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A Historical Analysis of Brand Activism and its Impact on Company Success

An Honors College Project Presented to
the Faculty of the Undergraduate
College of Business
James Madison University

by Katy Sharon

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Accepted by the faculty of the Marketing Department, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

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Table of Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	3
<i>Abstract</i>	4
<i>Introduction</i>	5
<i>Literature Review</i>	7
<i>Gay Marriage</i>	7
<i>Gun Control</i>	9
<i>Black Lives Matter</i>	10
<i>COVID-19</i>	12
<i>Conclusion</i>	13
<i>Topic Summary</i>	16
<i>Gay Marriage</i>	16
<i>Gun Control</i>	17
<i>Black Lives Matter</i>	19
<i>COVID-19</i>	20
<i>Analysis</i>	22
<i>Gay Marriage</i>	22
Chick-fil-a	22
Apple	23
<i>Gun Control</i>	24
Dick's Sporting Goods	24
Home Depot and Lowes	25
<i>Black Lives Matter</i>	26
Ben and Jerry's.....	26
Facebook and L'Oréal Paris	28
<i>COVID-19</i>	29
United Airlines.....	29
In-N-Out Burger	31
<i>Bibliography</i>	36

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Abstract

Corporate activism is a growing area of study that has become more important as the political climate becomes increasingly divided. This project evaluates how corporate activism affects company success. Four significant political events were chosen and within each event two to three companies with varying responses were analyzed to determine best practices for organizations looking to engage in corporate activism in the future. Going forward, companies should deliberate with employees and upper-level management to determine the best course of action, respond to the event in a timely manner, acknowledge previous company actions that may contradict its current position, and lastly, avoid staying completely silent on the matter. This study highlights that how a brand responds to social and political change is a crucial factor in deciding whether to give them business, whether to become or remain an employee, and whether to invest in them.

Introduction

It is no secret that the United States' political climate has grown increasingly divided in recent years, and there appears to be no sign of reconciliation or bipartisanship on the horizon. The polarization of politics in the United States, and across the world for that matter, has forced people to take a side. However, it is not just individuals that have to declare their allegiance and share their views on contentious cultural issues and other topics, but business entities have also been forced to get involved.

Basic economics emphasize that consumers are what drive the economy. If people are not purchasing goods and services, companies lose money and then lay off workers because they cannot afford the expense. In turn, workers laid off from jobs decrease their spending, creating a vicious cycle. Many factors determine why consumers shop where they do and what brands they prefer; however, in today's age, a brand's stance on political and social issues, particularly a retail brand's stance, has become increasingly important to consumers and other stakeholders, including investors and employees. According to a study conducted by Resonate—a "Consumer Intelligence Marketing" firm located in Northern Virginia—60 percent of consumers have admitted to taking some form of positive or negative action in response to a brand's activities on social and political issues (Resonate, 2020).

Brand activism can be defined as when a business attempts to promote or prevent political or societal change through public statements, financial support, and other activities that identify the brand with a particular issue that a company is seeking to influence. One company that has famously let its views known is Nike. In 2018, Nike released an advertisement on its 30th anniversary featuring Colin Kaepernick, a controversial former National Football League (NFL) quarterback, who kneeled during the National Anthem in protest of police brutality against Black

Americans (Abad-Santos, 2018). Because of the ad, thousands of consumers flocked to Nike in support of its bold pro-Black Lives Matter (BLM) stance. At the same time, many other Americans took to social media and pledged to boycott the brand.

Although Nike took a significant risk building a campaign around Kaepernick, the company saw a \$6 billion increase in its overall market value shortly after the ad was released, obviously pleasing investors as well as consumers (Abad-Santos, 2018). While other factors could have contributed to this surge, Nike has attributed most of that success to the Kaepernick campaign (Youn, 2018).

As political tensions rise across the US (United States), company opinions on current events have become increasingly important in today's business world. This is demonstrated through another study where 73 percent of United States consumers surveyed believed brands should take a stand on issues that reflect core company values (Resonate, 2020). To better understand the effect of brand activism, the purpose of this project is to do a historical analysis of political and social statements released by companies on certain highly visible issues to identify which approaches were “successful,” as measured in numerous ways, to develop best practices for future company statements.

The following research summarizes the literature surrounding brand activism and the various social and political topics analyzed, and it ends with an attempt to summarize the relationships between and among the topics. The issues examined comprise gay marriage, gun control, the BLM movement in 2020, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic. The specifics of each topic are explained in further detail in the topic summary section of this paper. Finally, this paper analyzes the issues and the responses from key business entities to answer the research question: *How does brand activism impact company success?*

Literature Review

The following review has been organized to better understand corporate activism literature and its historic effects on companies. The accumulation of past research points to the relationship between corporate activism and company success.

Gay Marriage

A Washington Post article from 2015 examined why companies speak out about gay marriage (Bogage, 2015). The article highlighted various companies that changed their logo, created products, and expressed support for passing the landmark Supreme Court case that legalized gay marriage, *Obergefell v Hodges*, while also acknowledging the potential backlash from conservatives. For example, Southwest Airlines' tweet "#SouthwestHeart beats for love #marriageequality #lovewins" provoked criticism from the American Renewal Project (ARP), a conservative Christian evangelical organization. David Lane, the founder of ARP, responded, "if Southwest Airlines wants to get embroiled in the cultural battle over same-sex marriage—and alienate 50 percent or so of your customers—this tweet is an effective way to do that." Despite the negative response from conservatives and right-leaning corporations, the Post says that "if businesses don't say something, consumers—especially millennials—are likely to walk away" (Bogage, 2015). Further, by staying silent, companies are more likely to land themselves in the "doghouse" with younger consumers who are looking for businesses to be corporate citizens and "not just salesmen" (Bogage, 2015).

