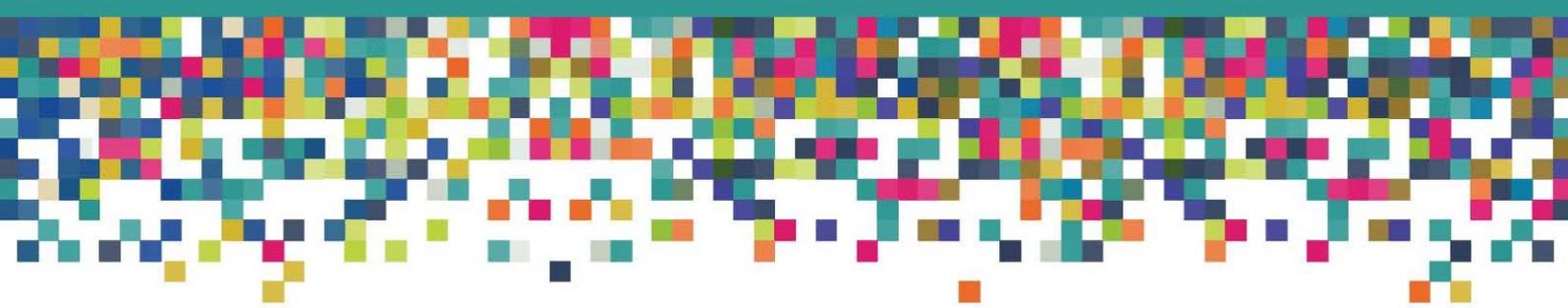




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Branding for New Futures

Brand Activism's Mediation of Collective Prospective
Remembering

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ABSTRACT

In the summer of 2020, the police killing of George Floyd catalyzed global protests and discourse regarding systemic racism. In the United States, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement prompted a surge in strategic communications in the form of brand activism, with companies issuing a range of statements, campaigns, and initiatives on racial injustice. This dissertation uses 2020 BLM brand activism as a case study to explore how brand activism mediates collective prospective remembering in US-- in other words, how brand activism constructs reminders to the public about collective future intentions. In order to explore this construction, this dissertation conducted multimodal critical discourse analysis on four video campaigns addressing racial injustice from nationwide US companies released in the month following George Floyd's death.

This research finds that 2020 BLM brand activism mediates collective prospective remembering in the US by negotiating alignment between the brand and BLM. To do so, brand activism reimagines the collective for the future, strategically remembers narratives that aligns with its mission and forgets ones that may harm its reputation, and uses emotional appeals to in-corporate collective commemoration. Ultimately, brand activism campaigns construct collective prospective remembering around continuing the neoliberal order. This study thus extends theories of collective prospective memory to brand activism and contributes to literature on race and strategic communications in the United States.

INTRODUCTION

“It all boils down to the fact that we must never allow ourselves to become satisfied with unattained goals. We must always maintain a kind of divine discontent.”

-- Dr. Martin Luther King

(Moscatello, 2015)

“If only Daddy had known about the power of #Pepsi”

-- Tweet from Bernice King, daughter of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., April 5, 2017

(O'Connor, 2017)

In April 2017, after years of contentious protests demanding justice for Black Americans killed due to police brutality, Pepsi's 'Live for Now' commercial depicted Kendall Jenner, white model and reality star, bestowing a can of soda as a 'peace offering' to a police officer at a protest. The advertisement was widely criticized by social media users for being a tone-deaf depiction of protests, and Pepsi pulled the ad less than two days later (Victor, 2017). By creating 'Live for Now,' Pepsi had hoped to brand itself as progressive by referencing Black Lives Matter (BLM) (Watson, 2017). Instead, the ad served as a warning for corporations across America: when engaging with complicated social issues, do not present the consumption of your product as a solution (Watson, 2017).

In the summer of 2020, the unlawful killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor led to nationwide Black Lives Matter protests and an apparent racial reckoning. Black Lives Matter discourse dominated traditional and social media, with competing framings of the protests reinforcing the polarization in American politics (Bolsover, 2020). While far-right Americans voiced support for the police through #BlueLivesMatter, “documentary evidence

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of cases of racism and excessive use of force by police... maintain[ed] high levels of support for the movement among the general population” (Bolsover, 2020: 9). Social media was saturated with shares of protest guides, scripts for calls to government leaders, anti-racist reading lists, infographics about defunding the police, and more, demanding action in the present and future for a more equitable America (Hu, 2020).

As BLM 2020 discourse highlighted the systemic nature of racism, the expectation for anti-racist action also targeted American institutions (Yoganathan, 2020). For corporate America, brands that did not speak up were seen as complicit or uncaring; this resulted in an outpouring of statements and campaigns, whether out of genuine concern, pressure from consumers, or desire to take advantage of the moment for brand building (McGregor, 2020). While there is no way of knowing a brand’s true motivations, there certainly was expectation and incentive to take a position, especially for a younger demographic. 69% of Gen Z and Millennial respondents to a June 2020 survey believed that brands should be engaged with the Black Lives Matter movement (Menon & Kiesler, 2020). After Pepsi’s disastrous failure to “capture the spirit” of those protesting (Victor, 2017), brands knew the swift consequences of a lighthearted tone when positioning their product in regard to BLM. In 2020, brands represented themselves as activists and allies in forging a new future, decrying racism and reminding consumers of the collective actions needed to be taken to create an anti-racist society.

This dissertation will explore the future-oriented approach of brand activism, using the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement as a case study. In this essay, ‘Black Lives Matter’ will generally refer to the movement as a whole and will specify when it refers to BLM as an organization. This study will specifically consider brand activism as a vehicle for reminding consumers of collective actions that the public intends to do in the future, a concept referred to as collective prospective remembering. By using multimodal critical discourse analysis, this dissertation will examine video campaigns by Sprite, McDonalds, Nike, and P&G addressing the 2020 BLM movement in the US. This dissertation will consider how these instances of brand activism

construct a shared vision of future actions and, ultimately, a future neoliberal order. This research hopes to make an original contribution to the field of media and communications by establishing brand activism as a mediator of collective prospective remembering, thus bridging strategic communications and collective memory studies, as well as adding to the underexplored body of literature on collective prospective memory.

THEORETICAL CHAPTER

In this chapter, I will establish the theoretical context for my own work by reviewing the relevant literature. First, I will give a brief introduction into the historical relationship between race and strategic communications in the United States; this will contextualize the key issue of authenticity in brand activism regarding the Black Lives Matter movement. Next, I will address the work of scholars on brand activism as a part of the neoliberal environment and show that this context highlights the dual purposes of brand activism that can make it appear inauthentic. Then, I will engage with collective remembering, outlining its relationship with the strategic communications of both brands and Black Lives Matter activists, and introduce the concept of collective prospective remembering. Finally, I will present a conceptual framework for my own contribution to the literature, as well as state my research aims and question.

Literature Review

Race and Strategic Communications

In this section, I will briefly contextualize 2020 BLM brand activism within the complex historical relationship between strategic communications and race, specifically focusing on representations of Blackness and the White lens.

Defining Strategic Communication

Holtzhausen and Zerfass define strategic communication as “the practice of deliberate and purposive communication that a communication agent enacts in the public sphere on behalf of a communicative entity to reach set goals” (2015: 4). A strength of Holtzhausen and Zerfass’ definition is its breadth—strategic communication can be utilized by both corporations and activists. Under this definition, strategic communication terminologically encompasses branding, marketing, public relations, and advertising, as well as other purposive communicative efforts like brand activism.

Race in US Branded Strategic Communications

Throughout America’s history, mainstream marketing has been targeted at a white, middleclass audience by largely white, middle-class practitioners (Crockett, 2008; Shankar, 2019), and this centralization of Whiteness has often relegated people of color to side characters, stereotypical tropes, or positioned in comparison to Whiteness in campaigns (Shankar, 2019). Despite increased awareness of the need for racial sensitivity, racialized advertising tropes pre-dating the civil rights movement still appear in today’s commercials (Shankar, 2019). For example, a 2017 Dove body soap campaign depicted a Black woman in a skin-matching tee flipping the shirt to a blinding white as a display of its cleanliness, mirroring historical advertisements that blatantly associated the white body with purity (Shankar, 2019).

While companies increasingly claim commitments to diversity and inclusion, racial diversity is visually represented in campaigns as celebrated ‘nonwhiteness;’ these representations perform a world of post-racial equality (Shankar, 2019). Even when Blackness is contextualized within struggles of inequality, advertisements frame these issues in the language of the mass market, masking the market’s part in perpetuating these struggles (Crockett, 2008).

Crockett argues that representation of Black people is especially performative in branded strategic communications (2008). While other minority groups are treated as their own markets with targeted advertising, “advertisers construct a version of blackness (i.e. black cultural identity), particularly as expressed by youth, that functions to set trends in the mass market –

not to be served as a segment apart from the mass market” (Crockett, 2008: 247). Blackness is instead used as a benchmark to establish the relationship between the viewer and Blackness or between the product and Blackness; either comparison to Blackness serves as a means of creating cultural capital for the brand (Crockett, 2008). This context of white centrality and the tokenization of Black people in branded strategic communication complicates the surge of Black Lives Matter brand activism in 2020, highlighting a central tension in brand activism—authenticity.

Brand Activism

Brands as Activists

From calling out toxic masculinity (Wright, 2019), to creating rainbow products for Pride month (Elan, 2021), to addressing racial inequality in the US (Menon & Kiesler, 2020), brands are increasingly using strategic communication to project social values in addition to their market value (Aronczyk & Powers, 2010). This incorporation of social values is commonly referred to as brand activism, a “communications strategy whose aim is to influence citizen-consumers by means of campaigns created and sustained by political values” (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019: 348). Citizen-consumers have emerged as a product of the neoliberal environment which turns purchasing into a political statement, or ‘voting with your dollar’ (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012), as well as a statement of personal identity (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019). In the current neoliberal moment, society is organized in the terms of trade, emphasizing individualism, entrepreneurialism, and liberties that echo the framework of competition within the market (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012). Through this lens, ethical and social causes have been reframed in the language of assets—a corporate social responsibility that adds market value to the brand by bolstering their reputation and associating their products with moral value (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012). Where there may be disconnect between the purported social values and the actions of a brand, “the purpose of a brand is to be buoyant enough to float above and beyond its actual practices” (Aronczyk & Powers, 2010: 6). This reinforces the value of favorable brand reputation, where

supporting popular social causes can mask business practices that overwhelmingly benefit the corporation and its associated economic elites (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012).

