Consuming Crisis

Commodifying Care and COVID-19

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⑤SAGE

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BEYOND THE PRETENSE OF 'BRAND ACTIVISM'

The world of advertising has been depicted in many different pop culture contexts, but the critically acclaimed televised drama series *Mad Men* (2007–2015) stands out from the crowd. Among the show's iconic season finales is The Wheel (episode 13 of season 1, 2007), which captures the power of advertising. The show's main protagonist Don Draper (played by Jon Hamm) finds himself delivering an impactful client pitch to Kodak. This involves Don reflecting on how consumer culture – namely, products and their advertising – can stir people's emotions and speak to their souls.

In earnest, and to an initially stiff client audience, Don speaks of how 'technology is a glittering lure, but there is the rare occasion when the public can be engaged on a level beyond flash, if they have a sentimental bond with the product'. Don goes on to discuss 'nostalgia', including its delicate yet potent nature. By turning to sentimentality, he demonstrates his ability to highlight how Kodak's product movingly brings photographs to life. In turn, Don proves his

potential to help Kodak successfully market The Wheel (which he affectionately refers to as The Carousel).

Brands consist of people, practices, and promises that play a part in the pursuit of a profitable profile and platform – including by stirring emotions and trying to conjure nostalgia. From the celebrities and logos associated with household supermarket names, to the social media handles and partnerships of influencers – a brand's image is made up of different texts, signs, and symbols. In some situations, 'brand' is deemed to be a dirty word that connotes the cravings and cruelties of capitalism. In other settings, the term 'brand' invokes prestige and a praised power to influence. In almost all circumstances, 'brand' is an expression that conjures up images and ideas of commercial activity and marketplace exchanges, including shopping transactions. But not all brands want to be associated with consumerism, and some even put a lot of effort into attempting to camouflage the market logic and exploitation that lies beneath their polished surface.

This chapter examines the marketing of brands who have claimed to care, convey a sense of comfort, and / or constructed camaraderie during the COVID-19 crisis (e.g., Boohoo, Deliveroo, Halifax). Such analysis investigates how the themes of normality, heroism, patriotism, and togetherness are drawn on by brands to promote their products and services in ways that allude to constructions of care and comfort (Sobande and Klein, 2022). In addition to considering such matters, I scrutinize an aspect of the public sector – UK higher education – that has sought to both distance itself from, and embrace, branding practices. The subsequent discussion reiterates the reality that brands have been political and politicized for much longer than is sometimes suggested by claims that '[b]rands are now seemingly comfortable alienating some consumers to address

contested and polarizing sociopolitical issues' (Vredenburg et al., 2020: 445).

This chapter also clarifies contradictions and contortions inherent to how the term 'woke-washing' – which relates to marketing approaches – has been used in scholarly and marketing industry settings. I critique how such a term has been taken up in ways that move away from critically examining brands, their harmful actions, and their hypocrisy, to move towards helping them disguise their actions and / or manage backlash. As I reflected on for *Disegno*:

> For more than five years [now, seven], as part of my research into the media experiences of Black women in Britain, I have been exploring how brands attempt to portray themselves as supporters of Black and social justice activism. The assumed woke attributes of brands have been praised by some media, but this form of strategic marketing can symbolically, and sometimes ambiguously, merely gesture towards activism. A case in point is when brands are celebrated for featuring images of activists in their campaigns, regardless of the reality that many companies' dubious employment conditions are at odds with the principles of racial justice upheld by the activists that they aspire to be associated with. (Sobande, 2020c)

Before examining how brands have presented themselves as caring, while also reflecting on hues of higher education that hint at its unrepentant marketization, I pause to consider the politics of care, (dis)comfort, and commodification. This means engaging with a range of work on care and capitalism, which I now turn to (Bailey and Mobley, 2018; Chatzidakis and Littler, 2022; Chatzidakis et al., 2020; Gonsalves and Kapcyznski, 2020; Johnson, 2020; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; The Care Collective, 2021).

THE POLITICS OF CARE(LESSNESS), (DIS)COMFORT, AND COMMODIFICATION

When I think of care, I think of unwavering and collective forms of support that are essential to survival but are about much more than stoicism or ableist notions of strength. I think of both the tenderness of love offered and reciprocated, and the sharpness of healthcare systems where medical racism and xenophobia remains rife. I think of the contradictions present in contexts that are claimed as sites of care but that are also spaces where care-lessness runs rampant. Experiences of care, of course, involve many forms of essential clinical work, as is palpably present during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. However, if care is conceptualized in purely clinical terms, there is a risk that care is constructed and delivered in ways that do not account for people's desire and need for care that places comfort (emotionally, physically, spiritually, and psychically) at its core. What is care without agency, comfort, gentleness, and grace? Is it care at all?

Arguably, the coronavirus pandemic 'has finally fore-grounded "care" as a keyword of our time – one that hitherto had remained largely peripheral in the lexicon of the left, despite the persistent efforts of a long line of feminist theorists' (Chatzidakis et al., 2020: 890), particularly those involved in disability justice work. However, the word comfort is often still glaringly absent from many mainstream conversations concerning care, as is consideration of how addressing the (dis)comfort of some people is societally prioritized (e.g., middle-class people) in comparison to addressing the (dis) comfort of others (e.g., working-class people).

In other words, discourse on care is sometimes steeped in expectations of unwavering stoicism and resilience – which is expected of both carers and those who they care for, and

which does not account for how structural forms of oppression impact who tends to experience specific vulnerabilities, harms, and the material conditions to access care (and comfort). 'Care, like all other human practices and emotions, always fluctuates, and is frequently at odds with other needs and affective states, such as the desire for personal gratification and recognition' (Chatzidakis et al., 2020: 890). In the context of neoliberalism, care and comfort are commonly constructed and understood in ways that are tethered to market logics and even expectations of customer service. Expressions such as 'service with a smile' and 'bedside manner' feature as part of media, political, and public discussions of experiences of care, including praise or critique of the extent to which a care-worker is deemed to be personable, friendly, and attentive.

I echo calls for forms of comfort to more effectively be provided alongside care, while recognizing that '[t]he availability of comfort for some bodies may depend on the labour of others' (Ahmed, 2004: 149). Expectations of comfort and care (e.g., who provides them, and how) are raced, gendered, and classed in ways which yield distinctly different expectations and societal treatment of care-workers, such as those faced by a Black working-class woman who is a nurse, compared to those experienced by a white middle-class man who is a doctor. Hence, when calling for forms of comfort to be more firmly embedded in experiences of care, it is important to recognize how the different pressures and problems faced by care-workers are impacted by racism, sexism, misogyny, classism, and their many intersections. This also means that pursuit of more meaningful forms of both comfort and care must include the comfort and care of carers, as well as those who they care for and about.

What would it mean to turn more attention to collectively ensuring that comfort is at the core of care, and to disentangling the way that consumer culture has sought to capture and capitalize on care and comfort? The purchase of various products – from food to clothes – can undoubtedly contribute to experiences of comfort and care. Yet, in some cases, consumer culture – including the purchase of products marketed as so-called 'self-care' essentials – may have the effect of making (some) people *feel* better, rather than resulting in them being so. As sociologist Bev Skeggs (2022) puts it as part of a recorded conversation with Rosie Hancock and Alexis Hieu Truong about care and its privatization, '[w]e're talking about something old that's been really, really commoditised. And absolutely, as you say, become a huge industry, and has also, by becoming so commodified, has eclipsed all sorts of different forms of care. It's almost as if it's eclipsed the interdependence of care that every form of care really relies on. So, it's impossible just to be self-caring'.

Relatedly, '[a] clear example of how feminist ideas have been decontextualised and recontextualised via consumer culture is the co-optation of Black lesbian feminist [Audre] Lorde's (1988) notion of "self-care" and its radical potential. Lorde's (1988) political position, which is undergirded by critiques of capitalism and its racist nature, is often reduced to marketing messages which insinuate that self-care exclusively starts and ends with consumerism' (Sobande, 2020b: 2725). Shaped by work such as that of Lorde's (1988), my critique of the commodification of care is not a critique of the fact that people pursue forms of care and comfort in their lives. Instead, I critique how consumer culture and its advocates seek to capture and redefine care and comfort, in ways that elide the reality

of how commodification processes are part of the capitalist problems that prohibit many people's experiences of care and comfort.

Sure, at times, the purchase of a product or participation in the marketplace can play a part in how people experience a sense of comfort and pleasure, and I don't pretend to be above such purchasing habits. However, the aspirational joy, gentleness, and so-called 'soft life' that many brands (including influencers) claim to embody, should not be mistaken for the type of care that Lorde wrote of. Nor should the nature of care that Lorde (1988) outlined be assumed to be completely joyless and devoid of pleasure.

As the language of care and pleasure continues to be wrapped up in the promotion of products and the brands behind them, there is a need to stay alert to how classism and respectability politics is implicated in marketed notions of joy and rest. This includes some framings of Black joy which can be part of the depoliticizing efforts of market entities which construct happiness as a (purchasable) choice – one which is sometimes made possible by the discomfort and exploitation of other people, including those who are Black and are expected to take on many different types of low-paid, unpaid, and forced care work.

It is true that '[h]istorically, many forms of care and care work have been strongly associated with the "feminine"' (Chitzadakis et al., 2020: 890). As well as noting the gendered dimensions of care and care work, it is essential to account for their raced dimensions and how the two (gender *and* race) intersect (Bailey and Mobley, 2018; Johnson, 2020).

As Chatzidakis et al. (2020: 889) assert, 'the COVID-19 crisis is becoming firmly established as above all a *crisis of*

care', but whose experiences and perceptions of care (as well as comfort) tend to be prioritized during this time and are regarded as 'normal'? Johnson's (2020) writing reminds readers that, contrary to public messaging, care is not something afforded to all. This point is mirrored by the work of Gordon (2022: 10) who states that '[e]ven where black people may have equal access, it doesn't follow that there is no racism in the administering of medical services to us'.

The crisis of care(lessness) (Dowling, 2021) that has been experienced in recent years is the outcome of much more than the impact of the coronavirus pandemic. In the words of The Care Collective (2020: 1-2):

> long before the pandemic, care services had already been slashed and priced out of reach for many of the elderly and disabled, hospitals were routinely overwhelmed and in crisis, homelessness had been on the rise for years, and increasing numbers of schools had begun dealing with pupil hunger. Meanwhile, multinational corporations had been making huge profits out of financializing and overleveraging care homes while work in the care sector was subsumed into the corporate gig economy, making precarious workers not only more numerous but also hugely overstretched.