A few notoriously neutral businesses also supported gay marriage, making it seem as though marriage equality was not an issue pushed solely by left-leaning companies (Lehr, 2015). Lehr identified over 400 companies that supported marriage equality before the *Obergefell v Hodges* decision. This list included such major corporations as Procter and Gamble and General

Electric (GE), two mainstream corporations that do not typically identify with either side of the political aisle (Lehr, 2015). This indicates that companies taking a political or social stand may not view their identification with an issue as getting involved in politics, but instead, they are speaking on a matter of fundamental human rights that transcends politics.

An article written by Alex Dimitrief, former GE General Counsel, identifies three guidelines for businesses getting involved in corporate activism. These guidelines were developed in response to GE's statements on gay marriage in 2015, responses that Dimitrief himself primarily influenced. The first tip is for businesses to pick specific causes. Corporate activism can be expensive, so the more substantial the "nexus between an issue and a company's mission, the stronger the case for engagement" (Dimitrief, 2020). He also suggests that companies utilize "robust processes," meaning it is crucial to ensure a diverse group of senior decision-makers and independent directors. Independent directors provide a third-party perspective on the issue to ensure that potentially contentious decisions, such as taking a side on gay marriage, are not being made in an "echo chamber" (Dimitrief, 2020). Lastly, Dimitrief warns companies to develop thick skin. It is impossible to please everyone when making a statement, therefore recognizing the potential backlash, and sticking to the plan is essential.

Even though *Obergefell v Hodges* passed in 2015, the ruling still faces considerable criticism. United States Supreme Court Justices Clarence Thomas and Samuel Alito have made it clear that they hope to take advantage of the current six to three conservative majority on the Court to overturn *Obergefell*. (Buchert, 2020). As a result, another wave of corporate activism on gay marriage is likely on the horizon, and "there is far more talk about the reward [of speaking out] than the risk" (Phillip, 2012).

Gun Control

An article from Triple Pundit, a business news website, highlights Dick's Sporting Goods' response to the mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in 2018. The 19-year-old shooter who killed 17 students owned a gun bought from Dick's years prior. Even though the gun bought from Dick's Sporting Goods was not the weapon used in the massacre, Dick's used the gun control momentum that resulted from the shooting to initiate policy changes, including no longer selling assault rifles or to buyers under the age of 21 (Casey, 2018). Dick's expected to receive heavy criticism for these changes, but the company received an "outpouring of support" from the public (Casey, 2018).

The Triple Pundit article also identifies two factors that make the Parkland shooting different from others: the Parkland survivors themselves and the corporate social responsibility (CSR) movement. According to Triple Pundit, the CSR movement has "shed the perception that it is simply a "feel good" public relations exercise," and that responsiveness to social concerns is a good indicator of various other company factors (Casey, 2018). More specifically, attention to social concerns can translate to sound management, value, and profitability of a company.

A study conducted by Gifford's—an organization dedicated to ending gun violence—found that Americans "overwhelmingly believe companies have the power and responsibility to influence social change." The study also said that gun control is one of only a few issues Americans care deeply about and are ten times more likely to buy because "a company committed to reducing gun violence than they are to boycott because of it" (Gifford's).

More generally, however, Gifford's came out with two significant statistics on corporate activism. Eight in 10 people believe companies should address critical issues facing society, and

“nine in 10 people think companies should have a set of core values built into their business models” (Gifford’s).

Further, in 2019, executives from 145 companies wrote a letter asking Congress to act on gun safety (Lucas, 2019). A few of those included in the strongly worded statement were Uber, Levi Strauss, Gap, Lyft, and Dick’s. John Feinblatt, President of Everytown for Gun Safety, applauded the letter and emphasized the use of corporate America’s influence to pass common-sense gun safety legislation. Feinblatt went on to say that the “experts on America’s consumers are speaking, and our elected officials should listen” (Valinsky, 2019).

Unsurprisingly, although the letter received support from Democrats, it received backlash from Republicans (Corkery, 2019). But when it comes to the public’s response, corporate activism can be good for business, at least it has been for Levi Strauss (Casey, 2018). The company’s robust performance in recent years “dovetails” their aggressive CSR policy launched in 2011 because, according to Levi’s CEO, “doing nothing, is no longer an option,” despite it being unpopular with some (Casey, 2018).

Black Lives Matter

The Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 encouraged corporate activism in numerous ways. Not only did businesses speak out in support of the campaign, but BLM organizers also created hashtags such as #BuyBlack, #CurbYourConsumerism, and #BuildBlackCommunity to encourage the support of Black-owned businesses and entrepreneurs (Johnson, 2021).

An article from the New York Times states that American businesses often avoid politicizing their advertisements, but after Floyd’s death, a wide range of companies took a stance. A notable statement from Netflix said, “to be silent is to be complicit. Black Lives Matter. We have a platform, and we have a duty to our black members, employees, creators, and

talent to speak up” (Hsu, 2020). Americus Reed, a marketing professor at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, said that when companies speak out on social issues, it is often a "calculated decision." However, by aligning corporate values with customer beliefs, “companies are hoping to build a sense of loyalty and a deeper sense of personal connection” with customers (Hsu, 2020). Reed continues to discuss the increase in pressure executives feel to take a stand. Consumers want to know where a company lies on specific issues, and picking a side allows an organization to differentiate itself (Hsu, 2020). However, a Washington Post article argued that companies that speak out in support of the BLM movement will face heightened scrutiny because of the issue's visibility (McGregor, 2020).

Companies can also make a statement by not saying anything at all. In other words, silence can be perceived as agreement or consent. An article from the Washington Post states that choosing to remain neutral is "contributing to the problem of racism” (McGregor, 2020). Anthony Johndrow, a corporate reputation advisor from New York, added that “silence is not an option” for companies (McGregor, 2020). A survey from Marketing Drive contradicts Johndrow’s statement, however. According to the article, only six percent of Americans would stop buying from a brand that remains silent on issues (Williams, 2020).

