

Neutrality in situations of injustice

A critical exploration of corporate responses to Black Lives Matter

Student Name: Abigail Luke

Student Number: 576529

Supervisor: Dr. Marco Scalvini

Master Media Studies - Media & Business

Erasmus School of History, Culture and Communication

Erasmus University Rotterdam

Master's Thesis

June 2021

ABSTRACT

Owing to the expectations of increasingly socially conscious publics in recent years, companies are increasingly engaging in corporate activism by taking a public stance on controversial social issues. Accordingly, scholars have theorized corporate activism as a normative practice that aims to engender positive societal changes. Concurrently, the functionalist tradition of public relations scholarship has focused on how the strategic management of controversial social issues can advance organisational interests. In response to these divergent approaches, critical scholars have begun to call attention to the incongruity between social and strategic objectives of corporate activism. Taking these theoretical perspectives into account, this study critically examines how companies strategically manage social issues through the discourse of corporate activism, and the implications of this for achieving social change. Specifically, this study focuses on corporate responses to the 2020 Black Lives Matter movement. An upsurge of corporate activism took place in response to this movement as companies raced to publish statements articulating their support for racial justice. Investigating how the social issue of racism was strategically managed in these statements therefore provides the analytical focus for this study. Accordingly, the study aims to answer the question: *How do companies strategically manage the social issue of racism in corporate activist discourse?* To conduct the investigation, this study employs the method of critical discourse analysis (CDA) to analyse statements addressing racism published to corporate websites. In particular, the study adopts a dialectical-relational approach to CDA in order to understand the societal impact of the corporate activism as discourse and social practice. By adopting the theoretical perspective of critical public relations as well as an emancipatory agonist approach, the study demystifies the dominant ideologies underlying corporate activist discourse and illuminates how these ideologies reinforce the hegemonic power relations between corporate elites and the marginalised groups they purport to advocate for. The results of the analysis identify an overarching strategy of depoliticisation in corporate activist discourse, driven by a neoliberal market ideology oriented towards improving the corporate bottom line. The findings of this study contribute to the emerging literature, by revealing how discursive and social practices of corporate activism reproduce social harms such as prejudice, marginalisation, and exclusion through processes of depoliticization. The study concludes by calling for further critical research on corporate activism, as theory and praxis, in order to move towards social emancipation.

KEYWORDS: *corporate activism, racism, social justice, public relations, strategic management*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to extend my thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Marco Scalvini, for his constant advice, patience, and encouragement throughout the process of planning and writing this thesis. I feel very fortunate to have been able to produce a thesis on the topic I started this degree wanting to write about, and that would not have been possible if not for Marco's guidance and openness to my ideas as well as the inspiration and insights I drew from his Brands, Media, and Identity class.

I am also very grateful to my family and friends, both at home and here in the Netherlands, who have at times provided much needed respite and have made it a lot easier to get through a year of studying in the midst of the ongoing pandemic.

Table of contents

Abstract and keywords

Acknowledgements

List of abbreviations

1. Introduction.....	6
1.1 Contextual background	6
1.2 Problematising corporate activism.....	7
1.3 Research aim and questions	8
1.4 Relevance.....	9
1.5 Overview of thesis structure	9
2. Theoretical Literature and Conceptual Framework	11
2.1 Review of corporate activism literature	11
2.2 Theoretical debates in strategic and critical PR	13
2.3 Conceptual framework.....	18
3. Methodology.....	20
3.1 Research method.....	20
3.2 Sampling and data collection	21
3.3 Operationalisation	22
3.4 Analytical framework and process.....	24
3.5 Methodological trustworthiness	28
4. Analysis and Results	31
4.1 Representations of racism	31
4.2 Corporate identification	35
4.3 Discursive construction of transformative action	41
5.1 Answer to the research question	49
5.2 Summary of research findings	50
5.3 Theoretical and practical implications	51
5.4 Social implications.....	52
5.5 Limitations and suggestions for future research	53
References.....	55
Appendix A: List of corporate statements analysed	64

List of abbreviations

- BLM:** acronym for the Black Lives Matter racial justice movement
- BLM 2020:** collective term for the incidents of racial violence against black Americans and the subsequent racial justice movement that took place during 2020
- CDA:** acronym for critical discourse analysis
- CPR:** acronym for critical public relations, the theoretical perspective that integrates critical theory and public relations
- CSR:** acronym for corporate social responsibility
- DRA:** acronym for the dialectical-relational approach (to critical discourse analysis)
- PR:** acronym for public relations
- SIM:** acronym for social issues management, a core concept of strategic public relations

1. Introduction

1.1 Contextual background

On May 25th, 2020, a white police officer murdered George Floyd, a 46-year-old black man, in Minneapolis, Minnesota (Forliti & Baenen, 2020). This became the latest in a series of highly publicised incidents of racial discrimination and violence in the United States in 2020. As a tipping point of social consciousness, Floyd's murder reignited the intermittent spark of public outrage and conversation about racism against black Americans, both in the U.S. and internationally. Protests took place worldwide alongside a surge in support for Black Lives Matter (BLM), the racial justice movement that began in 2013 following the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's killer (Campo-Flores & Jamerson, 2020).

The incidents of racial violence against black Americans and the subsequent racial justice movement that took place throughout 2020, events that are hereafter collectively referred to as BLM 2020, also notably drew reactions from the corporate world. Breaking from the convention of corporate silence on political matters, companies expressed support for the movement on social media and through their own channels (McGregor, 2020). Commentators have noted that "at no other time in recent history have so many high-profile brands publicly spoken out about topics of social injustice in the world." (Arlington Research, 2020, p. 2). The term *corporate activism* describes this phenomenon of companies taking a public stance on controversial sociopolitical issues (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020).

Corporate activism has become increasingly widespread in recent years, a trend which has been attributed to growing stakeholder expectations that corporations take a position on controversial issues (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Due to this social pressure, corporate activism has evolved from an elective strategy into a near imperative response when hot button issues arouse the public conscience (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Corporate activism is therefore an increasingly relevant consideration for corporate image and reputation. As such, it has become an important area of focus in marketing and public relations (PR) theory and practice.

Corporate responses to BLM 2020 have highlighted the need to revisit the social role of corporate activism. The routinisation of the practice has engendered discourses of corporate activism that are increasingly discernible to external audiences, resulting in greater cynicism (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019). Amidst BLM 2020, online sub-campaigns emerged to reflect frustration with corporate activist discourse deemed performative, hypocritical, or lacking in sufficient action (Braithwaite, 2020). For example, "Pull Up or Shut Up" challenged companies to release black employee figures (Shacknai, 2020), while "Open Your Purse" campaigned for greater donations to causes fighting racial injustice (Braithwaite, 2020). Accordingly, companies attempted to assuage or pre-empt this criticism and demonstrate the legitimacy of their stances, often by releasing extensive statements articulating their stance against racism and pledging actions to redress racial inequality.

