations may spread so swiftly, they are compared to viruses. The terminology "internet virality" derives from the scientific analysis of virus propagation, and it can be measured using the same mathematical equation that scientists use to quantify virus spread<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> [What Is Virality? | Indeed.com](#)

Yet if this is indeed the case, it would mean that content goes viral without any real logic. They become a bit like a virus that spreads in a society. This means that a content reaches the other side of the world only because people have been contaminated and have unintentionally attached the virus (=content) to others without their active involvement. A virus, in most cases, attaches itself without others knowing about it or, of course, wanting to. And again, according to science, once contracted, the virus is reattached to others and so on. Having said that, are we certain that internet media virality can be likened to a passive mass epidemic? Reducing online virality to a basic virus that multiplies unrestrained will constrain our investigation and obscure our understanding of the issue. Definitely, the metaphor of "infection" reduces consumers to the involuntary "hosts" of media viruses and even if attractive, such a notion doesn't reflect the complexity of cultural and communicative processes. In this regard, Henry Jenkins<sup>42</sup> offers an advanced model which better explains how media circulate from mouth to mouth (or from keyboard to keyboard): the spreadable media. *A spreadable model emphasizes the activity of consumers, those who were simple "multipliers" in virus model, in shaping the circulation of media content, often expanding potential meanings, and opening up brands to unanticipated new markets. Rather than emphasizing the direct replication of "memes," a spreadable model assumes that the repurposing and transformation of media content adds value, allowing media content to be localized to diverse contexts of use. This notion of spreadability is intended as a contrast to older models of stickiness which emphasize centralized control over distribution and attempts to maintain 'purity' of message.* Virality, as we understand it, implies the direct and active involvement of users. The latter are not limited to "stick" a viral content to others, rather they store it, understand it, and then spread it, adding a personal trait, an opinion, a tag ...

Again, whether or not a piece of content goes viral depends on a series of factors and antecedents. As with the sender, the receiver, and the brand, virality itself has its own antecedents that impact its evolution.

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<sup>42</sup> [If It Doesn't Spread, It's Dead \(Part One\): Media Viruses and Memes — Henry Jenkins](#)

According to Tellis et al. (2019), there are three major groups of reasons that motivate sharing: self-serving, social, and altruistic incentives. To begin, individuals distribute content for self-serving reasons; that is, they share content for their own advantage without regard for the benefit to others. By sharing important or compelling content, one can elevate one's standing by seeming knowledgeable or an expert in their field (Lee and Ma 2012). Apart from these selfish motives, individuals distribute internet material for the goal of social involvement. That is, individuals communicate information in order to participate with a community, learn about community interests, socialize with members of a certain community, and feel a sense of belonging to, or being a part of, a group (Syn and Oh 2015). (Ho and Dempsey 2010). Finally, but certainly not least, sharing is motivated by altruistic motives. Individuals frequently share and re-share stuff in order to essentially assist others. They occasionally wish to demonstrate concern and empathy for others (Syn and Oh 2015). Apart from these three factors, another significant factor influencing people's sharing behavior is the "kind" of content. Generally, contents, or advertisements, can be classified as emotive or informational. On the one hand, emotion-driven content draws attention to consumers' emotional side. It has the potential to elicit either pleasant or negative feelings. The majority of advertising and content sharing study focuses on the emotions elicited by advertisements. The rationale for this is that elicited emotions have an effect on pertinent advertising outcomes such as a favorable attitude toward the advertisement and brand, increased purchase intentions, recall, and brand loyalty. On the other hand, information-based material is frequently complex. Typically, a narrator or voice-over offers arguments or factual explanations about objects, characteristics, people, activities, and events. Due to the argumentative and factual character of information-based content, marketers should keep in mind that it may be dry and boring, even if it provides "important" information. To conclude, this case reached such a reservoir of hearings largely due to the vociferousness of those "affected" by the event. Without the power of the internets, the Floyd case would have gone a long way but would certainly have taken a lot longer. In the same way, the immediate activism of the brands would have reached overseas but, perhaps, would not have generated the desired effects in such a short term. All this to say that word

of mouth, and eWOM above all, deeply impacted the spread of information. Without the accentuated virality that characterized, since the beginning, the phenomenon, who knows where we would be today. Who knows if the brands from outside Minnesota would have adhered so quickly to the movement? Who knows if the tag would have toured the world, the news, the stadiums with the same speed? Nothing would be the same today. XXI century's society should be grateful to the viral spread of Floyd and activism-related information because it contributed to change the fate of humanity.

#### **2.4 Consequences on a brand: Boycotting vs Buycotting**

Jumping directly from information sharing mechanisms to the consequences that brand activism may have on consumers, we identify two opposing but common behaviors.

The need for companies to distinguish out by demonstrating responsibility and taking a position on the most critical social issues in order to foster brand loyalty and trust between the company and its target audience has grown in popularity. If before, brand competition was mostly focused on quality and price, today, so-called social-cause advertising is gaining traction among the majority of corporations. Numerous advantages exist for brands that are socially/politically/environmentally (and so on...) engaged. They entail understanding the difference of the brand from its competitors, increasing exposure via third-party blogs and influencers, increasing customer loyalty by aligning the brand with their principles, empowering consumers to behave as brand advocates by sharing advertisements and social media posts to raise awareness and support their values, and broadening the employing pool as a result of the increased hiring (Eyada, 2020). According to Sarkar and Kotler (2018), brand activism plays a significant part in consumer brand preferences and purchase decisions; purchasing a product has evolved into a means of expressing oneself, making a statement, and exercising power. Consumers regard the items they purchase as an extension of their perspectives, values, beliefs, and lifestyles, viewing them as a form of political and social action and a chance to make a difference.

Indeed, when businesses engage in brand activism, they risk being boycotted and buycotted by customers (Hong, 2018). Before we get into the primary distinctions between these two diametrically opposed actions, do we know where the term boycott originated? Charles Boycott was in charge of the holdings of a powerful Irish landlord, Lord Erne, in the County Mayo area in 1880. Charles abused and exploited the farmers to the hilt. He was arrogant and belligerent. That year's harvests were severely ruined, and the peasants, with little to eat, demanded a rent decrease. Mr. Boycott refused and attempted to expel those who complained. Farmers banded together, rebelled, and agreed not to work for him. Local businesses quickly joined the uprising, turning their backs on the tyrant in solidarity. Finally, they succeeded; even the postman joined the protest and ceased delivering correspondence to Boycott. The Times invented Boycott's surname to refer to a type of protest. Boycott became a verb and the despicable symbol of collective activism<sup>43</sup>. From a marketing/activist standpoint, boycotting is described as the deliberate avoidance of a product offered by a company, either due to the manufacturing process (e.g., environmental degradation) or because the customer disagrees with the firm's social, ethical, or political principles (Baek, 2010; Basci, 2014; Carr et al., 2012).

On the other hand, in response to the emergence of a new method of political activism, a new form of boycott emerged: the Buycott. Consumer activism nowadays is not limited to boycotting a particular product or brand, but also to making conscientious, ethical purchases. Buycotting is described as the deliberate selection of a product from a company by a consumer to demonstrate his or her support for the firm's stance (Baek, 2010; Basci, 2014; Carr et al., 2012). Both boycotting and buycotting enable customers to express their opinions or positions on a social or political subject of mutual importance. Both behaviors, according to Baek (2010), are examples of political consumption, which is defined as "a consumer's decision to penalize (i.e., boycott) or reward (i.e., buycott) private enterprises through selective product or brand selection based on social, political, or ethical reasons." Thus, variables other than price, quality, brand image, familiarity, status, or fashion trends affect the decision to purchase or reject a certain product or service. Indeed, consumer

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<sup>43</sup> [Why 'Buycotting' is The New Form of Political Activism | by Orge Castellano | Medium](#)

behavior is influenced by social ideals and political choices via boycotts and buycotts (Kam, Deichert, 2019).

These two diametrically opposed impacts of deliberate avoidance (boycotting) and deliberate purchase (buycotting) can be understood as a practical manifestation of political consumerism/consumption. Due to the fact that citizens cannot avoid consuming products, they can exert political influence over businesses by picking or rejecting specific items to further political or moral objectives (Schudson, 2006). Political consumerism in the form of boycotts improves the economy by pushing consumers to purchase more products and services from businesses that promote rights of minorities, environmental stewardship, and labor integrity. As a result, boycotting is not limited to product choices. It evaluates all production processes, the brand's ideals, the company's culture, activist convictions, and practice. For instance, in December 2017, Patagonia, a sports brand, blacked out their website and replaced it with the phrase "*The President Stole Your Land*"<sup>44</sup>, after Trump opted for reducing the size of two monuments in Utah, their external web sales increased by a multiple of six according to data from Slice Intelligence<sup>45</sup>. Without a doubt, buycotting assists citizens in making mindful, sustainable purchasing selections with the goal of becoming a better, more aware, and conscious consumer. Purchasing items that are manufactured in accordance with fair trade deals or where the wellbeing of employees and animals is assured is a clear illustration of this<sup>46</sup>.

In the light of what has just been described, we have understood which phenomena influenced and depended on Floyd case. Starting from corporate reputation, a fundamental element to talk about brand activism, we analyzed its relevance in today's marketing world. We then passed through the prolific territory of word of mouth to understand its facets. The latter in fact accentuated the spread of information about the event itself and the reaction of brands. Through the analysis of virality and eWOM, we understood the expansive

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<sup>44</sup> [Environmental Activism - Patagonia](#)

<sup>45</sup> [Why Patagonia's Website Says 'The President Stole Your Land' | Inc.com](#)

<sup>46</sup> Castellano O. (2018). Why 'Buycotting' is The New Form of Political Activism. [Why 'Buycotting' is The New Form of Political Activism | by Orge Castellano | Medium](#)

capacity of such information to reach the whole world. Finally, we briefly described two of the possible effects of brand activism on consumers, the boycotting and the buycotting. With this background, we are now ready to tackle the main subject of the research. We can finally jump directly into the study of one of the most emblematic cases of brand activism in response to the George Floyd assassination: “Ben & Jerry’s” case.



### **3. THE STUDY**

The first chapter of this thesis aimed at providing a comprehensive overview of Brand Activism phenomenon, basing on definitions and information on its main facets. After having deepened into the relevance of brand activism, the analysis focused on how Covid-19 Pandemic altered brands' activism positioning and the phenomenon itself. Finally, the chapter presented some key cases of brands who took stances besides #BlackLivesMatter movement.

In the second chapter, instead, we brought to light some central topics, intended to be the corollary to brand activism itself. Firstly, we conducted a rigorous analysis of corporate reputation by an academic point of view. As written, when a brand exposes itself with activist stances, it automatically gets ready (or should get ready) to an imminent effect on its reputation. Secondly, the focus moved to the topic of virality, which played a substantial role in George Floyd's case. In particular, we passed through the domain of electronic word of mouth (eWOM) since Floyd's video was mainly shared by the internet. The chapter concluded with a brief description of two opposite possible effects of brand activism on consumer behaviors: the buycotting and the boycotting.

The main purpose of these two chapters was to have a better understanding on Brand activism and on its inter-connected topics, in order to do the groundwork to define our research question. Drawing on this, we carry out our analysis and we prepare to go through the third chapter which will be focused on the research study cases.

#### **3.1 Research Question**

As examined, George Floyd's murder disrupted our society. It was not certainly the first police murder of a black person but something specific assigned to this case a renovate relevance. As known, the episode was entirely filmed and the amatorial video was shared all around the world. Consequently, and because of that horrible video, many people felt the need of acting. Protests spread in few hours. The world took a stance and brands with it. Step by step, hundreds of brands, from smallest to biggest, took the field. They published

posts on social media, publicly accused American institutions, donated money to organizations to support black people. They got out there. They amplified citizens' voice by taking clear stances in favor of black communities. People noted it. They scrutinized brands' behavior and responded to it. So, the answer comes up naturally. How?

How did people (or consumers in this case) react to those brand activism actions? This is a complex question which should deserve a wider place to be faced. Generically, we can assume that people had disparate reactions to brands' activist stances. As briefly described before, boycotting and boycotting are two of the main, and more general, categories of reactions. What can be generalized is that, as brands did, people did not lose the opportunity to give voice to their minds. After having scanned brands' #BLM stances, either if they agreed or not, they publicly expressed their opinion. Millions of comments, tags, retweets appeared below brands' posts, day by day. As predicted, people reactions had a strong impact on brands. More specifically, consumers' opinions impacted on corporate reputations. This is the key point of our research. The study aims at investigating the effects of brands' activist stances on their own reputations. Considering the huge variety of brands which supported the #BLM cause after Floyd's death, the research is based on two exemplary companies: "Ben & Jerry's" and "Amazon". The choice of these two main characters is based on their activist background, and so on the activist stances of the brand in past years. The past brand activism actions are indeed the keystone of our study. Definitely, the effects of #BLM stances on corporate reputation are examined through the lens of past activist moves. Drawing directly on this the research question of our study can be summarized as:

*Which is the effect of #BlackLivesMatter brand activism on corporate reputation? A comparative analysis between "Ben & Jerry's" and "Amazon's" based on their activist background.*

### **3.2 A Focus on GenZ**

Generation Z is the generation that comes after Millennials and before Generation Alpha. Researchers and the public press see the mid-to-late 1990s as the beginning of the birth

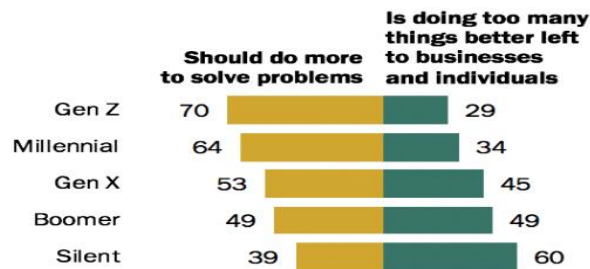
year and the early 2010s as the end of the birth year. The grounds for selecting this target for research are based on its primary qualities. Indeed, one of the generation's defining characteristics is its natural affinity for technology. While Millennials were labeled "digital pioneers" for their early exposure to technology and the internet, Gen Z was born into a world of peak technological innovation, where information was instantaneously available and social media became increasingly prevalent. Digital natives, as GenZ members are commonly referred to, have grown up with free and easy access to the internet, exposing them to both beneficial and harmful consequences. On the one hand, a plethora of information at GenZ's fingertips enables them to expand their knowledge and take an active role in their education. Unfortunately, excessive screen usage can exacerbate feelings of isolation and result in underdeveloped social skills. Then, another crucial feature of this target is its natural and unconscious approach to diversity. Based on the American demographic trend<sup>47</sup>, GenZ will be the last predominately white generation in the story: in US only 52% of zoomers are white. Besides that, GenZ grew up on the footprints of some emblematic historical and cultural achievements, such as the election of the first black President of USA and the legalization of gay marriage in many countries. As a result, zoomers are incredibly less upset than previous generations by differences in race, sexual orientation, or religion. Furthermore, and related to their digital nativity, zoomers have been defined as shrewd consumers. They have access to every kind of information on internet and social networks at hand, they have the constant possibility to compare products, prices and offers. Their pragmatism leads them to explore and evaluate a range of options before settling on a product. In addition, they perfectly know the added value of real-life users' reviews, so they usually rely on that before making informed purchasing decisions. Finally, another crucial point that identifies GenZ people is their progressive approach to politics. They are the generation least inclined to support President Trump's governance and the most likely to consider the growth of LGBTQ rights as a natural and beneficial development. Zoomers tend to take a more progressive stance on social issues,

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<sup>47</sup> [The Changing Child Population of the United States - The Annie E. Casey Foundation \(aecf.org\)](https://www.aecf.org/research/the-changing-child-population-of-the-united-states)

### Gen Z more likely than other generations to want an activist government

% saying government ...



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.  
Source: Surveys of U.S. adults ages 18 and older conducted Sept. 24-Oct. 7, 2018, and U.S. teens ages 13 to 17 conducted Sept. 17-Nov. 25, 2018.

"On the Cusp of Adulthood and Facing an Uncertain Future: What We Know About Generation Z So Far"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

respect to previous generations<sup>48</sup> (Figure 15): they concur that African Americans are treated more unjustly in the United States of America; they feel the government should play a larger role in issue resolution; and they are more likely to link climate change to human action rather than natural trends.<sup>49</sup> It is not a case that zoomers have

been at the forefront of some of the American most recent protests, obviously including the anti-racism and anti-police-brutality movement sparked by the death of George Floyd. In addition, according to a poll conducted by the Insider team, through Yubo<sup>50</sup>, and concordantly to what written above, digital natives used social media extensively to demonstrate their support for Black Lives Matter. 73% of Yubo respondents indicated that they utilized Instagram to express their support for Black Americans' equality, whereas 26% used TikTok, 25% used Twitter, and only 13% used Facebook.