An article on the website of WJLA/ABC 7, a local Washington, D.C. television station, reported that one in five consumers stopped patronizing a business because it took a stand in support of or against BLM (Bernstein, 2020). A survey from Pew Research Center indicates that 52 percent of Americans believe it is either “somewhat or very important for United States companies to address political and social issues” (Pew Research Center, 2020). 71 percent of those respondents identified as Democrats, and only 31 percent considered themselves Republicans or right-leaning (Pew Research Center, 2020).

According to Reuters, making a statement is not always enough (Martin, 2020). Sometimes being outspoken can reveal a gap between the company's words and actions. In summary, "declaring support for popular movements is not enough if companies have not internalized the changes being demanded" (Martin, 2020). When it comes to the future of corporate activism, Reuters recommends that companies develop a strategy for engagement because separating business from social activity can cause "unintended and adverse consequences for a company's reputation, trust ratings, and share price" (Martin, 2020).

COVID-19

A CSR expert, Susan McPherson, said that the outrage around racial injustice, environmental concerns, and COVID-19 had forced business executives to re-evaluate their company's stance on corporate purpose (McEvoy, 2021). Earlier this year, Carhartt came under fire from conservatives after the company mandated COVID-19 vaccines for its employees (BBC, 2022). Carhartt recently released a company-wide statement saying, "an unvaccinated workforce is both a people and business risk that our company is unwilling to take" (BBC, 2022). The entire message eventually circulated over social media, and prominent conservatives weighed in and called for a strict brand boycott. In a Gallup survey, 55 percent of US workers supported vaccination requirements at work, while "more than a third were strongly opposed" (BBC, 2022).

On the other hand, Starbucks faced considerable backlash after reversing its vaccination requirement. The hashtag #BoycottStarbucks started circulating and eventually became one of the top trending topics on Twitter (Suciu, 2022). Similarly, after mass flight cancellations, Southwest Airlines was scrutinized due to an "internal demonstration" against the organization's vaccine mandate (McEvoy, 2021). Congressional Republicans responded harshly to the incident

and vowed to shut Southwest down through boycotts as part of their “fight for freedom” (McEvoy, 2021).

In some cases, individuals “violently retaliated against workers over mask mandates” (Akhtar et al., 2021). In June of 2021, a customer shot and killed a cashier after being asked to wear a mask. An IKEA employee even said that no one wants mask mandates for customers because it makes people "irrationally angry" and "awful to deal with" (Akhtar et al., 2021).

Social media pundit Scott Steinberg says the "power of the pocketbook speaks volumes," and people are becoming "more vocal than ever, especially when it relates to issues around COVID-19" (Suciu, 2022).

Conclusion

The literature review suggests patterns between corporate activism and the success of a business. Most of the evidence presented clarifies that consumers care about what companies have to say on social and political issues. However, the question that remains is how much of an organization's statements can divide its customer base, offend its employees, and put off investors. Numerous experts in corporate activism recommend that companies only take a stand on issues that align with the organization's mission.

This paper agrees that a company should try to align its corporate activism with its overall mission, but it does not agree that such alignment is the only relevant factor. In addition, companies should consider other factors such as:

- The demographics of its customer and client base;
- The characteristics of its workforce;
- The fit of the issue within the company’s overall marketing strategies;
- The strength of a company’s brand loyalty generally;

- The perceived authenticity of the message with the company's past comments on the issues and its consistency with its involvement with similar cultural and social issues; and
- Whether saying nothing will be interpreted as opposition to an issue.

As research has suggested, corporate activism has become a more significant part of Americans' lives, and businesses and other organizations are expected to get involved for better or worse. A significant challenge for any company is trying to measure the success (or damage) caused by a particular political statement or campaign. Of course, there are ways to quantify the effect of a statement or association with a cause, for example, by comparing sales and stock values immediately before and after a political activity. But, corporate activism seems less about the immediate business consequences of aligning (or not) with an issue, and more about helping to identify a brand with the interests and passions of a company's customers and employees in particular and to strengthen (or not damage) a brand or a company's reputation, both typically built over a long period of time. Measuring such qualitative success can be done with surveys, focus groups, polling, online engagement, etc., but in the end, a company's choice of issues should reflect its core values and business ethics, rather than turn on a calculated financial decision based on an immediate business opportunity.

Description of Methodology

To narrow the scope of this study, company responses to four controversial social issues and movements in the last ten years will be analyzed. These influential topics include gay marriage, gun control, the BLM movement, and the COVID-19 pandemic. To prevent any personal political bias in the analysis, companies with differing responses on each topic will be

analyzed to ensure a fair assessment: one statement with a more positive outlook on the issue and the other with a more negative outlook.

The company responses analyzed come from a variety of mediums. Many share their opinions over social media, others draft press releases, and some even dedicate areas of their websites to specific causes. On the other side of the spectrum, companies may not make a statement at all, but instead, they let their actions, or a lack of a written response, reflect their opinions.

To determine whether a company was “successful” or not after highlighting its views, four different questions will be answered: (i) what happened to a company’s sales shortly after releasing a statement; (ii) was there any effect on the value of the company’s stock; (iii) what was the public's general response over social media (Tweets, Instagram, and Facebook posts); and (iv) what else did the company do to further promote or prevent change on the topic? If the company saw an uptick in sales or an increase in its share price within a month of releasing a statement, that is a good indicator that its statement was successful.