A year on from BLM 2020, research finds that companies are accelerating diversity and inclusion efforts, whereas just 0.5% of the \$50 billion pledged by corporate America in donations and investments has been allocated to a specific cause (Edgecliffe-Johnson & Rogers, 2021). Furthermore, the 2021 annual meeting season has revealed resistance to reform. Companies that had publicly professed a commitment to act on racial equality have internally opposed shareholder activists' proposals to drive progress through actions such as third-party audits, pay data disclosures, and board representation (Kishan, 2021; Sumagaysay, 2021). This suggests a disparity between companies' private and public commitments to transformative action.

1.2 Problematising corporate activism

Taking these contextual issues into consideration, this study calls into question the notion that the practice of corporate activism is socially transformative. Social movement activism is defined by its focus on driving positive social change (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). The claim that corporate activism strives for the same objective presumes that social transformation is compatible with business interests. However, critical scholars have countered that corporate activism is motivated by opportunistic promotion and stakeholder management at the expense of social change (Hoffmann et al., 2020; Sobande, 2019). This objection places corporate activism within the proliferation of promotional culture in contemporary social life, whereby it has become commonplace for communication to carry an underlying promotional message while performing a different function at surface level (Fairclough, 2003).

Critical scholarship contends that the promotional motivation for corporate activism can undermine social change by strategically managing controversial social issues (Hoffmann et al., 2020). Strategic management entails processes of internal communications planning focused on the advancement of organisational interests (Heath & Palenchar, 2009). Since it is in the interest of organisations to achieve external acceptance of their promotional messages (Breeze, 2012), the scholars contend that companies manage issues to obtain loyalty and reduce dissent (Simon, 2011). As well as aiming for broad acceptance, companies manage issues to safeguard their reputations. Corporate activism performs a self-justificatory function by "combining classic promotional elements with aspects of explanation and self-defence designed to pre-empt or defuse criticism on concrete issues" (Breeze, 2012, p. 5). Messages are strategically designed for positive self-presentation while evading criticism of corporate failings. By neutralising issues and defusing criticism, companies preclude transformative action on deep-seated issues and consequently limit social change. The result is that "managing people and ideas, therefore, trumps justice" (Simon, 2011, p. 161).

Informed by this critical contention, the obstruction of social change through strategic management of controversial social issues is identified in the present study as a social wrong. A social wrong is an aspect of the social order that has negative implications for human well-being and can only be ameliorated through major changes to the social order (Fairclough, 2013). This study adopts

an eclectic approach (Wodak, 2001) integrating theories and methods centred around the concept of *critique*. Critique seeks to understand the nature of social wrongs, identify obstacles to their rectification, and produce emancipation by finding ways to overcome obstacles (Fairclough, 2013; Wodak & Meyer, 2001).

1.3 Research aim and questions

The main research aim of this study is to critique the strategic management of controversial social issues, in order to explore the critical contention that a strategic approach to social issues undermines the objective of social change. Specifically, this study operationalises the social issues management (SIM) model (Coombs & Holladay, 2018) to understand the strategic communicative function of corporate activism. By critically analysing the discourse of corporate activist communications, the study aims to reveal how SIM is realised in discursive practice and, consequently, to consider the social implications of this practice.

In order to develop the central research focus of this study, BLM 2020 is selected as a research case to examine how corporate activist discourse entails the strategic management of the social issue of racism. Accordingly, the following research question is posed:

Research question: How do companies strategically manage the social issue of racism in corporate activist discourse?

The strategic management of social issues is a complex process as it requires companies to provide a discursive rationale for the social issue in question, for themselves as legitimate spokespersons, and for the actions they pledge to redress the issue and achieve social change (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). To guide exploration of this multifaceted process, the following research sub-questions are also posed:

Sub-question 1: How is the social issue of racism represented in corporate activist discourse?

Sub-question 2: What forms of identity construction are used to build corporate legitimacy in speaking out?

Sub-question 3: How do companies discursively construct their commitment to socially transformative action?

The discursive practice of corporate activism is realised through textual communication. The texts under investigation in this study are corporate statements that companies published to their websites articulating their stance on racism and pledging actions to redress racial inequality. The method of critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used to examine these texts and their social implications, in accordance with the critical theoretical approach.

1.4 Relevance

The present study seeks to critically examine the strategic communicative decisions that companies make in responding to social issues and producing corporate activist discourse. There are very few studies critically analysing the discourse of corporate activism, and extant studies of this practice have focused on commercial advertising campaigns (Hoffmann et al., 2020; Sobande, 2019) or have analysed singular case studies (Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Hoffmann et al., 2020). Thus, this study aims to contribute to the literature on corporate activism through a critical, comparative study of written corporate activist statements.

The lack of studies on corporate activist *discourse* is preceded by a general under-theorisation of corporate activism in academic literature (Vredenburg et al., 2020), since scholarship on the practice has tended to respond to industry trends. Thus, academic interest in the phenomenon has grown in recent years due to its increased uptake in practice (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018). The mass exercise of corporate activism that occurred in response to BLM 2020 provides fertile ground for further study of the practice and its strategic communicative function.

Critical research on corporate activism has particular relevance for PR practitioners who principally create these texts. Scholars have stipulated that it is increasingly important for managers to understand how engaging in corporate activism can impact brand perceptions and reputation (Mukherjee & Althuisen, 2020). While such business outcomes have often been the focus of scholarship, this study advances the notion that practitioners must consider the real societal impact of corporate activist messaging and actions, and not merely focus on how communication is received by stakeholders. As corporate activism becomes increasingly commonplace and subject to ever-greater scrutiny, practitioners must recognise the growing social expectations that come with making a public commitment to bring about social change.

At a social level, the research focus of this study can also help to uncover implications of corporate activism for systemic racism. Racism is a “system of group dominance” (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 24) that manifests in everyday social practices of marginalisation, discrimination, or exclusion based on racial difference. Racism is reproduced when these social practices are sustained through “collusion, passivity, inaction, or failure to combat” (p. 26). Powerful elites, including corporate elites, often contribute to the reproduction of racism through discourse (Van Dijk, 1993). Thus, it is pertinent to examine whether and how corporate activism might also participate in the reproduction of racism in social life. Critical research in this area may help to identify ways to ameliorate the practice and emancipate those who are oppressed by the propagation of racism.

1.5 Overview of thesis structure

The introductory chapter of the thesis has provided a brief overview of the contextual background and theoretical approach of this. In the next chapter, a literature review is conducted to conceptualise corporate activism and identify relevant key assumptions. Key theoretical debates and

the critical perspective that informs the study are then outlined, followed by a discussion of the conceptual framework that captures the strategic management of social issues. The third chapter explains the methodological tools, framework, and process that are used to analyse and interpret findings. This is accompanied by a reflection on methodological trustworthiness. The results of the analytical process are presented in the fourth chapter with a detailed discussion of interpretation of findings in relation to the research questions and supported by exemplary extracts from texts. Finally, the conclusion focuses on a synthesis of how the findings provide answers to the research questions and the theoretical and societal implications of these findings. Limitations of the study are discussed as well as suggestions for future research on corporate activism.