To conclude, we provided a brief analysis on GenZ with the aim of underlining which where the main features of the most relevant target taking part to the vicissitude. Actually, the first person who shared the video, by giving birth to the enormous wave of reactions, was a 17-year-old lady, also called a zoomer. Their propensity to politics and social matters, their natural approach to diversity and their digital essence makes them the optimal subject to be investigated. This focus was also prompted by the lack of research on brand activism among digital natives. Such as the exhaustive analysis of Elkan (2018), most of the studies conducted so far focus on millennials. Then, as widely explored by Shetty et al. (2019) and Backman et al. (2021), millennials represent a prolific target to be examined

<sup>48</sup> [What We Know About Gen Z So Far | Pew Research Center](#)

<sup>49</sup> [Social Issues That Matter to Generation Z - The Annie E. Casey Foundation \(aecf.org\)](#)

<sup>50</sup> [90% of Gen Z Americans Support the Black Lives Matter Movement \(businessinsider.com\)](#)

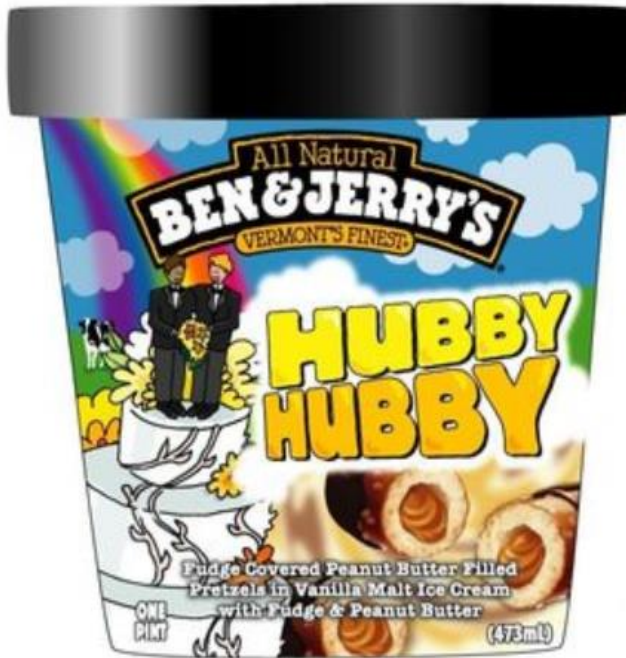
from the activism perspective. This has meant that their younger "peers" have been partially left aside. In this regard, the paragraph aimed to focus on GenZ and to shed light on how the latter accepts and approaches the phenomenon of brand activism.

### **3.3 “Ben & Jerry’s” #BLM activism: between past and present**

“Ben & Jerry's” is a Vermont-based ice cream, frozen yogurt, and sorbet manufacturer. It was created in 1978 in Burlington by two Jewish boyhood friends, Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield. Today, the company operates as a wholly owned subsidiary of Unilever on a global scale. The reason “Ben & Jerry's” was picked over thousands of other businesses is due to its activist nature. As we will see step by step, the company has always stood out for a distinctly radical note. Before many others, the company has been able to incorporate some of the most salient social causes into its communication and marketing plan. It has succeeded in incorporating environmental, racial, and civil issues into its products, which we must not forget being “simple” ice creams. Firstly, the analysis will focus on the company's activist past, on its products’ campaigns, on “Ben & Jerry’s” long-standing and ever-renewed dedication to the cause. A rigorous study of the several phases, and the various ice creams produced, through which the brand and its consumers have passed through, will allow us to arrive to the final destination of our journey: the analysis of the activism demonstrated towards the #BLM movement after the death of George Floyd. Therefore, proceeding in chronological order, the study aims to build up an exhaustive picture of the brand's past actions, so as to discern the present ones. Our journey begins back in 2009 when the state of Vermont witnessed the legalization of same-sex marriage. “Ben & Jerry’s” It decided to change the name of one of its most known ice creams. In partnership with *Freedom to Marry*<sup>51</sup>, it renamed “Chubby Hubby” to “Hubby Hubby,” (Figure 16) to celebrate homosexuals unions. The carton of the ice cream featured the image of two men (one black and the other white) in tuxedos getting married beneath a rainbow. According to the company, that act aimed to raise awareness of the importance

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<sup>51</sup> The national bipartisan organization dedicated to winning marriage for same-sex couples in the United States.



of marriage equality and to encourage other states to follow the blazing trails of Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Iowa, and Maine. On the same wave, in 2012, the company decided to expand its commitment to sex equity to overseas too. It renamed another ice cream, from "Oh! My! Apple Pie!" to "Apple-y Ever After" in the UK, in support of equal marriage rights for same-sex couples with new tubes featuring a

gay couple atop a wedding cake decorated with rainbows.

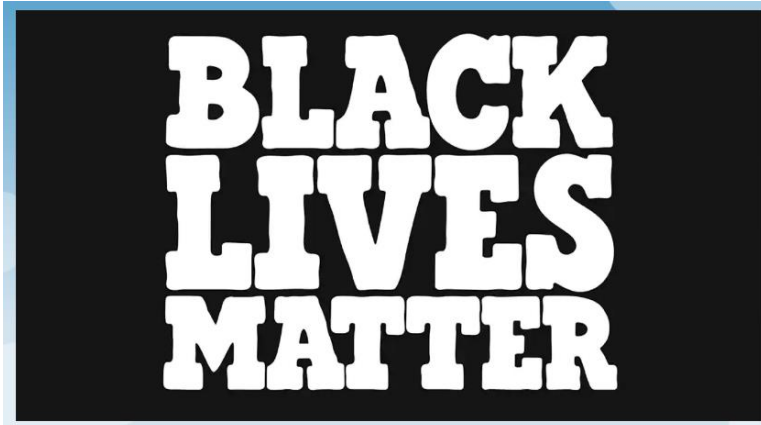
Continuing with social themes, "Ben & Jerry's" launched a limited-edition frozen yogurt flavor named "Taste the Lin-Sanity" in celebration of Harvard alumni and Asian-American basketball star Jeremy Lin. Initially, the recipe had vanilla frozen yogurt, lychee honey swirls, and fortune cookie bits. Even though it received widespread appreciation, it generated a public controversy about racial stereotyping as a result of the fortune cookie ingredient's connection to Chinese culture. In response the company released an official statement shortly after the launch of the product apologizing to those who were offended. *"We are proud and honored to have Jeremy Lin hail from one of our fine, local universities and we are huge sports fans,"* "Ben & Jerry's" said in the news release. *"Our intention was to create a flavor to honor Jeremy Lin's accomplishments and his meteoric rise in the NBA and recognize that he was a local Harvard graduate. We tried to demonstrate our commitment as a Boston-based, valued-led business and if we failed in this instance, we offer our sincere apologies<sup>52</sup>."* That event meant something relevant to the company. It

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<sup>52</sup> [New York Knicks' Jeremy Lin -- Ben & Jerry's apologizes for 'Lin-Sanity' flavor \(espn.com\)](http://www.espn.com/story/_/id/12345678/new-york-knicks-jeremy-lin-ben-jerry-s-apologizes-for-lin-sanity-flavor)

learned a lot from the reaction of consumers and consequently learned to pay even more attention to every possible link, action, details of its communication.

In 2016, after the police shooting in Charlotte<sup>53</sup>, North Carolina, ““Ben & Jerry’s”” felt the



need of standing up alongside black people. It publicly demonstrated support to black communities, and it published for the first time the “Black Lives Matter” statement (Figure 17). In

honor of that episode, it stated *“Black Lives Matter. They matter because they are children, brothers, sisters, mothers, and fathers. They matter because the injustices they face steal from all of us, white people, and people of color alike. They steal our very humanity. Systemic and institutionalized racism are the defining civil rights and social justice issues of our time. We’ve come to understand that to be silent about the violence and threats to the lives and well-being of Black people is to be complicit in that violence and those threats<sup>54</sup>.”* On its website page, the company clearly explained its commitment to the fight of systemic racism, assuming that *“All lives do matter. But all lives will not matter until Black Lives Matter”*. Carrying on in this vein, another major act of activism, strictly linked to our research topic, was the launch of an ice cream which aimed at countering Trump’s government in 2018. The “Pecan Resist” taste (Figure 18), comprised of white vanilla and brown and black components (dark fudged chunks, pecan, fudge wrapped almonds), was a significant component of the company's effort to lick injustice and support those working to establish a more just and equal nation for all. As the company said on its website, the new flavor celebrated groups that *“resist the Trump administration’s regressive and discriminatory policies and build a future that values inclusivity, equality, and justice for*

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<sup>53</sup> [Charlotte police shooting - CNN](#)

<sup>54</sup> [Why Black Lives Matter | Ben & Jerry’s \(benjerry.com\)](#)





*people of color, women, the LGBTQ community, refugees, and immigrants”<sup>55</sup>. The pint was designed by the artist and activist Favianna Rodriguez. The carton read: "Welcome to the resistance. Together, Pecan Resist!...We celebrate the diversity of our glorious nation & raise our spoons in*

*solidarity for all Americans. Take a stand & join those on the front lines.”* Apart from the tube and its advertising strategy, the corporation demonstrated its devotion with another bold and public gesture. It provided \$25,000 to four organizations that advocate for people of color, Native Americans' environmental justice, and women, including Color of Change, Honor the Earth, the Women's March, and Neta. Additionally, to raise awareness about those organizations, B&J included a URL on the package that directed consumers to information about the four realities to which the company gave money. Finally, but certainly not least, is the manner in which the flavor "Pecan resist" was sold. It was available exclusively through participating "Ben & Jerry's" scoop shops and the company's website. Although this option limited sales, it sent a strong message of concrete involvement and genuine commitment to the cause. “Ben & Jerry's” want that the message inspire consumers to take action, and to take action seriously. The emphasis was shifted away from the ice cream product and onto the social cause. In Pecan Resist edition, the product was seen as a means and not as an end. Drawing directly on this, the company began providing a variety of formative content on its website<sup>56</sup>. Indeed, “Ben & Jerry’s” is strongly committed, not only to spurring consumers, but also to educating them. In the “Dig deeper” section incipit on company’s website, we can read “*We invite you to join us*

<sup>55</sup> [The Art of Pecan Resist: A Q&A with Favianna Rodriguez | Ben & Jerry’s \(benjerry.com\)](#)

<sup>56</sup> [Dig Deeper | Ben & Jerry’s \(benjerry.com\)](#)



on a journey to better understand the issue of race in our country, to acknowledge the existence of systemic racism and the implicit biases that all of us carry and to join hands and move forward together.” The page section is enriched by a series of articles, videos, partner company’s programs, initiatives, campaigns, and, most importantly, by a series of links redirecting people to concretely support the cause and fight systemic racism together with the company. According to what it is written in Ben and Jerry’s website, the company always stood up for what it believed in. Besides the climate justice and LGBT rights, it also started to slowly devolve into the racial cause because it felt that *“the issues of race have become increasingly divisive over the past decade resulting in policies that intentionally force people of color out of our democracy. Through the suppression of Black, low income, and minority voters, we have landed with a government that doesn’t look all that much like ‘we the people’, instead the rule makers are predominantly white, older, and male. This has resulted in policies that are not representative of our diverse nation. It perpetuates a society that doesn’t provide equal outcomes for all of its members. We feel the polarizing issue of race is inherently at the root of many other issues our country is*



*facing.*<sup>57</sup>” According to that, in September 2019 “Ben & Jerry’s” created a new ice-cream flavor called *Justice ReMix’d* (Figure 19) and presented it as *“the new flavor featuring cinnamon and chocolate, gobs of cinnamon bun dough, and spicy fudge brownies. And the best part? Justice ReMix’d also has a sweet swirl of justice under the lid*<sup>58</sup>”. The initiative was realized in partnership with The Advancement Project National Office<sup>59</sup>, a multi-racial

<sup>57</sup> [Dig Deeper | Ben & Jerry’s \(benjerry.com\)](#)

<sup>58</sup> [Introducing Justice ReMix’d! | Ben & Jerry’s \(benjerry.com\)](#)

<sup>59</sup> [Portal Page - Advancement Project - Advancement Project](#)

civil rights organization dedicated to racial justice issues. Following on with the statement of the firm, “*We believe justice should be for everyone, not just the white and wealthy. So, we’re speaking out in the best way we know of, with a euphoric ice cream flavor, for an end to structural racism in our broken criminal legal system.*”<sup>60</sup>. The underlying idea of the ice-cream was to spread awareness to the justice needed when it came to systemic racism and criminal justice reform.

Systemic racism and criminal justice reform are obviously big issues for a business to take on. That is why, step by step, “Ben & Jerry’s” has been trying to be advocate for social justice and equity throughout its 40-year history. Over the years, the company has tried to actively participate in the daily lives of its consumers, recognizing which causes moved their minds more than others. It has been able to adapt, evolve and progress, supporting new colossal social causes, such as exactly the systemic racism one. In doing so, it has



come to growingly take the side of black minorities and fight for them. It has grown along with the cause itself, finally demonstrating an incredulous steadfastness at the time of George Floyd's death. In response to that dramatic event, the

brand stated “*The murder of George Floyd was the result of inhumane police brutality that is perpetuated by a culture of white supremacy (Figure 20). What happened to George Floyd was not the result of a bad apple; it was the predictable consequence of a racist and prejudiced system and culture that has treated Black bodies as the enemy from the beginning*”<sup>61</sup>. “Ben & Jerry’s” promptly called on Americans to "dismantle white

<sup>60</sup> [Justice ReMix'd Ice Cream | Ben & Jerry's \(benjerry.com\)](https://www.benjerry.com/justice-remix)

<sup>61</sup> [Silence Is NOT An Option | Ben & Jerry's \(benjerry.com\)](https://www.benjerry.com/silence-is-not-an-option)

supremacy" and "grapple with the sins of our past" as nationwide protests against racial injustice continued to stretch in the country<sup>62</sup>. It publicly accused Derek Chauvin and the other police officers of murder and *theft* because they “*They stole him. They stole him from his family and his friends, his church and his community, and from his own future*”. Because of the urgent need of dismantling white supremacy, “Ben & Jerry’s” called for four things:

- It urged President Trump, government authorities, and political parties to commit the United States of America to an official healing and reconciliation process.
- It urged Congress to pass H.R. 40, a bill that would conduct a study of the effects of slavery and discrimination from 1619 to the present and offer suitable reforms.
- It endorsed Floyd's family's proposal for the establishment of a national task force charged with the responsibility of drafting bipartisan legislation aimed at reducing racial violence and strengthening police accountability.
- It urged the Department of Justice to re-establish its Civil Rights Division as a stalwart champion of Black and Brown people's rights.

It finally stated: “*Unless and until white America is willing to collectively acknowledge its privilege, take responsibility for its past and the impact it has on the present, and commit to creating a future steeped in justice, the list of names that George Floyd has been added to will never end. We have to use this moment to accelerate our nation's long journey towards justice and a more perfect union.*” Besides this radical and rigorous statement, the brand took evident stances also on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, reaching multitudes of audiences. “Ben & Jerry’s” stances were widely well-accepted. According to Fortune, the statement for George Floyd was much in line with “Ben & Jerry’s” history. According to Miller<sup>63</sup>, this can be attributed to the fact that, long before it was fashionable, Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield embraced a triple-bottom-line approach to business, valuing the environment and people alongside profits. Despite the fact that the cofounders sold the

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<sup>62</sup> [Ben & Jerry's statement on white supremacy is so extraordinary. Here's why - CNN](#)

<sup>63</sup> Chris Miller, Global Activist Manager of Ben & Jerry’s.

company to Unilever in 2000, "Ben & Jerry's" preserved its independent spirit and humanitarian goal. It never ceased to express its commitment and act in the name of the organization. As Miller remarked, *"as a corporation that remains devoted to the values upon which it was formed, we felt compelled to address some of these challenges."* Without a doubt, "Ben & Jerry's" stance on #BLM was embraced as well, if not more so, because the company's activism history enabled it to voice a strong position.

### **3.4 "Amazon" #BLM activism: between past and present**

How to be unaware of the garage's history. "Amazon.com" is a multinational technology firm headquartered in the United States that specializes in e-commerce, cloud computing, digital streaming, and artificial intelligence. It has been described as "one of the world's most powerful economic and cultural forces", as well as the world's most valuable brand<sup>64</sup>. Additionally, "Amazon" is the world's largest Internet firm in terms of revenue. Due to the company's size, it is continually in the public eye. More precisely, because of its impact and strength, "Amazon" cannot afford to make errors, as every detail, no matter how minor, is constantly recorded, studied, and commented. The media, consumers, and competitors all keep an eye on "Amazon" for its next move.