The various companies analyzed were chosen based on the publicity of their actions and overall public reaction. Regarding gay marriage, Chick-fil-A and Apple’s responses will be reviewed -- Chick-fil-A with the more "conservative" view, and Apple with the "liberal" stance. Dick Sporting Goods, Home Depot, and Lowes will be analyzed for gun control, with Dick’s being more responsive to gun control and Home Depot and Lowes indicating resistance. Ben and Jerry's will be looked at for its positive response to the BLM movement, while Facebook and L'Oréal Paris will be analyzed for their delayed and contradictory responses. Lastly, COVID-19 will be looked at through United Airlines’ and In-N-Out Burger's responses to the pandemic, mask mandates, and vaccination requirements.

Topic Summary

This section is intended to summarize the four topics analyzed in this study to provide background and help with the overall understanding of the findings.

Gay Marriage

Same-sex marriage became a political issue in the 1970s, and since then, people worldwide have fought for equality. While gay marriage was legalized in 2015 in the Supreme Court case *Obergefell v Hodges*, the track leading up to the landmark decision was full of challenges.

The road to *Obergefell* began in 1972 when a same-sex couple's application for a marriage license was rejected. The case eventually went to the Supreme Court, and *Baker v Nelson* was dismissed "for want of a substantial question" (Wolf, 2015).

In May of 1993, the Hawaii Supreme Court ruled that "denying marriage to same-sex couples" violated the Equal Protection Clause of the state's constitution (Wolf, 2015). Several years later, a Hawaiian judge upheld the right of same-sex couples to marry. Still, the ruling was eventually reversed in 1988 when Hawaiian voters approved a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage (Wolf, 2015). By 2006, 18 states had passed amendments prohibiting same-sex marriage.

In 2008, California voters approved Proposition Eight, prohibiting gays and lesbians from marrying. Proposition Eight did not end there, however. Two years later, the proposition was declared unconstitutional by a federal district court judge in Northern California. After another contentious year, a Court of Appeals upheld the lower court's decision and declared Proposition Eight unconstitutional.

Around the same time across the country, a New York federal district court judge ruled against the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). This ruling was eventually upheld by the Second Circuit Court of Appeals months later. In March of 2013, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in *Hollingsworth v Perry*—the challenge to Proposition Eight—and the *United States v Windsor*, the challenge to DOMA (Wolf, 2015). On the first case, the Court left the district court's 2010 ruling in place invalidating Proposition Eight and allowed, after further litigation, gay marriages to proceed. On DOMA, the Court found Section 3 of the Act, which defined marriage and spouse as excluding same-sex partners, to be unconstitutional (Wolf, 2015).

Between January 2014 and July 2014, 17 states repealed their respective same-sex marriage bans. All these actions were appealed and taken back to court; however, the Supreme Court refused to hear appeals from Utah, Oklahoma, Virginia, Indiana, and Wisconsin. In 2015, the Supreme Court began hearing arguments for *Obergefell v Hodges*, a "group of six consolidated cases challenging same-sex marriage bans in Ohio, Michigan, Tennessee and Kentucky" (Wolf, 2015). On June 26, 2015, the Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage across the country, and individuals and corporations responded accordingly.

Gun Control

The topic of gun control traces back to 1791 when the Bill of Rights was added to the constitution and the second amendment gave Americans the right to bear arms. It was not until 1934 that the first piece of national gun control legislation was passed as part of Franklin Roosevelt's "New Deal for Crime." The National Firearms Act (NFA) imposed a \$200 tax on the manufacturing, transporting, and selling of specific firearms (Gray, 2018). In 1939, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in *United States v Miller* and upheld the NFA, stating that a short-

barrel shotgun does not fall within the second amendment and therefore there is no reason for individuals to "bear such an instrument" (Gray, 2018).

Many years later, in 1993, the Brady Handgun Violence Protection Act was passed after White House Press Secretary James Brady was shot during an attempted assassination on then President, Ronald Reagan (Gray, 2018). Even though Brady survived, he suffered significant injury and was permanently disabled following the event. As a result of the shooting, the Brady Act required background checks before purchasing a gun from a licensed dealer, manufacturer or importer and established the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS). One of the most visible pieces of legislation often still discussed today was the Violent Crime Control, and Law Enforcement Act signed into law by President Bill Clinton. This legislation banned all assault weapons, but only stayed in effect until 2004 (Gray, 2018).

Despite various legislation passed over the years, mass shootings continue around the country. From Columbine High School to Virginia Tech to Sandy Hook Elementary to Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School to a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, the list goes on and on. While no one disagrees that mass shootings are tragedies, the political and legal responses to these events have been hotly debated at all levels of government. Democrats push for universal background checks, renewing the ban on assault weapons, mandatory child safety locks, photo identification when purchasing a gun, and compulsory gun safety checks (Gray, 2018). Republicans argue that the right to bear arms is essential in the United States, and any legislation restricting gun usage threatens, indeed violates, their second amendment rights (Gray, 2018).

Most of the company responses analyzed in this paper relate to the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School (MSD) shooting in 2018. Numerous news outlets reported that the students of MSD "changed the gun debate" (Cottle, 2018). More specifically, they started the

#NeverAgain movement, traveled around the country pleading lawmakers to pass gun reform, organized national school walkouts, and even planned the March for our Lives in various cities across the country (Andone, 2018). The Atlantic magazine even mentions in an article "got a few hours to kill? Just Google *Parkland* and *different* for an avalanche of news commentary" (Cottle, 2018). Not only did lawmakers and news outlets notice the change in momentum in the debate over gun control, but corporations did too.

Black Lives Matter

The Black Lives Matter movement was founded in 2013 after George Zimmerman, the man who killed Trayvon Martin—a 17-year-old Black man—was acquitted of all criminal charges (Gottbrath, 2020). Although BLM remained visible throughout the next few years, the movement peaked in 2020 after the deaths of three Black individuals: George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmad Arbery (Altman, 2020).