2. Theoretical Literature and Conceptual Framework

Chapter Overview

This chapter begins with a review of literature on corporate activism in recent scholarship, including a summary of theoretical developments in the field, and identification of key assumptions and gaps in the literature. The second section presents the debate between functionalist, strategic PR and the liberal and agonistic critiques of this practice, informed by prominent theories of social interaction. This is followed by an outline of the theoretical perspective of CPR that grounds this study. The final section presents the conceptual framework based on a SIM model that operationalises the strategic communicative function of corporate activism.

2.1 Review of corporate activism literature

As a type of mass communication, corporate activism has been theorised and studied in PR, marketing, and strategic communication disciplines. From this multidisciplinary body of scholarship, multiple conceptualisations of corporate activism have emerged. Terms such as *brand activism* (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018), *corporate social advocacy* (Dodd & Supa, 2015), and *social issues management* (Coombs & Holladay, 2018) have been used in different streams of academic research to capture the phenomenon of companies taking a public stance on controversial social issues. The present study integrates insights into corporate activism from these closely related streams to analyse corporate activism as a communicative strategy. For clarity and comprehensiveness, the term *corporate activism* (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020) is used consistently throughout the study.

As a multidisciplinary concept in both theory and practice, corporate activism is somewhat lacking in definitional consensus. However, through a comprehensive examination of literature, three salient characteristics of corporate activism are identified. Firstly, companies must take an explicitly public stance (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020), to signal their position on an issue, which may take the form of messaging or concrete actions. Secondly, the issue in question must be controversial (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Dodd & Supa, 2015; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). What constitutes a controversial issue may differ between cultures, geographies, and times but the socially contentious nature of issues is central (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Closely related to the notion of controversy, a third characteristic is that the focal issue must be sociopolitical (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Sociopolitical issues are broadly defined as “problems that affect a large portion of society, which often have a high degree of polarization related to political ideologies” (Madden, 2019, p. 301). In this study, the term social issue is used for brevity.

In addition to the definitional characteristics of corporate activism, scholars have situated the practice within the wider field of corporate involvement in society and have particularly sought to distinguish corporate activism from the organisational function of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Coombs and Holladay (2012b) define CSR as “the voluntary actions that a corporation

implements as it pursues its mission and fulfils its perceived obligations to stakeholders, including employees, communities, the environment, and society as a whole.” (p. 8). The authors stress that the practice of corporate responsibility entails processes of dialogue and engagement with stakeholders to identify initiatives that are a “good fit” (p. 163) for both the company and its stakeholders. While the activities taken on by CSR departments vary between companies, they typically respond to stakeholders’ social concerns such as climate change, health and safety, human rights, and diversity and inclusion.

Both stakeholder dialogue and the focus on organizational mission in CSR have been stipulated in literature as distinct differences from corporate activism. Wettstein and Baur (2016) argue that CSR functions to strike an impartial balance between competing stakeholder interests by establishing inclusive dialogue to identify initiatives based on common interest. By contrast, the authors argue that corporate activism identifies social issues as violations of societal norms, without recourse to stakeholder dialogue and deliberation. On this conception, corporate activism entails a form of values advocacy based on the inherent validity of social issues. Thus, scholars argue that while corporate responsibility practices are widely accepted by different stakeholder groups, corporate activism adopts partisan positions that incidentally align with the values of some stakeholders while alienating others (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Wettstein & Baur, 2016).

The value-orientation of corporate activism has been widely stipulated in recent literature (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Sibai et al., 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Consequently, scholars argue that corporate activism primarily aims to bring about social change that rectifies violations of the normative conditions of society. Eilert and Nappier Cherup (2020) state that corporate activism is “goal-oriented toward solving specific social problems or transforming the social order and status quo” (p. 463). This objective differs from that of CSR which is primarily driven by functional organisational outcomes such as reputational benefits and improvement of the corporate bottom line (Ciszek & Logan, 2018; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Assumptions and gaps in literature

While the stated objective of corporate activism is to bring about social change (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020), scholars acknowledge that companies may also be motivated by strategic organisational interests (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020; Sibai et al., 2021). Vredenburg et al. (2020) state that authentic, values-driven corporate activism “must involve firm performance outcomes, specifically those related to increased revenues, brand equity, and customer loyalty, as well as aiming for social change” (p. 456). That the organisational outcomes are stated as a necessity, while social change is given as an aspiration perhaps indicates the difficulty of serving both interests in practice. It is therefore important to consider how the goal of societal change may be subordinated by the pursuit of organisational interests.

Hoffmann et al. (2020) note the lack of scrutiny in scholarship of the way in which companies position themselves in public debate on social issues. In extant studies, the role of companies in socially constructing issues is largely overlooked. Instead, there is an underlying assumption that social issues are predetermined, and companies enter the public conversation only to express a stance on an issue and influence prosocial change (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020). However, as Madden (2019) explains “issues do not simply exist out in the world waiting to be discovered” (p. 300). Instead, social issues are constituted by processes of meaning-making and negotiation through discourse (Madden, 2019). What is crucially missing in literature on corporate activism is the examination of the communicative decision-making and planning processes that are entailed by corporate engagement with controversial social issues. Coombs and Holladay (2018) explain that the strategic management of social issues entails not only the public communication of a stance but also the private sphere decision-making processes in which companies determine how they will define an issue.

Additionally, social issues tend to be dichotomised in corporate activism literature. Scholars state that companies must pick a side for or against the status quo (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020), and reductively conceptualise issues as either “progressive or conservative” (Vredenburg et al., 2020, p. 446). Such conceptualisations neglect to consider that companies can express stances on social issues in ways that are not categorically one-sided. Particularly, corporate activism literature has assumed that, in taking a partisan stance, companies are willing to alienate large sections of their stakeholder base in the noble pursuit of the common good (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). This naively supposes that companies will willingly jeopardise their organisational mission in favour of social change. Critiquing this assumption, Hoffmann et al. (2019) argue that corporate activism is built on harmonising ideological rhetoric which aims at “pleasing everybody” (p. 158) to minimise contestation and threats to corporate dominance in the social order.

The foregoing discussion identifies key assumptions regarding corporate activism in recent literature and how the strategic management of social issues as part of this practice has been overlooked. In order to inform the critique of SIM that is undertaken in this study, the following section turns towards key positions in the theoretical debate between strategic and critical perspectives of PR.

2.2 Theoretical debates in strategic and critical PR

The dominant PR paradigm of Excellence Theory advances the importance of strategic PR practice for organisational effectiveness (Grunig & Grunig, 2000). This theory advances a functionalist approach which conceives of PR as a means to the achievement of organisational goals. Grunig and Grunig (2000) explain that effective strategic management serves organisational interests by reducing “the costs of...pressure campaigns, boycotts, or lost revenue that result from bad relationships with publics” (p. 307). Strategic PR thus addresses the institutional level of strategic

management, which is concerned with how an organisation interacts with the publics that constitute the social environment (Bowman, 1990; Grunig & Grunig, 2000). *Publics* are the most strategic stakeholders for organisations – active stakeholders that create and communicate about issues, and whose actions impact the pursuit of organisational mission (Grunig & Repper, 1992).