Considering social causes within the language of the market provides a framework for deciding when to engage in activism and to what extent. For example, brands are inclined to take a position on “pre-political” issues that have general appeal, like feminism or equality, with the majority of campaigns being vaguely progressive but not controversial (Manfredi Sanchez, 2019). On the other side of the coin, brands can take a partisan perspective, engaging with issues that challenge the current system directly by advocating for policy changes regarding issues such as transgender rights and climate change (Moorman, 2020). By taking a stance on a partisan policy, brands risk alienating consumers who oppose on the issue (Moorman, 2020). Brands have the power to establish the strength of their stance, which can often depend on the mission of the brand or the palatability of the issue (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019). For example, racial justice straddles the line between pre-political and partisan in 2020 (Moorman, 2020), giving a brand’s strategic communication the capacity to determine its place on the spectrum according to corporate priorities and goals.

Woke-washing: Questioning Authenticity in Brand Activism

Given the overarching neoliberal moment that blurs the boundary between social and market value, the key tension of brand activism lies in the authenticity of a brand’s intentions for engaging in activism. During the 2020 BLM movement, this friction of purpose, combined with the history of Black representation in strategic communications, continually raised the question: do brands actually care about eliminating racism or are they just trying to profit from a ‘woke’ reputation (Todd, 2020; Sumagaysay, 2021; Dowell & Jackson, 2020)?

Sobande defines woke as “invested in challenging structural injustices faced by the most societally marginalised – especially Black people of African descent” (2019: 2724). While companies rarely explicitly refer to themselves as woke, brand activism cultivates a rhetoric of wokeness, leading to critique or praise depending on the execution (Sobande, 2019). One example of this implied rhetoric is brands using ambiguous ‘woke change agents,’ or people

who represents progressive reform, in their campaigns. This practice “align[s] with brands’ efforts to imply that they are committed to assisting forms of social change, often without specifying how this will be achieved or exactly what sort of social change is being implied” (Sobande, 2019: 2736). In this particular performance of wokeness, brands can position themselves as being ‘brave’ by their association with a Black person who has taken a stand (Sobande, 2019).

Performances of wokeness are commonly referred to as woke-washing, or when “brands have unclear or indeterminate records of social cause practices but yet are attempting to market themselves as being concerned with issues of inequality and social injustice, highlighting inconsistencies between messaging and practice” (Vredenburg et al., 2020: 445). Pepsi’s notorious Live for Now advertisement exemplifies how woke-washing engages with activist movements on a superficial level, because it treats BLM protests as an aesthetic backdrop in a purely profit-seeking commercial (Todd, 2020). Where accusations of woke-washing can be harmful to a brand’s reputation, as in the case of Pepsi, consumers are increasingly expecting brands to speak out on social issues; however, consumers are also increasingly skeptical about brands’ authenticity in engaging with those issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Thus, brand activism exists in an inherent state of tension as a strategic communication navigating two (often competing) purposes, a tension that will inform its mediation of collective prospective remembering.

Collective Remembering

Collective prospective remembering is an underexplored concept within the wider context of collective memory studies; therefore, the key discussions within the broader field are both applicable and essential for identifying the tensions within its understudied subset of collective prospective remembering. This section will review the literature regarding the discursive nature of collective remembering in the United States, explore the connections other scholars have made between collective memory studies and branded/activist strategic communications, and outline the relevant theories that guide this study’s understanding of collective prospective remembering.

Collective Remembering in the US

Collective memory studies “explains how members of particular social groups retain, alter, or reappropriate public knowledge of history” (Baker, Motley, & Henderson, 2004). Collective memories are as numerous as society’s many collectives, which each bear their own interpretations based on the relationship between the group and the object of memory (Davis, 2007). Collective memory is a product of the social dynamics that result from our membership in groups, as evidenced by the constitutive power of dominant institutions to formulate narratives that reaffirm collectives regarding nationality, religion, and other identities (Olick, 1999). While ‘collective memory’ is the dominant terminology, using ‘collective remembering’ “give[s] greater emphasis to the social and political contestation that is part of many accounts of the past.” (Wertsch & Roediger, 2008: 319). In embracing the term ‘collective remembering’, scholars highlight the struggle inherent within the process of collective memory-making between those who produce memories and those who interact with those productions (Wertsch & Roediger, 2008).

A primary avenue for producing and facilitating engagement with collective remembering is the media, whose own target audiences can influence the construction of collective remembering. Landsberg argues that the mass media and commodification of 21st century American culture allowed for increased circulation of mainstream, or ‘prosthetic’, collective memories across the varied identities and backgrounds within the United States (2004). While this argument could be seen as a remnant of the early 2000s before the social media boom, Wasilewski (2019) reaffirms the existence of mainstream collective memory in current US media. Furthermore, he argues for a sanitized mainstream, saying:

The exclusive character of the mainstream collective memory relies on removing all ‘extremities’, instead offering a ‘polished’ version of the past. It means that historical figures, symbols and events, which are at present are considered too radical or too divisive for the general public, are erased from the official memory discourse (Wasilewski, 2019: 80).

In addition to sanitizing the divisive, mainstream collective memory largely neglects (and thus forgets) the experience of the marginalized, such as Black Americans, due to the interests of hegemonic institutions, (Hammar, 2017), including the media itself. Marginalized perspectives are typically only brought into broader collective memories when they serve a political purpose (Kansteiner, 2002). However, for ‘mainstream’ appeal, the incorporation of the marginalized memory must not be too far left or right on the political spectrum (Wasilewski, 2019), a sentiment that parallels the tendency to be pre-political in brand activism (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019).

In tension with mass-mediated, mainstream remembering lies the interactivity of the digital age, where accessible multimodal technologies increasingly enable internet users to contribute to ‘social remembrance’ on public platforms (Burkey, 2020). The proliferation of remembrance on social media is relevant for the 2020 BLM movement, which occurred in a time of especially digitized communication due to Covid-19 lockdowns across the US. In dialectical online spaces, marginalized (or in this case, non-white) collective memories can go viral and offer a counter to mainstream (white) collective memory, prompting the (white) mainstream to change in relation to present understandings of history (Baker, Motley, and Henderson, 2004). In quickly developing movements like BLM 2020, this poses an additional challenge for brand activism, as the speed and accessibility of social media can rapidly adapt what narratives are deemed appropriate by exceptionally vocal online communities.

Collective Remembering and Strategic Communication

Branded Strategic Communication and Collective Remembering

Despite being relatively underexplored, the connection between collective memory and the strategic communications of brands has been used by scholars to showcase their negotiation implicit to collective remembering. In an examination of historical Coca-Cola advertisements, Okleshen, Baker, and Mittelstaedt (2001: 228) argue that the brand’s strategic communications efforts “unequivocally” shaped collective memories of Santa Claus in the United States throughout the twentieth century. Coca Cola’s advertisements mirrored contemporary ideas

of Santa while tweaking other features to construct new understandings of how Santa was represented. For example, Santa was depicted with reindeer and gifts, as expected, but his coat stabilized in popular memory as red, the color of Coca-Cola, as a result of their recurring campaigns (Okleshen, Baker, and Mittelstaedt, 2001). Thus, “when advertisers create, or encode, their images, they must do so within the confines of consumers' collective memories or frame resonance will not occur and they must understand how consumers will use these images in their everyday lives” (Okleshen, Baker, and Mittelstaedt, 2001: 229).

Even as practitioners advertise with target audiences in mind, consumers will modify their view of the strategic communication according to their current paradigms of remembering (Baker, Motley, & Henderson, 2004). For example, Pepsi's Live for Now did not account for its consumers' collective remembering of the BLM protests to be continuing sites of struggle as opposed to places of emerging freedom, particularly for people of color and young adult consumers. Identity factors like age and race play a large role in determining how collective memory will impact interpretations of strategic communications (Davis, 2007). Davis (2007) uses the case study of a 1994 Aunt Jemima marketing campaign to show how collective memories varied between Black and White consumers, as well as intergenerationally. Where White consumers saw Aunt Jemima as 'helpful,' Black consumers saw her as a relic of slavery (Davis, 2007). Older Black consumers collectively remembered 'mammy' images of Aunt Jemima and disapproved, where younger consumers were less disapproving (Davis, 2007). Altogether, these studies show the connection between and the consistent renegotiation of collective remembering and branded strategic communications.

Activist Strategic Communication and Collective Remembering: Black Lives Matter

In regard to the case study of the Black Lives Matter movement, the strategic communication of BLM activists has a particular resonance with collective remembering, as the movement implicitly calls out 'mainstream' collective memories as being constructed through a White lens. One such construction is the myth of the 'good' or 'bad' Black citizens, where 'good' Black Americans embody individualistic neoliberal ideals and 'bad' Black Americans call out systemic racism (Banks, 2018). To employ this rhetoric, media outlets such as the New York

Times, CNN, and Fox News have presented a collective (and sanitized) remembering of a nonviolent Civil Rights Movement to criticize Black Lives Matter demonstrations and justify the brutality of riot officers at protests (Banks, 2018).

Where the traditional media has been at odds with the structural concerns of BLM, the digital nature of the movement allows its followers to disrupt and challenge the “established institutional archives” of memory regarding Black Americans (Liebermann, 2020: 3). For example, through strategic communications on social media platforms, Black Lives Matter activists established continuity between the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2013 and the lynching of Emmett Till in 1955 (Liebermann, 2020). These posts reconstructed the collective remembering of Martin’s death in the legacy of structural violence against Black Americans (Liebermann, 2020). In addition to this structural framing, digital activists used everyday items such as hoodies (what Martin was wearing) and Skittles (the item his killer ‘mistook’ for a gun) to construct a collective memory of Martin’s death as a tragedy of the human body, rather than the pervasive media framing of the disposable Black body (Liebermann, 2020). These are examples of BLM memory work, a “discursive process—comprising practices, cultural forms, and technologies—wherein the past is shaped and constructed in the present and carried into the future” (Smit, Heinrich, & Broersma, 2017: 3120). By establishing alternative archives, BLM activism can serve as reminders of the work that needs to be done to secure justice and make structural change (Smit, Heinrich, & Broersma, 2017).