Care should involve individuals being treated with dignity and respect, while being cared for – whether that is an adult's experience of receiving medical treatment or a child's experience of different types of carers. As such, care-related activism includes the collective efforts of care experienced people such as those involved in Who Cares? Scotland (2022), who work 'to influence change which directly redresses the inequality that care experienced people face at both a community and national level'.

As Horgan (2021: 3) affirms, '[i]n a society that is highly unequal, like the UK, the conditions under which people will experience the same health problem will be vastly different. These differences are not secondary; rather they can define the likelihood of becoming sick and the severity of the illness itself'. Receiving care – whether as a baby, child, or adult – is not simply a matter of getting to access certain systems and services, such as the NHS. For example, research highlights that crucial healthcare equipment, such as oxygen meters (oximeters), work less well on dark skin than light skin, which means that the accuracy of readings for dark-skinned people can be considerably compromised (Feiner et al., 2007; Lovett, 2021). This is just one from a long list of issues which elucidate the harmful nature of 'post-racial' perspectives of 'universal care' which do not address issues regarding race, racism, colourism, and provision / experiences of care. Also, in the striking words of Skeggs (2022) on care and the NHS, 'until we come to face it, we don't actually know in the UK how much has been privatised. For instance, there's seven areas in the UK that have absolutely no social care support for the elderly. You can't get provision; you can't it's not there'. The privatization of health and social care existed before the COVID-19 pandemic but has undoubtedly played a part in the cruelty of the crisis.

The (mis)treatment that people do or do not receive, once they are within care systems, or when accessing related services, determines whether what they are receiving is care or is in fact the antithesis of it. Such experiences are always informed by the politics and history of the UK, where entrenched racism and xenophobia means that many Black and Asian people who work in care-based roles face abuse and discrimination while trying to do their (often low-paid) jobs.

To (re)turn to the clarion call of Johnson (2020):

Even though People of Colour have repeatedly warned against the violence of the UK's nostalgia for empire, many took every opportunity to tell us that things weren't 'that bad': they argued that if only we were a bit more patient, if only we worked a bit harder, things would eventually get better.

As Johnson (2020) emphasizes, despite others' claims that the crisis of Brexit and COVID-19 have exposed issues of inequality, people who are structurally marginalized – including those who are Black and disabled – have actively acknowledged and challenged such inequalities long before then. The incisive words of Johnson (2020) echo elements of Bailey and Mobley's (2018: 20) crucial 'Black feminist disability framework', which 'centers race, gender, and disability, challenging these generally siloed theories to work together to better understand the realities for those multiply marginalized within society'.

The impacts of ableism, austerity, and the underfunding and understaffing of health and social care in the UK and elsewhere have never been hidden. Rather, they are often only meaningfully and societally acknowledged as issues once they significantly impact the lives of white and middle-class people on a large scale – such as in the form of a global pandemic. Despite how Brexit and the COVID-19 crisis are often referred to as having 'revealed' issues of inequality, such deep-seated issues are not new. Instead, they were, and still are, often ignored and denied by institutions and individuals who believe they are immune to their negative impacts.

When reflecting on the crisis of care(lessness) in the UK, and the structural oppression that Johnson (2020) names, I recalled the resonant words and wisdom of creative and restorative

practitioner, cultural worker, and scholar Naya Jones (2021a) –
whose work lifts up 'Black community health, healing, and
ecologies, especially in the context of spatial injustice like gentri-
fication or climate injustice'. Jones' (2021b) approach to 'black
dream geographies' foregrounds the need to care for, and
about, 'Black interiority' – whether that be Black people's experi-
ences of dreaming while sleeping or dreaming while awake.

Informed by the generous work of both Johnson (2020)
and Jones (2021a, 2021b, 2022), my critique of the commodi-
fication of care and the absence of comfort in various so-called
care systems, acknowledges the experiences of individuals who
others may perceive as receiving care, but who are not tended
to in any meaningful, comforting, respectful, or care-full ways.

Writer, poet, philosopher, and literary critic Édouard
Glissant's (1997) critical work on *Poetics of Relation* is integral
to how I think through the differences between being cared
for / about, and being (mis)treated, as well as the differences
between being visually represented and being structurally
supported. 'Action is not always about creating or doing some-
thing that is visible to others' (Sobande and Emejulu, 2021: 2),
and so, care must be understood in ways that surpass a focus
on what is visible or legible to all.

As Glissant's (1997) writing illuminates, it is important
to move beyond the ineffective binary opposition of 'visible'
and 'invisible', including to grasp how forms of recognition,
retreat, resonance, refuge, and consequently, care, function
and feel in society. Glissant's (1997: 189) call for 'the right to
opacity' pushes against assumptions that all people want to
be represented and recognized in the same way. Such work
challenges the notion that forms of societal visibility and rep-
resentation are inherently beneficial to the people who appear

to be represented and recognized. So too does the insightful work of writer, scholar, and social activist bell hooks (1992) on *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, which critiques how 'marginalized groups, deemed Other, who have been ignored, rendered invisible, can be seduced by the emphasis on Otherness, by its commodification, because it offers the promise of recognition and reconciliation' (26).

Buoyed by the work of hooks (1992) and Glissant (1997), I engage with depictions and discourses of care, while respecting the intimacy, privacy, and, overall, *opacity*, of certain experiences of care (and experiences of a lack of it). Guided by such critical perspectives of visibility, opacity, and power, when reflecting on the relationship between activism and consumer culture, I acknowledge that '[i]deas regarding "real activism", can involve expectations of activism being very public and physical in nature, such as a protest march, or a demonstration "die-in"' (Sobande, 2018a: 84), and that, '[m]easuring the success of activism solely in relation to its visibility and the immediacy of its effects, can uphold neoliberal notions of productivity and speed over sustainability, that such activism may even be intended to resist' (ibid.).

Therefore, in writing this book, I recognize that much activism, including disability justice work, is 'underdocumented, private work – work often seen as not "real activism"' (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018: 19), despite its impact and importance. This means that, in principle, I agree with the sentiments of Gordon's (2022: 17) statement that '[t]he guiding theme of these pandemics – antidemocracy, colonialism, racism, and a disease – is invisibility', but the way that forms of visibility (e.g., marketing representations) and opacity (e.g., efforts to maintain intimacy and privacy) operate amid these pandemics

requires further consideration. Then again, particularly when accounting for the ongoing 'state suppression of community organising' (Campbell, 2021) and the UK government's efforts to prohibit protests, it is important to acknowledge the power of direct action that takes necessary public forms.

The following section continues this conversation about visibility, representation, commodification, and care. I provide an overview of how such issues appear in the form of expressions and analysis of brand 'woke-washing' and 'woke capitalism' (Dowell and Jackson, 2020; Kanai and Gill, 2020; Orgad and Gill, 2022; Rhodes, 2021; Rossi and Táíwò, 2020; Sobande, 2020b; Vredenburg et al., 2020), 'feminist advertising' ('femvertising') (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012; Sobande, 2019), and, more recently, 'carewashing' (Chatzidakis and Littler, 2022; Chatzidakis et al., 2020). Focusing on key marketing examples, and how literature on 'woke-washing' and 'carewashing' has developed, I critique how different concepts of care, injustice, activism, and inequality are made manifest in marketing and related theorizations.

THE CONTRADICTIONS AND CONTORTIONS OF 'WOKE-WASHING' AND 'FEMVERTISING'

Understandings and ideas about 'wokeness' predate the twenty-first century. Such understandings and ideas include Black American novelist and writer William Melvin Kelley's (1962) notable, and now often cited, *The New York Times* article, 'If you're woke you dig it'. Yet, it is also vital to recognize key recent cultural moments that have influenced the direction of contemporary discourses of 'wokeness'. Jordan Peele's iconic film *Get Out* (2017) is one of many sources of such impact.

Get Out depicts the horrors of anti-Blackness and white supremacy, with a soundtrack that features Childish Gambino's song Redbone which includes lyrics about staying 'woke'. The laidback track plays during the opening of the film – its lyrics foreshadowing the horrors that lie ahead for the main protagonist, a young Black man named Chris Washington (played by Daniel Kaluuya), who hauntingly finds that he must stay alert (or, 'woke') to the nefarious intentions of his white girlfriend and her family. *Get Out* played a part in ushering in a wave of media and cultural commentaries on what it means to 'stay woke' – actively conscious of anti-Blackness and social injustices and invested in tackling such forms of violence and structural oppression.

Due to the 'diversity-capitalism nexus' (Rossi and Táíwò, 2020), 'contemporary consumer culture frequently employs the term "woke" in ways that whitewash its genesis, confusing capitalist endeavours and corporate spin with collective racial justice action and sustained organising' (Sobande, 2020c). The word 'woke' packs a political punch that has been contorted by craven individuals who are intent on weaponizing notions of 'wokeness' to undermine perspectives that contrast with their own. There is much evidence of people invoking ideas about 'wokeness' (Kanai and Gill, 2020), including when seeking to critique, and even, obstruct, the words of others who they argue are impeding 'free speech'. Put simply, the word 'woke' is often unironically flung around during discussions of 'free speech', including by proponents of 'free speech' who appear intent on preventing the so-called 'woke' from speaking freely. By extension, the term 'woke-washing' can be uttered in ways that are indicative of hypocrisy and some people's disdain for critiques of racial capitalism.

Debating the details of free speech is beyond the aims of this book, but it is necessary to understand how the word 'woke' functions in contradictory ways in different contexts, to grapple with the term 'woke-washing' and analysis of related marketplace activity during the COVID-19 crisis. While my use of this term ('woke-washing') has changed in the years since I began to write about it, what has remained relatively consistent is my cynicism regarding the potential for brands to be activists – unsurprisingly, I don't think they can.

More recently, I have also scrutinized different scholarly contortions of 'woke-washing' which appear to be embedded in an intention to defend brands, while establishing individuals' expertise in 'woke marketing' or while claiming to 'guard' against criticism of CSIs and business ethicists. Such scholarly accounts that I have examined include those that reprimand critics of brands and capitalism by dismissively invoking ideas such as 'moral purity' and 'moral perfectionism' (Warren, 2022), and without interrogating how such terms and their use are impacted by power relations regarding race, gender, and class.

'Woke-washing' is an expression which has been wielded and critiqued to (re)present scholarly ideas as 'new' and 'novel', when sometimes, perhaps they are merely a re-hash and dilution of (often uncredited, and Black) liberationist perspectives from days gone by. No matter how many proponents of 'woke marketing' or business ethics defensively dismiss critiques of brands who claim to care, society does not need a corporate saviour. However, corporations do need ways to resuscitate, rehabilitate, and rebrand their image, and strategically alluding to activism or framing themselves as an ally is one way to do so.