Excellence theory posits a two-way symmetrical approach to public communications that establishes dialogue between organisations and publics and aims towards mutual understanding (Grunig, 2001). Within this, strategic PR programs must be able to identify “strategic constituencies”, publics that are likely to present opportunities or obstacles for the organisation’s ability to pursue its mission. Communication programs can then be planned in order to manage dialogic relations with such publics towards consensus. If strategic constituencies identify a salient problem and perceive that their voices are not being heard, they organise to turn the problem into an “issue”. Issue management is the “strategic core” (Botan & Taylor, 2004, p. 654) of PR that serves to anticipate, plan for, and respond publicly to issues, and manage relationships with strategic constituencies accordingly.

In recent years, PR scholars have called into question the strategic, functional orientation of Excellence Theory (Tyma, 2008). Much of this debate centres on how PR practice can strike an ethical balance between societal and organisational interests. These concerns have led scholars to theorise ethical approaches to PR, drawing on normative paradigms of social interaction from liberal and postmodern schools of thought.

Habermasian theory and PR practice

Some scholars have drawn on Jürgen Habermas’ liberal political theories of social interaction to extend ethical considerations in PR scholarship and practice (Leeper, 1996). Habermas’ theories are anchored around deliberative democracy through communication in the *public sphere*, the realm of the social world where private citizens come together to exchange information, engage in debate, and form public opinion through a process of rational-critical discussion (Habermas, 1998). A normative assumption of the public sphere is that social interaction entails communicative rationality, whereby communication is honest, sincere, and legitimate and oriented to achieving consensus (Cukier et al., 2004). When social actors participate in this rational and cooperative form of communication, they engage in *communicative action*.

Habermas (1984) makes a strong distinction between communicative action, that inherently aims towards shared understanding, and *strategic action*, for which communication is an instrumental means to achieve egocentric interests. Strategic action underlies the communication of private businesses that have colonised the public sphere in the last century (Habermas, 1998; Ramsey, 2015). Precisely, Habermas (1998) opines that the public sphere, once oriented towards general interest, has become unpolitical, privatised, and subsumed within a culture of consumption and advertising. He is particularly critical of PR as a practice that undermines the normative function of the public sphere, by managing public opinion through manipulation to serve private business interests. Habermas

argues that the promotion and exploitation functions of PR deliberately influence the process of public opinion formation on matters of human interest, by manipulating the representation of facts and events in ways that will gain acceptance.

Taking this assessment of PR into account, scholars have proposed ethical approaches to PR informed by Habermas' (1993) discourse ethics. Habermas contends that, from a moral perspective, contested matters of human interest must be generalised, through a process that seeks the attainment of universal consensus. This entails a normative condition of communicative action in which public opinion can only be deemed to have universal validity if discussants each act rationally and reciprocally, by placing themselves in the position of everyone who is affected by a problematic social norm or action. Accordingly, Habermas (1993) posits the following central principle of discourse ethics: "only moral rules that could win the assent of all affected as participants in a practical discourse can claim validity" (p. 50). Communicative action must be inclusive, non-coercive, and reciprocal to ensure that the conflicting perspectives of all individual participants are fully taken into consideration. These individual perspectives can then be extended to a generalised and universal understanding.

Given these idealistic conditions of ethical communication, Leeper (1996) suggests that discourse ethics can nonetheless be used for "testing and validating ethical decisions" (p. 140) in PR practice. The normativity of discourse ethics is thus considered not as a limitation, but as a standard against which to judge public communication. Particularly, Leeper identifies a strong parallel between the principles of discourse ethics and the dominant two-way symmetrical model of PR, based on the common goal of mutual understanding and consensus that underlies both theories. Indeed, recent theoretical approaches to PR have advanced consensus-orientation (Burkart, 2018). Conversely, it has been noted that such theorisations of PR communication have focused on consensus-seeking and dialogic communication while failing to consider the issue of hegemonic power (Davidson, 2016).

The emancipatory agonistic critique

Ciszek and Logan (2018) argue that consensus-driven PR entails the suppression of conflict, and thus fails to recognise conflict and contestation as central to social transformation. This line of criticism is informed by a postmodern agonistic approach to social interaction (Ciszek & Logan, 2018). Developed by Chantal Mouffe (2000), agonistic theory proposes that contestation is central to social interaction in the public sphere and is necessary to challenge the legitimacy of powerful elites. Far from being social problems, conflict and confrontation are important political goods against hegemonic control and restriction of discussion in the public sphere (Davidson, 2016). Contrary to Habermas' claims, it is argued that consensus-seeking, like all forms of social interaction, necessarily involves hegemony and exclusion, since some perspectives will always dominate at the expense of alternatives.

Underscored by a conception of politics as social contest, agonism critiques the *depoliticisation* of the public sphere that is entailed by liberal political theories such as deliberative democracy (Fossen, 2008). While Habermas' idea of depoliticisation focuses on how normative consensus is thwarted when the public sphere is colonised by strategic private interests, agonists argue that his principle of universal consensus itself entails depoliticisation by excluding conflictual perspectives (Davidson, 2016). As Fossen (2008) explains, the *emancipatory* agonistic critique is based on "the problematization of this strategy of depoliticization by identifying it as a source of harm, injustice, or subordination." (p. 385). Thus, what is critically of concern to emancipatory agonists is the social harms that result from exclusion. Agonists argue that social harms are perpetuated when the façade of universal consensus is pursued through the exclusion of alternative perspectives. Consensus cannot be established without the dominance of some perspectives over others, meaning that consensus necessarily engenders hegemonic power (Mouffe, 2000). The goal of emancipatory agonism is thus to continuously uncover and contest the hegemony and power that underlie social interactions, and the social harms that result from this – including marginalisation, inequality, and violence (Fossen, 2008). Emancipation, in this sense, entails that citizens are empowered – not in terms of attaining some measure of social equality – but in having the ability to challenge the social harms perpetuated by exclusion.

Taking the agonistic critique into account, scholars have begun to theorise ways in which PR can be reformed to recognise the value of contestation and empower active publics, instead of trying to neutralise issues to achieve organisational interests and reduce costs (Davidson, 2016). The emancipatory agonist perspective provides a useful entry point for the critical examination of PR practices and the identification of sources of oppression in these practices. Accordingly, Ramsey (2015) states,

It could be argued that the agonistic approach allows us to conceive of ways in which public relations might be harnessed to further the ends of the agonistic approach, rather than being seen as something intrinsically inimical to the establishment of a critical theory. (p. 73)

Critical PR

Critical public relations (CPR) draws on the social philosophy of critical theory that is concerned with the central ideas of power, oppression, ideology, and hegemony (Coombs & Holladay, 2012a). Critical theory aims to challenge oppressive social structures and contend domination within these structures (L'Etang, 2005). CPR challenges the dominant managerial perspective that privileges the interests of powerful organisations and elites over public interest (Motion & Weaver, 2005), and PR practice is thus a site of "struggle for and negotiation of power" (p. 50). A critical approach thus examines how the elites wield power in the process of social interaction through PR.