By an activist point of view, "Amazon" is certainly different from the case previously discussed. Its story is more complex and constantly made of "ups and downs". This is why, it deserves some attention. According to "Amazon's" position statement<sup>65</sup>, the company affirms that *"Customers represent a wide array of genders, races, ethnicities, abilities, ages, religions, sexual orientations, military status, backgrounds, and political views. It's critical that "Amazon" employees are also diverse and that we foster a culture where inclusion is the norm. [...] It's not only that diversity, equity, and inclusion are good for business- it's more fundamental than that. It's simply right."* Based on that, "Amazon" created in recent years its affinity groups, also known as employee resource groups, which

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<sup>64</sup>[Accelerated Growth Sees Amazon Crowned 2019's BrandZ™ Top 100 Most Valuable Global Brand \(prnewswire.com\)](https://prnewswire.com)

<sup>65</sup>[Amazon's Policy Positions \(aboutamazon.com\)](https://aboutamazon.com)

bring “Amazon” employees together across businesses and locations around the world<sup>66</sup>. Among these we find for example, Black Employee Network (BEN), Women@, and Latinos@. “The objective of Amazon's” Black Employee Network (BEN) is to recruit, retain, and empower African American employees. BEN connects members with mentors and conducts workshops on career and personal development. Women@ is the world's largest affinity organization for women, non-binary employees, and allies at “Amazon,” with over 80 chapters globally and the largest membership of any affinity group. Women@ is dedicated to recruiting, developing, and keeping women in technical and non-tech roles across all of “Amazon's” businesses. Latinos@ is committed to fostering a vibrant community for Hispanic/Latinx employees, with an emphasis on recruiting, retaining, and developing talent, as well as engaging in community outreach and improving our customers’ “Amazon” experience. The group offers an internal mentorship program, serves on an advisory board for Latinx-focused commercial ventures, arranges social, cultural, and fund-raising events, and assists in recruiting efforts at national conferences and colleges. Apart from the affinity clubs, “Amazon” has established another noteworthy initiative: the “Black Business Accelerator.” The project is committed to assisting Black businesses in achieving lasting equity and growth by facilitating their success as vendors. In practice, the company provides financial assistance to black entrepreneurs, including a \$500 credit to help with start-up and operational costs for eligible newly established sellers and \$400 in Sponsored Products advertising credits to help the business gain awareness. Definitely, according to “Amazon” digital communication strategy (mainly on the website), the company seems to be actively committed in many causes, the environmental one more than others. But exactly, what did “Amazon” do in “real-life” in terms of brand activism? And especially, were its actions in line with its corporate values?

In 2019, “Amazon” co-founded The Climate Pledge, a commitment to be net-zero carbon across its business by 2040 (Figure 21), 10 years ahead of the Paris Agreement<sup>67</sup>. According to what “Amazon” stated<sup>68</sup>, the initiative was undertaken also to drive

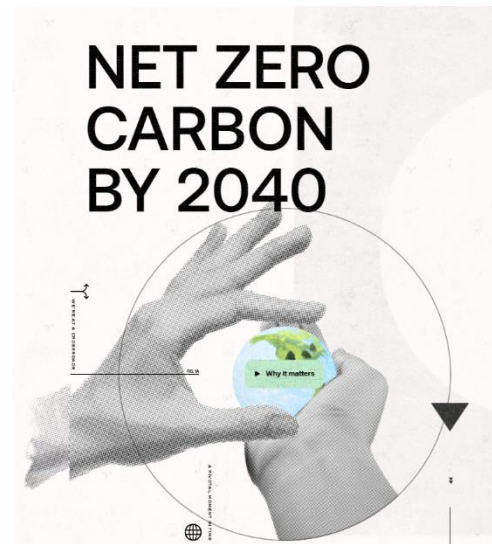
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<sup>66</sup> [Affinity groups \(aboutamazon.com\)](https://aboutamazon.com)

<sup>67</sup> [Challenge Accepted \(theclimatepledge.com\)](https://theclimatepledge.com)

<sup>68</sup> [The Climate Pledge \(aboutamazon.com\)](https://aboutamazon.com)

collective, cross-sector action on the climate crisis. Combating the climate change is indeed a matter of multitude of actors. A similar goal cannot be achieved by a single participant, rather by several ones cooperating ones with the others. In this regard, “Amazon” acted on the conviction that global businesses were responsible, accountable, and able to act together on the climate crisis. In line with what had been affirmed, “Amazon” started to buy renewable energy and to launch new sustainable projects all around the world. In 2020 the company achieved an incredible result: it became the biggest corporate buyer of renewable energy ever. As a response, Bezos stated *“With a total of 127 solar and wind projects, we are on a path to running 100% of our business on renewable energy by 2025, five years ahead of our original target of 2030. This is just one of the many steps we’re taking that will help us meet our Climate Pledge. I couldn’t be prouder of all the teams across “Amazon” that continue to work hard, smart, and fast to get these projects up and running”*<sup>69</sup>. Indeed, the corporation invested in 6.5 GW of wind and solar projects, which will enable it to deliver more than 18 million megawatt hours (MWh) of renewable energy to its operations each year, enough to power 1.7 million US homes for a year. The primary objective of these projects was, and continues to be, to provide renewable energy to "Amazon's" corporate headquarters, fulfillment locations, and "Amazon" Web Services (AWS) data centers.



Next to this huge worldwide project, something completely different happened in parallel. In December 2018, almost a thousand of “Amazon” employees created a coalition called “Amazon” Employees for Climate Justice. Some months later, they all signed a letter demanding the firm to do something to halt its contributions to climate change. The list of requests included ending its contracts with the oil and gas industry, to which it sold cloud infrastructure and AI. On September 20<sup>th</sup>, a day after Jeff Bezos announced the “Climate

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<sup>69</sup> [Amazon is now the largest corporate buyer of renewable energy \(solarpowerworldonline.com\)](https://solarpowerworldonline.com/)





Pledge”, “Amazon” workers joined other big tech employees in a historic walkout for the climate action (Figure 22). The walkout, directed to the firm's Seattle headquarters, aimed to pressure the

company to improve its environmental practices. In that occasion, two members of the coalition, Maren Costa and Jamie Kowalski, openly spoke to *The Post* explaining the movement and accusing “Amazon”. Some days after, “Amazon” human resources department sent them a letter intimidating them of a possible dismissal due to violation of company policies. The result was that the two activists were fired, and “Amazon” publicly explained that it supported *“every employee's right to criticize their employer's working conditions, but that does not come with blanket immunity against our internal policies, all of which are lawful. [...] We terminated these employees not for talking publicly about working conditions, safety, or sustainability, but rather, for repeatedly violating internal policies.”*<sup>70</sup> Despite that strong move, the climate activist coalition did not stop, though. The latter in fact, silenced by the Climate pledge initiative, raised a new point: pushing “Amazon” to address its *“disproportionate environmental impact in communities of color”*. Parallel to this story, those same years tell another important vicissitude about Bezos' company. In March 2020, Covid-19 Pandemic shocked the world. Nobody was ready to deal with it. Neither the market's giants, such as “Amazon”. After days of uncertainty and dread, workers at "Amazon's" Staten Island warehouse ended up choosing to strike in response to requests that the facility be shut down and sanitized following a positive Coronavirus test by one employee. They claimed that the firm was not doing enough to

<sup>70</sup> [Amazon 'illegally retaliated' against climate activists - BBC News](#)

safeguard them against the virus's spread. The walkout was led by Christian Smalls (Figure 23), a 31-years-old black management assistant at the facility. The day before the strike he publicly affirmed that the real number of infected people at the warehouse was seven and not one. *“People are scared, supervisors, managers ... all levels,” Smalls said. “We’re*

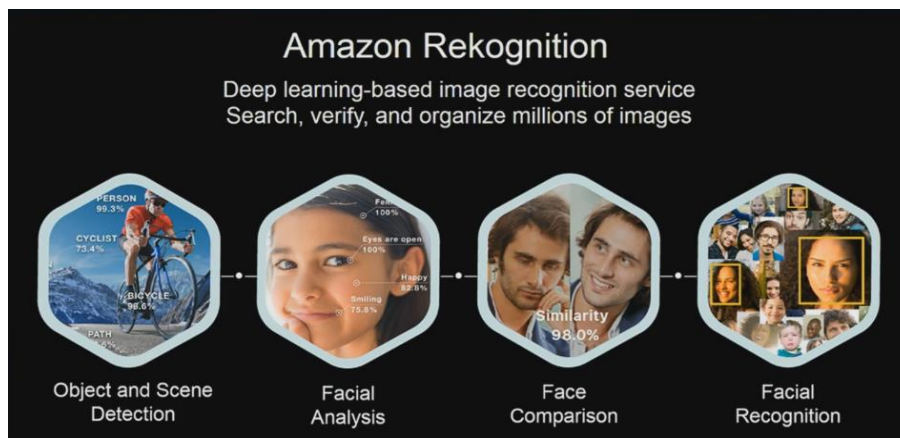


*unsafe. There are thousands of employees at risk*<sup>71</sup>.” “Amazon” confirmed that it had taken significant measures to protect employee safety, increasing its investment in thorough cleaning, buying available safety supplies, and altering protocols to ensure employees working in its buildings maintained safe distances. Unfortunately, Smalls revealed that nobody, among employees, knew what had been done in terms of cleaning and that rather everyone was asked to clean his own workspace when he came into work and left. Smalls also added that some employees had been self-quarantining as a precaution, including those at higher risk of catching the disease, but they had been forced to take unpaid time off. The company replied to this charge saying that Smalls’ statements were incorrect and misleading, and then that Coronavirus cases at the Staten Island facility were not connected to each other. Finally, “Amazon” affirmed *“Our employees are heroes fighting for their communities and helping people get critical items they need in this crisis. Like all businesses grappling with the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, we are working hard to keep employees safe while serving communities and the most vulnerable.”* Nevertheless, Chris Smalls was fired right after the walkout with a quick phone call, he confessed to The Post<sup>72</sup>. The decision came as a shock for Smalls and for all the other employees protesting. *“They pretty much retaliated*

<sup>71</sup> [Amazon workers on Staten Island to stage walkout over coronavirus \(nypost.com\)](https://nypost.com/2020/03/23/amazon-workers-on-staten-island-to-stage-walkout-over-coronavirus/)

<sup>72</sup> [Coronavirus in NY: Amazon’s Staten Island employees strike over response \(nypost.com\)](https://nypost.com/2020/03/23/coronavirus-in-ny-amazons-staten-island-employees-strike-over-response/)





against me for speaking out,” said Smalls, “I don’t know how they sleep at night.” After this controversial vicissitude, the

company was overwhelmed by a wave of critics, racist charges and boycotting comments.

Drawing directly on this, another main topic, strictly related “Amazon’s” reputation, deserves to be mentioned. In 2016, “Amazon” launched a cloud-based software as a service (SaaS) computer vision platform, called Rekognition (Figure 24). The tool once received video or images, could identify objects, people, text, scenes, and activities. It could detect any inappropriate content as well. “Amazon” Rekognition also provided highly accurate facial analysis, face comparison, and face search capabilities. *“You can detect, analyze, and compare faces for a wide variety of use cases, including user verification, cataloging, people counting, and public safety”<sup>73</sup>*, stated “Amazon” website. Among the software's primary capabilities was the ability to search photos, saved films, and streaming movies for faces that matched those in a container known as a face collection. Additionally, it was capable of detecting obscene and violent content in photographs and stored videos, as well as filtering out undesirable content based on corporate requirements. Within a few months, the software began to be offered to government organizations, police departments, and the FBI, which in 2018 piloted Rekognition in video surveillance. One year later, in 2019, “Amazon” received a letter from a shareholder requesting that the company restrict Rekognition usage and sales due to the risk it presented to human and civil rights, as well as shareholder value. Civil liberties parties, academics, and shareholders requested that “Amazon” immediately cease sales of Rekognition to the state, citing concerns that the Company was allowing a surveillance system *“easily available to abuse rights and target black communities.”* Four

<sup>73</sup> [What is Amazon Rekognition? - Amazon Rekognition](#)

hundred fifty “Amazon” employees echoed this demand, posing a talent and retention risk<sup>74</sup>. Then, in another letter, 50 prominent artificial-intelligence academics, including representatives from Google, Facebook, and Microsoft, discussed findings about the software's racial and gender biases. The study, conducted by Inioluwa Deborah Raji and Joy Buolamwini and published at the AAAI/ACM conference on "Artificial Intelligence, Ethics, and Society," discovered that the Rekognition tool made significantly more errors when classifying the gender of darker skinned women than it did for lighter skinned men (31 percent vs. 0 percent). In response, Matthew Wood, general manager of artificial intelligence at "Amazon" Web Services (AWS), and Michael Punke, vice president of worldwide public policy at AWS, attempted to discredit the findings by labeling it "misleading" and drawing "wrong conclusions." Several months later, in November 2019, almost 500 “Amazon” employees wrote to Jeff Bezos requesting that the business stop sales of Rekognition to police agencies and establish employee monitoring of ethical decisions<sup>75</sup>. Again, in January, another letter signed by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) was sent. It stated “*In a world with face surveillance, people will have to fear being watched and targeted by the government for attending a protest, congregating outside a place of worship, or simply living their lives*”<sup>76</sup>. In reply to those charges, Bezos strongly defended the company’s government sales, and argued that some misuse of certain technologies could be inevitable, but that should not be a reason to curtail their development<sup>77</sup>. Definitely, “Amazon” never agreed with protestants and firmly defended its facial-recognition tool against claims of racial and gender bias until the “end”. As a result, the software is still in use and it can still be sold to government organizations.

After this analysis of “Amazon’s” past, it might be a good time to get to talking about activism on behalf of George Floyd. We conducted an analysis of “Amazon’s” past to understand the foundation on which #BLM actions stand. We saw the company became

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<sup>74</sup> [AMZN Prohibit Sales 2019 FINAL.pdf \(squarespace.com\)](#)

<sup>75</sup> [SEC: Amazon can't stop an investor vote on face recognition \(fastcompany.com\)](#)

<sup>76</sup> [Coalition Letter to Amazon Urging Company Commit Not to Release Face Surveillance Product | American Civil Liberties Union \(aclu.org\)](#)

<sup>77</sup> [Amazon's Jeff Bezos Says Tech Companies Should Work With the Pentagon | WIRED](#)

more committed to the environmental cause, while still recognizing inclusion and race equality as corporate values. We went through the firing of the black employee during the Covid-19 pandemic. And then finally, we looked at the birth, growth and accusations made towards Rekognition software. Now we are finally ready to study “Amazon” activism around Floyd's death.

As imagined, “Amazon” followed thousands of other companies after Floyd’s death. It tweeted out a strongly worded message of support for those people who were protesting, saying: *"The inequitable and brutal treatment of Black people in our country must stop. Together we stand in solidarity with the Black community, our employees, customers, and partners, in the fight against systematic racism and injustice."* As part of that endeavor, "Amazon" pledged a total of \$10 million to organizations dedicated to advancing social justice and improving the lives of Black and African Americans. The recipients, selected with the aid of "Amazon Black's" Employee Network, included groups committed to combating systemic racism through the law system, as well as those committed to supporting educational and economic opportunities for Black people<sup>78</sup>.

Nevertheless, public opinion did not miss the occasion to give voice to its thoughts. Two days after the “Amazon’s” tweet, an incisive retweet followed. It came from @Amazionans: WeWontBuildIt<sup>79</sup>, a group of “Amazon” workers calling for accountability and transparency in the company. It said *“Which police contracts have you cut? How many remain?”*, retweeting then the original “Amazon” post (Figure 25, on next page). Clearly referring to “Amazon” actions connected to the Police, the post seemed to not have forgotten anything of “Amazon’s” past<sup>80</sup>. “Amazon” employees chastised the firm for supporting George Floyd demonstrators while continuing to sell monitoring technology to law enforcement. Amazon was accused of woke-washing following its #BLM stance. Definitely, because of the strong incongruency between what “Amazon” had did in the past and what it professed on Floyd’s case, people mostly rejected its brand activism stance.

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<sup>78</sup> [Amazon donates \\$10 million to organizations supporting justice and equity \(aboutamazon.com\)](https://www.aboutamazon.com/news/social-justice/amazon-donates-10-million-to-organizations-supporting-justice-and-equity)

<sup>79</sup> [Amazonians: We Won't Build It \(@WeWontBuildIt\) / Twitter](https://twitter.com/WeWontBuildIt)

<sup>80</sup> [Amazon Workers Accuse Company of Hypocrisy Over George Floyd Statement \(businessinsider.com\)](https://www.businessinsider.com/amazon-workers-accuse-company-of-hypocrisy-over-george-floyd-statement)



**Amazonians: We Won't Build It**

@WeWontBuildIt



Which police contracts have you cut? How many remain?