Those who try to crush critique of such brand activity often draw on a spectrum of scaremongering tactics, including by implying that terms such as 'woke-washing' disincentivize brands to 'do good'. The notion that people must avoid critiquing brands in order for brands to take seriously social injustice and inequalities reflects the power of capitalism and expectations that people submit to it.

By focusing on criticism of brands and not the structures that they are part of, those who claim that 'woke-washing' is nothing but a derogatory descriptor, ensure that critical discussion of macro issues (e.g., racial capitalism and white supremacy) is obfuscated. In some cases, such writing which dismisses critiques of brands and capitalism, upholds notions of 'wokeness' that uncritically stem from an understanding of the term that is tethered to its [white] mainstream appropriation as an expression of disdain that is used to disapprove of something and / or someone. The charges made against critics of brands, and their use of the term 'woke-washing', often reveal much about how racial capitalism guards itself – whether that be via the defensive actions of brands or the words of scholars who seem to believe that brands need saving.

When thinking through these matters, I have queried the function of questions regarding the attitudes and actions of brands, such as 'are inconsistencies morally problematic?' (Warren, 2022: 183). This is but one of many questions that may initially seem anodyne, but I contend that the ambiguity of 'problematic' does a lot of heavy-lifting in this context. Who gets to authoritatively determine what is (and is not) 'morally problematic' and how so-called 'moral purity' functions, is worthy of critical analysis.

Depending on who utters them, and exactly what they are referring to, statements laced with moral panic such as '[b]oth woke and woke washing critics are using labels to create stigmas that they hope will punish targeted firms through divestments, boycotts, or legislation when they engage in social issues' (Warren, 2022: 187) are sometimes little more than proxies for telling marginalized folk to know their place and quit calling out brands (and Big Business). For these reasons, I remain very wary of work that is quick to dismiss critiques of brands as nothing other than supposed 'moral purity' and 'moral perfectionism'.

More than that, some efforts to undermine critique of brands and capitalism draw on theories of philosophy that, at 'best', don't address race, and at worst, have promoted racist perspectives. As a result, I am reminded of how oppressive notions of morality that treat whiteness as their compass, have been rehashed for centuries in ways that oppress Black and other racialized people. Sometimes, I feel that much of the scholarship that debates and discusses the meanings and uses of terms such as 'woke-washing' is merely a distraction from the real issues at stake. Perhaps much of such work, conveniently, by continuing to toil over the trials and tribulations of terminology, enables individuals and institutions to avoid attempting to address the structural issues and inequalities that such terminology can be used in relation to.

When reading through accounts that scold people for critiquing brands, and which imply that 'woke-washing' is merely a derogatory term, I grimaced at the prospect of brands becoming a protected characteristic under the UK's fragile Equality Act – a law intended to prohibit discrimination. After the impact of a global pandemic that has destroyed lives

and been entangled with racial capitalism, it speaks volumes that some spheres of academic and political life are focusing on admonishing individuals who deem the actions of brands and businesses to be harmful and / or hypocritical, rather than them tending to the structural stigmatization and oppression of people.

As the expansion of writing on the topics of 'woke-washing' and 'brand activism' illuminates, despite the term being one with the capacity to be used to critique brands and their claims to care, 'woke-washing' has also been taken up by marketers and scholars who seem committed to sustaining and aiding marketing practices by positing that brands should pursue a 'woke' image in an allegedly 'authentic' way.

Despite the rising number of accounts of 'brand activism', it is still my opinion that 'brands are often a component of the very structural problems that community organisers strive towards dismantling as part of liberationist work' (Sobande, 2021a). A case in point is that '[t]he imagined "we" that brands brazenly construct via adverts that are meant to tug on the heart strings of individuals during the pandemic is a "we" with money to spend. Such a "we" consists of consumption, not care, and profit, not people' (ibid). Such a 'we' *consumes* the crisis, rather than working collectively to address its harmful impacts and the inequalities that preceded it.

Differences between people's take on the topic of 'brand activism' may be, at least partly, due to what Hall (1997a, 1997b) described as being 'shared conceptual maps'. What I mean is that some people share a conceptualization of 'brand activism' which is based on a particular perspective of what constitutes both brands and activism, but which contrasts with the perspectives of other people who identify brands, by

nature, as operating in ways that are at odds with activism. Such different opinions are evidence of how the discursive terrain of activism (e.g., how activism is (re)defined) is a site of struggle which involves various claims being staked – including in support of, or against, capitalism.

On that note, while there is a multitude of explanations of what the term 'woke-washing' is intended to encompass, to me, the expression can capture how and why 'approaches to feminism and Black activism [among other social justice movements] are drawn on in marketing content related to the concept of being "woke" (invested in addressing social injustices)' (Sobande, 2020b: 2723). 'Woke-washing' has been used in reference to how 'brands (mis)use issues concerning commercialised notions of feminism, equality and Black social justice activism as part of marketing that flattens and reframes liberationist politics while upholding the neoliberal idea that achievement and social change requires individual ambition and consumption rather than structural shifts and resistance' (ibid.). Relatedly, as Gordon (2022: 13) affirms, '[n]eoliberalism thus nurtures racism by undermining the conditions of addressing it. It is, in short, reckless', and brands capitalize on this by presenting people with the illusionary opportunity to overcome adversity through their consumption choices and brand loyalty (Rosa-Salas and Sobande, 2022).

As is considered in the work of scholars Enzo Rossi and Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, (2020), although the term 'woke-washing' is a relatively recent one, the critiques of capitalism that the term sometimes supports has a long and multivocal history. This includes the legacy of the work of hooks (1992), who in the early 1990s wrote about how 'the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever

difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, *via* exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other's history through a process of decontextualization' (31).

In 2018, at the point that I first fully turned my attention to this term – 'woke-washing' – scholarly literature on it was significantly scarce. While preparing my talk on 'The "wokefluencers" of "diversity" marketing: the commercial co-optation of free(ing) online labour', for the January 2018 symposium *After Work: Life, Labour and Automation* (Sobande, 2018b), I found myself fixated on understanding the fraught relationship between digital culture, consumer culture, and activism. Although academia's engagement with the notion of 'woke-washing' was lacking at that time, critical discourse on 'wokeness' led by journalists and media professionals was swelling and included discussion of brands' interest in appearing 'woke'.

In the years since then, writing on 'woke-washing' and its contestations has rapidly risen, resulting in a range of explanations that expose the contradictions inherent to the term itself, as well as those at the centre of marketing, academia, and their connections. Perhaps the way that such a term has been (re)framed in academia is symptomatic of 'the contradictions that occur when attempting to develop research that disrupts racial violence while working within and for academic institutions that reproduce racial violence' (Johnson, 2018: 15).

Is 'woke-washing' a useful description of marketers' attempts to position brands in proximity to activism? Is it simply a rinsed and washed-out label that has been leveraged by both marketers and scholars to simultaneously valorize and dismiss the actions of brands, as well as pursue careerist (and

capitalist) goals? Perhaps the term 'woke-washing' is always at work somewhere between all those dynamics, with its precise location in flux and impacted by whose perspective of 'woke-washing' is foregrounded, and how the etymology of 'woke(ness)' is (dis)connected from their perception and portrayal of it.

'Woke-washing' is a term that has the potential to be used as part of critical interventions intended to critique organizations and call out their hypocrisy, such as 'the extent to which the commodification of blackness (including the nationalist agenda) has been reinscribed and marketed with an atavistic narrative, a fantasy of Otherness that reduces protest to spectacle' (hooks, 1992: 33). However, 'woke-washing' is also a term at risk of reinscribing some of the very power dynamics that it is intended to critique, such as by being used in ways that merely enable brands (including self-brands) and the capitalist system they stem from. I suspect that 'we' are past the point of the expression's potential recuperation as a critical rhetorical device, particularly as the broader concept of 'wokeness' has been contorted and flung around as part of the circus that is present-day British party politics (Milton, 2022). Perhaps the notion of 'woke-washing' never did the work that it was professed to in the first place?

The body of writing on 'woke-washing' which tepidly critiques brand activity includes claims that '[w]hen brands match activist messaging, purpose, and values with prosocial corporate practice, they engage in authentic brand activism, creating the most potential for social change and the largest gains in brand equity' (Vredenburg et al., 2020: 444). My own approach to analysing the acquisitive dynamics between activism, care, and consumer culture is rooted in a more critical

tradition, informed by Black studies and Black feminist work which highlights the oppositional nature of much branding and activism. Put plainly, I argue that brands cannot be activists. If it looks like a brand, talks like a brand, and profits like a brand … it's a brand.

While significant societal change can indeed occur due to sustained processes of people and organizations chipping away at structural forms of oppression, such work is a far cry away from the ambiguous notion of 'building brand equity and nudging social change' (Vredenburg et al., 2020: 445). The concept of 'nudging' connotes a potential tentativeness, secrecy, or light touch approach which juxtaposes with the clear commitment and robust action that many activists undertake. Accordingly, the term 'activist marketing' (Vredenburg et al., 2020: 445) appears to be an oxymoron. Suggesting that brands can be activists, and defending their efforts to be labelled as such, contributes to capitalism's attempt to consume the radical potential of liberationist work, including by upholding the 'elite capture' (Táíwò, 2022) of 'identity politics' (ibid.).

As cultural anthropologist and documentary filmmaker Marcel Rosa-Salas and I assert, '[t]he epistemic power wielded by the marketing industry and marketing academia, arguably, often entails similar ideological commitments to capitalist political economy' (Rosa-Salas and Sobande, 2022: 177). Such ideological commitments, contrary to what is sometimes claimed by both brands and scholars, include a commitment to the maintenance of brand practices (and resultingly, capitalism). Thus, I am ever sceptical of the implication that brands can achieve 'clear transparency about brand practice and values in support of a sociopolitical cause' (Vredenburg et al., 2020:

444), as the capitalist ideology buttressing branding is in direct opposition with any intention to be transparent about a brand's inner workings.

I am increasingly disinterested in examples of perceived 'marketing success in terms of brand equity, which results from a positive response to the brand driven by strong, favorable, and unique brand associations held in consumers' minds' (Vredenburg et al., 2020: 445). The potentially 'successful' impact of brand equity marketing endeavours is often measured in ways that involve a preoccupation with consumers' perceptions, with little to no consideration of the work and labour experiences of the brands' employees, and the brands' long-term impact on wider society (e.g., socially, politically, environmentally). Essentially, such marketing efforts are often measured using metrics that have little to do with assessing the extent to which a brand is (or is not) aiding forms of societal change that can contribute to tackling specific social injustices.