Discussions of power in CPR literature are influenced by Foucault's theorisation of power and discourse. (Moffitt, 2011; Motion & Weaver, 2005). Accordingly, power and knowledge are

understood to mutually create and be created by each other, resulting in a unified concept of *power/knowledge* which captures the inseparability of the two concepts (Foucault, 1972; Motion & Leitch, 2007). Power/knowledge is a relational concept that diffuses within society through discourse (Motion & Weaver, 2005). Discursive strategies are thus given as “the means by which the relations of power/knowledge are created, maintained, resisted and transformed” (Motion & Leitch, 2007, p. 265). In PR practice, practitioners use discourse to represent and justify organisational interests and influence public opinion. Drawing on the terminology of Fairclough (2013), Motion and Leitch (1996) describe PR practitioners as “discourse technologists” (p. 298) who deploy discursive strategies in order to create, maintain, and transform discourse. Accordingly, Motion and Weaver (2005) set out the analytical task of CPR research:

The task for the critical public relations scholar is to investigate how public relations practice uses particular discursive strategies to advance the hegemonic power of particular groups and to examine how these groups attempt to gain public consent to pursue their organisation mission (p. 50).

The concept of hegemony explains how dominant ideologies are expressed through discourse. Hegemony is created when the viewpoint expressed through discursive strategies is accepted by publics as the dominant interpretation and becomes so pervasive that it is considered commonsense (Coombs & Holladay, 2012a; Motion & Leitch, 2007). Hegemony is dynamic because the dominant discourses created by PR practitioners on behalf of their organisations are constantly challenged by active publics with oppositional interests (Place & Vardeman-Winter, 2013). This entails ideological contestation, in which activists seek to change the status quo while organisations seek to maintain it. Crucially, the ability of activists to pose a challenge to organisations does not entail equal power. Even when organisations engage in dialogue with activists, this is often a product of strategic efforts to neutralise the threat and maintain hegemonic power. Accordingly, the agonistic perspective of activism sees conflict as necessary for social change (Ganesh & Zoller, 2012) and seeks to challenge the hegemonic power relations that are entailed by consensus-oriented approaches to activism that “risk privileging civility over social and material needs, including social justice” (p. 85).

Theoretical perspective of CPR

The CPR perspective provides a theoretical frame of reference for this study that draws on critical theory to reveal how hegemonic ideologies are carried by the discourse of strategic PR (Motion & Weaver, 2005). CPR examines the role of strategic PR practices in maintaining systems of power that privilege organisational interests and power. The core ideas in CPR theory are particularly relevant for the examination of corporate activism. As a form of strategic PR communication, the discourse of corporate activism and the discursive strategies that create, maintain, and transform it can be scrutinised through the lens of CPR. Informed by the emancipatory agonistic critique, CPR can help to understand and challenge the way in which corporate activist discourse can propagate social harms through the hegemonic dominance of organisational perspectives and exclusion of

comparatively disempowered publics. Having established the theoretical perspective of CPR, the next section presents a conceptual framework that captures the practice that is critiqued in this study – the strategic management of social issues.

2.3 Conceptual framework

This section discusses SIM, which is critiqued in this study as the strategic practice that underlies corporate activism. The framework is based on the SIM model proposed by Coombs and Holladay (2018). The authors describe SIM as:

A firm's involvement in promoting specific orientations toward social issues. To qualify as social issues management a firm must speak publicly about its stance toward the social issue and attempt to shape how stakeholders view that stance. (p. 80).

As with corporate activism, SIM entails publicly expressing a stance on a social issue. An important element of the SIM model, however, is an inherent focus on the strategic communicative process that is involved when a company takes a public stance. SIM concerns the way in which companies communicate to influence public perception of issues. It should be noted that while corporate SIM is the main focus of this study, social activists can also adopt techniques of SIM to take their challenges directly to organisations (Coombs & Holladay, 2018).

The social issues management model

SIM is centrally a process of contestation between companies and active publics. Companies are considered the final decision-making entity that takes action on an issue. Active publics are “stakeholders committed to changing a firm's behavior” (Coombs & Holladay, 2018, p. 82). With a focus on the tasks of strategic communication, Coombs and Holladay propose a SIM model that explicates how companies construct social issues through communication to manage contestation.

SIM takes place in both the private and public spheres. Typically, when a social issue is identified, issue managers first internally plan how they will address the issue. The central strategic aims of this process are definition and legitimation, the foundational elements of the SIM process. Issue managers will construct a definition that is consistent with their preferred resolution of the issue. Various stances on the issue may be expressed in the public sphere, prompting contestation. Coombs and Holladay (2018) note that power is entailed by the ability to control how an issue is defined. Many social issues are well-established topics of public debate, as such, the issue manager does not need to establish the issue as worthy of attention but seeks to strategically enhance the legitimacy of the issue in ways that foster consensus and reduce conflict. Consensus-building is thus a strategic resource for controlling contention of definitions of issues. For companies, establishing their legitimacy as issue managers is an intensive communicative task. Issue managers aim to be viewed by publics as an acceptable voice on the social issue in question. This requires pre-emptive consideration; if publics perceive incongruence between issue managers and a social issue, they are likely to repudiate the company's claims.

Once the definitions and legitimations of social issues and managers are established, the company, as final decision-maker, decides how to resolve the contested issue. Here, the communicative task is to justify their proposed actions to redress the social issue. Actional legitimacy entails that companies communicate the usefulness and responsibility of their actions to society (Boyd, 2000; Coombs & Holladay, 2018).

Following this internal strategising process, issue managers go public to raise awareness of their stance on the social issue (Coombs & Holladay, 2018). This is the point that most studies of corporate activism proceeds from. Companies communicate to justify their definition of the issue, and their license to speak on the issue. For activists, going public is less a justificatory action, and more about raising awareness to mobilise support and create pressure for social change. In the public sphere, a dynamic process of social interaction takes place in which activists are likely to challenge a company's stance on an issue and corporate issue managers decide how to respond. Companies aim to manage the issue in such a way that minimises threat to organisational interests, however the issue may be brought back into prominence if activists believe that the company has not taken satisfactory action.

In the SIM model the definition, legitimacy, and awareness communication efforts of issue managers together constitute the strategic communicative process of taking a stance. Thus, "what appears as a firm simply stating its position on a social issue is really a complex and dynamic process" (Coombs & Holladay, 2018, p. 85).

Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided theoretical background to corporate activism as a PR practice. Having established the theoretical perspective that will inform analysis, and the conceptual framework that explicates the practice that will be subjected to critique, the next chapter presents the methodology of this study.

3. Methodology

Chapter Overview

This chapter begins by outlining CDA as a suitable method of this study. Secondly, the sampling choices and data gathering are explained. In the third section, the operationalisation of the concepts under investigation is elaborated, followed by an explication of the analytical framework and its relevance for the research questions. The analytical procedure is then discussed in detail to establish transparency. The section concludes with a discussion of methodological trustworthiness and a reflection on the researcher's positionality.