**Amazon**



@amazon

The inequitable and brutal treatment of Black people in our country must stop.

Together we stand in solidarity with the Black community – our employees, customers, and partners – in the fight against systemic racism and injustice.

**amazon**

6:01 AM · Jun 2, 2020



Although, the company was deeply committed to the cause, its past actions were still alive in people's minds. This basically prevented “Amazon’s” activism from being received as it should have been.

## **4. METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION**

After the case analysis proposed in chapter three, it is time to shed light on what happened specifically. In particular, it is time to examine and to deepen the meaning of the posts published on Twitter by the two companies. After proposing a rigorous analysis of posts' significance in a semiotic perspective, we will explore the reactions of consumers, in form of comments on social media, to the activist stances of "Amazon" and "Ben & Jerry's". The comparison will focus on two companies which, even by supporting both the #BlackLivesMatter movement, have two different historical activist backgrounds and so differently approached to the topic of Floyd's death. In this regard, the fourth chapter aims to unhinge the Twitter posts of the two companies and to analyze the impact of posts' content on consumers' opinions. Consequently, it aims at detecting the effect of the reactions aroused in the minds of consumers on the reputations of the companies themselves. The chapter, in order, will present the research methodology employed. It will then move on to the semiotic analysis of the two posts. It will continue with the study of the empirical data produced by the users (comments). In conclusion, it will propose a brief discussion on possible future developments of the research.

### **4.1 Methodology**

The main part of the research focuses on the analysis of the content itself, such as the two posts published on "Amazon" and "Ben & Jerry's" Twitter profiles. Accordingly, we decided to employ a semiotic approach in order to deepen the meaning vehiculated by the two companies through their statements. Semiotics is usually defined as a social science discipline which seeks to understand how the codes, structuring meaning production in sign systems, influence the ways people react to messages in their contexts. In this regard, before analyzing consumers' reactions, a semiotic approach was assumed to be the best solution to serve our scope. When we generally refer to brands, we must keep in mind that they are real sign systems (Oswald, 2007). Indeed, the associations made by consumers of the brand with specific symbols or meaning come from the marketing management of

brand semiotics. In general, marketing semiotics is based on a deep analysis of consumer target's culture, on the identification of target cultural codes and finally on the alignment of the brand with those codes. For this reason, a semiotic approach seemed to be the best solution in order to decompose the sign system of the two posts and link it to the cultural dimension of consumers / users. Passing through the enunciative structure of brands' communication messages, the research proceeds with an analysis of the brands' posts storytelling. Storytelling in marketing refers to an instrumental employ of the story to build a certain brand image, to attribute values and create emotional links with consumers. To treat about storytelling, we borrowed some main concepts from narratology and semiotics again. Indeed, narratology is about the theory of narratives where the latter are supposed to convey brands' core values and be entertaining, easy to understand and emotive to the audience. As described, the first part of the analysis aims to clarify and shed light on the hidden meaning of the posts. Only once these will be clarified, we will proceed with the second methodology employed. The latter consists in an analysis of the comments, published under the two posts, carried out using NVivo software. The latter was selected because of its wide range of qualitative approaches that could be applied to the research. Before getting in touch with NVivo, a social media marketing software was used to export the comments of the two Twitter posts in question. Once exported, we passed to the qualitative analysis through NVivo which aimed to uncover richer insights and produce clearly articulated findings backed by rigorous evidence. Considering the deeply divergent nature of the two companies and their different reaction to the death of George Floyd, the analysis respectively focuses on the main concepts and themes of each post. The same methodological schema will be used only at the beginning and at the end of the analysis, in order to figure out some common patterns even in those completely dissimilar scenarios. The aim of the research is indeed highlighting consumers' reactions in the light of companies' past actions.

#### 4.2 Content analysis: a semiotic approach to “Amazon’s” post

“Amazon” was one of the first companies publishing a post (Figure 26) in reaction to George Floyd’s death. The post appeared on Twitter on May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020. Its simple structure



includes a black background and a white text. No caption was added to image shared. The image, showing a company’s statement, can be divided into three sections. In the first one, identifiable with the upper side of the image, we can read the opening sentence “*The inequitable and brutal treatment of Black people in our country must stop*”. Through a literal analysis, we can assume that black people are the focus of the attention. No information is spread on their identity. They could be anyone. The only information we have is their skin color. We can also read that they suffer from a brutal and inequitable treatment. *Brutal* certainly identifies something bad but the post does not explain in which measure it is bad, and why it is. Then, the sentence reports the use of the term *inequitable*, but no reference is made to “others”. Theoretically, we can’t say by whom Blacks are treated differently. Going on, it appears a vague spatial information, such as *in our country*. Literally, it could be any country in which “Amazon” operates since the statement is made

by the company itself. Finally, the expression *must stop* refers to a mandatory action which must be put in place. So, if we only stick to the literal meaning of the words employed, we do not get any useful insight. If we now re-analyze the same sentence with a semiotic approach, we will be able to capture the hidden signs underlaying the text and so to understand the real meaning of the words. Indeed, according to Ferdinand de Saussure (1916), each meaning has a dialectical nature which swings from a signifier and a signified (what they mean to readers). So, we can state that a sign is given by a signifier which denotes its signified. In turn, a denotation, the literal meaning of the text, can suggest or imply a connotation, which is an associative meaning. This association is generated because of the culture, the values, and the feelings of the audience. Then, through the syntagmatic structure of the statement (choice of words), the company decided to deliver a specific message to its community. It could have used a different vocabulary (creating another syntagmatic sequence), but it opted for those specific terms for a reason. Those terms indeed assume a particular meaning if they are inscribed into their context of belonging. Those *Black people* assume a face. First of all, even if not expressively said, the first Black person we think of is George Floyd. Actually, “Amazon” published this post only 6 days after the death of Floyd. It means that the statement was supposed to generate a top-of-mind association in consumers / users’ minds: it had to immediately recall the murder of Floyd happened the week before. In addition, since the company refers to a plural subject, it should convey the association to other Black people died in similar conditions in the United States, such as Dreasjon “Sean” Reed, Breonna Taylor, Atatiana Jefferson, Ronald Greene, Stephon Clark,.. etc. Indeed, all these names belong to other Black people killed by the police brutality in the years before Floyd’s murder<sup>81</sup>. If we imagine that a consistent part of people who read the statement published by “Amazon” was black, we can affirm that vague subject, as black people, assume a relevant meaning (signified) to those readers. Then, according to the brand, black people are victim of *inequitable and brutal treatments*. The term *inequitable* highlights the roots of the discrimination of the black ethnicity, who continuously suffers from an unequal treatment.

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<sup>81</sup> [list of unarmed black people killed by police — On Monuments — Renée Ater \(reneeater.com\)](#)



Although the references of inequality are not defined in the statement, readers perfectly understand that the tacit reference is linked to white people. Actually, black people are not treated as white ones. In addition, that treatment is defined as being *brutal*. The adjective here clearly evokes the concept of police violence even if not openly said. The choice of the term *brutal* indeed creates a resounding link to the word *brutality*, which is usually associated to the term police. More specifically, the concept of police brutality was particularly recalled and cited after the death of George Floyd. Finally, the company uses the word *treatment*. Even if it is usually employed as a generic word, in this case it evokes the murder of Floyd. It evokes the *treatment* of the knee pushing on the neck of the victim. Then, as for Floyds, it includes also all the other *treatments* of black people who died because of the police. Going on, the spatial reference obviously assumes a clear meaning: the actions described belong to the United States. At the end, the sentence concludes with a “*must stop*”. The employ of the modal verb *must* identifies a mandatory request. Actually, it is an assertion, but the fact that the manner of stopping is not clarified, makes it seem an impersonal request. An order demanded to no one knows who. A vague command. Following on, this first sentence is then followed by a space. An empty black space. The text does not re-start at the end of the period, neither on the next available line. One line is kept empty, as it should impose a pause to readers. The main subject of the text is going to change, and the black space wants to warn readers about it. The text then continues, showing up the second section of the image and displaying “*Together we stand in solidarity with the Black community - our employees, customers and partners – in the fight against systemic racism and injustice*”. The term *together* literally means “with each other”. Here in the post, it clearly refers to the company, in its totality, and to its community who is reading the post. By using the word *together*, the brand aims at putting itself within the crowd of those who stand for the #BLM movement, but who do not necessarily fight for it. Indeed, the verb employed is not evoking an aggressive or impactful action. The brand *stands in solidarity*. The expression here evokes an extremely peaceful action. The act of standing up, literally, is made when a subject wants to demonstrate its respect, devotion or attention to something. Here the brand stands in *solidarity* with the black community.

Solidarity is defined as a unity (as of a group or class) that produces or is based on community of interests, objectives, and standards<sup>82</sup>. Actually, the brand wants to disclose its interest in Black community topic to its community. It clearly wants people know it takes the side of the *Black community*. In particular, the community “Amazon” is referring to is explained by the following part of the sentence, where the brand names its *employees*, its *customers* and its *partners*. That is the Black community intended by “Amazon”. On one side, the list of subjects helps those three groups of people (employees, customers and partners) to feel part of a whole. They all belong to the *black community* of the giant “Amazon”. They are directly called into this common project. Unfortunately, on the other side, the specification kindly excludes all the other black people who do not work, do not buy or do not collaborate with “Amazon”. The brand seems to distinguish the black people who are linked with it from those who have nothing to do with it. The specification creates a sort of magnifying glass on those who belong to the community and those who are excluded from it. Finally, the statement concludes with “in the fight against the systemic racism and injustice”. The term *fight* literally means “A confrontation between opposing groups in which each attempt to harm or gain power over the other, as with bodily force or weapons<sup>83</sup>”. Even if a fight is usually something physical, here the term seems to have an abstract meaning. No information is given on how the brand intends to fight the systemic racism and the injustice. Furthermore, the concept of *fight* does not follow the main verb/action of the sentence. If the brand stands in solidarity, how could it fight the racism? The two concepts evoked are extremely distant one from each other. The fight of systemic racism is not supposed to be made by a standing in solidarity act. This is why the term *fight* assumes an abstract meaning in the sentence. Finally, two relevant topics are treated in the statement, such as the systemic racism and the injustice. The *systemic racism* refers to all the policies and practices that exist throughout a whole society or organization, and that result in and support a continued unfair advantage to some people and unfair or harmful treatment of others based on race<sup>84</sup>. It can result in concerns such as discrimination in

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<sup>82</sup> [Solidarity | Definition of Solidarity by Merriam-Webster](#)

<sup>83</sup> [Fight - definition of fight by The Free Dictionary](#)

<sup>84</sup> [SYSTEMIC RACISM | meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary](#)

criminal justice, employment, housing, health care, political power, and education when it is ingrained in society. Systemic racism, alternatively referred to as institutional racism, is distinguished from other forms of racism by the presence of institutional systemic policies and economic or political structures that disadvantage minority racial and ethnic groups in comparison to the institution's racial or ethnic majority<sup>85</sup>. Indeed, systemic racism can take on a variety of forms and manifest itself in a variety of human circumstances. Restrictive housing contracts and bank lending regulations, for example, have been identified as examples of institutional racism. The employment of racial stereotypes and the under- or misrepresentation of particular ethnic groups in the mass media were also believed to be manifestations of systemic racism at the time. In this case, even if not disclaimed, the *systemic racism* which “Amazon” refers to is the one present in the United States of America. The systemic racism of a country where black people are extremely discriminated because of their skin. A country where police and government silently contribute to make the systemic racism exist. And exactly as for the systemic racism, they contribute to make injustice exist too. Again here, the term *injustice* could be referring to any unfair situation. The context of the post instead specifically relegates the concept to the daily unfair treatment of black people, which are condemned to suffer from *injustice* because of their skin color. Then, the text ends up. The third level of the image is dedicated to the logo of the brand. The brand decides to display its logo even if it published the post on its official Twitter account. This choice reflects a marketing purpose. Even if the statement has clearly nothing to do with the brand itself, or with its sales, “Amazon” wants to create a second-level association in consumers’ minds. The statement has its own power and discloses a specific message, but the brand wants to underline the fact that the author of that statement is itself. According to “Amazon”, the social activist stance here can’t be posted alone. It needs a signature, and more specifically the commercial signature of the brand: the logo. Customers must have clear in mind that the company is engaged in the support of the black community. This is why “Amazon” opted for displaying the logo within the image.

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<sup>85</sup> [Institutional racism - Wikipedia](#)

Moving on, the second step of our semiotic analysis deals with the narrative residing the message. Indeed, in brand communication, the brand itself is portrayed as the enunciator of its messages. In this case, the message can be approached at a semio-narrative level because it delivers a “story”. According to the actantial model, developed in 1966 by semiotician Algirdas Julien Greimas, characters and action elements can be distinguished within a brand story / plot. Actually, if we descend into the hidden side of the message we can identify those actantial elements suggested by Greimas. At a semio-narrative level, the brand assumes the role of the sender. It is indeed the one who induces the receiver to take action. Even if the action is impersonally expressed (*the inequitable and brutal treatment of Black people in our country must stop*), it is sent and delivered by “Amazon” to the Black community. The latter, on its turn, plays two roles. On one side it is the implicit receiver of the action because, even if it is already committed into the fight against racism, it is prompted by the brand in pursuing that goal. As a consequence, on the other side, the Black community is also the subject who is engaged into that fight which, as a result, is the main object of the narrative. In this specific case, the object is both abstract, since no practical actions are cited, and concrete since the fight against racism can’t be achieved only through statements. In this schema, the brand proposes itself as being the helper, and so the one who supports the receiver (black community) in the accomplishment of the action. Practically speaking, the help given by “Amazon” is its standing in solidarity with Blacks. Finally, according to what theorized by Greimas, the remaining role to be assigned is the one of the opponent. The latter is the one hindering the subject in the realization of its goal. Actually, the role of the opponent can be recognized into the systemic racism and injustice themselves. Indeed, by being part of the action, they represent at the same time the main obstacles to be destroyed in order to stop the *inequitable and brutal treatment of Black people*.

In conclusion, a final remark should be made on the choice of lettering. For this post, “Amazon” opted for a neutral font, which could be identified in the *Calibri* (body) one. The choice reflects a need for clarity and simplicity. The font recalls the usual one employed in any kind of text, the default font proposed by every kind of digital tools. On

one side, the style employed aims at communicating a message in all its clarity. The topic treated indeed does not need a particular style to be expressed with. The simpler and more neutral it is, the better. On the other side, the extreme simpleness of the overall layout leaves something to be desired. The post seems to be published as it was thought. No attention to the details is present. Actually, the tweet seems to be the result of an impulsive and hasty need.

Definitely, the semiotic analysis helped us to collocate the post within its context and its cultural reference. Only through this approach we were able to detect the real and deep meaning of what “Amazon” tried to communicate to the world.