Remembering for the Future: Collective Prospective Remembering

Structural change is facilitated by remembering what needs to be done, a type of memory referred to in neuroscience and psychology as ‘prospective memory.’ While collective memory studies literature largely conceptualizes memory as retrospective, or the remembering of the past in the present (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2013), a growing body of scholarship highlights the ‘prospective’, or future-facing, elements (Jordan, 2012). Psychologists McDaniel and Einstein define prospective memory as “remembering to carry out intended actions at an appropriate point in the future” (2007: 1). These intentions permeate our daily lives on an individual level

(e.g. remembering to take laundry out of the washer in an hour) and extend to broader societal issues, like the Black Lives Matter movement. Two theoretical frameworks that conceptualize collective memory in relation to the future are collective future thought (Szpunar & Szpunar, 2016) and mediated collective prospective memory (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2013).

Szpunar and Szpunar (2016) offer a challenge to collective memory studies' focus on the past and present. They argue that this represents a prioritization of memory over imagination, thus relegating the future to a theoretical afterthought overshadowed by the past (Szpunar & Szpunar, 2016). Instead, they maintain that the "notion of a collective future serves as a driving force of collective memory and can affect the ways in which a past is reconstructed" (Szpunar & Szpunar, 2016: 382). This means that groups are constantly negotiating overlapping collective futures and trying to prepare for those by constructing pasts that optimally fit the imagined scenario (Szpunar & Szpunar, 2016). Collective remembering of the past is thus reconstructed with the continued survival of the group in mind; therefore, the collective ideas of what the future will hold can mean restructuring the group identity to adapt to the new imagined future (Szpunar & Szpunar, 2016). Szpunar and Szpunar's argument provides insight into the fluidity of collectives and existing discourses when imagining the future, a concept that is relevant to the 2020 BLM movement, which challenges the current discourse on race and belonging in the US.

Tenenboim-Weinblatt theorizes prospective memory on a social and political level, defining collective prospective memory as "collective remembrance of what still needs to be done, based on past commitments and promises" (2013: 92). She argues that collective prospective memories construct what becomes collective intentions and how those intentions should be acted upon (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2013). These collective prospective memories often appear on the public agenda due to mediation (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2013). While Tenenboim-Weinblatt's scope focuses on collective prospective memory as mediated by journalists and the news media (2013), it has theoretical implications for other media, such as strategic communications. Collective prospective memory is bound to collective retrospective memory and public agendas; the former develops discourse that informs the goals constructed by

collective prospective memory (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2013). The public agenda overlaps with collective prospective memory by issuing reminders of collective intentions via the media, thus “making the social commitments associated with these issues more accessible in people’s minds” (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2013: 101). Therefore, collective prospective memory is mediated to negotiate reminders of collective priorities and intentions (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2013). As this dissertation embraces Tenenboim-Weinblatt’s conceptualization of collective prospective memory, it will also adapt a more discursive perspective by using the term ‘remembering,’ which includes emphasis on the potential to forget.

Conceptual Framework

This essay’s point of departure for brand activism is that it is a form of strategic communication. Strategic communication is a fitting overarching framework for this study because it contextualizes brand activism within the pre-existing dynamics of privileging Whiteness in the relationship between race and advertising in the United States (Shankar, 2019; Crockett, 2008), an essential consideration for my case study of the Black Lives Matter movement. By placing brand activism under the same umbrella as advertising, marketing, and public relations, the framework of strategic communication allows for further examination of the legacy of racialized discourse in these fields and its relationship with brand activism. Additionally, conceptualizing brand activism as a form of strategic communication reinforces that it is “deliberate and purposive,” as well as being goal-oriented (Holzhausen & Zerfass, 2015: 4).

The tension of brand activism, then, is that it has two purposes—to promote the brand and to be an activist for a social cause. This essay will conceptualize these dual purposes as being a product of the neoliberal environment in the United States, where the lines between the commercial and socio-political realms are increasingly blurred (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012). Neoliberalism will be defined as

a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills

within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. (David Harvey in Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee, 2012: 17)

By employing the framework of neoliberalism, this study can consider the institutions that align and deviate the dual purposes of brand activism.

Finally, this research will be informed by the concept of collective remembering, employing 'remembering' over 'memory' to emphasize the discursive nature of memory—one that is constructed, challenged, and negotiated by different groups throughout time—and the ability to forget (Wertsch & Roediger, 2008). In order to avoid essentializing the American collective memory, I have drawn from literature establishing the existence of a mediated mainstream collective memory in the US (Landsberg, 2004; Wasilewski, 2019) that is continually challenged by 'alternative,' or marginalized, collectives (Liebermann, 2020).

This research combines the theoretical frameworks of mediated prospective memory and collective future thought to consider 'collective prospective remembering.' The choice of 'collective' highlights Szpunar and Szpunar's recognition of collectives being continually contested and restructured with the future in mind (2016). 'Prospective' was selected instead of 'future' to employ Tenenboim-Weinblatt's understanding of prospective memory as being intention-oriented and overlapping with agenda setting (2013), creating a framework for collective remembering that parallels the goal-oriented nature of brand activism.

Research Aims and Question

Under the established conceptual framework, this study seeks to provide insight into the connection between brand activism and collective prospective remembering, thus filling a gap in the literature by bridging these two bodies of scholarship. In doing so, this dissertation will also contribute to the limited research within collective memory studies that conceptualizes remembering in relation to the future. The selected case study of the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement frames this work's understanding of brand activism within the historical and

power-laden context of strategic communication and race in the United States. With this context in mind, this research seeks to empirically explore the discursive nature of brand activism, investigating how this particular medium negotiates the meanings that constitute collective prospective remembering.

Therefore, this dissertation is concerned with answering the question:

RQ: How does 2020 Black Lives Matter brand activism mediate collective prospective remembering in the United States?

METHODOLOGICAL CHAPTER

Justification of Method

This essay uses multimodal critical discourse analysis (MCDA) to evaluate how brands strategically communicate their activism in ways that mediate collective prospective remembering. More specifically, I will look at branded video campaigns addressing the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement in the US, exploring how they represent the brands and the BLM movement and thus remind viewers of collective intentions. I do not seek to assess the effectiveness or influence of the video campaigns, but to interrogate the meanings that they embed and perpetuate through sight and sound (Williamson, 1978). Given this focus on meaning, my work is situated within a rich methodological tradition of examining advertisements as audio-visual reflections of underlying cultural ideologies (Goffman, 1979; Schroeder, 2007; Williamson, 1978). This body of literature scrutinizes the multifunctionality of advertisements, exploring how advertisements, in performing their apparent function of promoting a brand, also link brands to identities (Williamson, 1978). By creating association with identity, the advertisements also establish ideas of what it signifies to consume certain products (Williamson, 1978). In investigating these signifiers within “the cultural context of consumption, researchers gain a more thorough (yet never complete) understanding of how

images embody and express cultural values and contradictions” (Schroeder, 2007: 303). Therefore, MCDA of advertisements creates the opportunity to analyze both the ideologies within the campaigns and the consumerist context of their production (Banks, 2001). In this vein, my research grapples with the multifunctionality of brand activism by examining the elements of video campaigns, ultimately unveiling the ideologies that explicate the function of mediating collective prospective remembering.

Multimodal critical discourse analysis is the most fitting strand of audio-visual analysis for my project because MCDA “reveal[s] discourses, the kinds of social practices that they involve, and the ideologies that they serve” (Ledin & Machin, 2018: 28). MCDA distinguishes itself from other methods by giving more attention to the ways the audience views the material, as well as its social and institutional context (Rose, 2001). MCDA emerges from the Foucauldian notion of discourse, or “a particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it” (Rose, 2001: 136). Scholars like Fairclough and Van Dijk then used this idea of accepted knowledge to analyze language as a site of struggle through critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Ledin & Machin, 2018). MCDA extends the scope of CDA to include the text and the features that surround it, applying discourse analysis to multimodal materials like visual images, videos, or objects (Ledin & Machin, 2018). The Foucauldian perspective means that researchers utilize MCDA to explore the entwined relationship between power and knowledge (Rose, 2001), a framework that aligns with this essay’s conceptual understanding of collective remembering as being discursive and socially constructed.

Research Design

Sampling Strategy

In order to answer my research question, I chose to use branded video campaigns about the US 2020 BLM movement as my sample. Video campaigns, which I will also refer to as ‘advertisements’, ‘spots’, or ‘commercials’, are purposive and public, complying with the Holtzhausen and Zerfass (2015) definition of strategic communication that serves as a

framework for this project. I specifically chose video campaigns over still images or text because research indicates that, through the combination of verbal, vocal, and visual communication, “videos may be the most powerful methods of creating a strong mental impression of the organization in the public's mind” (Waters & Jones, 2011: 249). Given that my research question interrogates brands’ dual mission to promote themselves while promoting intentions of collective social change, the impact and multimodality of video campaigns’ storytelling allows for a richer analysis of how these dual narratives are interwoven through brand activism.

In selecting the video campaigns, I focused on spots that lasted between one minute and one minute and 30 seconds, because this range is shown to be enough time to develop a compelling story, which is associated with higher brand favorability (Jones, 2016). Another consideration was the type of brand producing the video, and I chose to use brands within Fortune 500 companies that sell consumer good products (CGP). As the Fortune 500 ranks the most well-known companies in the US (Fortune, 2021), I found this to be a useful indicator of brands that typically cater to a mass American audience, which will inform my conceptualization of ‘mainstream’ collective remembering in the US. My criterion of CGP brands was prompted as my data collection process revealed there was a significant industry range in the campaigns being produced, from professional sports and entertainment (NFL; Disney Channel) to advertising industry bodies (AdCouncil) (Adage, 2020). In this discovery, I realized that I had implicitly prioritized CGP brands because of their direct relationship with consumption and chose to make it an explicit criterion as a control across industries. The content in the videos had to address racial injustice in the US. The videos needed to be launched for an American audience online or on TV between May 26th and June 30th of 2020, in the aftermath of George Floyd’s death and during the consequent Black Lives Matter protests.