3.1 Research method

The present study uses CDA to examine public corporate statements addressing the social issues surrounding BLM 2020. As a field of socio-linguistic enquiry, CDA investigates discourse as a social practice (Fairclough, 2013). Discourse is understood in this context as the part of the social life that constitutes the process of meaning-making, and CDA particularly aims to unearth the power relations and ideologies that underlie this social process. With a focus on hermeneutic, interpretative analysis, the qualitative approach of CDA is deemed appropriate for the exploration of complex social phenomena (Brennen, 2013). Furthermore, CDA is distinguished from other forms of qualitative analysis by going beyond a focus on the textual content of discourse to centrally analyse the role of discourse in the production, reproduction, and transformation of unequal power relations and ideologies.

This study takes a dialectical-relational approach (DRA) to CDA (Fairclough, 2013). The DRA is centrally concerned with how discourse, as a social process of meaning-making, is dialectically related to other elements of the social world. Analysis of discourse, or how meaning is created, must consider how discourse is shaped by, and shapes, the social world. This can be understood within a three-level conceptualisation of social reality (Fairclough, 2003). The potential construction of texts is delimited by the possibilities afforded by language as a social structure, and texts are actualised by the social practice of discourse that selects and orders certain possibilities of language to articulate in texts – and simultaneously excludes other possibilities – in order to create meaning.

The analytical aim of this study is therefore to understand how meaning is created in corporate activist discourse by a process of selecting and excluding certain elements of language to articulate together when managing racism in corporate statements. The critique of this process stipulates that this process of selection and exclusion is necessarily non-neutral and strategic and seeks to sustain certain ideological positions, since ideology functions in the process of meaning-making to sustain power (Mumby, 1989). CDA is thus an appropriate method for unmasking the dominant ideological perspectives that underlie corporate activist discourse and drawing out its strategic communicative function.

3.2 Sampling and data collection

The research sample consists of ten exemplary textual statements published to corporate websites in response to BLM 2020, outlined in Table 3.1 (see also Table A1). The genre of public statements was chosen as the issue specificity, length, and structure of these texts is deemed suitable for the research aims. A systemic online search was conducted to retrieve statements addressing racism, using the Lexis Nexis news database and a manual search of company websites. Data was collected between April 15th-19th, 2021. Where possible, statements were checked against digital archives to confirm that the content had not been altered since publication.

In selecting the number of texts to analyse, consideration was given to richness and interpretive considerations. The study of singular texts inhibits the possibility of making comparisons and identifying patterns. At the same time, analysis of several texts is restricted by practical limits of the methodological approach of this study, and the need to ensure that each text is analysed in depth and sufficiently presented with supporting evidence. As such, the approach in this study concurs that “meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected and the observational capabilities of the researcher than with sample size” (Patton, 1990, p. 185). Ten exemplary statements were thus selected for the sample using purposive, criterion sampling.

Sampling procedures in qualitative research are necessarily purposeful and criterion-based (Morrow, 2005). This entails selecting exemplary texts based on information-richness and criteria informed by the research questions. The primary criterion was that all texts discussed the three key concepts of the SIM model – the social issue of racism, the company as issue manager, and proposals for action (see 3.3 Operationalisation). The time period for the publication of texts ranged from May 26th, 2020 through June 30th, 2020. This covers the timespan from the initial news of George Floyd’s death through the majority of corporate responses to BLM 2020 (Schott, 2020). Where a company published more than one statement on the issue, only the first statement published was considered. Large multinational companies, as given by the Forbes 2000 list (Tucker, 2020), were the chosen producers of texts. From a theoretical standpoint, these companies have the most power and platform in the marketplace to influence social change (Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2020). On a practical level, these organisations typically have accessible and up-to-date corporate websites, facilitating the retrieval of statements for analysis.

Alongside these criteria, variation was sought within the sample. From the broad genre of corporate statements, statement sub-genres included press releases, blog posts, meeting remarks, and internal memos. Statements were written from the perspective of a variety of speakers including corporate bodies, executive boards, and individual executives. Diversity of corporate profile was also pursued, with statements taken from companies that vary in size and industry. Consideration was also given to companies’ history of engagement with racism and social movement activism, as such, companies with previous high-profile controversies in this area (H&M, PepsiCo) were included as

well as a company known for dedicated advocacy (Ben & Jerry’s). While Ben & Jerry’s is the only multinational subsidiary in the sample, this company was specifically identified as a potentially disconfirming case. Given the company’s history of political advocacy (Ciszek & Logan, 2018) it was deemed useful to examine whether their statement contradicts or conforms to conventions of strategic corporate activist discourse.

Table 3.1

Summary of corporate statements selected for research sample

Statement title	Company	Primary Genre	Date published
“Creating Lasting Change Now”	adidas	Press release	June 9, 2020
“We Must Dismantle White Supremacy”	Ben & Jerry’s	Company statement	June 2, 2020
“I can't breathe.”	Citigroup	Blog post	May 29, 2020
“CEO Peter Kern Letter to Employees”	Expedia	Internal letter	June 3, 2020
“We stand with and support the black community – today, everyday and everywhere”	H&M	News article	June 1, 2020
“The Sidelines are Not an Option; Intel Pledges \$1M to Address Social Justice, Racism”	Intel	Internal memo	May 31, 2020
“A Message from Johnson & Johnson Chairman and CEO Alex Gorsky About Recent Events in the United States”	Johnson & Johnson	Internal letter	June 2, 2020
“PepsiCo's Racial Equality Journey”	PepsiCo	CEO statement	June 16, 2020
“We Stand Together”	Snap	Internal letter	June 1, 2020
“Making a Difference in Racial Equity”	Walmart	Meeting remarks	June 5, 2020

3.3 Operationalisation

The following section explicates the operationalisation of the concepts articulated in the research question: How do companies strategically manage the social issue of racism in corporate activist discourse?

Strategic management of social issues

SIM provides an understanding of how companies strategically manage social issues when a decision to take a public stance on an issue is made. An understanding of the strategic communicative function of SIM informs the critique of this discursive process and is central to the research aims of this study. Table 3.2 summarises the operationalisation of the three key concepts, derived from Coombs and Holladay’s (2018) SIM model and drawing examples from the authors’ case study of Target’s (2016) response to the Bathroom Bill:

Table 3.2*Operationalisation of Social Issues Management*

SIM Concept	Definition	Communicative tasks	Example
Social issue	An unresolved societal problem subject to social and political contestation	<i>Define and legitimise:</i> Companies define the social issue in a way that favours their preferred resolution, and seek broad support for their definition	“Recent debate around proposed laws in several states has reignited a national conversation about inclusivity.”
Company as issue manager	A corporate entity that makes strategic decisions about how to intervene in and promote specific perspectives of a social issue	<i>Legitimise:</i> Companies position themselves as legitimate spokespersons for the social issue	“Inclusivity is a core belief at Target.”
Proposal for action	The ways in which a company purports to address a social issue when a decision to act is made	<i>Present and legitimise:</i> Companies raise awareness of their proposed actions to resolve the issue, and justify the societal benefits of these actions	“And we’ll live that belief as champions of a more inclusive society by creating a diverse and inclusive work environment”

Corporate activist discourse

The concepts and corresponding communicative tasks outlined in Table 3.2 are together articulated in the act of publicly communicating a stance on a contested social issue. This act, or “discursive event” (Fairclough, 1993, p. 4), is summarised as the articulation of *corporate activist discourse*, where “discourse” refers more accurately to a *discourse type* (Fairclough, 1993). Corporate activist discourse is thus given by the cohesive articulation of all three SIM concepts, and their corresponding communicative tasks, within corporate texts.