#### 4.3 Content analysis: a semiotic approach to “Ben & Jerry’s” post

The American ice-cream producer reacted to the death of George Floyd with a post on Twitter, published on June 2<sup>nd</sup> (Figure 27). The image, displaying an assertive and short



message, is preceded by a brief caption. The latter aims to clarify the contextual cues of the statement below in order to avoid people misunderstanding the reference of the message. To provide a clearer understanding of what the company refers to, the caption also includes a link<sup>86</sup> which readdresses people to an article about White Supremacy on brand's website. The article mainly proposes a call to action to the users and explain the four demands of B&J to dismantle the white supremacy. Going back to the caption, it only contains one sentence "*The murder of George Floyd was the result of inhumane police brutality which is perpetuated by a culture of white supremacy*". To analyze the overall sign, or meaning, carried out by the caption we can split word per word in order to examine their signified / connotation. The expression *The murder of George Floyd* literally refers to the death of a person, whose characteristics are not described. It could be about any death of any person. In this case instead, the expression assumes a specific meaning since it is inserted into a specific context. The *murder* identifies a choking. More specifically, it identifies a knee of a person on the neck of another, who smothered to death after 9 minutes and 29 seconds. The cause of death was a cardiopulmonary arrest due to neck compression. In particular, the knee belonged to a police officer, a white police officer, identified with the name of Derek Chauvin. In addition, the *murder* assumes some other contextual cues, such as it happened on a public street, in the center of Minneapolis, surrounded by dozens of people, on May 15th, 2020. Who was the victim? Clearly *George Floyd*, that name displayed in the caption of the post. He was a 46 years-old African American man with a family. He was arrested after a store clerk suspected Floyd might have used a counterfeit \$20 bill. He died under the knee of Derek Chauvin and under the gaze of three other police officers. The second section of the caption, *was the result of inhumane police brutality*, literally affirms that the murder was caused by a brutal police behavior. The expression *result* means "to happen as a consequence". So, the text denotates that was the *inhumane police brutality* which lead to the murder of George Floyd. *Inhumane* means "something cruel and causing suffering to people or animals"<sup>87</sup> ". The act of suffocating a man with a

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<sup>86</sup> [Silence Is NOT An Option | Ben & Jerry's \(benjerry.com\)](#)

<sup>87</sup> [INHUMANE | meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary](#)

knee in front of many people. The act of demanding silence to a man which was praying and calling “Mama” before dying. The act of smiling and ignoring people asking to stop. The act of not having any kind of doubts during the execution. This is what *inhumane* denotes in this specific context. Then, the mention of *police brutality*. The Law dictionary<sup>88</sup> identifies “police brutality” as the use of excessive and/or unnecessary force by police when dealing with civilians. More specifically, in the context of USA, in 2020, under Donald Trump presidency, the term assumes another meaning. Though police forces should be entrusted with safeguarding and serving all residents regardless of race, several instances of police violence have been attributed to racial bias. Why? Because most of these cases are rooted in historical and systemic racism. As described before on “Amazon” post, *systemic racism* can be defined as systemic racism, is a proposed racist theory which is embedded through laws and regulations within societies or organizations. This is what the expression mainly denotes. It silently refers to all those black victims fallen under the abuse of police power. Finally, the last part of the caption tries to provide a reason why the police brutality exists: “*which is perpetuated by a culture of white supremacy*”. The verb *perpetuate* literally means to cause something to continue. So, according to it, the *police brutality* perpetuation should be caused by something. The term denotes that USA government does not take action to make police brutality end. On the contrary, they do something to make it continue. Police brutality, in particular, is perpetuated by a *culture of white supremacy*. *Culture* is an umbrella term which encompasses the social behavior and norms found in human societies, as well as the knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs.. etc. The term here denotes the racial vein of the USA and in particular, the reinforcement of this belief with Donald Trump presidency. A culture which has ancient roots going back to the historical background of a nation, which has always given up space to the *white supremacy*. The latter denotes the belief that white people are superior to those of other ethnicities and thus should dominate them. The belief favors the maintenance and defense of white power and privilege. In particular, it denotes all those past cases in which white people could benefit of their skin-color privilege at the expense of others (especially blacks

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<sup>88</sup> [What Is Police Brutality? \(thelawdictionary.org\)](https://thelawdictionary.org/what-is-police-brutality/)

and Hispanics in US). It denotes the existence of a form of supremacy which does not have any logical, objective, permitted foundation. A supremacy which is rooted in US society. Now, that we have finally examined the caption of the post, it is time to review the image itself. After a first gaze, we can notice a black background with five white words. What do these words say? *We must dismantle white supremacy*. Literally, a common unidentified subject (*we*) must dismantle a form of supremacy, identified as *white supremacy*. First of all, to whom the pronoun *we* refers? The meaning conveyed by the brand refers to a totality of subjects. *We* means the company, its employees, its stakeholders, its consumers but not only. *We* refers also to the Twitter users, to those who had never bought the B&J ice-cream before but who want to join the movement. *We* is the most omni-comprehensive personal pronoun that the brand could use. Then, the expression *must* does not give space to choose. The brand is not proposing an option. It doesn't want to let people free to opt for a solution rather than other one. It only proposes one way to do things. The way the sentence is stated seems to be a commandment. *Must* is the highest expression to order something. The brand could have used "we have to dismantle.." but instead it opted for *must*, to not provide a way to escape. Then, the verb employed, *dismantle*, convey a specific meaning. Literally it means to destroy the integrity or functioning of something<sup>89</sup> or to disconnect the pieces of something. According to the second meaning, the verb is employed to referring to nuclear engines. The brand could have used several other words, but it opted for the same tense used in nuclear field. The power conveyed by the meaning of the word cannot be denied. Finally, the object of the sentence: *white supremacy*. As analyzed just before, the white supremacy denotes a bigger concept which refers both to the past and to the present of US society. In particular, the white supremacy is seen as a huge wall to be dismantle because of its deep-rooted foundations which allow it to be widely disseminated in Americans' minds. Definitely, the syntagmatic choice of the words to be displayed exactly conveys the meaning that B&J wanted to deliver. The image indeed assumes the look of a *manifesto*. Those five words conveys a clear call to action.

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<sup>89</sup> [Dismantle | Definition of Dismantle by Merriam-Webster](#)



Furthermore, this call to action can be analyzed by another point of view: the narrative vehiculated by the brand's statement. As the brand uses the pronoun *we* in its statement that we can assign to that element both the role of the sender and the receiver. The brand is the sender who shares and vehiculates the message. As described, the term *we* includes both the brand, and all its components, and the users / consumers. This is why the pronoun co-involve the brand (sender) and consumers / Twitter users (receiver) who receive the commandment of "Ben & Jerry's". According to Greimas, the receiver is indeed the one who receives the task of completing an action. The action in question, or object, is the act of dismantling the white supremacy. This object is a complex one because it can be intended as an abstract value, but at the same time it conveys a concrete call to action to do something. Then, we can identify the opponent, which is anything that impede the realization of the goal. The opponent in this case can be found in the concept of white supremacy itself. The main obstacle to dismantle white supremacy is indeed the white supremacy itself. According to the caption, in order to dismantle the white supremacy, something should be changed at the cultural level. Finally, one last element can be identified: the helper. Greimas refers to the helper as anything that supports the subject in the realization of the goal. As said, the subject is the totality of the community, the consumers and the brand taking action to accomplish their goal. The helper is again the brand. "Ben & Jerry's" is indeed offering to its audience the way to dismantle white supremacy. The latter is not displayed in the brand message but on the brand's website, reachable through the link in the caption.

The last part of our semiotic analysis focuses on the image, by examining its plastic layer. The plastic layer of an image consists of the distribution of spaces, colors and shapes within the image itself. As we can see, the five words are distributed on four rows, which can be divided into two sections: the first two rows, and the second ones. The main graphic difference between these two sections is the color employed. In section one, words are colored in white, while in section two they are grey. In particular, the grey employed is related to the material which the words seem to be made of. They seems to be made of marble, and as the marble they seem to be cracked. The marble, similar to those of

tombstones, could recall the idea of a strong and resistant material which is indeed associated to a deep-rooted culture, such as the one of white supremacy. At the same time, we also know that the marble is not unbreakable, and as the other stones it can be broken. The cracks could refer to the fact that the dismantlement of white supremacy has already started. The American culture has been changing and “Ben & Jerry’s” believes that it can definitely change only through a common action. Finally, we should pay attention to the font employed and the size of the words. This massive font is not used here for the first time. It was employed by the brand to support Black Lives Matter movement in 2016 for the first time (back to Figure 17). The same font is so re-used here because of the relevance of the message. Without openly expressing its support for the #BLM movement, the brand does it through the use of that specific font. Finally, regarding the size of the words, we can identify three different sizes. The biggest word is *white*, the enemy, the opponent, the supremacy holder. Then, it comes the first line with “We must”. The size of the words is not the same as for the rest of the text. It means that the brand wants people to focus on the communality of the action. Finally, the words *dismantle* and *supremacy* which are the smallest ones.

Through our semiotic approach, now readers should have a clearer understanding of the meaning underlying the two posts. In this case, semiotics provided us the essential tools to reveal what was hidden in brands’ messages. In particular we had the possibility to circumscribe the statements into a specific cultural context. Definitely, semiotics opened the doors of significance and allow us to understand even the smallest detail present in those two Twitter posts. In conclusion, as we have now a better overview on the content, we can be ready to pass through the reactions of consumers.

#### **4.4 The reaction of consumers: Twitter posts’ comment analysis**

As many other companies “Amazon” quickly reacted to the death of George Floyd publishing a post on Twitter. Once online, the post lead to an enormous wave of comments and retweets. Thousands of people urged the feeling of speaking out. Critics, compliments, complaints. In few hours, “Amazon’s” Twitter feed became the focus of discussion. After



having exported the unique comments (1302 in total) in reply to the post, we performed the analysis through NVivo software. The first query we run aimed at having a clearer understanding of the subjects discussed in comments, by visualizing

them into a world cloud. A "word cloud" is a grouping of words shown in varying sizes. The larger and bolder the term, the more frequently it is mentioned in a text and the more significant it is. As displayed in "Amazon's" comments word cloud (Figure 28), the orange bold words are those appearing the most. As expected, the name of the company, the words composing the #BLM and *https*, due to the high number of websites cited, appeared the most. What is interesting to notice is the consistent appearance of other significant words, such as *police* (counted 124 times), *racist* (98 times) and *employees* (62), whose amounts are relevant considering the total sum of unique comments being 1302. The relevance of these words increases if, by breaking down totals, we analyze the single relationships of these words with other themes.

Starting with the term *police*, it was identified as one of the main nodes within our data collection. In particular, it was extremely helpful to unhinge the term-connections to understand what came up in consumers' minds by reading the company's #BLM post. In order to do that, we run a second query, called the word tree map. A word tree graph is able to depict multiple parallel sequences of words. It can be usually used to show which words most often follow or precede a target word or to show a hierarchy of terms. In this regard, we extrapolated the term *police* in "Amazon's" post comments in order to have a clearer view on the topic (Figure 29, on next page). The aim of this query was understanding if the term *police* was uniquely associated to Derek Chauvin, the police officer who killed



happened<sup>90</sup>. Definitely, according to the user, “Amazon” contributes to the horrible transformation of US democracy into a worse reality. The same topic was supported by another user who claimed “*@Amazon isn't fighting anti-Blackness. They give direct, material tech to 1,330 police depts across the country who are attacking protesters: ICE's detention machine. Tell @Amazon to cut ties with police*”. The latter also included a link where all the anti-black practices followed by “Amazon” are summarized<sup>91</sup>. So, the user claims the incongruency of “Amazon’s” behavior, between the “verbal” fight against racism and the technological and unequivocal support to the police. The same argument was supported by another user who tweeted “*@Amazon Solidarity? Come on, you are now harassing and promoting people to hate police officers! Now you are about to stop providing your software for face recognizing to police for what reasons??? What a shame!*”. In particular, this specific comment includes a term, *shame*, which can be counted other 19 times in comments. The term usually refers to a painful emotion caused by consciousness of guilt, shortcoming, or impropriety the susceptibility to such emotion<sup>92</sup>. In this context it probably recalls the deep guilt of the company which verbally supports Blacks and practically cooperates with the police. In conclusion, one last exemplary comment needs to be mentioned “*@Amazon This is a good act. As a corporate superpower, now go further. If you want us to believe you truly care, show us the higher limits of what you can do. Stop supplying police departments and ICE with facial recognition technology*”. In particular, this last tweet highlights the expectations of a user towards “Amazon”. As one of the most influential companies in the world (= *a corporate superpower*), it is expected to go further because it actually can go further, according to the user. On one side, the user appreciates the activist stance of the company, but on the other side he cannot forget what “Amazon” does for the police, so it openly asks to reduce the dissonance between what is said and what is done.

The same wave of comments, demanding for congruency between deeds and words, deals with the past vicissitude of Chris Smalls’ firing. To shed light on black employee’s story,

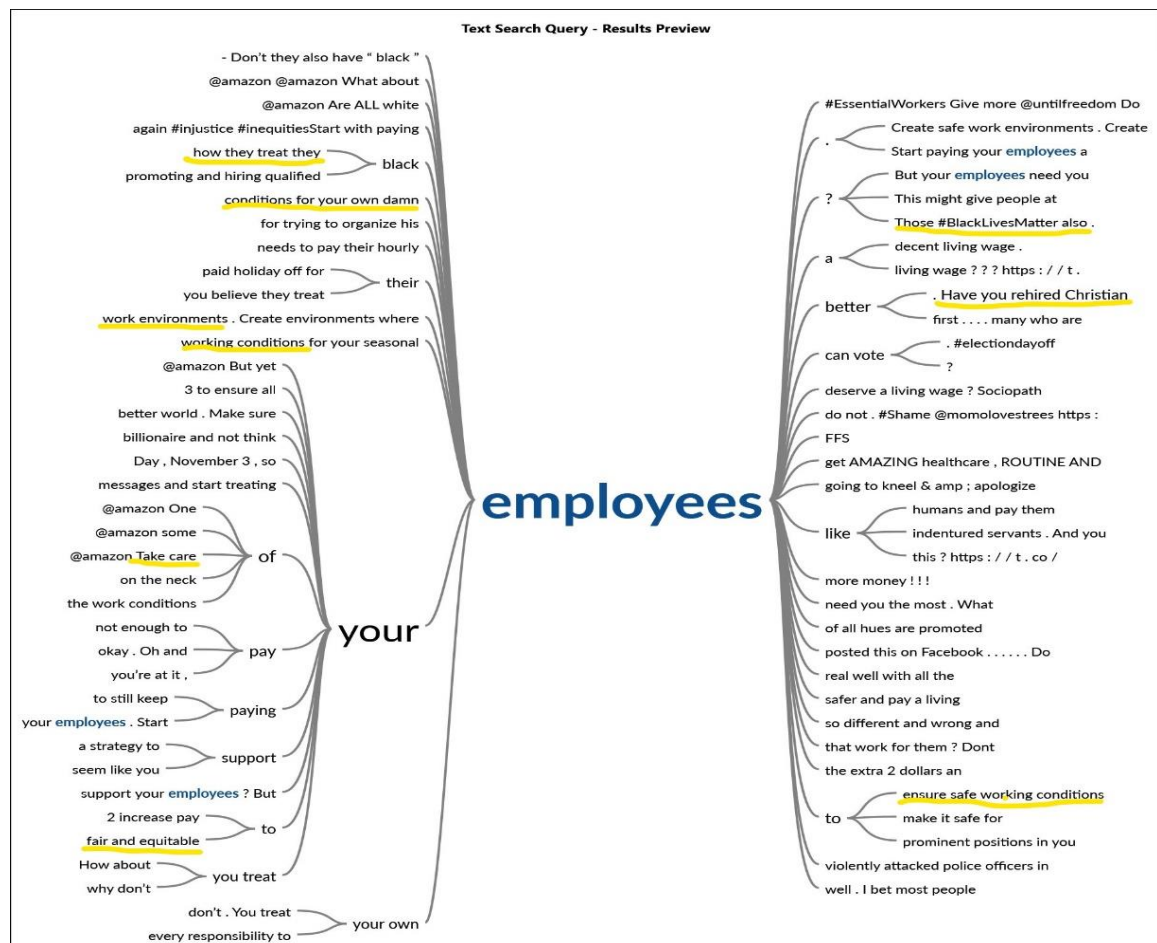
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<sup>90</sup> [DYSTOPIA | meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary](#)

<sup>91</sup> [Amazon: Cut Ties With Police & ICE! \(p2a.co\)](#)

<sup>92</sup> [Shame | Definition of Shame by Merriam-Webster](#)

we identified another crucial node, which is indeed *employee*. The *employees* tree map (Figure 30) shows how many comments, in reply to #BLM stance, deal with the topic of employees' treatment in working environments (yellow highlighted content in the picture). Definitely, many people felt the need of speaking out about employees' conditions in "Amazon" facilities when the corporate claimed the treatment of black people. Another



time, Twitter users were upset in front of this strong incongruity: the same corporate that fired a black employee demanding for better and safer working conditions was now claiming black people's rights. People astonishment can be perfectly found in comments, such as "*@Amazon This is a shameful tweet considering you fired a Black worker for trying to organize to get adequate protections for employees against COVID- 19, you sell racist facial recognition to police departments and you're the last large advertiser on Breitbart,*

which had a “Black Crime” tag.” This specific comment highlights several concepts, and it is interconnected with two other codes. The first sentence remembered the firing of Chris Smalls, the *Black* (the usage of the capital letter aims at underlining the skin color of the subject) *employee fired* because he protested for better health conditions at work. Then, apart from the facial recognition software (one of the other relevant node), the user attacks the company to do advertising on Breitbart, an American far-right syndicated news, opinion, and commentary website<sup>93</sup>. Another comment reported “@Amazon Does your solidarity extend to Christian Smalls, the black employee you fired for trying to organize his employees to ensure safe working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic?”, figuring out what “Amazon” exactly did some month before against Mr. Smalls (March 2020). Then, focusing on employees’ treatment in general, a user published “@Amazon Sure does seem like you support your employees really well with all the protests from them against horrible working conditions amidst a pandemic and before.” This one in particular addressed to the company with irony, stressing out the several episodes of employees’ protests. How could a company affirm it cares about its employees, if they, who are not satisfied, are “obliged” to struggle against the company itself to be heard? Following on the same topic, a user pointed “Amazon” out for the unequal treatment of white and black employees, “@Amazon can donate but won’t take away the fact how they treat they black employees so different and wrong and it’s very disgusting especially when we order from you guys #cancelingAmazon #Dontevenorderfromthem.” In particular, this last comment introduces another topic which can be considered as a consequence, or a form itself, of systemic racism: the delivery policies of “Amazon” in black neighborhoods. The disparity concerns the policy of same-day delivery with an “Amazon” subscription. Actually, in 2016 it was revealed that in some cities where the same-day option is available, some neighborhoods are not served. More specifically, the areas which can’t benefit from the quickest delivery option are those mostly populated by blacks people. A concrete example of this revelation is New York City. Same-day delivery is offered across Manhattan, Staten Island, and Brooklyn, but not in the Bronx or certain mostly black communities of Queens.