George Floyd died on May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Minneapolis police officers arrested Floyd after he allegedly used a counterfeit \$20 bill in a local store (Dungca et al., 2020). After the store owner called the police on Floyd, Floyd was then handcuffed and placed into the back of a police SUV. Floyd, claiming he was claustrophobic, was taken out of the car and pinned down on the ground with Officer Derek Chauvin's knee on Floyd's neck. Floyd was repeatedly heard in videos taken by bystanders saying, "I can't breathe." Chauvin's knee remained on Floyd's neck for approximately nine minutes until Floyd went unconscious (Dungca et al., 2020). Chauvin was later charged with second-degree murder, convicted, and sentenced to 22.5 years in prison (Levenson, 2021).

Breonna Taylor and her boyfriend Kenneth Walker were in bed when Louisville police raided their apartment shortly after midnight. Her boyfriend, thinking it was an intruder, shot

officer Sergeant Mattingly, striking him in the thigh. In response, the police shot Breonna Taylor five times (Dungca et al., 2020). One officer, who has since been fired, blindly shot ten rounds into the apartment. The officers involved were acquitted of all charges (Killough et al., 2021).

Ahmad Arbery was killed while out jogging in a Georgia residential neighborhood. From his front yard, Gregory McMichael saw Arbery run by and thought he looked like a man suspected of several local break-ins (Dungca et al., 2020). Gregory Michael and his son, Travis McMichael, then got in their car with a shotgun and a handgun and tracked Arbery down while he was running. The men unsuccessfully attempted to cut Arbery off and eventually got out of the car and shot and killed Arbery (Dungca et al., 2020). The McMichaels believed they were making a "citizen's arrest," however that argument did not hold in court (Dungca et al., 2020). The three men involved in Arbery's murder—the McMichaels and their neighbor William Bryan—were sentenced to life in prison (CNN, 2022).

Floyd's death was the initial spark for the BLM protests in 2020. Even though Ahmad Arbery and Breonna Taylor were killed months before the peak of the BLM movement, their cases became more prominent as race relations became the center of attention after Floyd's death.

COVID-19

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic, and just two days later, President Donald Trump announced a nationwide emergency. Soon after, the world essentially shut down -- countries sealed their borders, professional sports leagues canceled their seasons, schools closed, and employees were told to stay home. Forty-three states issued stay-at-home orders in March and April, while seven states—Arkansas, Iowa, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming—did not (Ballotpedia, 2021). The next three months included "phased reopenings" and attempts at "flattening the curve" (Katella,

2021). Finally, in December of 2020, the first American outside of a clinical trial received the first vaccine.

Today, and for most of 2021, the constitutionality of vaccine mandates has remained a prominent issue related to COVID-19. In October 2021, President Biden announced a vaccine mandate for larger businesses and health care workers, but the Supreme Court struck down the employer mandate in early January 2022, while allowing the separate mandate for health care workers to remain in force (Kimball, 2021).

Masks have been another crucial point of contention over the last few years, despite public health experts encouraging their use. A study in 15 states and the District of Columbia found that masks may have prevented "as many as 230,000 to 450,000 cases of COVID," yet people continue to challenge their effectiveness (North, 2020).

According to Vox, masks were politicized from the pandemic's start (North, 2020). One reason is that President Trump routinely went out in public without a mask and often said refusing to wear a mask was the "tough or strong thing to do" (North, 2020). Additionally, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) initially said masks were not essential and initially discouraged their use to avoid shortages of personal protection equipment for health care workers (North, 2020). The CDC reversed its stance a few months later, but the effects of the prior statements still linger for some.

Even though the effects of the recent Omicron variant are fading, the pandemic continues in a highly politically charged environment that places concrete science and health practices against abstract notions of personal freedom. Given the direct impact of COVID-19 on company employees and the economy, corporations have felt a need to get involved.

Analysis

Gay Marriage

Chick-fil-a

In 2012, Chick-fil-a CEO, Dan Cathy, came under fire after discussing his anti-gay beliefs on a radio show. Cathy said the company and his family only support the "biblical definition" of a traditional family unit (Greenfield, 2021). Although these comments were made before the Supreme Court legalized gay marriage in 2015, the company still feels the heat from that specific interview.

After years of donating to anti-gay groups, in 2019, Chick-fil-a pledged to halt all donations to those against same-sex marriage (Greenfield, 2021). Gay rights supporters rejoiced at the news (Kirkland, 2019). However, despite the business no longer giving to groups that support anti-gay initiatives, Cathy continued to push back against marriage equality and supported numerous organizations that worked to prevent new gay rights legislation, the so-called Equality Act, from passing (Greenfield, 2021). People took to social media to express their disgust and encouraged others to stop separating businesses from their owners.

Even though Chick-fil-a's actions have provoked numerous boycotts and protests, its statements have not affected business (Del Valle, 2019). In 2018, Chick-fil-a's sales increased 15.5 percent, with revenue close to \$10.4 billion. In 2020, Chick-fil-a's sales totaled approximately \$12.8 billion. Although Chick-fil-a may be the most politicized fast-food chain in America, many individuals love it, including those who disagree with the organization's politics (Sugar, 2018). Since the chain is privately owned, it is hard to get an accurate picture of their financials, but one thing is clear, Chick-fil-a continues to grow at an astonishing rate, and their political beliefs have no effect on growth or sales (Sugar, 2018).

Apple

Immediately after *Obergefell v Hodges*, Apple CEO, Tim Cook, shared his joy over social media. Apple also came out with a lengthy statement supporting the landmark decision. It concluded by saying, "we could not be happier for our employees, customers, and people all over America who now have the right to marry the one they love" (Newcomb, 2015). After releasing the statement, the company saw a 33 percent increase in its third-quarter revenue (Apple, 2015). Even though the company's pro-same-sex marriage statements may not have been the only factor impacting sales, its sales did not decrease, meaning that Apple's speaking out in support of gay marriage did not negatively impact the company.