Racism as a social issue

To operationalise racism as a social issue, the concept can be reformulated within Fairclough’s (2003) three-level conceptualisation of social reality. Fairclough expounds the difference between social events and social structures as a distinction between the *actual* and the *potential* that is mediated by social practices. In the context of this study the relevant social structures are, broadly speaking, historically bounded, racialised social systems that constitute the ongoing hierarchical racial stratification of American society (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Takeuchi & Gage, 2003). Within this, BLM 2020 is a series of events actualised by networks of social practices that sustain racism through elements including discourse, persons, organisations, and institutions. Thus, the broad concept of racism is put into practice at multiple levels of social reality. Alongside social structures and practices, human agency also has causal capacity to actualise social events (Fairclough, 2003). To guide analysis of how racism is discussed in texts, Van Dijk’s (1993) theory of elite discourse and racism is drawn on, particularly his discussion of corporate elite discourse.

Research sub-questions

In addition to the main research question, three research sub-questions are posed in this study. Each research sub-question corresponds to one of the main concepts of the SIM model and its respective communicative tasks. This ensures that the elements of corporate activist discourse are comprehensively analysed in order to understand how social issues are strategically managed.

Sub-question 1 (SQ1): How is the social issue of racism represented in corporate activist discourse?

The conceptual framework establishes that an essential function of SIM is to define a social issue in a way that is favourable to the organisation. Definition, in this sense, is not merely semantic, but refers to the way in which social issues are represented in texts. SQ1 is concerned with the discursive construction of racism, with a particular focus on how the different levels – events, practices, and structure – are represented.

Sub-question 2 (SQ2): What forms of identity construction are used to build corporate legitimacy in speaking out?

SQ2 is centrally a question of self-presentation, that is, how corporate identity is constructed to establish legitimacy in speaking out on the issue of racism. Insofar as companies themselves are organisations that operate, or practice, within social structures that sustain racism, it is important to consider how companies navigate this when presenting themselves as issue spokespersons.

Sub-question 3 (SQ3): How do companies discursively construct their commitment to socially transformative action?

SQ3 focuses on how companies justify their actions to bring about social change on the issue of racism. The question is concerned with how transformative action is represented and how companies present themselves as committed to this. The focus on actions in this section draws on an important aspect of Fairclough's (2013) DRA approach to CDA, namely, that the relation between discourse and other elements of social life entails a dialectical process in which "discourses are enacted in ways of acting" (p. 77). Fairclough refers to this process as the *operationalisation* of discourse that entails how discourse comes to be realized more concretely, for instance, in the form of new procedures, management styles, and other changes to organisational practice. Thus, in addition to examining how actions to address racism are discursively constructed, analysis must consider the operationalisation of these proposals, and the societal implications of corporate activist discourse as a social practice.

3.4 Analytical framework and process

The analytical framework of this study is focused on processes of meaning-making and legitimation in discourse. Two types of meaning that are particularly relevant for this study are *representation* and *identification* (Fairclough, 2003). Representation concerns how aspects of the social world are constructed through discourse. Identification is concerned with "ways of being" (p.

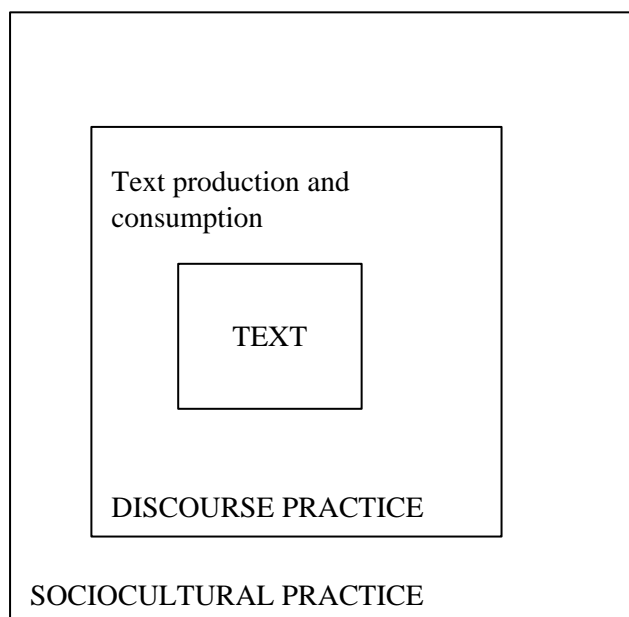
26) and the self-presentation function of discourse. As such, focusing on these types of meaning will help to understand how racism and transformative action are represented, and how companies identify themselves in relation to these aspects. Accordingly, these types of meaning are a central focus in each of the research sub-questions. Built on particular representations and identifications, a discursive practice that is relevant to all research questions is *legitimation*, since SIM centrally aims to legitimate definitions of social issues, companies as issue managers, and proposed actions to address social issues.

Analytical framework

This study adopts Fairclough's (1993) three-dimensional analytical framework (Figure 1) to analyse the representation, identification, and legitimation processes in texts. In addition to Fairclough's method, Van Leeuwen's (2007) framework of the legitimation of social practice is drawn on to inform analysis of how the legitimation of issues, companies, and actions is discursively negotiated.

Figure 3.1

Three-dimensional CDA framework



Adapted from *Media Discourse* (p.59), N. Fairclough, 1995.

The three-dimensional framework of CDA consists of three levels of analysis – text, discursive practice, and social practice (Fairclough, 1993). The text level focuses on the identification and examination of pertinent linguistic features. The social practice level includes analysis of how texts function in the wider social context that they are produced in, particularly how ideology and hegemony are reproduced. Analysis of discursive practice is the mediating level that is concerned with the production and consumption of texts which influences how texts are received and interpreted.

Understanding of the processes of constructing and negotiating meaning requires analysis of all three levels.