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<sup>93</sup> [Breitbart News Network](#)

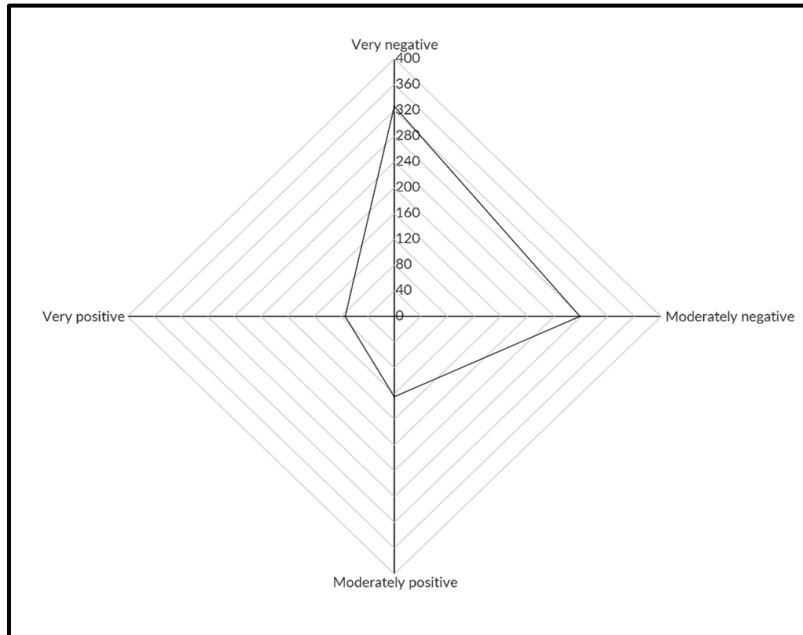


Additionally, in certain locations, same-day delivery by "Amazon" extends many miles into the surrounding suburbs but is not available in some ZIP codes within the city borders. Finally, we selected one last comment where the user argued for the company's responsibility to provide a good treatment to all its employees *regardless the color*: "*@Amazon I don't want to turn this into a race issue, but you have every responsibility to your own employees to make it safe for them regardless of color.*" Here the statement presumably referred to the firing of Smalls and to the conditions of working during the Pandemic of some non-white employees.

These were just some of the most exemplary comments which appeared below the "Amazon" post. Actually, our analysis aims at unhinging semantic sphere to understand consumers' feelings in response to "Amazon's activism in favor of #BlackLivesMatter movement. In the comments, people evidently want past "Amazon" actions resurface. People's comments aimed at remembering the way "Amazon" behaved in front of Christian Smalls protest. They wanted to shed light on working conditions and environments. Another time, the deep incongruency between what was said and what was done urged people to give voice to their thoughts. These comments deeply embodied the need of coherence that people expected, and pretended, from such a company. Even if a big action was undertaken, as a consistent monetary donation, it was not "enough" in consumers' opinions. Moreover, the speech and the donation were not (considered) in line with "Amazon" multiple past behaviors which contributed to assign it a specific reputation. As described, corporate reputation is an extremely sensible topic which must be handled carefully. Each action, even the smallest, has the power to write something indelible down. Comments below "Amazon's" post are the exact proof of that. For this reason, we run a sentiment analysis in order to have a clear visualization of the direction of tweets. In particular results showed that tweets are polarized as following (Figure 31, on next page). The radar graph helps us to understand in which direction go most of the comments in response to "Amazon's" post. A previous analysis was run in order to exclude from the representation all those comments not dealing directly with the company (addressed to other users, related



to the murder itself etc..). This is why the sum of the comments displayed in the Radar



graph is not equal to the total amount of tweets below the post. Anyway, most of the comments are classified as very negative, a consistent part as moderately negative, and the remaining ones as moderately and very positive (just few comments). Although

the analysis could continue and go even deeper, we believe this overview provides a general idea of consumer reaction to “Amazon’s” BLM post. Multiple themes were covered, some related to the event itself, others related to the company's past. What is certain is that consumers have high expectations of a company such as “Amazon”, and they can't resist pointing out every word, or act, that is inconsistent with the company itself or with the expectations carried out by the 21<sup>st</sup> century society. This is the approach we need to have. We need to surround the event, “Amazon's” behavior and the reaction of consumers within a precise political and cultural context. Only by taking into account the contextual characteristics will it be possible to fully understand the reactions of users to “Amazon’s” activism.

Regarding “Ben & Jerry’s”, the post appeared on Twitter on June the 2nd. Compared to previous post, it gave birth to much more comments, such as 4994, even if the amount of followers of B&J’s profile was clearly smaller (524.2 K) than the “Amazon’s” one (3.8 M). As a result, we can affirm that “Ben & Jerry’s” Twitter community was much more engaged than one of “Amazon”, in occasion of the death of George Floyd. As we did for the previous case, we run a word cloud query also for “Ben & Jerry’s” post (Figure 32).



supremacy						
yellow supremacy	white supremacy something	white suprem...	white suprema...	whit supremacy	vanilla supre...	peoplewhite s...
women supremacy	white supremacy organizat...					
		jewish supremacy		cultural supremacy	communist supre...	chinese supremacy
white supremacy wtf	white supremacy leader					
		ethnic supremacy				
white supremacy works	white supremacy ice cre...			bruin supremacy	bame supre...	asian supre...
		economic supremacy				
white supremacy wagon	white supremacy ice cream			blsck supremacy		
		dismantling supremacy				
white supremacy stuff	white supremacy groups			black supremacy	actually supremacy	

specifically to show the breakdown of the code *supremacy* into its sub-codes. Just by quickly looking at the chart, the code seemed to be split into a series of sub-codes which deal with extremely different topics. The most recurrent sub-codes include the association between the term *white* and *supremacy*. Others instead deviate from the main theme and bring up completely different concepts. Among the main ones, we can go through other types of supremacy: such as the women, the Jewish or the communist supremacy. Going back to the *white-supremacy* connection, our research aimed at understanding the reactions and opinions of consumers through the analysis of their empirical data. More specifically, we were able to distinguish two opposite themes, or sub-codes, which mostly contributed to our research question. These two can be identified in: the supporters and the opposers of B&J's post, with a higher number of the second ones. We will proceed in order, starting with those who supported "Ben & Jerry's" and so boycotted the white supremacist. One of the first comments affirmed "*@benandjerrys White Supremacists are the worst thing to happen to this once great nation! #EndPoliceBrutality #EndRacism*". It openly took the side of the brand, and of the *great nation*, by defining the white supremacists as the *worst*

thing that could have hit the US society. It added two clear but different hashtags, one fighting the police brutality and the other against the racism. Another user, supporting the company, stated *“Everyone can face discrimination and injustice but for white people it's not because of the color of their skin, But for black people and the rest of us it is because of the color of our skin our culture and our race #NoWhiteSupremacy”*. This comment in particular, published by a non-white user, stressed out the fact that the discrimination exists for everyone but the one faced by black and non-white people comes exactly from their skin color. The user in this case wanted to highlight the deep distinction between whites and all the others (=we). On the same side of these first two comments, another user tweeted *“@benandjerrys Thank you for talking about those who continue and perpetuate white supremacy. They are the cancer to a people. When found they need to be identified for who they are before they can hurt others. In an ideal world. Too bad we find out after the fact as in this recent case”*. Here the brand's stance was appreciated to such an extent that the user thanked it to have raised the point. The tweet followed with a strong metaphor, where the white supremacy was defined as a *cancer to people*. It ended with an idealistic view of a reality where supremacists could be identified, and revealed, before they could hurt others. Going on in the same direction, another user tweeted *“@Benandjerrys You are right. Donald Trump is a white supremacist. #BoycottWhiteSupremacy”*. The reference to Trump seemed to be expressed as a top-of-mind association. In this short message, the user indeed agreed with the company and assigned to USA President Trump the label of *white supremacist*. The tweets ended with a hashtag that, reasoning by syllogism, seems to be addressed to Trump himself. In another tweet instead, the company was thanked by the user because it shared that statement *“@benandjerrys Thank you for this message and make all these white supremacists understand what systemic racism is”*. In the perspective of the user, the brand here assumed the role of teaching others what systemic racism is. Then, besides these supporter comments, some others defending the brand appeared. These ones were not directly addressed to the company, however they defended the brand in front of the boycotting charges of other users. Among the replies to the several allegations towards B&J, which we will analyze in a while, we could find *“@benandjerrys I genuinely*

*thought that anyone with a middle school education understood that white supremacy and white privilege is real.. stupid ME*". Here the user, looking at the high number of boycotting tweets, ironically cited the brand saying that almost everyone (those with *a middle school education*) should have understood what the brand was saying, and so that the white supremacy exists. This tweet came out because many other users started boycotting the brand because of its general racist statement. On the same line, another user said "*@benandjerrys Love all the racist snowflakes that are triggered by a call to end white supremacy. I love the strong stance on what is right, my family will always support @benandjerrys.*" This tweet clearly referred to all the racist users who commented and argued against the B&J's post, by calling them *snowflakes*. The similarity wanted to evoke the image of a sudden snowfall, which was "solicited" by the *strong stance* of the brand. Finally, one last comment on this side deserves to be cited "*@benandjerrys Why are white people so touchy when it comes to white supremacy? Can't agree that it's bad? You guys always go off topic.*" This comment perfectly described the behavior of people below B&J's post. Even if almost neutral, the user defined all those people (especially referring to whites) reacting negatively to the post as *touchy*. As if they would not be able to accept something that clearly exists, and they would need to *go off topic* to find some supporting elements to the cause. Actually, these three comments make readers imagine how many negative comments could be found under the post. Definitely true. The tweet from "Ben & Jerry's" was submerged by an enormous amount of comments which boycotted what stated by the brand. This contributed to raise up the engagement rate of the post. Most of the comments belonged to people replying to other people statements. The strong call to action made by the brand solicited thousands of users to complaint and boycott. The fact that B&J's post was about white people and not black ones automatically brought white people in the focus of attention. In front of that post, white people felt called into question. This is why so many comments appeared below the post. As we will see by going on with our analysis, most of the comments negatively attacked the brand because of its statement and opposed to the dismantlement of white supremacy. The first comments we will pass through accused the brand of racism towards white people. They dealt with a concept that

usually takes the name of reverse racism. Reverse racism is the idea that whites are also victims of discrimination and victimized because of their color. In much the same way that blacks are being discriminated against because of their skin-type. The claim is that white people are as disadvantaged as the blacks and other minorities as well. Thus, the reverse racism point appears to be motivated by a desire to demonstrate that racial minorities do not have it so bad; they are not the only ones who suffer prejudice and discrimination<sup>94</sup>. Going back to the comments, one of the most exemplary was “@benandjerrys *I think it’s time to boycott this brand. Maybe You should never make white Ice Cream anymore? I Will never buy this. You are Just as a racist as You claim the white people are. I Will never support a Company like this.*” As we can see, the brand was accused to be racist because of its claim. The user, boycotting the company, affirmed he wouldn’t have bought B&J’s products anymore. On the same line, another tweet reported “@benandjerrys *I will never buy a product from your racist company. White, proud and I fuck you!*”. As for the previous one, the user accused B&J to be a racist company and then he strongly claimed his pride to be white. Following with this perspective of the white pride, another user affirmed “@benandjerrys *White Pride, Some of us don’t apologize for being WHITE! You are RACIST!*”. Here the user claimed his white pride saying that some *white* people do not apologize for the skin color. Then he accused the brand to be racist. It is interesting to notice that only two words were written with capital letters: *WHITE* and *RACIST*. It is clear the opposition intended by the user: white people were victim of racism because of B&J’s statement. Then another tweet, reporting “@benandjerrys *I can do without @benandjerrys racist #icecream as I’m white and they clearly pander to everybody else*”, accused the brand to produce racist ice-creams. In particular the users affirmed to being able to do without B&J’s products because the brand pandered all the others except whites. The tweet highlighted the sense of exclusion felt by white consumers in reaction to the statement. Then, on a similar stance another post reported “@benandjerrys *There is no white supremacy just because some people are racist. And there are racists of every color. You should be boycotted by everyone for using the death of a person to promote your brand. I*

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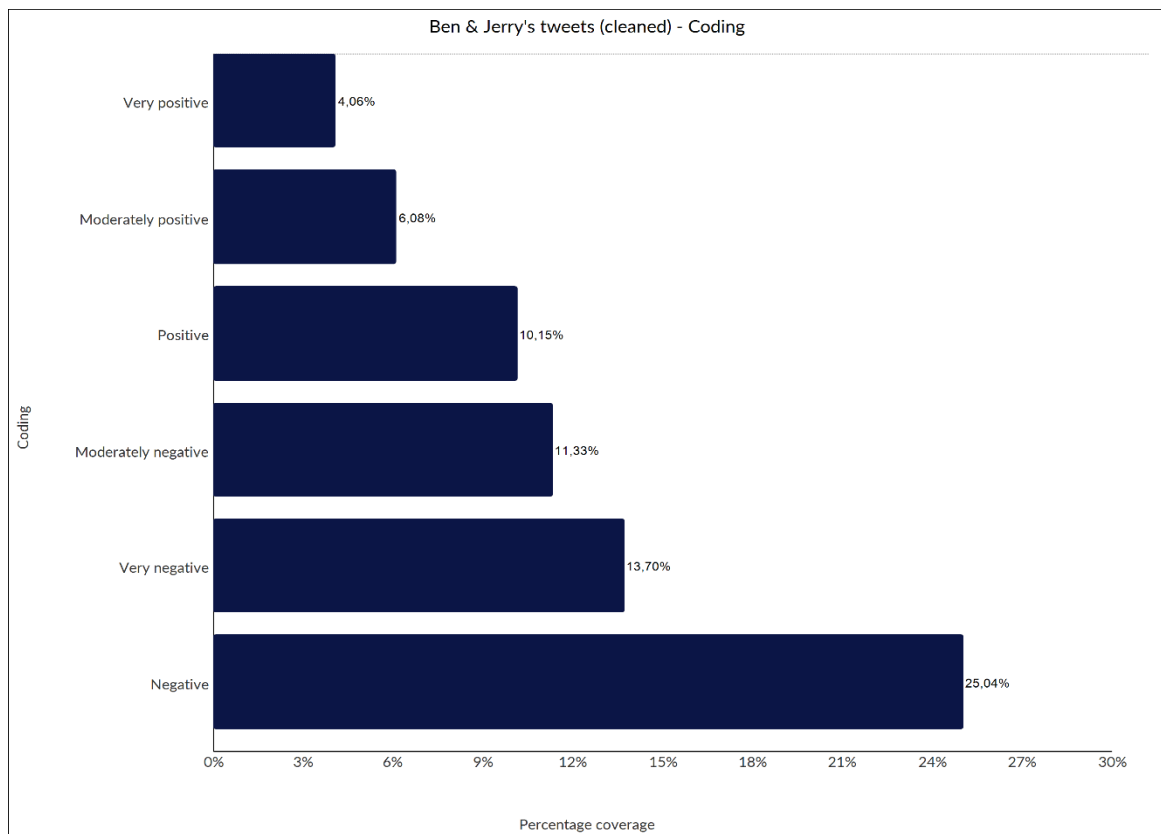
<sup>94</sup> [4 'Reverse Racism' Myths That Need To Stop | HuffPost](#)

*start today. #Boycott*". The user in this comment distinguished the concept of white supremacy from the one of racism, that instead existed for any type of skin. He then strongly attacked the brand to have used Floyd's death as a pretext to speak out, and according to the user, to promote itself. Going on with the charge of racism, a user posted "*@benandjerrys you stereotype on all white. I think you hate white people it is racist!*". Here it came out an interesting concept of stereotype. The user pointed the company to have stereotyped on all white people and so to be racist because of its white hate. Finally, one tweet retook out the argument of Trump, but this time on the opposite side, saying "*@benandjerrys Your anti-white, racist comments do you no favors #WhiteLivesMatter #Trump2020.*" The user here, boycotting the racist attitude of the brand and supporting Trump, claimed the *#WhiteLivesMatter* statement.