In contrast with perspectives that promote and praise the notion of 'brand activism', I argue that the concept of 'brand activism' is symptomatic of sustained marketing attempts (in both private and public sectors) to position profit-making activity as radical, and institutions as caring. The fact that writing on 'brand activism' includes approaches that rank this alleged activism, such as Vredenburg et al.'s (2020: 445) slippery scale of 'high to low', symbolizes pervasive, competitive, and hierarchical systems of value which are far from many activist intentions. Contrary to claims that supposedly '[a]uthentic brand activism can be contrasted with the practice of "woke washing"' (Vredenburg et al., 2020: 445), I contend that, akin to the façade of 'greenwashing' (Littler, 2008; Miller, 2017), 'brand activism' is merely a discursive construction that reflects

attempts by marketers (and, sometimes, scholars), to capital-ize on activism and (re)define it, rather than do or aid it.

For a while now, I have found myself asking:

> are we witnessing the *branding* of "brand activism" occurring, and if so, who and what stands to gain from this? How might academia be complicit in the diluting of radical liberationist politics and the reframing of Black activism to appease mar-keters and brands (as well as to appease academe)? … The compulsion across disciplines, spaces, and sectors to support claims of brand activism seems to signal more of a concern with reputational management (on the part of both brands and those who they consult) than a concern with dismantling white supremacy and other forms of entangled oppression' (Sobande, 2021b).

As someone who has and continues to work in both academic and marketing spheres, I recognize that, at times, my work and I may be complicit in such dynamics. So, in writing this book I consider what it means to critique these matters while knowing that neither me nor my work exist outside of the constraints, and capturing gaze and grasp, of capitalism. Among the many prior claims that this book takes to task is the claim that 'woke-washing' is a term that simply encompasses 'inauthentic brand activism in which activist marketing messaging about the focal sociopolitical issue is not aligned with a brand's purpose, values, and corporate practice' (Vredenburg et al., 2020: 445). Such assertions about 'brand activism' and 'woke-washing' appear to miss the point – just as there is no ethical consumption under capitalism, surely, there is no 'brand activism' either.

> 'To me, the potential benefit of critiques of so-called "woke-washing" and alleged "brand activism" is not necessarily the potential to expose the misleading actions of brands or to

imply that such a thing as "brand authenticity" is achievable, let alone measurable. Rather, the potentially generative nature of critiques of alleged "corporate wokeness" includes the clear refusal to uncritically accept rhetoric, representations, and responses by brands which appear to do the work of triviliasing and distorting activism as part of the recuperation of the overall image of the marketplace, not just the image of individual corporations' (Sobande, 2021b).

Conscious of the limitations of merely 'highlighting inconsistencies between messaging and practice' (Vredenburg et al., 2020: 445), in this book I take a different approach to analysing brand adverts and the scholarly study of them. Drawing on Critical Marketing Studies' interest 'in questioning Capitalist values, especially the profit-motive and individualistic conception of "consumer" behaviour' (Tadajewski, 2014: 40), I offer a brief outline of a typology of writing on 'woke-washing', which distinguishes between work which engages with the term to do the following: 1) critique specific brands, 2) critique branding practices and capitalism in general, 3) critique critics of specific brands, and 4) critique critics of branding practices and capitalism in general. Both departing from and building on my prior work on brand 'woke-washing', I theorize the withering and washed-out nature of the term which has often been mobilized in ways intended to help brands rather than spur on structural change.

Further still, I critique

'elements of marketing and consumer culture studies that engage with Black thought and critical studies of race and gender in extractive and acquisitive ways. To be direct, I'm critical of work in these disciplines and areas that results in a cursory nod to Black and racial justice scholarship as part of attempts to position such longstanding work (including

that of Black scholars) as something "newly discovered" and "established" by those whose subject position (for example, race, gender, and institutional status) is more palatable to the imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchal purview of much of academia' (Sobande, 2021b).

Scholarly and industry efforts to maintain and sustain brands include attempts to theorize the relationship between social justice and branding in ways which imply that brands are capable of being radical political actors. As follows, part of the work of challenging the capitalist appropriation of activism is the refusal of narratives such as those of Vredenburg et al. (2020) which, to an extent, are (re)presented as a critique of brand activity, despite perhaps more accurately being described as an attempt to propel and praise it. Unconvinced by Vredenburg et al.'s (2020: 445) positioning of brands as capable of becoming 'activists in the sociopolitical sphere', this chapter considers what political and power relations (within both the predominantly white marketing industry and academia) are part of the process involved in what Vredenburg et al. (2020: 445) refer to as 'when brands become activists', or, as I describe it, when brands are marketed as such.

Unlike the explanation of 'woke-washing' offered by Vredenburg et al. (2020), which asserts that the term describes when 'brands detach their activist messaging from their purpose, values, and practice' (444), I regard 'woke-washing' as an imperfect term with the precarious potential to encompass contradictions inherent to *all* brand activity that is intended to frame brands as deeply invested in activist matters such as racial justice, feminism, and nebulous notions of 'intersectionality' (Rosa-Salas and Sobande, 2022). After all, contrary to what some brands might try to imply, much marketing that

is intended to be framed as feminist 'still upholds the profit-oriented idea that women must buy and consume certain products to affirm themselves and the market-bound sense of "feminism" that is being promoted' (Sobande, 2019: 106).

As I have previously argued, when analysing so-called 'femvertising' by brands such as H&M and Missguided, 'a marketing buzz has surrounded the words "intersectional feminism". When incorporated into marketplace activities, the term frequently loses its original meaning, which stressed a commitment to articulating and addressing interlocking forms of structural oppression, particularly as experienced by Black women (Crenshaw, 1989)' (Sobande, 2019: 105). There are many examples of when 'feminist-coded content is effectively and ineffectively used, and discarded, as part of fast fashion marketing messages of inclusivity' (Sobande, 2019: 106).

Founded in 2006, fast fashion company Boohoo has created many adverts that are relevant to discussions about femvertising and my wider interest in investigating the commodification of care. These include the colourful 58 second filmed advert 'HERE'S TO 2022, HERE'S TO YOU', which is viewable through Boohoo's (2022) official YouTube channel and is accompanied by the following explanation: 'We have big goals for 2022. As the new year rolls in, we're pledging to use our reach to drive positive change and to inspire confidence and body positivity'. The advert opens with a bubblegum pink background and the canary yellow words 'hey you', and 'yeah you', which establishes Boohoo's direct and informal address of the audience.

Boohoo's 'HERE'S TO 2022, HERE'S TO YOU' advert also includes written words such as 'Everything we do is made possible because of you' and features a montage of images of different people wearing Boohoo clothing, including a shot

of someone in lingerie, who appears to have stretchmarks on their stomach. Another part of the advert features a visual of a Boohoo billboard with the statement 'all bodies are *billboard ready*' – perhaps partly as a critical commentary on a controversial and banned 2015 Protein World billboard advert which featured a very slender and bikini-clad model, and asked 'are you beach body ready?'. Among additional written statements in the Boohoo (2022) advert are the following:

> we're here to support you, we are here to … empower and inspire you … help you to achieve your dreams … remind you to take care of your mind and body … give back to our community … raise awareness and funds for good causes … and continue our journey towards a more sustainable future.

Shortly after the half-way mark, the advert features the instructive and, possibly, spiritual sounding words, 'it's time to realise your potential … realise your worth … realise that your power is just being you'. Such messaging is consistent with aspects of popular feminist perspectives that circulate as part of the 'economy of visibility' that Banet-Weiser (2018) has prolifically researched and written about. What appears to be the advert's recognition of the COVID-19 crisis involves statements such as 'it's been a tough few years but now it's time to go to that party … dream big, apply for the job, wear the outfit … and be unapologetically you'.

In Boohoo's advert, consumption experiences, such as fast fashion ecommerce transactions, are positioned as playing a part in a so-called 'return to normal' (e.g., 'now it's time to …'). The advert's message about 'empowerment' appears to rest on an assumption that the target audience is lacking in confidence (e.g., 'be unapologetically you'), or dealing with some sort of

self-esteem deficit, as is indicated by Boohoo's paternalistic tone (e.g., 'it's time to realise your potential'). The advert's mention of career aspirations (e.g., 'dream big, apply for the job') and words such as 'worth', also hint at how societal expectations of productivity are part of the everydayness of 'normal' life.

As Jenny Odell (2019: 1) argues in *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, '[n]othing is harder to do than nothing. In a world where our value is determined by our productivity, many of us find our every last minute captured, optimized, or appropriated as a financial resource by the technologies we use daily'. Picking up on such a theme, Chapter 3 examines how marketed discourses of productivity, home life, and presence have been prolific during the pandemic, in ways that are often distinctly classist, racist, and ableist.

Overall, Boohoo's 'HERE'S TO 2022, HERE'S TO YOU' advert may be an attempt to communicate that they care about driving 'positive change' and supporting 'good causes'. Yet, other than referring to 'body positivity', and alluding to hollow '#GirlBoss' feminism, there is little evidence of them explicitly articulating what such causes and forms of change are. The advert appears to present Boohoo as taking a stance, but does so in ways that are relatively, and, maybe, strategically, ambiguous. The marketing messages present in Boohoo's 'HERE'S TO 2022, HERE'S TO YOU' advert reflect how some brands have claimed to care during the COVID-19 crisis, and tried to cultivate camaraderie, but in ways that tiptoe around naming exactly what it is that they care about.

The notion of brands taking a stand is often based on the assumption that this entails a clear socio-political (and, *sometimes*, financial) commitment on the part of brands. However,

brands may carefully choose their words in ways that result in the illusion of their investment in certain people and issues, in the form of messages that use buzzwords, but do not clarify exactly who and what it is that they (claim to) care about. As well as being a potential example of 'femvertising' and the fraught relationship between marketing and feminism (Maclaran et al., 2022), this Boohoo advert may be regarded as a form of 'carewashing' – an expression that refers to examples of 'how powerful business actors' (Chatzidakis et al., 2020: 891) have 'been keen to promote themselves as "caring corporations" while actively undermining any kind of care offered outside their profit-making architecture' (ibid.).