My search for these videos was complicated by the change of SEO terms to ensure that advertisements did not appear before informative BLM content in Google/Youtube searches (Yin & Sankin, 2021). In order to locate a comprehensive database of advertisements, I consulted AdAge’s archived blog “How Brands and Agencies Responded to Racial Injustice

in the First Month Following George Floyd's Death," which provided continuous updates from May 31, 2020 to June 30, 2020 (Adage Staff, 2020). I then checked the blog for all references to spots that met my specified criteria and compiled a list of video campaigns. Due to the limited scope of this project and discourse analysis' emphasis on quality over quantity of analysis (Rose, 2001), I purposively used operational construct sampling to choose the 4 campaigns that exemplified themes from the literature to give the fullest analysis (Eitkan & Musa, 2016; Drauker et al, 2007). Such were the strength of these themes that I organized my analysis by advertisement, choosing to highlight what each spot demonstrated in relation to my research question.

Design of Analytical Framework

As multimodal critical discourse analysis is a form of CDA, I modeled my analytical framework on Fairclough's three levels of analysis: the semiotic, the ideological, and the contextual (Yan & Santos, 2009). I used an inductive and deductive approach to generating the codes and questions that constitute each level, basing them on theories presented in the literature and notable trends that arose when analyzing my data sample.

➤ Semiotic: This level "considers the text's work of signification, the interplay of signs, both visual and verbal" (Baym, 2000: 320), which, when repeated, indicate discourses of power (Van Dijk, 1993). Some elements I consider will include color, angle of shot, tone of music and text, and intertextuality, or how meanings are formed in reference to other images and texts (Rose, 2001). For my particular project, I also ask: How is verb tense used to situate the audience temporally? What is the mode of address? Which pronouns are being used to describe the audience and the brand? Where is the brand present? Who is represented and how? What emotions do these elements generate?

➤ Ideological: The ideological level of analysis examines that which underpins discourse, looking at the conventions and expectations that structure our understanding of the world (Rose, 2001). To illuminate these underlying structures, I ask: How do these strategic communications represent the Black Lives Matter movement? To what extent is their

representation pre-political or partisan (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019; Moorman, 2020)? How do these representations interact with existing understandings of race in strategic communications (Shankar, 2019; Crockett, 2008)? Where is remembering renegotiated, and to whose benefit? What visions of the future are being projected (Szpunar & Szpunar, 2016)? How are the spots reminding the audience of tasks and intentions to achieve this future (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2013)? Which ideologies are privileged, and which are forgotten?

➤ Contextual: The contextual level of analysis interrogates the structures of power that determine the parameters for discourse (Van Dijk, 1993). This study asks: What institutions are being perpetuated in these campaigns? What discursive formations are determining the connection of meanings within the discourse (Yan & Santos, 2009)? What alternate discourses are absent or forgotten (Rose, 2001)? Where is authority placed? Who is included in the discourse (Van Dijk, 1993)?

Limitations, Reflexivity, and Ethics

Within branches of discourse analysis, sampling strategies are commonly seen as limitations to the objectivity of the study (Aydin-Düzgit & Rumelili, 2018), and my multimodal critical discourse project is no exception. My purposive selection of advertisements attempts to identify the most theoretically relevant campaigns to my research question, but this process is based on my own interpretations of relevance, which could be challenged as lacking objectivity (Aydin-Düzgit & Rumelili, 2018). In order to control for that, I have outlined my decision-making process and sampling criteria, as well as provided a robust literature review covering the key theoretical concepts that informed my choices. Even with these measures, I recognize that some degree of subjectivity is inevitable due to the interpretative nature of discourse analysis, which is informed by my own position in and resulting perspective of society (Aydin-Düzgit & Rumelili, 2018).

The interpretative nature of multimodal critical discourse analysis necessitates a critical reflection on my own positionality as a researcher in order to understand how my lived experience informs my reading of the data (Rose, 2001). My positionality as a millennial will

inform my analysis, as I belong to a generation that is shown to have high expectations for brand activism (Sanchez, 2021).

Because my data is drawn from campaigns that address the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement, this project particularly calls for reflexivity on my positioning as a white American. To do so, I will use an adapted version Emirbayer and Desmond's typology of racial reflexivity, investigating the social unconscious and the disciplinary unconscious of my work (2012). The social unconscious acknowledges that "students of race are deeply shaped, privileged, or disadvantaged by a society in which racial domination is prevalent, and their social experiences condition the very perspectives they assume upon the racial world" (Emirbayer & Desmond, 2012: 4). As I undertook this project, I was forced to confront my implicit assumption of myself as 'the mainstream' target for American advertising as a middle class, white American millennial, which I now recognize reinforced the centrality of whiteness in US strategic communications (Shankar, 2019; Emirbayer & Desmond, 2012). Additionally, my experience with and observations of the 2020 BLM movement are undeniably shaped by my positionality as a white American. To address the disciplinary unconscious, or the influence of Whiteness on the discipline in which this dissertation is situated, I am conducting this research within the media and communications discipline, a field that has been a subject of critique by the #CommunicationsSoWhite movement for its entrenched assumptions and privileging of Whiteness (Chakravarty et al, 2018; Ng et al, 2020). After illuminating these unconscious, I have endeavored to engage with literature and create an analytical framework that problematizes the centrality of Whiteness; in doing so, I hope to utilize and generate tension with my own scopic regime as a white American.

This study was granted ethical approval from the London School of Economics Research Ethics body in April of 2021.

ANALYTICAL CHAPTER

In this chapter, I will analyze and discuss the 2020 BLM video campaigns of Nike, Sprite, P&G, and McDonald's. In order to address my research question which asks how 2020 Black Lives Matter brand activism mediates collective prospective memory, I will conduct a close analysis of each advertisement, exploring the semiotic, ideological, and contextual elements that reinforce the relationship between these two concepts. First, I will analyze the Nike campaign, using it to clearly illustrate the connection between brand activism and collective prospective remembering. Next, I will individually examine the Sprite, P&G, and McDonald's campaigns, using each campaign as an exemplar of the tensions within brand activism, collective prospective remembering, and the relationship between race and strategic communications outlined in the theoretical chapter. Finally, I will conclude my analytical chapter with a final discussion section, where I bring together the results of my analysis to argue that 2020 BLM brand activism mediates collective prospective remembering by negotiating a neoliberal future.

Analysis

Nike "For once, Don't Do It": The Branded Prospective Perspective

When examining the relationship between brand activism and collective prospective memory, arguably one of the most fundamental tasks is to identify how brands are embedding themselves into reminders of intended actions. Nike's "For once, Don't Do It" provides a clear example of this intersection by wrapping its reminders in the format of Nike's widely known slogan, drawing on authority from its existing brand identity, and presenting the Nike logo.

Don't Do It opens to a black background, a color choice that conveys seriousness (Ledin & Machin, 2018) and is maintained throughout the entirety of the advertisement, along with a small gray Nike logo in the lower righthand corner. To contribute to the somber tone, the ad is accompanied by slow piano music playing in minor chords. In the center of the black background is a white font bearing the words "For once", under which fades in "Don't Do It" (Appendix A, Figure 1; Nike, 2020). In choosing this language, Nike is immediately

acknowledging its subversion of its own slogan, “Just Do It,” an iconic feature of the Nike brand that appears in advertisements and on merchandise (Hutchins, 2013). With the word choice of “for once”, the commercial indicates that this message will be exceptional. It gives the appearance of decentering the brand by contradicting its established slogan, but actually roots the message of the advertisement in relation to its brand identity. The relationship is strengthened through repetition. “Don’t pretend” fades onto the middle of the screen, and almost immediately “there’s not a problem in America” appears next to it (Nike, 2020). This pattern replicates for the next five statements, which contain messages such as “Don’t accept innocent lives being taken from us” and “Don’t sit back and be silent” (Nike, 2020). The sequence of ‘don’t’ statements is didactic, mirroring the structure of the Judeo-Christian Ten Commandments.

In dictating a list of “don’ts,” Nike evokes a tone of authority. This authority is implicitly linked to Nike’s history of featuring Black athletes in its commercials. Nike gained credibility as a brand willing to speak out for racial injustice when it created the controversial Dream Crazy campaign starring Colin Kaepernick, a Black American football player fired from the National Football League for kneeling during the National Anthem in protest of racism. Sobande argues that Nike ads like Dream Crazy have been part of a larger trend for corporations to brand themselves as bravely woke (2019). Nike’s authoritative tone in Don’t Do It “speaks to how the image of a Black celebrity can be closely connected to forms of racial politics and activism, and how corporate brands draw on what may be perceived as authentic celebrity brands” (Sobande, 2019: 2736). Thus, in this ad, Nike is calling on the ‘cultural capital’ (Crockett, 2008) of its commercials featuring black athletes (and, consequently, the capital of the Black athletes themselves) to grant it authority for its commanding statements, as its reputation for taking risks by speaking out proceeds it. Furthermore, the list of “don’ts” functions as a collective to-don’t list, a set of commitments negotiated by Nike and presented to its consumers (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2013). The negotiation comes in Nike’s framing of the commitments in regard to the problem at hand, systemic racism, but also in regard to the current needs of Nike (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2013). In other words, Don’t Do It has two

purposes that Nike attempts to balance: to create a future where people are not racist and to create a future where people are inclined to purchase Nike products. Where Nike had made a bold and specific statement in *Dream Crazy, Don't Do It* employs vague language with its overall message being phrased in pre-political terms of encouraging consumers to not be apathetic in the face of racism (Manfredi-Sanchez, 2019). For example, "Don't make any more excuses" negotiates collective prospective remembering that could as easily apply to a spot about racial injustice as it could to a commercial about practicing hard on the basketball court (Nike, 2020). The final don't is "Don't think you can't be a part of the change" which fades into a positive, consumer-directed command of "be a part of the change" and then morphs into "Let's all be a part of the change," a sentiment that includes Nike in the collective prospective memory (Appendix A, Figure 2; Nike, 2020).

Once "Let's all be a part of the change" fades away, the Nike Swoosh logo appears in white (Appendix A, Figure 3; Nike, 2020). The swoosh sits in the center of the black screen for the final four seconds of the spot, the longest frame in the commercial. By presenting its logo immediately after the only positive collective intention in the spot, Nike explicitly situates its brand as part of the 'let's'. This pairing at once reminds consumers to fight racial injustice and that Nike is a company that reminds consumers to fight racial injustice.

Sprite "Dreams Realized": Collective Prospective Re-membering

Where *Don't Do It* clearly establishes the connection between brand activism and collective prospective remembering, Sprite's "Dreams Realized" campaign draws attention to brand activism's role in redefining the collective for the future. In doing so, it shows how brand activism can contest past conceptions of the collective and renegotiate imaginings of the future to include new groups as members (Szpunar & Szpunar, 2016).