Besides these comments, some others accused the brand of racist stances. In particular, the following ones were based on the historical background of the brand, and of its owner Unilever. One affirmed "*@benandjerrys What a bunch of Hypocrites. Two old white guys are talking about white supremacy. Stop with the Mind Control social engineering psyop of white supremacy. It doesn't exist. Except of course among white elitists as you who own more than 70% of the world's wealth.*" Here the user, referring to Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield, the two white founders of the brand, accused the brand to be hypocrite. In addition, he stated that the two owners belonged to the white elite which benefited from more than the *70% of world's wealth*. As for this comment, another reported "*@benandjerrys First of all, we're all a shade of brown. Second, this coming from a company based in VERMONT, the state with the least POC in New England, started by two "WHITE" men. Why don't you make a statement @Unilever and burn down your own factories and stop being racist? #AllLivesMatter*". This assertive comment replied to the post of the brand arguing that humans are not white but all shades of brown. It then addressed directly to the historical background of the company, which was initiated by two *white* (between quotation marks considering that white people do not exist) *men* in a predominantly white state. In conclusion, it tagged Unilever and proposed to level all its factories and stop being racist. Then, one final comment related to Unilever needs to be

highlighted “@benandjerrys Seriously? You're owned by Unilever, the biggest buyer of palm oil in the world. Palm oil = deforestation & displacement of indigenous people. And how many children has Unilever employed in India, paying approx. 40 eurocents per day? About 25000? You profit off white supremacy.” Here the comment dealt with a totally different topic: the palm oil deforestation, the displacement of indigenous people and the child labor. The user decided to shed light on alleged charges of Unilever to state that the brand profited of white supremacy.

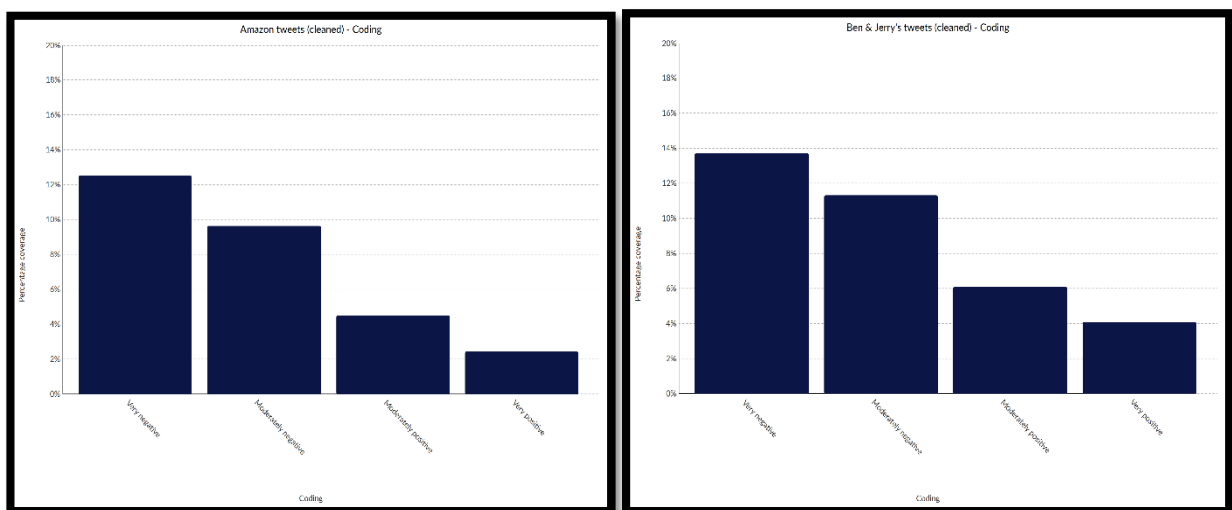
Based on what we have analyzed so far, comments under the post of Ben and Jerry’s have a deep controversial nature. Positive comments alternated with negative ones, whose percentage is definitely higher. As described, most of the boycotting ones came from people who didn’t agree with the statement of the brand. White or non-black users which were deeply against the idea of white supremacy. According to this net polarization, we behave as we did for “Amazon’s” post. We run a sentiment analysis to have a better visualization of the direction of the comments. The codes assigned were moderately





positive, very positive, moderately negative and very negative. They were then grouped under two wider codes which were respectively positive and negative comments. In Figure 34, percentages help us to understand the enormous wave of critics and boycotting tweets born in response to “Ben & Jerry’s” tweet. Excluding the neutral and the non-identifiable comments (mixed comments), more than 25% tweets were negative. More than the half of this 25% was then labeled as very negative, while only the ~ 11% was coded as moderately negative. Regarding the positive tweets (10,15%), only ~4% was very positive.

After having run our analyses, both on “Amazon” and “Ben & Jerry’s” tweets, we have now a clearer understanding of users and consumers’ reactions to the posts. Both dealing with the death of George Floyd, the two posts took two different positions to speak out of the event. As seen, “Amazon” clearly took the side of the black community by asking for support and equitable treatment for all black people around its company. “Ben & Jerry’s” instead decided to claim its position in a different way. It posted an assertive and short message aimed at dismantling the white supremacy. They shew the two sides of the coin. On one side the black victims, on the other side the white suppressors. In reaction to these two singular approaches, people could not avoid being silent. Even if extremely divergent one from each other, both posts were flooded by negative comments. To have a simpler idea of percentages in comparison, we propose two specular bar charts, one for “Amazon” (Figure 35 on the left) and the other for “Ben & Jerry’s” (figure 36 on the right). Even if



the total amount of comments was deeply different (“Ben & Jerry’s” post collected ~four times the number of “Amazon’s” post), percentages of very negative comments are similar: 12,3% for “Amazon” and 13,7% for B&J. Almost the same ratio can be identified in the other categories too. So, the question comes up naturally. How was it possible considering the deeply divergent statements and the backgrounds of the two companies that they collected similar sentiment results? As we could examine, the negative nature of comments was not the same below the two tweets. On “Amazon” case most of the negative tweets came from users who boycotted the company for its hypocrisy. Lots of them focused on the discrepancy between what was written by “Amazon” in favor of #BLM and what was done by the company. Macro-themes as the sale of Rekognition and the employees’ treatments populated the strongest negative comments. Consequently, users attacked the brand for its inconsistent and incongruent statement. On “Ben & Jerry’s” post comments came from a totally different branch of users. Mostly white people argued and pointed the brand as being racist. The strong post of the ice-cream company was interpreted as a racist positioning against the white community. Indeed, most of the negative tweets contained such as personal comments of white users feeling excluded, attacked or threatened by the company. This is the main difference between the two waves of comments. Their nature. Their message. Their call to action towards the brand. In this perspective, the analysis succeeded in shedding light on consumers’ reactions. On one side we could say that both brands were boycotted because of their inconsistency with their pasts. “Amazon” supported blacks and condemned the police even if it provided a facial recognition software to police and unfairly treated its employees. “Ben & Jerry’s” proposed a fight to white supremacy even if the company was founded by two white men. Obviously, those two arguments cannot be compared because of their relevance and incidence. Anyway, it helped us to understand that a company’s past is never forgotten by consumers. The risk of charges for incongruity represents a big danger for companies. On the other side, we can affirm that both posts stood on the side of black people, but they gave birth to two opposite waves of reactions. On “Amazon” side, the company was boycotted when it came out with its #BLM

post. People could not trust “Amazon” was finally supporting the black community “for real”. Its support to the discriminated ones was not consistent with its past behaviors. Definitely, the post resulted “vain” and superficial. On “Ben & Jerry’s” side instead, people deeply believed in the statement. They believed the company wanted to support the black people at the expense of the white ones. They believed the strength of the proposal: dismantling the white supremacy. Users published negative comments to boycott the brand, not because they did not trust the intentions of B&J, but instead because they felt offended and outraged as whites. In conclusion, the two companies gave birth to two different resonance boxes in which users, and consumers, felt free to express their opinions. Actually, our analysis aimed at detecting their reactions which played a crucial role in impacting the corporate reputations of “Amazon” and “Ben & Jerry’s”.

#### **4.5 Discussion**

The goal that this paper pursued was consistent with the research question outlined. Indeed, the aim of the research was firstly shedding light on the historical activist background of "Amazon" and "Ben & Jerry's"; secondly, analyzing the posts they published on Twitter after George Floyd's death; and thirdly investigating consumers' reaction to those same tweets.

With increasing fervor, the topic of Brand activism is acquiring relevance and interest among the community of marketers and academics. Actually, they are turning more and more attention on the brand activism, and especially on its value to consumers and companies. From the study we carried out, it emerges that brand activism has the power to profoundly influence the opinion of consumers, changing their consumption habits and the consideration they have towards brands. As a consequence, businesses are expected to be agents of change. Simultaneously, people determine the fate of brands through their purchases. And, when all other factors are equal, consumers opt for a brand with a good influence. Consumers, without a doubt, expect brands to take a clear position, as these latter are seen as powerful social actors that reflect critical ideas and meanings for society.

Therefore, it is crucial that companies align themselves with these needs, so they can constantly renew the pact of trust between brand and consumers. Although if the adherence to consumers expectations and beliefs seems to be simple to achieve, it is not. The process which leads brands to a path of “real” activism, in the meaning of Kotler (2018), implies a long radical change in brands’ core strategy. Supporting socio-political causes is not enough to capture new young consumers, as those belonging to Generation Z. As described, zoomers tend to take a more progressive stance on social issues, compared to previous generations. That’s why they are defined as shrewd consumers who deeply examine brands before purchasing. Actually, consumers, and especially the youngest ones, prefer brands that share their core values and actively strive to uphold and protect their beliefs. According to that, we could state that now consumers tend to look for the brand activism model theorized by Kotler and Sarkar (2018), the one which from a purpose materializes in action. Based on what stated, the research aimed to extrapolate the case of George Floyd in order to examine the perspective of #BlackLivesMatter activism in 2020. In particular, we focused our attention to that specific case for its unique features. Floyd’s death had a similar resonance all around the world because of the viral video, showing his execution, uploaded on Facebook by Darnella Frazier. For several days, the video was at the center of the worldwide e-WOM discussion. This actually contributed to assign to the case a wider relevance and limitless implications. In front of Floyd’s death information, and especially of people reactions, brands were silently obliged to take a stand. In particular the research aimed to analyze two brands, such as “Ben & Jerry’s” and “Amazon”. These two companies were selected because of their different activist backgrounds. On one side, we proposed the analysis of a consistent activist path carried out by “Ben & Jerry’s”. On the other side, we instead passed through “Amazon’s” activist “absenteeism”. Once examined their activist past stances, the research moved to the two tweets posted by the companies after the death of Floyd. To carry out our study, we applied two investigation methods of different nature: first of all, a semiotic analysis of both tweets, which was meant to- decompose the meaning of the posts in order to understand their technical features and, above all, their communicated values; secondly, we run a qualitative comments analysis to

deepen into consumers' minds and try to understand their reactions. The results of the semiotic analysis showed how much the two posts were actually different and aimed at supporting the #BLM movement with an opposite approach. Accordingly, the comments analysis carried out with NVivo showed to opposite waves of reactions. On "Amazon" side, people negatively replied to the #BLM stance because of its incongruency with the past behaviors of the company, such as the sale of *Rekognition* and the employees' treatment. On "Ben & Jerry's" side instead, the post was credible and in line with company's past, so that white people felt offended and discriminated compared to blacks. Definitely, our analysis was able to show how much the past of a company can impact its present reputation. Indeed, according to Fombrun and Shanley (1990) corporate reputations represent public cumulative judgments of firms over time. This statement perfectly underlines the relevance of a reputation management *over time*. In fact, a corporate reputation is not an isolated goal or achievement, instead it is an ongoing construct which needs to be carefully managed from day zero to the end of a brand life. In conclusion we can state that, nowadays, brand activism has become one crucial element to be carried out for companies. Consumers' dimension is rapidly changing and asking for an increasing attention to socio-political cues. Brands, on their side, need to be aligned with this new set of expectations, by showing their real and truly committed activism in topical matters. Furthermore, they need to carefully manage their activist positioning because, by being at the center of consumers' attention, they risk assisting to a reputation crisis if they make a misstep.

Concerning the academic and managerial fields, the research provides some insightful implications to both sectors. From an academic perspective, the research confirm the study of Shetty et al. (2019), where it is demonstrated that young generations are more socially, culturally, environmentally conscious than their counterparts and they believe activist brands should add voice to promote such causes. Then, it contributes to previous findings related to brand activism phenomenon, by clarifying the role of historical activist background of a company as capable to directly influence present consumers' reactions. From a managerial point of view, the research indirectly delivers its contributions in two

major areas. The first insight deals with political involvement of the younger generations, and especially of Generation Z. One of the key-point to attract and retain younger consumers is indeed the socio-political commitment to brands. Consumption is no more driven only by the product, and neither by the experience proposed. It is now influenced by brand activism behaviors. The second insight deals indeed with the economic relevance of brand activism. The study aims to make brands understand the role of activism related to their own corporate reputations. Actually, brand activism seems to be the new prerequisite for brands who want to achieve a competitive advantage on others.

Finally, some limitations can be identified that may represent insights for future research. The research results are uniquely based on a qualitative analysis of comments found below the two companies' posts. It would be interesting to cluster the comments based on the age of the users. Indeed, the age variable would be able to support, or not, previous findings related to younger generations as the most devoted to racial matters. Furthermore, many other brands' cases could be analyzed in the light of #BLM movement. An interesting research could deal with an analysis of direct competitors in lights of brand activism stances. In doing so, strictly comparable results could be achieved in order to provide some consistent marketing insights and future possible directions for companies.

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## 7. APPENDIX - FIGURES

Figure 1 : Kotler, P., Sarkar, C. (2018). Brand activism: from purpose to action

Figure 2: Ipsos (2020), Retrived from [How Do People Want Brands to Support the Racial Justice Movement? - Marketing Charts](#)

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## 8. RESUME

“I can’t breathe”. These were his last words. On May 25th, 2020, George Floyd, a 46-years-old black man, was killed by Derek Chauvin, a white police officer of the Minneapolis Police Department. While the ladder, surrounded by dozens of unbelieving people, was executing his victim, Darnella Frezier, a seventeen-years-old black lady, filmed the scene with her phone. Once at home, she decided to post the video online on her Facebook profile, giving birth to an inconceivable reaction. The video went viral. It reached millions of people in less than 24 hours. An incessant series of protests and demonstrations started right from the following day. A week after Floyd’s death, people were demonstrating in almost every state in the country (US). The echo of the phenomenon was so huge that many global brands were called into question. Gradually, they started to stand up with protestants, to take sides of #BLM movement and to show their political and social commitment. Definitely, Floyd’s case gave birth to a fierce wave of Brand activism.