Boohoo has faced publicly documented claims of exploitation and mistreatment, and in 2020 announced an independent review following allegations of dangerous working conditions and labour exploitation in its UK supply chains (Drapers, 2020). When accounting for their potentially contentious work and labour practices, Boohoo's invocation of notions of empowerment and care appear to be particularly galling. Their 'HERE'S TO 2022, HERE'S TO YOU' advert is part of a longer recent history of Boohoo marketing and femvertising. That history includes their 2017 '#AllGirls' campaign which, again, featured messages such as 'keep on being you', but was critiqued due to the disconnect between Boohoo's claims of inclusivity and the notably limited nature of the diversity of people in the campaign.

Sustaining sentiments that were evident in their previous adverts, the message of Boohoo's 'HERE'S TO 2022, HERE'S TO YOU' is one of self-celebration, but also, embracement of a return to 'normal' life, or a rise of the seemingly 'new normal'. The advert's message hinges on the idea that consumer

culture is the key to 'empowerment', and that brands (Boohoo) care about *you* – even though 'greenwashing' efforts do not obscure the destructive socio-environmental impacts of the fast fashion world that they are part of. Such advertising is consistent with popular feminism's themes of 'empower-ment, confidence, capacity, and competence' (Banet-Weiser, 2018: 3), which are, arguably, wrapped up and tenuously tied together with allusions to – or, even, illusions of – intersectionality (Rosa-Salas and Sobande, 2022). Despite this, some people may still view such a brand and their actions as an example of 'brand activism'.

When writing about the contested concept of 'brand activ-ism', Vredenburg et al. (2020: 446) refer to when 'a brand adopts a nonneutral stance on institutionally contested socio-political issues, to create social change and marketing success', but I ask – change to what end, for whom, and with what intention? My questions concerning this are shaped by Critical Marketing Studies 'concerned with challenging marketing, concepts, ideas and ways of reflection that present them-selves as ideologically neutral or that otherwise have assumed a taken-for-granted status' (Tadajewski, 2011, p. 83). So, I argue that the notion of brands taking a 'nonneutral stance' in response to societal issues is *not* evidence of their alleged 'activism' – far from it. As an example of what I mean, there is a stark difference between being anti-racist and simply claiming to not be racist. Still, both positions have the potential to be referred to as a 'nonneutral stance' – but are they both indica-tions of activist inclinations? I think not.

Being (and being described as) 'nonneutral' drastically dif-fers to being (and being described as) political, or an activist. Marketing scholarship that frames the alleged 'nonneutrality'

of brands as an activist credential, reduces activism to little more than a label or badge of honour that papers over the cracks of a brand's public image. In fact, it could be argued that – despite what some brands claim – brands have never been neutral, so it is inaccurate to suggest that them adopting a 'nonneutral stance' deviates from industry norms or is akin to activism.

Adverts, such as Boohoo's 'HERE'S TO 2022, HERE'S TO YOU', are part of a history of femvertising which involves brands dipping in and out of discourse on empowerment, popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018), and what scholars Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill (2022) term 'confidence culture'. But creating and circulating femvertising does not a feminist make. Such approaches to marketing, which increasingly involve brands trying to portray themselves as 'inclusive' of Black women, are sometimes part of efforts 'to detract from scandal surrounding their ethics and CSR' (Sobande, 2019: 110). To date, '[a]s fast fashion brands try to survive mounting backlash that the industry faces, including on issues of sustainability and labour ethics, femvertising and diversity marketing remains a potentially alluring CSR diversion strategy' (ibid.).

Also, as the work of Maclaran et al. (2022: 1) highlights, the future of the relationship between marketing and feminism is one that is destined to be shaped by ongoing and '[f]ast growing online grassroots activism' – work which brands may seek to capture or replicate, but, hopefully, will struggle to. Rather than assisting 'aspiring brand activists' (Vredenburg et al., 2020: 444), my hope is that this part of Chapter 2 helps to develop ongoing analyses of the dynamics between activism and consumer culture.

My critical approach involves (dis)regarding 'brand pur-
pose' and 'brand values' as terms that do not do much other
than refer to the fact that brands claim to care about certain
matters. This is one of the reasons why I reject the idea of 'the
authenticity of brand activism' (Vredenburg et al., 2020: 445),
which has been dubiously defined as when 'the alignment of
a brand's explicit purpose and values with its activist market-
ing messaging and prosocial corporate practice – emerges
as being critically important for marketing success as well as
potential for social change arising from this strategy' (ibid.).

Instead of leaning into discourses of so-called 'brand activism'
and the construct of 'authenticity', I turn away from vague and
competition-oriented claims that 'brand activists may strengthen
outcomes in an increasingly crowded marketplace' (Vredenburg
et al., 2020: 444). So, I work with partly flawed and fruitful
expressions such as 'femvertising' and 'woke-washing', and
accompanying terms such as 'brand pretense' to pick apart the
ways that both the marketing industry and academia are invested
in alluding to brands' assumed activist credentials – including
their alleged capacity to care for / about more than profit.

There are clear tensions between scholarly efforts to sani-
tize brands' (in)actions, and those intended to critique brands
and, more pertinently, the capitalist system that spawns them.
Such tensions appear in the form of who and what is refer-
enced and / or omitted in the rush to establish what so-called
'woke marketing' and 'brand activism' is, and in the form of
what use of the term 'woke-washing' tends to involve being
critical and / or supportive of.

Frankly, territorial marketing and consumer culture studies
(which is not how I would describe this whole area of work
but needs to be named) repackage various ideas and concepts

(including by extracting and decontextualizing Black scholarship and activism), to try to possess terms and remove the potential for them to critique this field of research and the marketplace that it examines. I contend that the insistence on using terms such as 'brand activism' and 'woke marketing', and claims that 'woke-washing' is a derogatory descriptor, form branding and public relations tactics, on both individual (e.g., self-brand) and institutional levels. Use of these terms can be part of a strategic approach to naming and / or claiming that reveals more about proprietorial behaviours that underpin academia and the marketing industry, than indicating that there is any evidence of brands' efforts to address structural oppression.

Moving away from an explicit focus on 'woke-washing', and towards a deeper analysis of how brands have claimed to care during the COVID-19 crisis, the next section of this chapter considers how messages about multiculturalism have been communicated in the content of marketing. Such discussion is followed by writing on the marketization of higher education, which involves revisiting my contemplations on 'brand activism', and their connections to the commodification of care.

CONSUMING (UN)COMFORTABLE MULTICULTURALISMS

Since 2020, there has been ample evidence of brands 'framing the current COVID-19 global pandemic as a force that is bringing people together, in ways that may distract from their dubious treatment of employees, as well as their thirst for productivity and profit' (Sobande, 2020a: 1034). While brands' attempts to signal a sense of togetherness have sometimes

been subtle, in other cases, they have overtly attempted to invoke 'team spirit', such as by connecting to sports events and constructions of national identity, culture, and pride.

Food delivery company Deliveroo released their 'England 'Til We Dine' Euro Championship advertising campaign in the summer of 2021, which acknowledged their sponsorship of the England football teams. The 'Creative Works' section of *The Drum* (2021a) features a profile on 'Deliveroo: England 'Til We Dine by Pablo', which refers to it as being a brand campaign that 'builds off the insight that even though we're England fans, minds will also be on favourite takeaways and food from different countries around the world'. When critically considering this campaign, it is helpful to remember the work of bell hooks (1992: 21) on how '[t]he commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight. More intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling'. It is also essential to engage the work of Manzoor-Khan (2022: 84) which emphasizes the grim state of the UK defining 'extremism as "opposition to" British values', resulting in the perception that 'racial Others arguably pose a criminal threat until we learn them' (ibid).

A 30-second filmed advert formed the locus of the Deliveroo campaign and alludes to aspects of 'the politics of multiculturalism' (Hesse, 2000: 5) in the UK, namely, within England. Analysis of the advert illuminates some of the many ways that brand messages about multiculturalism and national identity are entangled with the claim that brands care – but about whom, and what?

At the time of writing this, Deliveroo's 'England 'Til We Dine' advert has had more than 78,000 views via their official YouTube channel. The advert features a voiceover by presenter,

comedian, actor, and producer Karl Pilkington, who opens filmed footage by listing a range of food from different places – pork bao, lamb dhansak, and chicken taco. Therefore, the advert immediately alludes to multiculturalism, which is a term that 'always refers contextually to the "western" and "non-western" cross-cultural processes involved in establishing the meanings invested in the racially marked incidence of contested cultural differences' (Hesse, 2000: 2).

In 'England 'Til We Dine', between meals being reeled off by Pilkington are punchy chants of 'England!', which drown out Deliveroo's potential pitch to appear invested in different countries, cultures, and the people who are part of them. Despite the relatively short length of this advert, the content of it seems to capture aspects of 'national cultural formations' (Hesse, 2000: 5), including connections made between cuisine, consumption, comfort, and cultural inclusivity and / or diversity.

Specifically, Deliveroo's 'England 'Til We Dine' campaign reveals some of the ways that marketing in the UK during the COVID-19 crisis has involved brands seeking to convey a sense of community and camaraderie, while actively invoking nationalistic sentiments which may be comforting to some but undoubtedly exclusionary to others. The advert is one of many discussed in this book which signal how brands and marketing practices construct and respond to 'the nation's imagined communities' (Hesse, 2000: 1) by trying to comfort them while encouraging them to consume.

My use of Hesse's (2000: 2) term 'nation's imagined communities' is not intended to dismiss the existence of people and cuisines from many different cultures and countries in England, and Britain more broadly. Instead, I engage with

the concept of national imagined communities to acknowledge forms of framing and (re)imagining which are part of perceptions of who and what constitutes countries, cultures, and national identity – including what it means to be 'England 'Til We Dine'.

Pablo (2021), the creative agency behind the 'England 'Til We Dine' campaign, describes it with words such as the following:

> Pablo and Deliveroo's new Euro's 2021 campaign brings to life the insight that whilst we're all about supporting the England team during the football, when it comes to match-day dining we're less loyal and enjoy all manner of amazing cuisines from around the world. As fans across the country are cheering on England, we know that their minds will also be on their favourite lamb dhansak, pork bao, brioche buns and tacos.

Pablo's use of words such as 'loyal' arguably signal how the campaign depends on discourses of dutifulness that are tethered to nationalistic notions of support and team spirit. Their focus on the enjoyment of food also evidences how the campaign is meant to conjure up feelings of comfort, perhaps under the guise of claiming to care about different cultures and their peoples.