This function of collective prospective re-membering is immediately explicit as the spot opens with a black and white photo of a billboard with a line of people standing beneath it (Appendix B, Figure 1). The billboard displays a painting of a smiling White nuclear family; they are cozily tucked into a car that is zipping down the highway. The father's hands are on the wheel, and

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the mother looks forward hopefully from the passenger seat. Behind them, the son and daughter grin in the backseat, and the dog peeks its head out the window, tongue wagging in the wind. Above the family, the billboard proclaims “The World’s Highest Standard of Living” in bold, black, all caps letters (Sprite, 2020). To their left, loopy white cursive declares “There’s no way like the American way” (Sprite, 2020).

Beneath the billboard, Black people stand in a cramped line, wearing coats while holding empty bags and buckets. Their expressions are neutral; most are people gazing towards the front of the line, and some look curiously around or at the camera. The contrast between the scenes is stark-- as an idealized White family, the symbol of the American way, drives hopefully forward in the vehicle of the future, Black people wait on their own two feet in a stagnant line for their turn. The commercial makes a series of abrupt, successively closer zoom-ins on the photo in time with urgent violin music, forcing the viewer to focus on its content (Appendix B, Figure 2). This 1937 photograph creates both a sense of distance from and continuity with the past, a combination that usually evokes nostalgia in advertising (Keightley & Pickering, 2012). However, the content of the photograph creates instant tension with any nostalgia, challenging the idea that the image portrays a past that should be remembered fondly. By beginning with and emphasizing this photo, *Dreams Realized* acknowledges America’s history of white supremacy in strategic communications (Shankar, 2019) and includes the lived experience of Black people to expand the exclusionary collective featured in advertisements.

Building on this tension, a Black male narrator’s voice says “The American Dream” as the scene shifts to footage shot from a car, an American flag flapping in the wind (Sprite, 2020). As the car footage films shots of Atlanta, Georgia, the narrator says, “It wasn’t made for everyone. It forgot one very important detail” (Sprite, 2020). The voice pauses, the music stops, and the screen goes black for emphasis. A picture of a protest appears on the screen, with a Black hand raised in a clenched fist in the foreground as the narrator says, “Black America” (Appendix B, Figure 3; Sprite, 2020). In this sequence, the narrator decisively states the spot’s interpretation of the opening image, specifically naming the omission of Black Americans from

the historic 'collective.' By pairing the protest and raised fist, a sign of Black Power (Stout, 2020), with the utterance of "Black America," *Dreams Realized* reinforces the integration of Black people into the collective American dream as a continually contested site of struggle.

The spot then begins a sequence of photos and short video clips of Black people, most of them young, going about their daily activities, protesting, or looking straight into the camera. The eye-level shots create a sense of equality between the subject and viewer, and the shots from slightly below give power to the Black subject (Jewitt & Oyama, 2004), reinforcing the equality and power that the advertisement demands (Appendix B, Figures 4 and 5). The increased representation of young people has both theoretical and strategic implications: youth are a "symbolic referent of the future" (Mackey, 2010: 172) and young adults as Sprite's target market (Sprite, 2017).

As these images appear, the narrator issues a new definition of the American dream, a definition that includes and centers Black America: "Black America's dream is the real American dream, because it means everyone has the chance to succeed" (Sprite, 2020). In this statement, *Dreams Realized* is taking on inclusive language to expand the collective that has access to living the American Dream. This is an inherently prospective process as the American Dream in particular represents aspirations for the future, as well as the commitment and work it takes to reach that future goal (Callahan, 2017). Furthermore, this reconstructs the existing discourse and collectives to imagine a new future of the American collective that is inclusive of Black people (Szpunar & Szpunar, 2016). As Sprite argues to redefine who is a part of the American Dream, it establishes itself as part of that dream. *Dreams Realized* does this directly by stating "Sprite is supporting the Black Lives Matter movement to ensure Black creators and artists continue to have their dreams realized" (Appendix B, Figure 6; Sprite, 2020). In this vague promise, *Dreams Realized* includes the consumer in a mission to support both BLM and the dreams of Black creatives by supporting Sprite. Thus, *Dreams Realized* demonstrates a redefinition of the collective that simultaneously reimagines the past and future of the US; in this re-membering, Black Americans (and Sprite) are included.

P&G “The Choice”: Strategic Remembering and Forgetting

By adopting the terminology of “remembering” as opposed to memory, this essay seeks to highlight the activity involved in remembering, which is a process of highlighting or privileging certain narratives within public memory and obscuring, and often consequently forgetting, others (Wertsch & Roediger, 2008). In P&G’s *The Choice*, the spot explicitly draws attention to the audience’s understood collective memories and knowledge of racism, implicitly evoking a more nuanced power relation between black men and white women. As *The Choice* represents these intersectional power dynamics, it positions P&G from the perspective of the black man and as a racial justice resource, thus obscuring its role and practices as a corporation. In doing this, *The Choice* exemplifies strategic forgetting by foregrounding that (white) audiences should remember to be anti-racist and use P&G as a resource to achieve that aim, but forget other crucial aspects of P&G or indeed BLM. *The Choice* highlights tensions that exist while hiding P&G’s complicity within those tensions.

The Choice opens with close up shots of highly saturated Black skin. The words “Where are we to go?” in bold white font and all capital letters appear in the righthand corner of the screen, accompanied by the chilling falsetto of Moses Sumney singing “Doomed” (Appendix C, Figure 1; P&G, 2020). A new patch of Black skin appears along with “How are we to respond when we are shown”; and then another with the words “over and over and over” appearing one by one in quick succession (P&G, 2020). The vocals pause as the shot switches to a close up on a Black man’s right eye and ear, parts of his cheek blending into the black background, where the words “That our lives do not matter?” appear (Appendix C, Figure 2; P&G, 2020). As the singing begins again, some words fade to leave “our lives matter” (P&G, 2020).

This preoccupation with skin is commonly seen in advertising, referred to as the epidermal schema, which reductively fixates on skin color as a form of identity and difference (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2018). Additionally, the mode of address is notable in this sequence, as the use of inclusive collective pronouns “we” and “our” frames the speaker as the black community, rather than as P&G, a corporation.

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A white flash transitions to a new shot, this time a close-up of a White back, on which a bold, black all caps font reads “Being white in America” (P&G, 2020). Shortly after, “is not needing” then “to state your life matters.” appears beneath, before each word disappears quickly and randomly (Appendix C, Figure 3; P&G, 2020) The shot stays on the back as, one-by-one, the words “And when your life matters, you have power” appear (P&G, 2020). As Moses Sumney sings “though you’re someone I can’t see,” the shot switches to a closeup video of a blue-green left eye opening (P&G, 2020). The mascara and skin with slight age lines indicate that the eye belongs to a white, middle-aged woman (Appendix C, Figure 4). The word “Now” appears beneath her eye, followed by “is the time to use it” (P&G, 2020). The woman closes her eye, and the shot switches to white skin, with black words appearing one after the other, urging viewers to take actions like “read” and “vote” (Appendix C, Figure 5; P&G, 2020). The camera almost imperceptibly zooms out from a new shot of white skin overlaid with “how you use your power is a choice” (P&G, 2020). The shot changes to a new section of white skin, which reflects a flash as the words “choose action over observation” appear with a punch one after the other one, then disappear to show “choose progress over perfection” (P&G, 2020).

The Choice sets up a clear juxtaposition between its first subject, a young black man, and its second, a middle-aged white woman with the changing color of font, the fixation on skin highlighting the difference in their skin tones, and the mode of address changing from ‘we’ to ‘you.’ In the context of June 2020, this pairing is an intertextual reference to the concept of the ‘Karen’, a white woman who uses her racial and often economic capital to complain about people of color. This meme was brought to the fore in late May when a video went viral of a white woman calling the police after a Black male birdwatcher asked her to put her dog on a leash (Elliot, 2020; Lang, 2020). The Choice acknowledges this power dynamic and challenges its white female customers to act differently.

While this power dynamic is certainly real, The Choice frames the participating in the BLM movement as a series of individual choices to be made by P&G’s white customers. None of the text, images, or music makes any references to the larger systemic concerns of racism that the Black Lives Matter protests seek to address, like policing (BLM’s 7 Demands, 2021). There are

nods to inequalities, but in these nods the inequalities are reduced to individual actions and choices. The name “The Choice” itself ignores that, in many situations, racism is not about choice, it is about biases so ingrained and systemic that they are the instinctual, hegemonic privileging of Whiteness (Lentin, 2016). The Choice encourages a prospective remembering that addresses its white audience with what (singular) “you” can do, thus strategically forgetting the complicated and often political work that the collective must remember to enact.

At the end of the advertisement, the music resolves and the background goes black, with white text saying “Start Here. PG.com/takeonrace” with a small blue P&G logo at the bottom of the screen for the final four seconds (Appendix C, Figure 6; P&G, 2020). In presenting P&G as an anti-racist advocate, the Choice encourages the forgetting of P&G business practices. Like Nike, P&G has a history of releasing advertisements that address racial injustice, such as *The Talk* in 2017 and *The Look* in 2019. However, in presenting narratives that abruptly address racial issues, P&G obscures its role in capitalizing on racism. Most notably, P&G has a skin lightening brand, a product that is often decried for having roots in colorism and colonialism that privileges proximity to Whiteness (Glenn, 2008). While other corporations like Johnson & Johnson have discontinued their skin lightening products, P&G has not (Caldwell, 2020). Therefore, in representing itself as a resource for information, it reconstructs the role of P&G, encouraging consumers to make ‘the choice’ to be individually less racist and buy P&G products. In doing so, P&G’s *The Choice* exemplifies that brand activism is a site of actively remembering, engaging in the push and pull of competing narratives to strategically reinforce the discourses and the sets of commitments that align with the goals of the brand.

McDonald’s “One of Us”: Corporate Commemoration

Like *The Choice*, McDonald’s “One of Us” campaign also takes on the “we” mode of address, but it differs in that its inclusion of itself is more self-aware, acknowledging the corporate role as an employer that engages with consumers. Through this perspective, *One of Us* focuses its activism on McDonald’s actions in the present, as well as memories from the past. While this may make the connection between the brand activism and collective prospective remembering more subtle, *One of Us* provides insight into how collective prospective remembering can be

an implied, affective result of explicit engagement with the past and the present. Specifically, *One of Us* shows that brand activism can mediate collective prospective remembering through collective commemoration, a theme acutely relevant to the case study of Black Lives Matter.