The brand activism concept appeared for the first time in 2018 when Philip Kotler and Christian Sarkar identified and developed it as a marketing and business management construct. Actually, according to Kotler (2018), Brand Activism is defined as company activities to support, obstruct, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stagnation with the goal of promoting or obstructing social reforms. While conquering the activism frontier might seem like an easy path to take, it's not. Companies that embrace brand activism must do so with a constant spirit of research and learning. Internal engagement must be even greater than the external one. Such companies must have a very specific mindset, organizational culture and style of leadership. Once these three key-points are verified, companies must generate a brand activism strategy in order to create a concrete movement. Following Kotler’s proposal, the steps to build a movement up are five. The first thing to do is defining a mission built on the common good. The second step is about imagining what the movement should provide and how to provide it. Then, the company must ask itself how to inspire people to be actively engaged in supporting the cause (and the brand). Step four deals with the practical commitment of

those who took sides of the cause. And finally, the final step is about coordinating the action to generate an impact. A movement, to be defined as such, starts with a purpose and ends up with an action. That's why the two (purpose and action), one without the other, may lose their power by risking to not deliver any impact to society. In this regard, it's indeed our society which is unconsciously pushing brands to embrace Brand activism practices. Actually, a growing number of companies are jumping at the chance to signal their social and environmental credentials. For good reason too: it is what people want. Today, businesses are expected to be agents of change and consumers make most of their purchase decisions based on the socio-political role of brands. The new "trend" for consumers is purchasing brands which are aligned with their ethical expectations. This is why an increasing number of businesses are focused on the image they project to the public. Indeed, consumer perceptions of a business are not only influenced by its brand but also by its responsible behavior, since consumers expect businesses to act ethically and contribute to society (Creyer & Ross, 1997). Thus, the rules for survival in today's market environment have shifted away from economic maximization and toward responsible behavior as well (Waddock, 2008). In this resurgent activist scene, brands are put to the test on a daily basis by public opinion. If we contextualize businesses' strategies in contemporary culture, and particularly in 2020, when the Covid-19 Pandemic expanded, we will observe significant shifts in marketing and "activism." In 2020, the pandemic significantly impacted numerous areas of civic involvement and brand activism: the majority of political conventions went virtual, long-planned rallies were canceled, and communities of activists promoting a range of topics coalesced around online platforms. In fact, according to Dominik Stecula<sup>95</sup>, professor at Colorado State University, *"Before the COVID-19 pandemic, activism took many forms, often involving large demonstrations, door-to-door canvassing, or asking strangers for signatures on petitions. But the arrival of the novel virus shifted a lot of these traditional practices away from in-person contact. The pandemic changed a lot about how activism was practiced. Although the virus shifted the landscape of engagement, it did not dampen enthusiasm around it. Brands started to*

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<sup>95</sup> [Dominik Stecula, Assistant Professor - Political Science | Colorado State University \(colostate.edu\)](https://colostate.edu/)

*feel a greater sense of urgency than in the previous years, whether the issue was racial justice, public health, financial insecurity, or climate change*". Activism had always been around us, but the COVID-19 pandemic absolutely shifted the visibility to it, and the consciousness around it. This is why many brands have started embracing activist theories and practices. Under the spotlight of public opinion, enhanced by the sanitary emergency, brands have been obliged to re-design their strategy in order to meet people expectations and to safeguard their corporate reputations. Even if no one definition of corporate reputation exists (Veh, Gobel, & Vogel, 2019), it can be described as the sum of all the opinions and beliefs held about the company in relation to its history and future prospects in contrast to nearby competitors. Reputation is a composite of all prior transactions over the course of an entity's existence and demands the consistency of an entity's acts over an extended period of time (Herbig and Milewicz 1993). Additionally, research consistently demonstrates that a positive reputation boosts a company's value and gives persistent competitive benefits. That is why brands, especially nowadays, need to carefully think of all their moves in order to avoid missteps and to prevent reputational crisis. In conclusion, building up a strong reputation takes its time and requires long periods to become visible, but then companies can rest assured: if they correctly manage it, they will probably skyrocket their business.

In this theoretical framework, where we analyzed Brand activism phenomenon and possible implications for brands, we decided to focus on a specific case: the activist reaction of brands after the death of George Floyd. We selected this specific vicissitude because of its intrinsic features. First of all, the video, showing the entire execution of the black victim, went viral. Compared to all previous cases, the one of George Floyd shocked people worldwide. This mainly happened because the video, uploaded by a young lady on Facebook, went viral in a while. Actually, when that shocking content was shared via Internet, a fast wave of word-of-mouth started to accompany it. This happened because people have a natural tendency to share information with others. They talk about clichés, gossip about other people's lives. They share vital information. They give opinions on politics and current events. They criticize the system. They recommend things and advise

against others. They encourage friends to visit one place rather than another. They talk about brands, products, and services. In short, they always want to have their say, but at the same time they expect others to share. Interpersonal communication can be defined as "informal conversations directed at other customers regarding the ownership, use, or features of specific goods and services or their suppliers" (Westbrook, 1987). While methods of sharing vary, WOM (word of mouth) commonly refers to literal word of mouth, face-to-face dialogues, and, of course, all forms of digital/online word of mouth (e-WOM), including tags, mentions, and postings. The question is: why do people talk of certain topics in specific situations rather than others? Drawing directly on that, research confirms that the prevalence of different topics varied with the situation. So, it is clear that environments and circumstances have impact on the choice of topics, but the previous finding does not respond to the reason why. Why do people share information? Which are the underlying drivers of their chitchatting? According to Berger (2014) word of mouth serves five key functions: Impression Management, Emotion Regulation, Information Acquisition, Social Bonding, and Persuading Others (Figure 14). In Floyd's cases, we could assume that the word-of-mouth, aroused around that video, was mainly accompanied by a need of emotion regulation and social bonding. According to the first criteria, people share certain content to accentuate, make known, repress, or manifest one's emotional state with others. Emotion management can be "done" in a variety of ways, including providing social support, venting, lowering cognitive dissonance, enabling sense making, exacting vengeance, or encouraging rehearsing. Thus, one type of interpersonal communication that should aid in mood control is offering assistance and support to others. Rather than that, according to social bonding, information sharing enables humans to strengthen ties and maintain contact with other individuals quickly and readily. By and large, sharing appears to promote social connection by reinforcing shared beliefs and alleviating loneliness and social isolation. According to the first case, people tend to share information that they know will be welcomed by others. More specifically, they prefer to talk about common topics that reinforce a connection with their audience. Consequently, the goal of social bonding lead people to share extremely emotional content and common ground topics. To recap, these

were the main two reasons why people talked about and shared the video of Floyd's death, by making it go viral in few days. In this perspective, it would be worth to analyze the meaning, and the role, of virality in order to better understand the context surrounding Floyd's case. Today, the term "virality" refers to a new video, tool, app, content, product, software program, game, or other online-based item that generates thousands or millions of views from users of the product or service. Because these forms of online sensations may spread so swiftly, they are compared to viruses. Indeed, the term "internet virality" stems from the scientific study of virus spread. However, if this is the case, it would imply that content spreads virally without any discernible reasoning. They become a bit like a virus that spreads in a society. This means that a content reaches the other side of the world only because people have been contaminated and have unintentionally attached the virus (=content) to others without their active involvement. A virus, in most cases, attaches itself without others knowing about it or, of course, wanting to. And again, according to science, once contracted, the virus is reattached to others and so on.... Having said that, the comparison between online media virality and a passive mass epidemic does not persist. By reducing the complexity of online virality to a simple virus that spreads unchecked, we would risk limiting our analysis and would blur our vision on the phenomenon. Definitely, the metaphor of "infection" reduces consumers to the involuntary "hosts" of media viruses and even if attractive, such a notion doesn't reflect the complexity of cultural and communicative processes. In this regard, Henry Jenkins<sup>96</sup> offers an advanced model which better explains how media circulate from mouth to mouth (or from keyboard to keyboard): the spreadable media. *A spreadable model emphasizes the activity of consumers, those who were simple "multipliers" in virus model, in shaping the circulation of media content, often expanding potential meanings, and opening up brands to unanticipated new markets. Rather than emphasizing the direct replication of "memes," a spreadable model assumes that the repurposing and transformation of media content adds value, allowing media content to be localized to diverse contexts of use. This notion of spreadability is intended as a contrast to older models of stickiness which emphasize centralized control over*

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<sup>96</sup> [If It Doesn't Spread, It's Dead \(Part One\): Media Viruses and Memes — Henry Jenkins](#)

*distribution and attempts to maintain 'purity' of message.* Virality, as we understand it, implies the direct and active involvement of users. The latter are not limited to "stick" a viral content to others, rather they store it, understand it, and then spread it, adding a personal trait, an opinion, a tag. Based on this perspective, we can now have a clearer understanding of the cultural and digital context where Floyd's death before, and the video after, took place.

The main purpose of the first part of the research was to have a better understanding on Brand activism and on its inter-connected topics, in order to do the groundwork to define our research question. The study aims at investigating the effects of brands' activist stances on their own reputations. Considering the huge variety of brands which supported the #BLM cause after Floyd's death, the research is based on two exemplary companies: "Ben & Jerry's" and "Amazon". The choice of these two main characters is based on their activist background, and so on the activist stances of the brand in past years. The past brand activism actions are indeed the keystone of our study. Definitely, the effects of #BLM stances on corporate reputation are examined through the lens of past activist moves. Drawing directly on this the research question of our study can be summarized as:

*Which is the effect of #BlackLivesMatter brand activism on corporate reputation? A comparative analysis between "Ben & Jerry's" and "Amazon's" based on their activist background.*

The first company we analyzed was "Ben & Jerry's". It manufactures ice cream, frozen yogurt, and sorbet. Today the company operates globally as a fully owned subsidiary of Unilever. The reason why "Ben & Jerry's" has been chosen over thousands of other companies stems from its activist behavior. As we will see step by step, the company has always stood out for a distinctly radical note. Before many others, the company has been able to incorporate some of the most salient social causes into its communication and marketing plan. It has succeeded in incorporating environmental, racial, and civil issues into its products, which we must not forget being "only" ice creams. Among all the activist stances, and ice-cream limited editions, one of the most salient was the *Justice ReMix'd* one. It was presented as *"the new flavor featuring cinnamon and chocolate, gobs of*





cinnamon bun dough, and spicy fudge brownies. And the best part? Justice ReMix'd also has a sweet swirl of justice under the lid<sup>97</sup>". The initiative was realized in partnership with The Advancement

Project National Office<sup>98</sup>, a multi-racial civil rights organization dedicated to racial justice issues. Following on with the statement of the firm, *"We believe justice should be for everyone, not just the white and wealthy. So, we're speaking out in the best way we know of, with a euphoric ice cream flavor, for an end to structural racism in our broken criminal legal system."*<sup>99</sup>. The underlying idea of the ice-cream was to spread awareness to the justice needed when it came to systemic racism and criminal justice reform.

On the opposite side of "Ben & Jerry's", we took into analysis a totally different company: "Amazon". It has been referred to as "one of the most influential economic and cultural forces in the world", as well as the world's most valuable brand<sup>100</sup>. Then, it is also the largest Internet company by revenue in the world. By an activist point of view, "Amazon" is certainly different from "Ben & Jerry's". Its story is more complex and constantly made of "ups and downs". This is why, we decided to analyze it. Among the "ups" we could cite mainly three initiatives. A few years ago, "Amazon" established its affinity clubs, also known as employee resource groups, to connect employees across businesses and regions worldwide. Apart from this initial program, "Amazon" has established another noteworthy initiative: the "Black Business Accelerator." The project was intended to assist Black

<sup>97</sup> [Introducing Justice ReMix'd! | Ben & Jerry's \(benjerry.com\)](https://benjerry.com/justice-remixd/)

<sup>98</sup> [Portal Page - Advancement Project - Advancement Project](#)

<sup>99</sup> [Justice ReMix'd Ice Cream | Ben & Jerry's \(benjerry.com\)](https://benjerry.com/justice-remixd/)

<sup>100</sup> [Accelerated Growth Sees Amazon Crowned 2019's BrandZ™ Top 100 Most Valuable Global Brand \(prnewswire.com\)](https://prnewswire.com/accelerated-growth-sees-amazon-crowned-2019s-brandz-top-100-most-valuable-global-brand/)

businesses in achieving sustainable equity and growth by enabling their success as salespeople. In practice, the company provides financial assistance to black entrepreneurs, including a \$500 credit to help with start-up and operational costs for eligible newly established sellers and \$400 in Sponsored Products advertising credits to help the business gain awareness. Finally, the third “activist” initiative deals with the Climate crisis. As one of the main co-founders of the Climate Pledge (2019), “Amazon” started to act on the conviction that global businesses were responsible, accountable, and able to act together on the climate crisis. In line with what had been affirmed, “Amazon” started to buy renewable energy and to launch new sustainable projects all around the world. Besides these positive actions, the brand was negatively “reviewed” by people for two other major facts. The first one dealt with the fact that “Amazon” sold, and continue to sell, a facial recognition software to the USA Police. In particular, researchers reviewed findings about the software’s problems with racial and gender biases. Moreover, a study, conducted by Inioluwa Deborah Raji and Joy Buolamwini, published at the AAAI/ACM conference on “Artificial Intelligence, Ethics, and Society”, found out that *Rekognition* tool had much higher error rates while classifying the gender of darker skinned women than lighter skinned men (31% vs. 0%). Besides this, another crucial act strongly impacted the reputation of the company. During the first days of Pandemic, Christian Smalls, a black “Amazon” employee, decided to organize a protest against his employer to pretend safer conditions at work. “Amazon” on its side took the decision to fire him. As a consequence, those previous “activist” and positive initiatives undertaken by the firm were rapidly blurred by these two negative and tedious matters.

In this scenario, we were able to base our research. The first part aimed to analyze how “Ben & Jerry’s” and “Amazon” reacted to the death of George Floyd. In particular, the study focused on the posts they shared via Twitter. A semiotic approach was used in order to deeply understand the meaning of the two statements. The second part of the research instead aimed to analyze the impact of the content on consumers’ opinions, through an analysis of the comments. Though a semiotic perspective, aimed at deepening into brands’



Amazon  @amazon · May 31, 2020

...

The inequitable and brutal treatment of Black people in our country must stop.

Together we stand in solidarity with the Black community – our employees, customers, and partners – in the fight against systemic racism and injustice.

amazon

 4.7K

 11.8K

 9.7K



Ben & Jerry's   
@benandjerrys

...

The murder of George Floyd was the result of inhumane police brutality that is perpetuated by a culture of white supremacy.

[benjerrys.co/2XXle5J](https://benjerrys.co/2XXle5J)

**WE MUST  
DISMANTLE  
WHITE  
SUPREMACY**

7:48 PM · Jun 2, 2020 · TweetDeck

107.7K Retweets 18.7K Quote Tweets 333.9K Likes

sign system and meaning production processes, we were able to detect the consistent differences of the two posts. Because of its complex and multi-level structure, the semiotic analysis of the two posts can't be easily summarized. As main insights we could affirm that the two brands had two opposite approaches to the theme. On "Amazon's case", the brand opted for a stylistically simple (Calibri font) white statement on a black background. It focused on to the black community, identified with "Amazon's" employees, customers and partners, as victim of brutal treatment and injustice. On "Ben & Jerry's case" instead, the brand preferred to share a lapidary post where the attention was turned to whites. The-cracked "marble" letters affirmed "*We must dismantle white supremacy*" and delivered the idea that there is no other option to support #BlackLivesMatter if not a radical common action against white supremacy.

Both dealing with the death of George Floyd, the two posts took two different positions to speak out of the event. They shew the two sides of the coin. On one side the black victims, on the other side the white suppressors. In reaction to these two singular approaches, people could not avoid being silent. As we could examine, both posts were followed by a series of negative comments, but their nature was not actually the same. On "Amazon" case most of the negative tweets came from users who boycotted the company for its hypocrisy. Lots of them focused on the discrepancy between what was written by "Amazon" in favor of #BLM and what was done by the company. Macro-themes as the sale of Rekognition and the employees' treatments populated the strongest negative comments. Consequently, users attacked the brand for its inconsistent and incongruent statement. On "Ben & Jerry's" post, comments came from a totally different branch of users. Mostly white people argued and pointed the brand as being racist. The strong post of the ice-cream company was interpreted as a racist positioning against the white community. Indeed, most of the negative tweets contained such as personal comments of white users feeling excluded, attacked or threatened by the company. This is the main difference between the two waves of comments. Their nature. Their message. Their call to action towards the brand. In this perspective, the analysis succeeded in shedding light on consumers' reactions. On one side we could say that both brands were boycotted because of their inconsistency with their

pasts. “Amazon” supported blacks and condemned the police even if it provided a facial recognition software to police and unfairly treated its employees. “Ben & Jerry’s” proposed a fight to white supremacy even if the company was founded by two white men. Obviously, those two arguments cannot be compared because of their relevance and incidence. Anyway, it helped us to understand that a company’s past is never forgotten by consumers. The risk of charges for incongruity represents a big danger for companies. On the other side, we can affirm that both posts stood on the side of black people, but they gave birth to two opposite waves of reactions. On “Amazon” side, the company was boycotted when it came out with its #BLM post. People could not trust “Amazon” was finally supporting the black community “for real”. Its support to the discriminated ones was not consistent with its past behaviors. Definitely, the post resulted “vain” and superficial. On “Ben & Jerry’s” side instead, people deeply believed in the statement. They believed the company wanted to support the black people at the expense of the white ones. They believed the strength of the proposal: dismantling the white supremacy. Users published negative comments to boycott the brand, not because they did not trust the intentions of B&J, but instead because they felt offended and outraged as whites. In conclusion, the two companies gave birth to two different resonance boxes in which users, and consumers, felt free to express their opinions.

The goal that this paper pursued was consistent with the research question outlined. Actually, the aim of the research was firstly shedding light on the historical activist background of “Amazon” and “Ben & Jerry’s”; secondly, analyzing the meaning of the posts they published on Twitter after George Floyd’s death; and thirdly investigating consumers’ reaction to those same tweets. As main insight we could state that before undertaking an activist path, a company always needs to pay attention to its own image, to the perception that consumers have towards it and to the consistency with its own past behaviors.