The visual content of the 'England 'Til We Dine' advert includes mouth-watering shots of hot meals, such as pizza boxes covered with an Italian flag print, which gesture to multiculturalism, or, at least, cultural difference. As well as focusing on food, the advert includes scenes that feature the familiar faces of famous England football players – Harry Maguire, Jack Grealish, Dominic Calvert-Lewin, and Tyrone Mings. A recurring visual in the advert is that of the England flag (derived

from Saint George's cross) which is symbolized in various ways, including the strategic placement of cutlery, and the deconstruction of food, which results in visuals that resemble the flag.

In other words, although Deliveroo's advert involves optics that point to the Other (different cultures, cuisines, and multiculturalism), it is English patriotism and celebration of it that is the most salient theme. This results in what I deem to be hollow messages of multiculturalism which are firmly embedded in praise of England, assumptions about people's 'normal' food consumption habits, and the premise that 'to seek an encounter with the Other, does not require that one relinquish forever one's mainstream positionality' (hooks, 1992: 367), in this case, one's Englishness. Just as British 'values themselves are racialised as white' (Manzoor-Khan, 2022: 84), seemingly so too are the values of English patriotism invoked in Deliveroo's advert, regardless of how 'colourful' or 'exotic' it may appear to be.

Hesse's (2000: 2) work on 'inward-looking nationalist identities' is highly relevant to this analysis, as such writing clarifies how nationalist identities and the marketing of them can involve deep investments in so-called 'good' (and patriotic) citizenship, including perceptions of loyalty to a nation-state. The scholarship of Ben Carrington and Ian McDonald (2001) on *'Race', Sport and British Society* is also essential to engage here. As they argued near the start of the second millennium, 'sport is a particularly useful sociological site for examining the changing context and content of contemporary British racisms, as it articulates the complex interplay of "race", nation, culture and identity in very public and direct ways' (Carrington and McDonald, 2001: 2). When absorbing such observations,

it is apparent that Deliveroo's 'England 'Til We Dine' campaign presents a cornucopia of representations and rhetoric that are rich with sport (and food) signs and symbols which are suggestive of what Carrington and McDonald (2001) observed.

At first glance, meanings associated with multiculturalism in the 'England 'Til We Dine' advert may appear to contrast with statements such as those captured by the generatively critical words of Hesse (2000: 3), 'No multiculturalism, please – we're British'. Yet, the 'England 'Til We Dine' advert falls short of foregrounding multiculturalism or different cultures in ways that divest from English patriotism. Parts of Pilkington's narration particularly point to this, including the lines 'Our hearts are England crazy. Our mouths are more jalfrezi', which may hint at the notion of being emotionally invested in England but merely carnally interested in (cuisine from) elsewhere.

Adverts such as Deliveroo's 'England 'Til we Dine' exemplify how brands have sought to conjure up a sense of comfort during the COVID-19 crisis, including in ways that connect to messages of multiculturalism, but which ultimately affirm nationalistic patriotism. The work of hooks (1992) on 'Eating the Other: desire and resistance' significantly informs my analysis of the 'England 'Til We Dine' filmed advert, and the wider campaign it is part of. hooks (1992), who explores the relationship between racism, white supremacy, and capitalism, observes that commodified 'fantasies about the Other can be continually exploited, and that such exploitation will occur in a manner that reinscribes and maintains the status quo' (367) – including via marketing that alludes to the 'normality' of multiculturalism but also upholds patriotism.

hooks' (1992) analysis includes discussion of how the commodification of Black culture involves efforts to make

blackness 'the "spice that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture"' (14). Deliveroo's 'England 'Til we Dine' advert is an example of how brands attempt to allude to multiculturalism to create such a sense of 'spice'. The assortment of meals that the campaign depicts – from calabrian pepperoni to prawn szechuan – is part of how English patriotism is porously positioned as being inclusive of people, or, at least, food, from a variety of different countries. Still, the closing lines of the advert perfectly encompass what seems to be the campaign's investment in appealing to those who take pride in England, more so than maintaining messages of multiculturalism.

An animated fish leaves the viewer with what is perhaps meant to be, dare I say, a comforting reminder that when using Deliveroo 'you can have fish n' chips n' all!'. Whether the light-hearted line is meant to provide relief to those who may be completely disinterested in 'Other' food from elsewhere is unclear. Irrespective, the sustained emphasis on England and its norms is entirely apparent in the advert.

In addition to featuring a filmed advert, the overall 'England 'til We Dine' campaign includes radio and social media activity, as well as the launch of edible face paints which were intended to provide people with the opportunity to decorate their face or their food. Evidently, eating, and other forms of consuming, are at the centre of the campaign. This could be regarded as an expression of how brands seek to frame forms of transactional consumption as a celebration of cultural difference – in ways that are consistent with the notion of 'consumer citizenship' (McMillan Cottom, 2022).

You might be asking, what does all of this have to do with the commodification of care during the COVID-19 crisis?

A lot. Although Deliveroo's advert does not explicitly refer to 'caring', its illusion of inclusivity insinuates that caring about England means caring about, or, at least consuming, aspects of multiculturalism. The advert's tone connotes some of the celebratory and commodified invocations of multiculturalism that Hesse (2000) critiques.

'Multiculturalism refers to particular discourses or social forms which incorporate marked cultural differences and diverse ethnicities. In this "substantive" sense, multiculturalism can be named, valued, celebrated and repudiated from many different political perspectives' (Hesse, 2000: 3). The allusions to multiculturalism in Deliveroo's advert seem to be symptomatic of what hooks (1992: 25) referred to as being 'cultural strategies that offer Otherness as appeasement, particularly through commodification'.

The 'England 'Til We Dine' advert is the by-product of a brand recognizing the potential profitability of upholding nationalism while marketing perceived symbols of multiculturalism (e.g., food from 'elsewhere'). Also, the advert may be perceived as part of the 'pick 'n' mix' of marketing during the COVID-19 crisis, which attempted to tap into notions of togetherness and 'team spirit' in ways that obscured the ongoing impact of deep-rooted inequalities.

Related examples of how togetherness has been leveraged in this way include the 'Appeal from Roger, Asda's CEO: We're all in this together' [2020] video, as well as the 'We're all in this together' videos of Fitbit [2020], M&S [2020], and Disney Channel UK [2020]. Moreover, '[t]he comments of celebrities such as American singer-songwriter Madonna, who has claimed that "coronavirus is the great equalizer", convey a similar sentiment and the damaging perspective that this

crisis is being universally experienced, in the same ways, by all' (Sobande, 2020a: 1034).

Wide-ranging evidence highlights that contrary to procla- mations that 'we're all in this together', certain demographics have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and the crises that preceded it. 'The persistence of intersecting structural oppressions and socioeconomic disparities is laid starkly bare when considering the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Black people of African descent and Asian peo- ple in Britain who have been critically ill coronavirus patients' (Sobande, 2020a: 1036). This includes the experiences of individuals 'who work in high-risk roles that are [temporarily] identified as "key" and "essential"' (ibid.), even though due to racism, classism, xenophobia, and sexism, some of these roles (e.g., working in cleaning and hospitality) were previously sel- dom societally deemed as 'skilled' (Cowan, 2021).

Despite such inequalities, many brands have created cam- paigns during this time (2020–2022) which depend on vapid messages of unity, community, and caring about cultural diversity, without acknowledging distinct differences between the material conditions and harms faced by people during the COVID-19 pandemic. Regardless of brands' efforts to move away from the language of racism and xenophobia, towards the ambiguity afforded by terms such as 'difference' and 'diversity', '[w]hat has been central to the experience of black people in Britain has been neither the "idea" nor the "politics" of "race" as the "idea" or the politics of "racial difference". Rather, it has been racism and other forms of oppression' (James and Harris, 1993: 3).

When accounting for stark differences between people's experience of the crisis, including how racism and racial

capitalism are implicated in this, the cynical gestures of brands who seek to construct camaraderie and conjure comfort through messages of multiculturalism, seem reductive. Lines uttered during the narration of Deliveroo's advert, such as 'we're St George, head to toe', accompany a shot of a bulldog sporting an England football top and St George printed hat. This is yet another example of the overall campaign's intention to cultivate patriotism. Such patriotism is partnered with hints at heroism, as is evident in the words of Pablo (2021), the creative agency behind the campaign and who describe the advert as '[t]he hero film' which 'features the England team and Karl Pilkington, who voices a fun subversion of the traditional football song "England 'til I Die".'

Discourses of heroism and nationalism have featured in branding strategies for a very long time (Aronczyk, 2013; Jiménez-Martínez, 2021; Lury, 2004; Preece et al., 2019; Sobande and hill, 2022), including in the world of sport (Carrington and McDonald, 2001), so it is unsurprising to encounter such sentiments in the content of marketing during the COVID-19 crisis. However, what makes this Deliveroo example revelatory in terms of what the advert suggests about the commodification of care, is both the content of the advert and the contemporary context that drastically contrasts with it.

Vitriolic anti-Black comments and actions were directed at England football team players Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho, and Bukayo Saka following the outcome of the European Championship final in July 2021. The three players whose penalty spot kicks were not successful were subjected to a torrent of racist abuse and threats of violence, including on social media platform Twitter. This all occurred little more than a year

after galvanizing Black Lives Matter (BLM) activism which was visible around the world in response to the murder of George Floyd by a police officer in the US, as well as the deaths of many other Black people due to police brutality and violence (Grier and Poole, 2021; Taylor, 2021).

As author, academic and broadcaster Emma Dabiri (2022) describes it, '[m]uch of the energy that erupted after the murder of George Floyd seems to have been hijacked by a brand of "antiracism" overconcerned with microaggressions, with representation in film and media, and with interpersonal relationships. It's a framework that largely ignores economic inequality, or the potential for strategic, organized strug-gle'. Thus, in the months that followed a rise in media and public discourse on BLM in the UK, '[a]cross various sectors, brands pledged to "hire more Black people" and claimed they would "amplify Black voices", and "diversify" their industries' (Sobande, 2020c).

One of many examples of how BLM impacted different actions in the UK includes the fact that at the start of the European Championship 2020 final (which, due to COVID-19, took place in 2021), the England team took the knee. Such a potentially anti-racist gesture is intended to be a statement in support of Black people. Even though the final opened with a somewhat collective statement about the need for racism to be addressed, it ended with an ongoing wave of online and offline racist abuse aimed at Black football players on the England team, including by people in England. When witness-ing such vile, and, sadly, predictable, abuse unfold, I recalled Deliveroo's advert 'We're England 'Til We Dine', which is based on a message that seems to imply that English patriotism and multiculturalism are not mutually exclusive.