One of Us has no audio; the silence provides a disconcerting sense of emptiness for advertisements, which are usually designed to attract our attention through noise. Instead, the spot begins with silence, an audio technique that prompts contemplation and reflection (Olsen, 1994). The spot opens visually with a golden background, the color of the signature arches in McDonald's logo. One by one, names of Black victims of racist killings appear, starting with Trayvon Martin, the 17-year-old Black boy killed by George Zimmerman in 2012. As George Zimmerman's acquittal prompted the beginning of the Black Lives Matter movement, the list (Appendix D, Figure 1), which ends with George Floyd, acts as both a memorial and a chilling timeline of the BLM movement. The absence of sound reinforces the absence of the victims, giving the viewers space to generate and reflect on their emotional response to a list of murdered people.

Intertextually, these names represent highly mediatized deaths that remain in America's collective retrospective memory. For example, the police shooting of Michael Brown (listed) resulted in the Ferguson protests that dominated US media during the summer of 2014 (Smit, Heinrich, & Broersma, 2018). By choosing names that call to mind specific memories and narratives of injustice, *One of Us* shapes the narrative of the past that informs viewers' perspective of the future (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2013). As it displays the list of Black victims, the spot reminds viewers about just a few of many gross injustices that keep recurring. *One of Us* makes "an active attempt to ...maintain the issue on the public agenda" (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2013: 101) by presenting emotionally charged collective retrospective memories that facilitate collective prospective remembering.

As the spot continues, the list of names disappears, and a bright red font declares "he was one of us", "she was one of us", then "they were all one of us" (Appendix D, Figure 2; McDonalds, 2020). The switch in font color to red is jarring; red is a color that evokes a sense of urgency

and emergency, in addition to being the color of blood (Ledin & Machin, 2018). Notably, red is also a globally recognizable color in McDonalds' brand identity, and when it sits against the golden background, the red text generates branded associations to accompany the emotional associations. The red font is then used for emphasis throughout the rest of the spot in sentences like:

"We see them in our customers."

"It's why we stand for them and any other victims of systemic oppression and violence."

"Today we stand with Black communities across America."

"Which is why we're donating to the National Urban League and NAACP."

(McDonalds, 2020)

As indicated by the above statements and the name, *One of Us* focuses on the relationship between McDonalds and the Black communities in the US, whether that relationship is one of feeding them, hiring them, standing for/with them, or financially supporting them through donations. The language of the commercial is focuses on the collective in the past tense "was one of us" and the present tense "Today we stand" (McDonalds, 2020). Through this language, *One of Us* shows the desire to pursue "action in the near future to repair an existing situation that can still be fixed, and by that to symbolically repair past failures that haunt the collective consciousness" (Tenenboim-Weinblatt, 2013: 102). Notably, the group making the repairs is presented as 'we' and 'us.' In some phrases, like "we're donating," the collective is understood to mean McDonald's (McDonald's, 2020). However, these are presented after the emotive statements claiming the victims as 'one of us,' a framing that poignantly creates a relationship with the viewer. In doing so, *One of Us* blurs the lines of 'us', incorporating the audience into the grieving "McDonald's family" just as it incorporates the victims explicitly listed (Appendix D, Figure 3; McDonald's, 2020). By including viewers in a brand's grief and commemoration,

One of Us mediates collective prospective memory in a way that generates urgency, empathy, and brand association.

DISCUSSION

The above analysis and integrated discussion give a close reading of 2020 BLM brand activism video campaigns, demonstrating the semiotic techniques and ideological discourses that mediate collective prospective remembering. These analyses provide insight into broader themes and tensions in this mediation: the positioning of the brand in relation to the cause, the reimagining of the collective for the future, the strategic remembering of certain narratives and omission of others, and the in-corporation of collective commemoration. The following discussion will engage with these themes to argue that 2020 BLM brand activism mediates collective prospective remembering by imagining a neoliberal future where brands are incorporated into the social realm of the US. This happens on three levels, the rhetorical alignment of the brand and anti-racism, the ideological negotiation of the BLM movement to the brand, and the potential re-remembering of strategic communications' target audience in the US.

Rhetorical alignment of the brand to being anti-racist

On a surface level, 2020 BLM brand activism mediates collective prospective remembering by perpetuating the collective expectation for brands to speak out on racial injustice and for consumers to make purchasing decisions accordingly. As brands embrace the language of anti-racism in their strategic communications, they further integrate the neoliberal norm of selling and consuming "virtuously" (Banet-Weiser and Mukherjee, 2012: 11). This shapes an immediate prospective task of remembering to buy the product that aligns with one's values next time one is in the store, and it also builds in a long-term reminder to expect and urge brands to take a position of moral authority. For example, each of the advertisements examined ended on a brand logo, and in each advertisement the logo was the longest still shot.

Under neoliberal logic, this practice is common sense. The brands paid for the commercials, naturally they want to promote themselves to justify the cost of production or signal to consumers that this is something they believe in, which impacts their brand reputation. But what if the advertisements ended with books to read, activist websites to visit, the number of a legislator to call, or simply no logo? In problematizing this advertising trend, the transactionality of virtue under the neoliberal hegemony is brought to light. The logo at the end is a rhetorical commitment made by the brand that reinforces its authority on and participation in making America anti-racist. By communicating that the brands set this intention, however in/sincerely, the brands are reinforcing collective prospective tasks of committing to 'conscious' consumption. This promotes the future of the brand while reiterating the moral authority of brand activism itself, reminding consumers to expect and act on this neoliberal strategic communication.

The ideological negotiation of the Black Lives Matter movement to the brand

As brand activism takes on authority in the activist space, it mediates collective prospective memory by altering the discourse of the activism to appeal to its customer base and align with the neoliberal order. The case study of 2020 BLM is particularly apt for demonstrating these renegotiated ideologies, because Black Lives Matter, the eponymous group providing key organizing behind the larger social movement, is an anti-capitalist organization (Sultana, 2021). This resistant element of Black Lives Matter is strategically forgotten from all of the examined commercials, as are other calls for systemic change issued by both the BLM movement and the BLM organization. For example, Nike's passive construction of "do not accept innocent lives being taken from us" at once individualizes the issue to one of personal acceptance and sanitizes the structures of violence in the US that facilitated the 'taking' (Nike, 2020). Of the ads examined, Sprite's Dreams Realized was the only one to acknowledge police brutality, albeit through a brief flash of a sign in the background of a protest photo. Instead of meaningful emphasis on structural reform, focus was given to the actions of individual consumers (Nike and P&G) and the actions of the brand itself (Sprite and McDonalds). These commitments to action reimagine a BLM movement that is aligned with key structures of

neoliberalism, capitalism and private property rights, as policing in the US largely emerged from the trade of people treated as property and is criticized for prioritizing property over Black lives (Martin & Blain, 2020; Kelley, 2020). By forgetting the discourse of Black Lives Matter that clashes with neoliberal ideals, brand activism reconstructs the movement's ideology to generate a collective to-do list that is compatible with the continuation of capitalist practices.

Broader re-membering of strategic communications' audience

Furthermore, 2020 BLM brand activism mediates collective prospective memory by establishing tension with strategic communications' own tendency to cater to a white audience in the US. The White centrality of strategic communications in the United States is not only ethically rife (Shankar, 2019), but it represents a functional concern for strategic communications' future effectiveness in 2020's America and beyond. 2020 US Census data shows that, for the first time in its history, the number of Americans identifying as white went down, while over half of Americans under 18-years-old were identified as people of color (Bahrapour & Mellnik, 2021). In this landscape, brand activism addressing the Black Lives Matter movement problematizes the assumption of a target white audience in national advertising, while presenting an opportunity to redefine the target consumer in a way that will create continuity with its future intended audiences (Szpunar & Szpunar, 2016).

In Nike and P&G's commercials, the text is primarily addressed to a white audience, and they both set prospective tasks that assume a position of racial privilege and previous indifference. However, calling a white audience to action does not just speak to a white audience; it attempts to send a message of 'woke' awareness to audiences of color as well (Sobande, 2019). Sprite and McDonald's address a wider audience by focusing on expressing solidarity with Black Americans as a brand. While these examples by no means prove that White centrality is over in American strategic communications, their subject matter and approaches indicate an awareness of the need to reimagine the hegemonic assumption of the (white) consumer, if not out of conviction, then for long-term profitability. These re-memberings are neoliberal in nature, as they seek to redefine the American consumer, reinforcing the primacy of the

language of the market (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012). In speaking on the 2020 BLM movement, brand activism implicitly commits to collectively re-member strategic communications' audience beyond the white American consumer, thus broadening the market for the future. Whether this will remain a prospective intention or becomes a reality remains to be seen.

CONCLUSION

This research used multimodal critical discourse analysis to research the relationship between brand activism and collective prospective remembering in the case of the 2020 US Black Lives Matter movement. By conducting an in-depth analysis and discussion of four video campaigns, this dissertation was able to identify key themes in 2020 BLM brand activism's mediation of collective prospective remembering: embedding the brand into intentions of antiracist actions, re-membering the American collective, strategically foregrounding brand-compatible narratives to forget contradictory ones, and in-corporating collective commemoration. When considered together, this analysis demonstrates brand activism's perpetuation of the neoliberal order into the future, co-opting ideologies of resistance and expanding its audience to construct a shared vision of corporate involvement in an anti-racist (but still neoliberal) future.