In response to the Supreme Court decision, the company resurrected its original rainbow logo to celebrate diversity and reinforce its commitment to equality (Mac Daily News, 2015). Additionally, when the Pride Edition Apple Watch band was announced on June 4, 2017, its online sales soared to triple those of all other Apple Watch Bands, again indicating that customers were not turned off by its political displays (Edison, 2018). Apple's commitment to diversity and inclusion goes much further back than 2014. The company championed the slogan "think different" during the Steve Jobs era, and Cook continues the effort by often stating, "inclusion inspires innovation" (Newcomb, 2015). During the Tim Cook era, Apple is known and often applauded for its commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, and its sales also reflect this positive feedback from consumers.

In comparing Apple and Chick-fil-a, it is much easier to boycott a fast-food chain than to give up state-of-the-art technology. More specifically, changing where you get fried chicken is also much easier than transferring all your files, photos, and data to a new phone or laptop. One might have expected that Chick-fil-a's position would be considered riskier than Apple's;

however, the company's sales and continued success appear to say no. That is likely because both brands enjoy significant brand loyalty and may well have customer bases and employees with income, educational, geographical tendencies, general political activism, and other characteristics that, in the case of Apple, reward more public, progressive policies, while in Chick-fil-a's case, favor more conservative, less public approaches.

Gun Control

Dick's Sporting Goods

Two weeks after the mass shooting in Parkland, Florida, CEO Ed Stack went on Good Morning America (GMA) to announce that Dick's Sporting Goods would be ending all assault weapon sales and sales to buyers under 21 years old. This was important news since the company's hunting and outdoor business reached almost \$1 billion a year and was a staple for the Dick's brand (Stack, 2019). After the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in New Jersey, the company promised to halt all gun sales from Dick's Sporting Goods stores. Yet, the ban was short-lived, and the brand went back to selling guns a few months later after developing Field and Streams, a subsidiary of Dick's dedicated entirely to the outdoors (Stack, 2019). On GMA, Stack was quick to say that all assault weapons will be gone for good from Dick's and their affiliates.

After days of television interviews on the topic, the company started to receive thousands of letters, emails, and comments on social media from people sharing their support for the CEO'S decision, with some people even saying that they had never shopped at Dick's before but would do so now (Stack, 2019). The overwhelming support from people all over the country was apparent. The store manager of the Dick's closest to Parkland even called the company to say

that the company's decision to end the sale of assault weapons allowed the community to start healing from the tragedy (Stack, 2019).

That is not to say, however, there were not a substantial number of negative comments. Sixty-five percent of Dick's employees quit in protest immediately after the decision, and hundreds more followed weeks later (Stack, 2019). Additionally, the company projected that their decision would cost them well over a quarter-billion dollars (Stack, 2019). In November 2018, the company reported a 3.9 percent decline in sales, and it expected the downward trend to continue through March 2019 (Selyukh, 2019). However, the company's profit margin improved "slightly" because guns and ammunition tend to yield extremely low margins (Selyukh, 2019).

Home Depot and Lowes

In December 2019, the Guns Down America (GDA) group released a score card grading businesses on their gun safety policies and stances on the issue (Guns Down America, 2019). This grading system was developed by the father of a Parkland victim (Palmer, 2019). The group hoped that consumers would "shop their values" during the holiday season and boycott businesses that did not meet GDA's standards (Palmer, 2019). The two companies at the bottom of the list receiving zeros in all three of the evaluation categories were Lowe's and Home Depot (Guns Down America, 2019).

The home improvement stores received an "F" because the stores lacked an in-store gun policy and they refused to call for gun reform. Quite the opposite, in fact, since the two companies, in combination, donated over half a million dollars to Congressional recipients of National Rifle Association (NRA) dollars (Palmer, 2019).

Home Depot has resisted gun control efforts. In 2014, about 150 gunowners, many carrying semi-automatic weapons, staged a rally outside of a Home Depot store in response to Texas' more restrictive open-carry restrictions (Wahba, 2014). The company received heat over Facebook, with many pledging to boycott the store because of the incident (Wahba, 2014).

Despite the backlash, Home Depot and Lowe's remained virtually unaffected. Although many customers have called out the brands for their conservative leanings, it has not affected either company's performance. This may be because the two stores never actually released statements highlighting their distaste for stricter gun control measures, but in this case, their actions, or a lack thereof, speak louder than words. It is also true that the two stores dominate the home improvement market, so consumers have limited alternatives. Both also engage in other worthy causes that offset any negative impressions based on their gun control positions and speak to their customers' interests (e.g., sports sponsorship, low-income housing, etc.)

Black Lives Matter

Ben and Jerry's

In 2020, Ben and Jerry's issued a lengthy statement calling for an end to systemic racism and demanding legislative and other changes in law enforcement to generate real and sustainable improvement. Specifically, Ben and Jerry's called on President Trump and other elected officials to commit the nation to a time of healing; they asked Congress to pass a particular piece of legislation, H.R.40, and demanded a national task force be created to pass bipartisan legislation aimed at ending racial violence and increasing police accountability, and, lastly, they asked for the Civil Rights Division within the US Department of Justice be "reinvigorated" (Ben and Jerry's, 2020). The company explicitly referenced George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmad Arbery by name in making these demands.

This statement received significant recognition not only because of its powerful stance on BLM, but also because of the public display of corporate activism. Bloomberg Businessweek referred to it as the most "detailed and powerful message from any corporation seeking to condemn" the recent deaths of Black Americans (Holman, 2020). The Huffington Post also came out with an article in 2020 titled "Ben and Jerry's showed America what real corporate activism looks like" and described the company as a corporate leader in social justice campaigns (Solis, 2020).