The allusions to cultural inclusivity that underpin 'We're England 'Til we Dine' contrasted with watching Black England football players being harassed by people who may proudly profess to be 'England 'til we die'. Then again, arguably, given Deliveroo's emphasis on celebrating cultural difference insofar that it satisfies a patriotic English audience, maybe their advert does not contrast at all with what followed the Championship final in 2021[1].

Here, it is helpful to turn once more to Tyler's (2020: 26–27) research which critically examines 'the crafting of stigma in the service of governmental and corporate policy goals, and the cultivation of stigma to extract political and economic capital'. Perhaps part of the function of Deliveroo's 'We're England 'Til we Dine' advert is to implicitly stigmatize critique of English patriotism (and stigmatize dissent in general), which in this marketplace context is linked to a brand's (Deliveroo's) pursuit of 'economic capital' (Tyler, 2020: 27).

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[1]In July 2022, 'the Lionesses' (England's women's football team) won the Euro 2022 football tournament. This was a momentous occasion which resulted in commentary concerning the often overlooked, underpaid, and societally obstructed efforts of women in football. Accordingly, there were many collective calls for changes to be made to address inequality in the sport. While the success of 'the Lionesses' was indeed cause for celebration for many people, it is important to acknowledge the racism, sexism, and misogyny that was, *and* still is, directed at players of African descent on this team. Thus, while this chapter highlights the racism and online abuse that was directed at players such as Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho, and Bukayo Saka in 2021, this should not be mistaken for negating the abuse that Black women football players face too.

'By its nature, sport is a complex protean cultural forma-
tion. It is too simplistic to argue that sport improves "race
relations", just as it is to say that sport can only reproduce rac-
ist ideologies' (Carrington and McDonald, 2001: 2), but events
that followed the European Championship final in 2021 cer-
tainly bring home (as if it ever left …) that racism is as English
as the fish and chips featured in Deliveroo's campaign. Any
meaningful interpretation of the 'We're England 'Til We Dine'
advert, and any advert for that matter, must grapple with the
socio-political context it is part of. Regardless of the rhetoric
and representations deployed in 'We're England 'Til we Dine',
racism and xenophobia is ever-present and societally normal-
ized in England, and in Britain more broadly.

It has been claimed that '[t]he notion of post-imperial
Britishness – as a legal, civic, inclusive non-racial identity – has
eased this absorption of millions of people of different back-
grounds, religions and ethnicities' (Cowley, 2022). However,
the (dis)connection between the sentiments of 'We're England
'Til we Dine' and the aftermath of the European Championship
final in 2021 indicates that 'post-racial' perspectives of national
identity and nationalism in Britain are redundant. Undoubtedly,
racism and colonialism continue to contour Britain, including
patriotism and the treatment of people within, and beyond,
this place.

I don't think that anyone is expecting a Deliveroo advert
to put an end to inequalities in Britain, and my critique of this
advert is certainly not based on the assumption that Deliveroo
intended to actively address racism and / or xenophobia. Still,
I shine a light on this specific example because it reflects a
larger landscape of advertising during the COVID-19 crisis,
which illuminates some of the ways that brands have tried to

portray themselves as relatable with the use of depictions and discourses of togetherness, comfort, and the myth of multiculturalism which is always overshadowed by the pervasiveness of patriotism.

Having so far predominantly focused on advertising and marketing messages that stem from the private sector, I now move on to consider how the branding practices of an aspect of the public sector (UK higher education) are also part of the commodification of care during the COVID-19 crisis. Focusing on the marketization of higher education, I consider some of the key components of content and campaigns created by universities as part of their effort to appear to care about certain socio-political issues (e.g., the gender pay gap and the Black degree-awarding gap). Undeniably, my thoughts and theorizing on these matters are shaped by my own experiences of working in UK higher education – previously in marketing and communications for several years, and then as a scholar since 2015. That said, the analysis that follows is informed by a range of writing, research, and work on the neoliberal university (Breeze et al., 2019), particularly, critiques of its (mis) treatment of people (both students and staff) from structurally marginalized demographics.

WHEN UNIVERSITIES (CLAIM TO) CARE

In their crucial edited collection on the neoliberal university, scholars Maddie Breeze, Yvette Taylor and Cristina Costa (2019: 1) reflect on how UK universities have been altered by 'the principles of "free market" capitalism – particularly the logics of profit, individualism and competition'. Breeze et al. (2019) provide examples of this in action, such as the fact '[i]t is well established that *the* university is subject to and

implicated in the reproduction of market logics, often identified in the tuition fee regime of England and Wales' (1–2). Although many universities portray themselves as bastions of efforts to address inequality, their brand image cannot mask the power relations that form the foundations of much of UK higher education.

Extensive work has critiqued 'the role of academia in (re)producing white supremacy' (Kamunge et al., 2018: 2), and posed pressing questions such as 'What does it mean to stand as an academic witness against the function of white supremacy within and beyond the walls of the academy?' (Johnson, 2018: 16). Those who have addressed such issues include The Surviving Society Podcast (hosted by Chantelle J. Lewis and Tissot Regis, and executive produced by George Ofori-Addo), which explores 'local and global politics of race and class from a sociological perspective', and who 'are resistant to positioning such projects as anything other than a collective endeavour, but are also mindful that, as Black creatives, podcasters and academics, their method and praxis can be overexposed to processes of co-option, plagiarism and erasure' (Lewis et al., 2021: 94).

Inspired by crucial work, such as that of Johnson (2018) and The Surviving Society Podcast (Lewis et al., 2021), this section of Chapter 2 critiques how UK higher education responded to the surge in discourse about BLM and anti-racism in the Spring / Summer of 2020. But, before examining this, it is important for me to establish key aspects of the current state of many UK universities, where both staff and students have been navigating the impact of COVID-19 (and multiple crises) on their lives, including their 'classroom' experiences and expectations.

As scholars Yvette Taylor and Kinneret Lahad (2018: 2) note, due to the marketization of universities, '[m]any colleagues,

departments, disciplines and institutions are under constant threat of being closed down, forced to downsize, lay off staff, and justify their existence according to rigid market-driven models'. Among numerous issues in UK higher education is the persistence of pay gaps (e.g., the gender pay gap and the race pay gap), as well as the continued use of precarious and casualized work contracts.

'While precariousness refers to employment status in the first instance, it also has an emotional dimension. Not knowing where the next paycheck is going to come from, not knowing what may happen in the longer term, not having adequate sick pay or a pension – this produces feelings of insecurity' (Dowling, 2021: 2). At the time of writing this, 'around half of teaching-only staff and 68% of researchers are employed on fixed-term contracts, while many more have contracts which are dependent on funding' (UCU, 2021). Also, 'UCU's [the University and College Union's] research showed that 42% of staff on casual contracts have struggled to pay household bills, while many others struggle to make long-term financial commitments like buying a house' (UCU, 2021).

While precariousness and structural inequality is undoubtedly a major issue in UK universities, it is essential that work which is intended to address these matters does not frame hardships faced in higher education in a way that trivializes people's experiences of precariousness and inequality in other sectors and environments where, on average, they have fewer rights and receive less pay. Also, any discussion of precariousness and inequality in higher education which does not account for the experiences of individuals in cleaning and hospitality roles in this context, is a discussion that likely discounts issues concerning classism and its intersection with other forms of oppression.

As someone who has worked in UK universities (although, not exclusively) for over a decade, what seems to have remained consistent is the normalization of structural racism, sexism, xenophobia, classism, and ableism, as well as other interconnected oppressions. Such forms of oppression impact both students and staff, including PhD researchers who are often both at once (e.g., postgraduate research students who are graduate teaching assistants), and whose experiences of precariousness can include being under pressure to do work even when they are unwell. Despite the 'divide and rule' discourse of universities that seeks to stoke tension between students and staff, the discontents of both groups are often strikingly similar and connect to issues such as inadequate provision of resources and mistreatment by these institutions. For this reason, and many more, it is vital that the health and wellbeing of both university students *and* staff is structurally supported.

UK higher education disparities between workload, pay, and work conditions, seem to be as common as garden-variety weeds. Hence, one of numerous ongoing campaigns undertaken by the UCU (2021) is the 'four fights dispute', which is intended to tackle such matters. Specifically, the demands of the 'four fights dispute' include calls for 'fair pay', 'job security', 'manageable workloads', and 'equality'. Continuing with my considerations of 'femvertising' and how brands position themselves as empowering women, I now examine aspects of how universities have claimed to care (and about whom) during the COVID-19 crisis. Specifically, I reflect on the yearly waves of universities posting International Women's Day (IWD) messages on social media platforms such as Twitter. In 2022, following the IWD posts of many UK universities, their hypocrisy was called out by the Twitter profile Gender Pay Gap Bot

(@PayGapApp), which Francesca Lawson and Ali Fensome are behind (Lawson, 2022).

The Gender Pay Gap Bot on Twitter is currently followed by approximately 241K people and features a bio that includes hashtags such as '#InternationalWomensDay', '#PayGapDataDay', and '#BreakTheBias'. A website that the bio links to provides a more detailed explanation of the Gender Pay Gap Bot – '[t]he totally automated Twitter account that spent International Women's Day annoying your social media and comms teams' (Gender Pay Gap App, 2022). More precisely, '[w]henever a company listed on the government's gender pay gap service tweets International Women's Day key phrases, The Gender Pay Gap Bot automatically responds with their median gender pay gap' (ibid.), which is based on publicly available data. The overview of what the Gender Pay Gap Bot does outlines an intention to 'provide a neutral, factual counterpoint to emotion-led International Women's Day social media posts' (Gender Pay Gap App, 2022), such as IWD 'messages of "empowerment", "inspiration" and "celebration"' (ibid.) which contrast with the reality of many women's lives.

The theme of IWD in 2022 was '#BreakTheBias', which many UK universities posted about on social media, including by sharing images of women with their arms crossed, forming an 'X' shape as a statement about the need to 'break the [gender] bias'. Such messages, and the wider communications campaigns that they were part of, exemplify how universities claim to care (e.g., about *some* women).

As I mentioned, shortly after the proliferation of UK universities' IWD posts, the Gender Pay Gap Bot responded by highlighting the median gender pay gap of the institutions that had proudly posted. Then, some UK universities tried to prevent

people from commenting on their original posts by changing their 'who can reply' tweet settings, presumably to mitigate the potential for people to critique the contrast between their IWD comments and their grim gender pay gap. The speed at which the Bot responded to university IWD posts, paired with the poignancy of the pay gaps pointed out, made a dent in IWD discourse that was intended to market universities as caring about equality, and, particularly, caring about women.