While the scope of this project led me to localize my research within the US, future research on 2020 BLM brand activism could consider the presence or absence of brand activism with prospective messaging in markets within the global BLM movement, investigating how national norms influence the intentions constructed in strategic communications. As each of the brands in my sample has an international presence, this extension could provide a cross-cultural perspective on brand activism's mediation of collective prospective remembering. Furthermore, this dissertation bridges the theoretical gap to link brand activism and collective prospective remembering, and future research could expand upon this connection, exploring

how brand activism negotiates collective to-do lists regarding other systemic societal issues, like the climate crisis. This study demonstrates the discursive power of brand activism to construct collective intentions for building a new future; subsequently, this study shows the necessity of problematizing that power. As brand activism becomes ubiquitous, scholars must continually interrogate the collective commitments that brand activism negotiates and the power structures behind them.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Nike: "For Once, Don't Do It"

Video URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=drcO2V2m7lw>

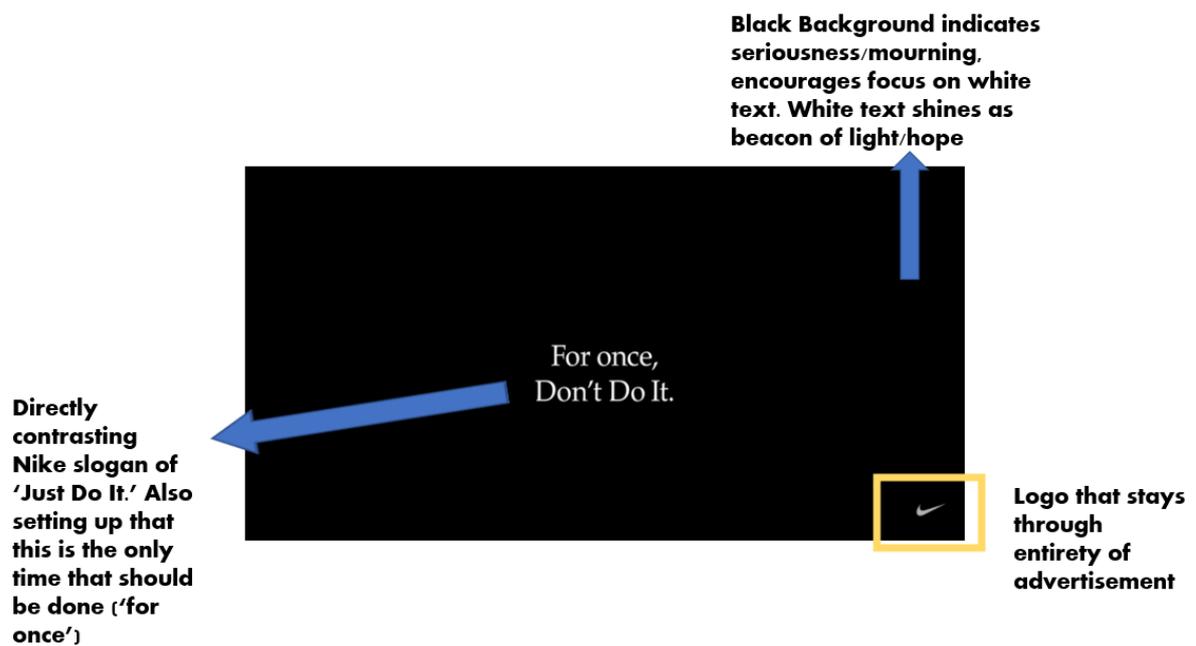


Figure 1 (annotated)



Figure 2.

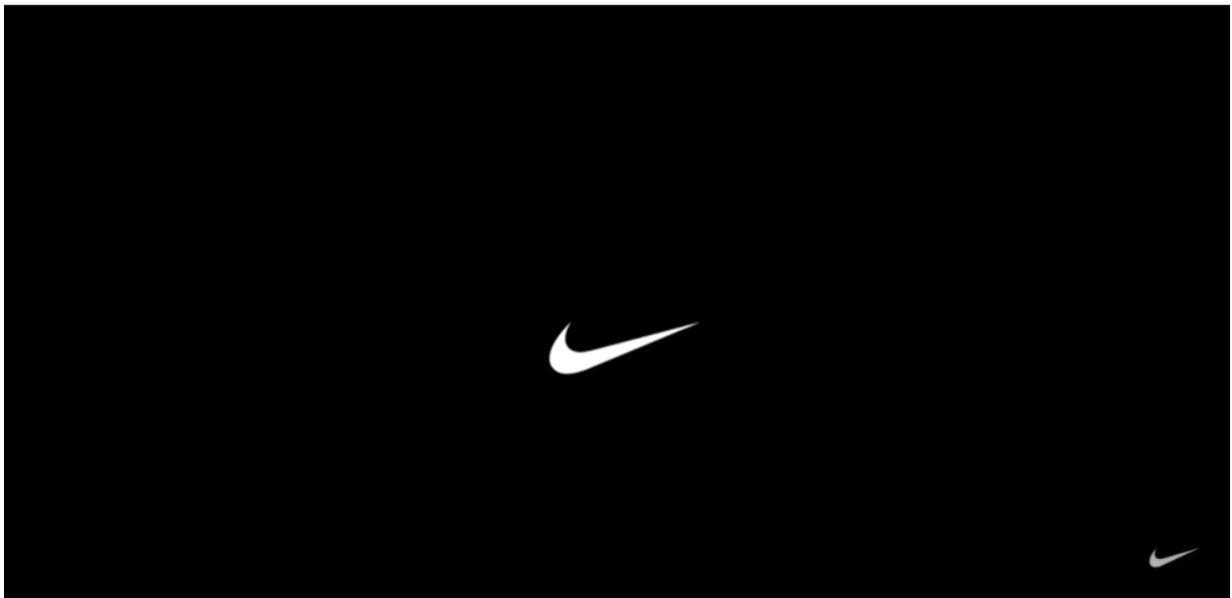


Figure 3

Appendix B

Sprite: "Dreams Realized"

Video URL: <https://adage.com/article/cmo-strategy/new-ad-sprite-says-american-dream-forgot-about-black-america/2264631> (video embedded in article)



Figure 1. (annotated)



Figure 2

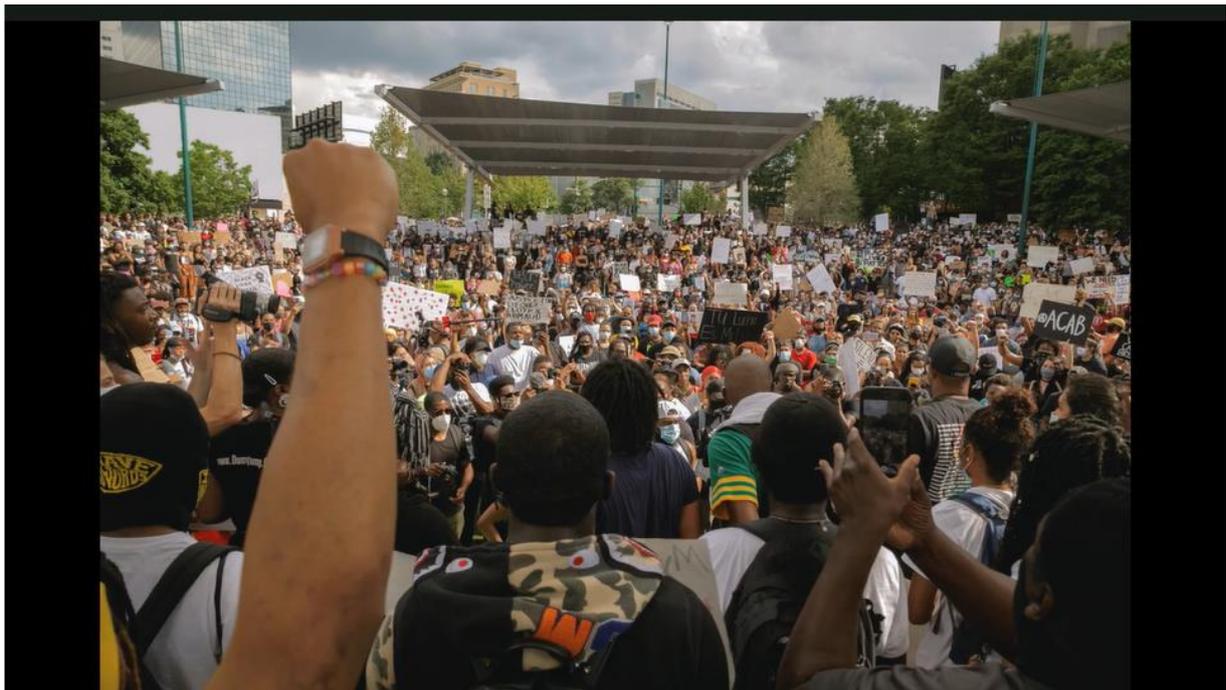


Figure 3

Branding for New Futures

Kelly M. Smith



Figure 4



Figure 5



Sprite is supporting the Black Lives Matter movement to ensure Black creators and artists continue to have their dreams realized.

Figure 6

Appendix C

P&G: "The Choice"