In an interview with Christopher Miller—the head of global activism strategy at Ben and Jerry's—he said plenty of people disagree with their political views. The statement previously mentioned generated thousands of angry phone calls and emails from people accusing the company of being anti-law-enforcement (Beard, 2021). However, it did not seem to bother Miller or other Ben and Jerry's executives because the company continued to see "strong growth" and support for its social mission activities (Beard, 2021). Further, Miller acknowledged that consumers purchase Ben and Jerry's because of its strong stances on issues. A survey conducted after Floyd's death found that two-thirds of Americans from Generation Z (encompassing those born between 1995 and 2010) said that the way corporations and their brands reacted to the BLM movement "would permanently affect their future purchasing patterns" (Holman 2020).

For Ben and Jerry's, sharing controversial opinions, which it has done for years with a predominant focus on progressive issues, has meant establishing its reputation as a leader in change, which, in turn, has furthered the company's growth. Like Patagonia, the Ben and Jerry's approach has cemented their relationship with young and left-leaning voters, creating both strong brand identity and customer loyalty in a competitive market.

Facebook and L'Oréal Paris

In contrast, Facebook and L'Oréal Paris did not issue specific statements against the BLM movement, their words contradict their stated commitments to improving race relations in America. Facebook came under special fire because its message was mostly "reactive." For example, Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, released a statement only after Facebook employees staged a "virtual walkout" in response to the company's failure to remove user posts that incited violence while referencing the BLM protests.

For Facebook their silence and lack of action on the issue has caused widespread anger throughout the company and the public in general. In 2016, the Wall Street Journal reported that an internal Facebook report found that 64 percent of users who joined extremist groups on the platform did so because Facebook's algorithm "steered" them there (Roose, 2020). Again, Facebook did not act and instead tried to obscure the study (Roose, 2020).

Facebook's actions, or a lack thereof, on BLM-related matters, along with many other business practices that have raised the ire of both liberals and conservatives, have caused more considerable damage to the company's reputation than Zuckerberg's statements themselves, although both are tied so closely together that it is hard to separate the animus toward Zuckerberg from the company itself. Regardless, thousands of companies suspended or reduced ad spending on the platform due to its silence and lack of action on hate speech and inappropriate content, including Ben and Jerry's (Hsu, 2020). Still, the New York Times reported that the advertising boycotts did more damage to the company's reputation than to its financials. Even though Facebook lost millions of dollars in ad revenue and users, it was not enough to significantly damage its overall business (Hsu, 2020).

Likewise, L'Oréal Paris was criticized after releasing a two-sentence statement on Instagram saying, "speaking out [against racism] is worth it." This troubled many consumers because, in 2017, L'Oréal ended an endorsement contract with Munroe Bergdorf, a Black-trans model, after she spoke out against racism on her social media accounts. Bergdorf accused L'Oréal of "racial hypocrisy" and encouraged her social media followers to speak out. One person commented, "you sure as hell never understood solidarity before. How you treated Munroe is an embarrassment, and make these words sound incredibly empty" on the company's Instagram post (Young, 2020). L'Oréal's post was flooded with thousands of similar comments expressing their support of Bergdorf. While the company did not indicate any decline in stock price or revenue, its reputation suffered from the backlash on social media. L'Oréal donated almost \$58,000 to the Black Lives Matter cause and rehired Bergdorf as a consultant (Nesvig, 2020).

For L'Oréal, speaking out in favor of BLM caused them more trouble than if they did not speak out at all. Consumers want corporations to share their opinions and take a stand, but not if it is insincere and solely a publicity stunt and not backed up with consistent action. Therefore, if a company intends to engage in politics, but has a messy or inconsistent track record, it should acknowledge its prior controversial stances and develop a statement that reflects its commitment to change.

COVID-19

United Airlines

In August 2021, United Airlines became one of the first major companies to mandate vaccines for all employees. The airline said that all employees who do not comply with the mandate would be fired unless they have proof of a medical or religious exemption. In March

2022, the airline said that all employees with exemptions may return to in-person work due to the decline of cases nationally (Choksi, 2022).

At the time of the initial vaccine mandate, 593 employees were at risk for termination after boycotting the new requirement. In the end, about 200 employees were fired, and nearly 67,000 employees were inoculated in one of the "most successful corporate vaccination efforts at the time" (Choksi, 2022). However, this did not stop six United Airlines employees from filing a lawsuit against the airline for failing to provide "reasonable accommodations" for religious or medical reasons (Josephs, 2021). A federal district court temporarily halted United's new policy. Days later a judge told the plaintiffs that he was "wary of ordering a private company to change its policy" (Smith, 2021). Despite the backlash, United continued to defend its vaccine policy vigorously.

The more significant issue lies with customers and the federal mask mandate. There are countless news stories describing passengers' outrage after being asked to wear masks on planes, which often ends with the customer being removed from the flight. While the public transportation mask mandate is expected to be lifted in April 2022, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton filed a lawsuit against the CDC to stop mask mandates (Dey, 2022). This suit is just one of many in-state attempts to challenge COVID-19 safety measures.

United Airlines' resistance to changes in its mask mandate makes sense, given that the mandate has been imposed by the federal government and applies to all airlines. If an individual wants to boycott the mandate, they must avoid all types of air travel and most other public transportation. That is not practical for many people, especially those who travel frequently and enjoy the rewards of frequent flyer status, which on their own create significant brand loyalty.