Lawson (2022) states that '[b]y contrasting companies' sentimental words with cold hard data, we've helped the public see through these empty gestures and start holding companies accountable for their gender pay gap', but the question of whether universities will now do more to tackle such pay gaps remains to be answered. While UK universities sought to suggest they are supportive of women on IWD in 2022, many women were facing the ongoing impact of sexism, misogyny, and interconnected forms of oppression such as homophobia, transphobia, ableism, ageism, Islamophobia, colourism, classism, and racism, which result in significant differences between the experiences and material conditions of women in higher education. Typical university IWD narratives overlook such differences, including the experiences of Black women who face some of the sharpest edges of labour market precarity and structural oppression (Sobande and Wells, 2021).

Empty university statements about equality, bias, stereotypes, and inclusivity, are often accompanied by images and / or videos of smiling (typically, white, but, sometimes, tokenized Black and brown) faces. This is suggestive of who society deems to be 'normal' and 'respectable' women. Seldom do universities' IWD posts acknowledge the experiences of trans women, or the rampant nature of transphobia in UK higher education

and the society it is part of. Also, such IWD marketing mes-
sages tend to obscure the realities of women affected by the
intersections of the race, gender, *and* disability pay gaps, such
as by using broad terms, including 'equality', without naming
specific and interconnected inequalities that impact women,
but not only them.

As well as posting social media and marketing content on
IWD and gender equality, in recent years (particularly since
2020) UK universities have shared comments in response to
Black Lives Matter (BLM). Research suggests that most UK uni-
versities responded publicly to BLM, such as in the form of
showing 'solidarity by releasing a statement on their website
and then sharing that on their social media as they took part in
the #blackouttuesday social media trend (which had organisa-
tions and individuals post a black square and stop using social
media for 24 hours to show support)' (Halpin, 2020: 4). The
university doth protest too much, methinks.

The #blackouttuesday social media trend that occurred in
2020, which cut across many spaces and sectors, was even-
tually the subject of much criticism due to the potential for
such posts to distract from vital BLM-related information
being shared online, as well as the capacity for such #black-
outtuesday content to have the effect of simply platforming
the people and institutions who were posting it. Some of the
statements issued by universities in response to BLM have
been strongly criticized, as '[m]any believed that the state-
ments were hollow because anti-Black racism is not a new
phenomenon – over the decades, students, staff and activ-
ists have been raising these issues – yet it appeared that only
now universities were prepared to talk about their support of
Black lives publicly' (Halpin, 2020: 4). The Halpin (2020: 2)

report on *UK Universities' Response to Black Lives Matter* highlights elements of the (Western) international context within which universities sought to suggest they were anti-racist, or, at least, not racist:

> The murder of George Floyd on May 25th 2020 triggered a worldwide response and boosted the momentum of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Society was asked to acknowledge that it is not enough to be non-racist; everyone has a part to play to help society become actively anti-racist. As with other key sectors, higher education is being held to account by its core constituent groups, with students, staff and the wider community all asking universities to consider their part in systemic racism, and what they can do to be truly anti-racist.

The various ways that UK universities responded to such matters included producing new reports on race equality, holding one-off panel discussions, and attempting to 'diversify' the curriculum. The research of Halpin (2020), which involved a survey and interviews with students, staff, activists, and student officers in UK higher education, explored such people's perception of how universities responded to Black Lives Matter. Halpin's (2021: 2) key findings included 'that only 26% of survey respondents felt that their university's response to Black Lives Matter was appropriate or sufficient'. Such dissatisfaction with these responses is unsurprising for many reasons, including when considering the words of Johnson (2018: 17) who documented having 'seen so many panels and group discussions with all white academics talking about how we must take a stand or speak truth to power, with no discussion of how these institutions (and the bodies normalized within them) are deeply implicated in the functioning of that power'.

The notion that UK universities care about Black people is to some, laughable, particularly given the litany of experiences and evidence of anti-Blackness in UK higher education. There is an extensive list of examples of how universities fail, if not actively obstruct, Black people – from the workload, pay, contract, and work condition disparities faced by Black staff, to the 'degree-awarding gap' that impacts Black students who are often unsupported. Documentaries such as 'Is Uni Racist?' (BBC, 2021) have investigated students' experiences of racism, including how their lives have been harmed by forms of abuse and surveillance. Even a quick search of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests faced by universities reveals extensive interest in the realities of the experiences of Black students and staff, which are experiences that universities can often conveniently obfuscate under the guise of General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) concerns.

The marketization of UK higher education has resulted in institutional embracement of the language and logics of markets – 'recruitment strategies', 'reputational risk', 'brand cohesion and consistency'. Since my days of working at the Universities and Colleges Admissions Services (UCAS) events, and Open Days as a university communications assistant, UK higher education has become more caught up in the online attention economy. It seems that 'social media is reshaping universities' value systems in a scramble for likes and shares' (Carrigan, 2021) and due to their compulsion to convey that they care. Universities' attempts to project, protect, and preserve their (brand) image include the way that they comment on IWD and BLM, and how they do (or do not) create the opportunity for people to respond to such comments. Such communications activity is, to me, a clear example of elements

of the commodification of care, and, of course, not only during or due to the COVID-19 crisis.

Many universities put a lot of effort into trying to get people to buy into them (both literally and figuratively). Such efforts include universities' work to present themselves as caring about different demographics and societal issues – from Black people during Black History Month in October to women on International Women's Day in March. Universities' claims to care, if conveyed in ways that are well-received, may be regarded as part of how they pursue capital and one way that they seek to stand out from the higher education crowd in the race to recruit more (and more, and more …) students. Caring, in this case, is a marketable trait that institutions attempt to ascribe themselves as part of their work to appear to be more than (just) a brand. It is not that care is the commodity. Instead, care is (re)constructed, consumed, or captured (Táíwò, 2022) by universities as part of marketing approaches based on higher education's culture of commodification.

In other words, universities' claims to care (about IWD, BLM, and everything in between) are not a commodity for sale. However, such claims symbolize one of the ways that universities seek to sustain their reputation and, possibly, distance themselves from marketization via messages of equality, diversity, and inclusion that tend to demarcate who and what they regard as 'respectable'. Arguably, much of university marketing (not only about IWD and BLM) reflects the 'controlling anxieties' of universities.

Controlling anxieties is 'a term that encompasses expressions of the anxieties (and in turn, expectations, and norms) of institutions, such as their concerns regarding reputational management and the (un)controllable nature of their public

image' (Sobande, 2022a). The controlling quality of such anxi-
eties includes 'their capacity to convey the conventions and
preoccupations of institutions in a threatening, or, at least,
cautionary, way – including by indicating what they deem to
be "deviant" behaviour in need of "disciplining" (and the indi-
viduals who they deem to exhibit it)' (ibid.).

I'm not sure whether any UK universities would (have the
audacity to) view themselves as activists, but regardless of that,
what is apparent is that many use the lens of social justice in
ways that may distract from the commodification processes
that they are part of, and in ways that unintentionally illustrate
their controlling anxieties. Although universities work hard to
construct and constantly communicate their brand 'voice',
including by carefully posting about social and political issues
on social media, perhaps they have much to learn from the
timelessly haunting 1990 lyrics of Depeche Mode – sometimes,
people 'enjoy the silence'.

CARING (OR, CONSUMING), TOGETHER?

'For decades, brands have used rhetoric and representations
with the aim of yielding adverts which feature emotional
appeals. Often, such efforts are intended to humanise brands
and make them relatable and attractive to different target
demographics' (Sobande, 2020a: 1034). I opened this chap-
ter by reflecting on the power of advertising which appeals
to people's emotions and gets them to care (e.g., about the
product and / or service and the brand behind it), so it seems
right to close it by reflecting on a campaign that is strategically
sentimental in its style. Since the emergence of the COVID-19
crisis there has been a slew of brand efforts to stir emotions and
touch on a form of togetherness that often upholds the idea

that brands are 'one of us'. This is demonstrated by advertising campaigns such as 'It's a People Thing' by British banking brand Halifax, in addition to the other examples discussed in detail throughout this book.

'It's a People Thing' 'seamlessly amalgamates various vignettes, capturing the highs and lows of those living on a typical British street' (*The Drum*, 2021b). Featuring the track 'Stand By Me' by Oasis, the filmed advert depicts different emotional moments in people's lives. These include someone receiving flowers (captioned 'it's a joyful thing'), a couple commiserating together while looking at a pregnancy test result (captioned 'it's a we'll try again thing'), sisters trying to film a workout video that goes wrong (captioned 'it's a sister thing'), and a child looking lovingly at their pregnant mother (captioned 'it's a new playmate thing'). Other scenes in the advert include a teary-eyed person looking lovingly at a dog that seems to be waiting to be euthanized at the vet (captioned 'it's a thank you, for everything'), and an elderly couple looking lovingly at a photograph of a child after an adult outside waves to them while on a run (captioned 'it's a look what we achieved thing'). Although it is not clear who the child in the image is, the elderly couple's gaze of admiration alludes to it potentially being their child or grandchild.

The advert closes by focusing on a Halifax branch, and the narrator states 'for the ups, the downs, and everything in between … Halifax, it's a people thing'. Overall, the advert is illustrative of 'emotional appeals in advertising banking services', which is a phenomenon that the work of marketing scholar Emmanuel Mogaji (2018) sheds light on. Such advertising by Halifax, which appears to simultaneously individualize notions of care while drawing on the themes of togetherness, 'nuclear' family life, heteronormative coupledom, and

(middle-class) domesticity play a common part in UK market-
ing depictions and discourses in general. 'It's a People Thing'
particularly focuses on pregnancy and parenthood, which may
be part of a strategy to position the brand as practically being
part of the family. As the advert opens with a bird's eye view
and closes with a relatively brief, but clear focus on the Halifax
brand, it may suggest the ever-present nature of Halifax (e.g.,
watching over people, and never far from where they are).

   Adverts such as 'It's a People Thing' may be intended to
communicate messages about caring for each other, and, car-
ing, *together*. However, by nature, such adverts are clamped
to consumer culture which (re)presents consumption and
commerce as care. 'It's a People Thing' might be yet another
example of what Chatzidakis et al. (2020) call 'carewashing',
but, specifically, it is an example of how when claiming to care,
brands push messages about so-called 'normal' life – including
by repeatedly depicting the pursuit and pride of parenthood,
which connects to the discourses of (re)productivity which I
now move on to discuss in Chapter 3.