Video URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7bnS8R994I>



Figure 1

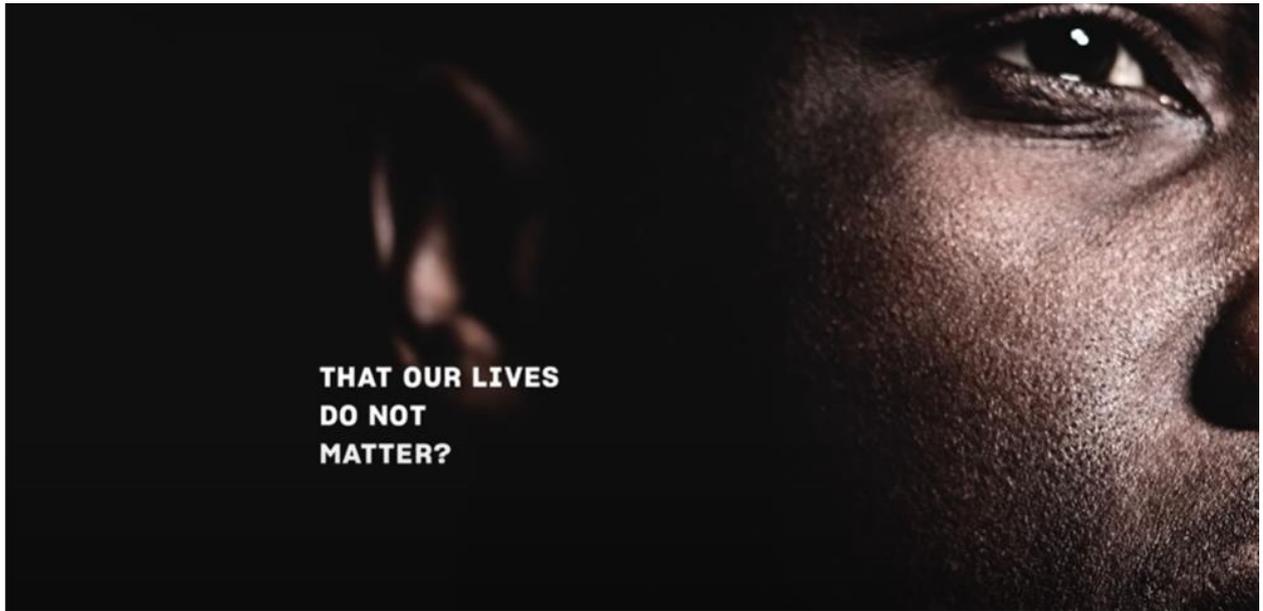


Figure 2

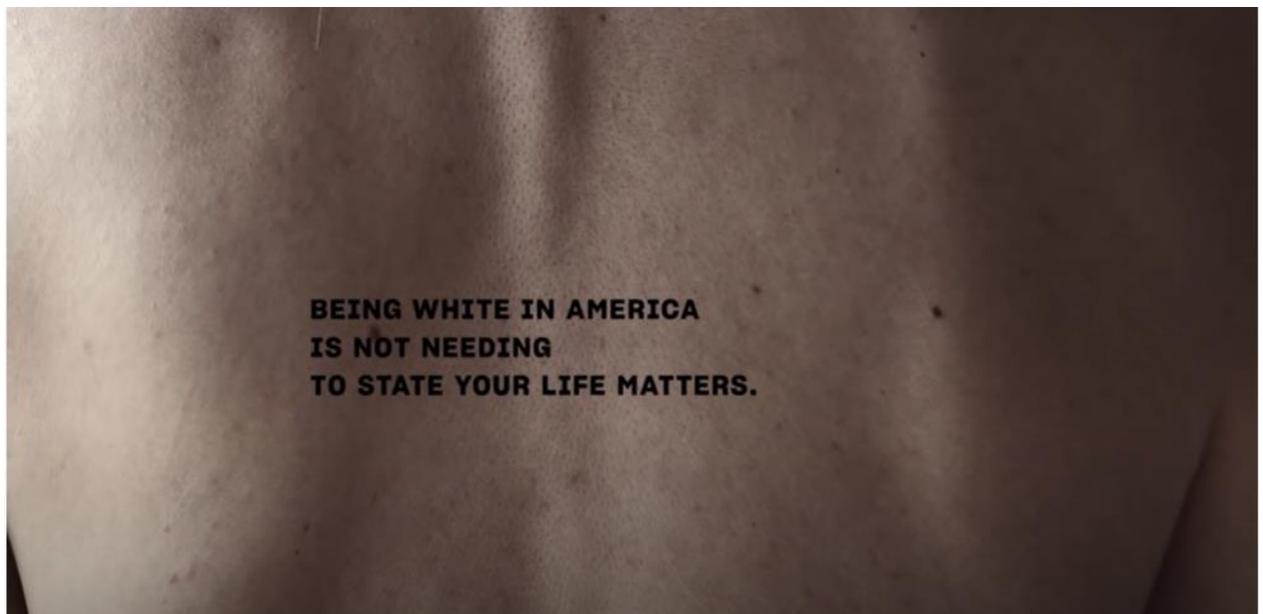


Figure 3

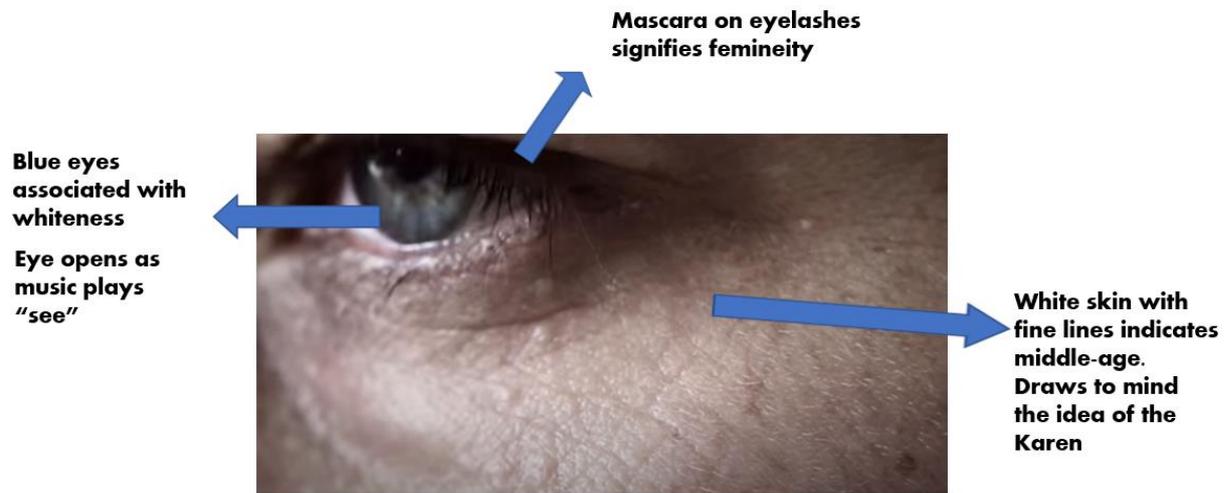


Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

Appendix D

McDonalds: "One of Us"

Video URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3HaC5D_TaEo

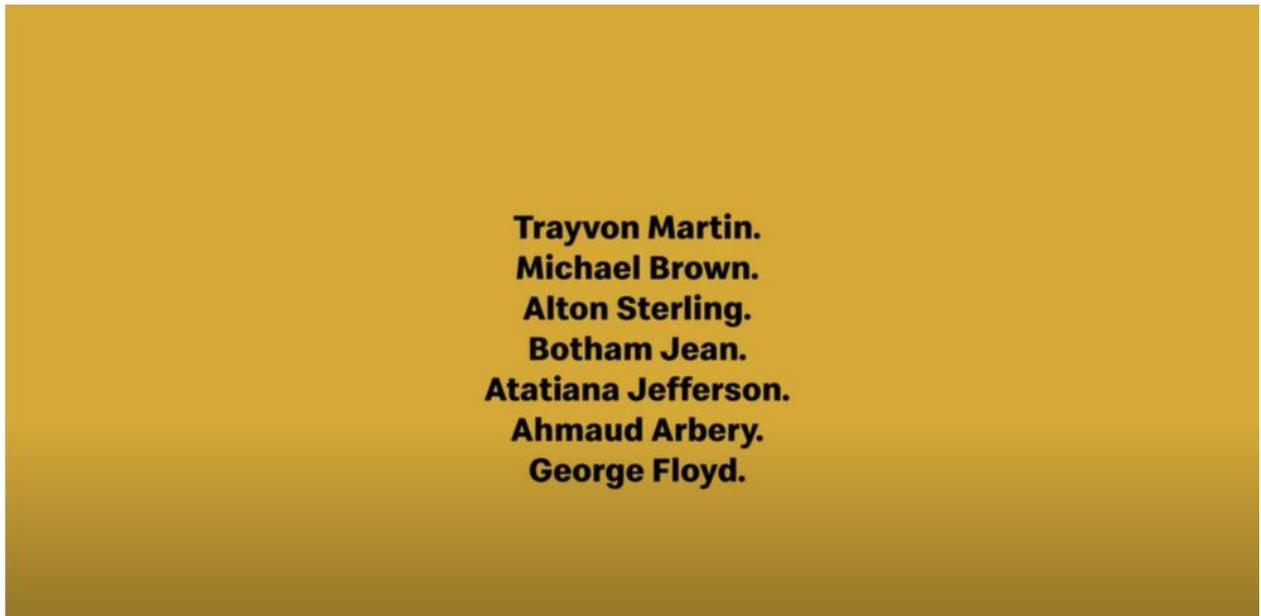


Figure 1

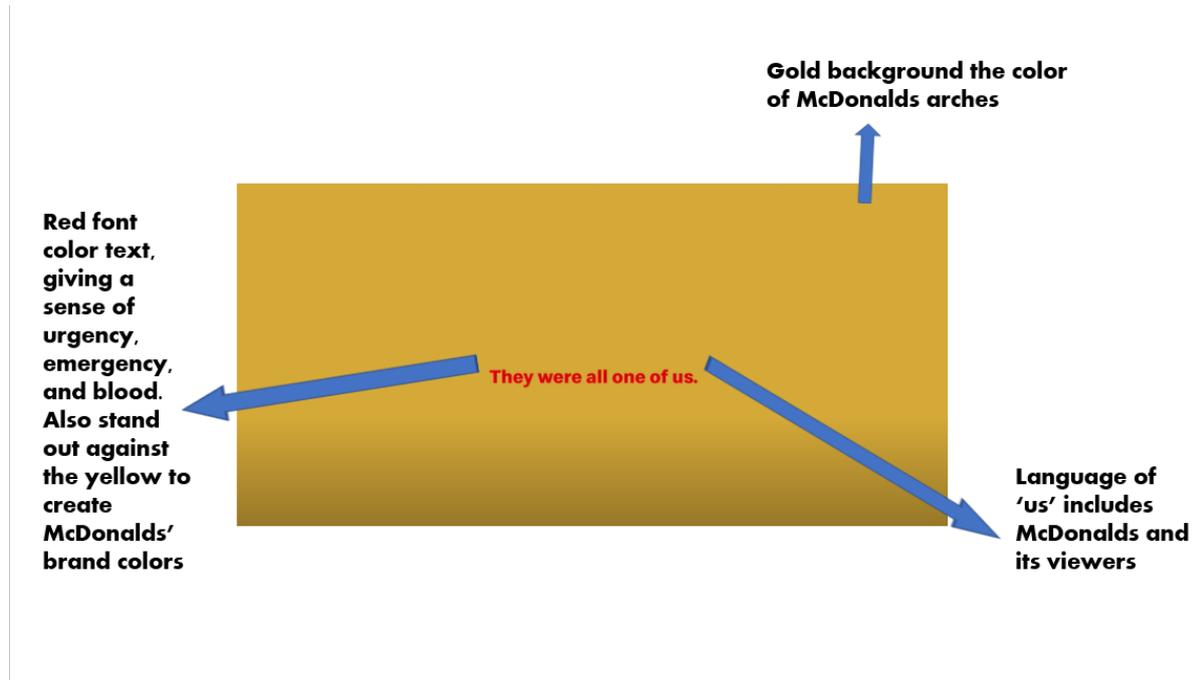


Figure 2 (annotated)



Figure 3

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