In-N-Out Burger

In October 2021, the popular California-based fast-food chain refused to comply with San Francisco's mandate that requires all restaurants to check vaccination cards before allowing customers to sit indoors (Mark, 2021). As a result, the restaurant temporarily shut down the city's only location. Arnie Wensinger, the In-N-Out's chief legal and business officer, shared a strongly worded statement with the Washington Post, saying, "We refuse to be the vaccination police" (Mark, 2021). Wensinger went on to say that the company "fiercely disagrees with any government dictate that forces a private company to discriminate against customers who choose to patronize their business" (Mark, 2021). Days later, a second In-N-Out location closed and eventually Contra Costa County was forced to shut down all indoor dining because of repeated violations of COVID-19 health policies (Guzman, 2021).

Soon after the closings, numerous customers gathered outside one location in Contra Costa County to protest the vaccine mandates. One individual was heard yelling, "stand up and stop these mandates," and dozens of honks could be heard by people passing by to indicate their support of the protest (Stone, 2021). Another protester said, "I don't eat hamburgers much, but I will eat there to support them" (Stone, 2021). To date, there's minimal evidence that In-N-Out Burger's anti-mandate position has adversely affected its high standing in the California hamburger market, with the public reaction being like the reaction to Chick-fil-a's active opposition to gay rights. Notwithstanding the availability of other fast-food alternatives, brand loyalty has seemed to outweigh the adverse publicity generated by the company's vaccine position. Perhaps consumers simply do not associate their political views strongly enough with low-cost food items.

Conclusion

Some may say that an organization is responsible for speaking out because of its significant presence in society. On the other hand, individuals may believe that companies should stay in their lane and not involve themselves with issues outside of company business. However, it is clear that consumers want organizations to share their opinions.

For the future of corporate activism, companies should adhere to four guidelines. First, before putting out a statement, companies should have a genuine discussion with management and employees about the issue. This goes along with General Electric's Alex Dimitrief's best practices that he identified after being involved in the company's statements on political and social issues. In the case of Facebook, employees made their unhappiness known after Zuckerberg refused to release a statement in support of the BLM movement. If Zuckerberg had listened to those beneath him on day one, the tech giant could have avoided significant media scrutiny. Additionally, by encouraging company-wide discussion, executives gain a wide variety of perspectives and opinions on the subject. Take polls, hold town-halls, and initiate small group discussions within departments because it is unwise to draft a brief statement as a publicity stunt that completely disregards employees' thoughts on the matter.

Secondly, companies should speak out in a timely manner. Again, in the case of Facebook, its remarks came later after the employee protest, and people noticed. It is essential to formulate and share an opinion within 48 hours because waiting to make a statement appears forced and inauthentic. In the end, if a company is passionate about the topic at hand, it will make an effort to speak up, put other company matters on hold, and release a statement that takes a side and reinforces the organization's purpose.

Third, suppose a company knows its previous actions may contradict its current statement. In that case, it should acknowledge the past and emphasize the changes they are making to be a better corporate citizen. L'Oréal Paris knew that they had fired Munroe Bergdorf due to her anti-racism statements via social media, and yet, they still spoke out in favor of the BLM movement. Ignoring company actions in the past highlights a lack of awareness and, again, inauthenticity. L'Oréal could have avoided the trouble if it first acknowledged its past mistakes with Bergdorf and then pledged to remedy its previous actions by being better going forward. As the saying goes, "honesty is always the best policy."

Lastly, companies should not stay silent. Home Depot, Lowes, and Facebook, all received backlash for taking no action. By remaining silent, companies inherently take a side, which may not necessarily be the side companies intend to identify. Corporations are in the public eye, and they affect people's opinions, whether they mean to or not. Therefore, organizations must take responsibility and involve themselves in the growing area that is corporate activism.

But, does corporate activism impact company success? The short answer: yes. Six out of the ten companies analyzed all experienced success or suffered the consequences of sharing a political opinion. When it comes to United Airlines, many of the rules for COVID-19 are universal and do not differ from airline to airline. As federal COVID-19 regulations relax and airlines can make decisions on a company-by-company basis, that is likely where the overwhelming support or backlash will surface. In-N-Out burger appears to be an outlier after remaining virtually unaffected after their strong anti-vaccination stance. Locations closed, and groups protested, but as previously mentioned, brand loyalty seemed to outweigh political views.

As far as Home Depot and Lowes, it is unsurprising that both stores also remained unaffected by their silence on major issues, particularly gun control. This is likely because consumers have limited alternatives when it comes to home improvement outlets, and they never actually released statements discussing their dislike for stricter gun control measures.

However, the six companies affected by engaging in corporate activism—Chick-fil-a, Apple, Dick's, Ben and Jerry's, Facebook, and L'Oréal Paris—all made their views known and reinforced those beliefs with their actions. While corporate activism may not make or break a company, it is hard to ignore brands' influence on consumers' lives. Businesses are everywhere and are some of the most powerful entities in the world. To many, as indicated in the Resonate survey mentioned previously, how a brand responds to social and political change is a crucial factor in deciding whether to give them business, whether to become or remain an employee, and whether to invest in them.

Figure 1.1 – Summary of Findings

<u>Company</u>	<u>Issue</u>	<u>Brand Activism</u>	<u>Success Outcome</u>
Chick-fil-a	Gay Marriage	- Donations - Statements from the owners	Successful
Apple	Gay Marriage	- Statement - Product lines - Temporary logo alteration	Successful
Dick's Sporting Goods	Gun Control	- Statement - Removal of products	Successful
Home Depot	Gun Control	- Donations - No Statement	Unaffected

Lowes	Gun Control	- Donations - No Statement	Unaffected
Ben and Jerry's	Black Lives Matter	- Statement - Donations - Product lines	Successful
Facebook	Black Lives Matter	- Delayed Statement	Not Successful
L'Oréal Paris	Black Lives Matter	- Contradictory Statement	Not Successful
United Airlines	COVID-19	- Actions	Unaffected
In-N-Out Burger	COVID-19	- Actions	Unaffected

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