Text

Research questions determine the linguistic features that are selected for textual analysis (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). In this study, linguistic analysis of representation and identification entails analysis of semantic, grammatical, and lexical aspects of texts, as well as clause, sentence, and text structure with a focus on how these linguistic features together perform the following functions:

- Particular representations and recontextualisations of social elements – including representation of processes, social actors, time and space
- Selective constructions of speaker and reader identities – including status and role identity, or individual and personality aspects of identity
- A particular construction of the relationship between speaker and reader – including narrative voice, direct or indirect address, formality of tone and language

(adapted from Fairclough, 1995, p. 58)

Additionally, legitimation in texts is identified by verbal or mental process clauses (Van Leeuwen, 2007) or semantic causal relations between clauses and sentences (Fairclough, 2003) that centrally seek to answer the question of “why?” (Van Leeuwen, 2007) – that is, *why* a given issue position, company, or action is justified according to socially acceptable norms. These linguistic aspects together reveal how representations, identifications, and legitimations are constructed in text. As well as the linguistic features that are selected and observable, analysis must also consider features that are suppressed, as these are equally important for interpretation.

Discourse practice

Discourse practice is an interpretive process based on the linguistic features identified in texts (Fairclough, 1995). Analysis of discourse practice acknowledges how texts are produced and interpreted. Intertextuality and interdiscursivity are two important choices for text production that entail how external texts and discourses are drawn on in the construction of corporate activist discourse. Intertextuality focuses on the ways in which external texts are drawn on, typically through direct or indirect references. Key questions that guide analysis of intertextuality are:

- Which external texts and voices are included and notably excluded?
- Are other voices attributed, and if so, how specifically or non-specifically?
- Are other voices directly quoted or indirectly reported?

(adapted from Fairclough, 2003, p. 192)

Interdiscursivity concerns how texts draw together different genres and discourses in creative ways (Fairclough, 1995). The following guiding questions are used to identify interdiscursivity in texts:

- Is there a significant mixing of discourses?
- What discourses are drawn upon in the text, and how are they worked together?
- Which linguistic features characterise the discourses which are drawn upon?

(adapted from Fairclough, 2003, p. 193)

Both intertextuality and interdiscursivity entail processes of *recontextualisation* whereby texts or discourses from one area of social life are appropriated within another (Fairclough, 2003).

Recontextualisation can significantly impact discursive practices of representation, identification, and legitimation, and it is important to consider the ideological function of these choices.

Sociocultural practice

Analysis of sociocultural practice brings together the observations of textual and discursive practice to consider the ideological implications of corporate activist discourse (Fairclough, 1995). Working together strategic management and social movement activism, with their disparate objectives, into singular texts entails an ideological struggle between differing perspectives of what social issues are and how they should be resolved. Analysis of sociocultural practice therefore aims to uncover the ideological perspectives within corporate activist texts, with particular attention to how these ideologies maintain or reproduce hegemonic discourses and relations of power.

Analytical process

Having outlined the research method, research sample, and analytical framework of this study, this section outlines how these methodological elements come together in the analytical procedure. While the steps of the analytical procedure followed a general structure guided by the analytical framework, analysis did not proceed in a purely linear fashion, but instead entailed a reflexive and abductive process of going back and forth between theory and data (Wodak & Meyer, 2001), identifying and unearthing new insights, and revising interpretations accordingly.

The first step of the analytical procedure concerns contextual examination. Since statements were published in May or June 2020, and analysis for this study took place in April 2021 it was necessary to develop a focused understanding of then-current social context. To form a more complete view, wide reading of relevant contemporaneous external texts – including news articles, statements by social activist organisations, and social media discussion – elucidated different perspectives on BLM 2020 and the social issue of racism. Importantly, this provided a useful point of comparison for the perspectives articulated in corporate activist texts that did not solely rely on the researcher's pre-conceptions.

Following the familiarisation with social context, the selected sample of texts were downloaded from each website and uploaded to the qualitative analysis software program Atlas.ti. Atlas.ti functioned as a data management tool to aid in the process of exploring, annotating, and making comparisons across texts. Initial reading of each text was open-ended, informed by theory but not restricted to the research questions, so as not to constrain or predetermine findings (Carvalho,

2008). At this stage, the thematic structure of each text was noted along with interesting or significant observations, questioning presences, emphases, and silences.

Immersion the data then involved sentence-by-sentence readings of each text, guided by the analytical framework. Analysis sought to identify how clusters of linguistic features figured in the construction of certain representations and identifications of social issues, actors, and actions. In a separate round of analysis, focused attention was given to how discursive legitimation strategies were constructed from certain representations and identifications. Each reading was guided by constant questioning of what was present and suppressed in texts, what assumptions were made, and the potential ideological functions of these textual choices.

The next stage of the procedure was to compare the texts against each other, particularly to identify commonalities and patterns suggestive of conventions of corporate activist discourse. The comparison process gave a more complete picture of the corporate activist discourse type, and concurrently helped to identify external discourses that were co-opted or hybridised within texts. Salient discursive strategies were accordingly identified by discursive practices that occurred in multiple texts and were found to carry a potential ideological function. As well as commonalities, attention was given to deviant findings that did not conform to expectations derived from the theoretical framework or patterns that emerged from analysis. Finally, the societal implications of corporate activist discourse, and its operationalisation in practice, were examined, especially the implications of this practice for maintaining and reproducing systems of dominance and exclusion, and the consideration of possible ways to overcome these challenges (Fairclough, 2013).

3.5 Methodological trustworthiness

Qualitative research methods, including CDA, that are based on hermeneutic interpretation have been scrutinised for their lack of objectivity (Breeze, 2011; Widdowson, 1998). Defenders of CDA have argued in response that objectivity is not an analytical goal, since analytical choices are necessarily selective and subjective (Fairclough, 2003). Fairclough argues for a critical realist view of CDA to ground this argument. Foregoing discussion has highlighted the distinction between the actual and the potential domains of reality. From a critical realistic perspective, another domain – the *empirical* – concerns knowledge of reality, recognising that human experience of the natural and social worlds is limited and sometimes mistaken. (Fairclough, 2003, 2005). This entails that analysis of texts, discourse, and social context is necessarily non-exhaustive and partial, and cannot establish universal truths.

As such, much discussion of methodological credibility in qualitative research centres on the issue of trustworthiness, and how this can be established. Scholars have foregrounded the need for systematicity, transparency, and rigour in qualitative research (Greckhamer & Cilesiz, 2014). Given that the analytical process in CDA is necessarily influenced by the researcher's epistemological positions, it is important to be transparent about how analysis is conducted in a systematic and

rigorous way in order to establish trustworthiness of findings. The foregoing discussion has explained in detail the steps that were taken in the methodological process, including the appropriate selection of method, sampling process, analytical framework, and explanation of the analytical procedure.

Additionally, reflexivity is considered essential for establishing transparency and trustworthiness of research (Morrow, 2005; Zienkowski, 2017). Reflexive practice requires the researcher to introspect and expound how their experiences and knowledge of the world influence the research process. Particularly, researchers have stressed the importance of adopting a mindset of intersectional awareness with regard to reflexivity (Atewologun & Mahalingam, 2016). Accordingly, the remainder of this section explains the researcher's positionality in relation to the topic under investigation.

Reflexivity

My interest in this research topic emerged from a combination of professional and lived social experience. My professional experiences in marketing and corporate affairs inform an interest in the strategic nature of the production of corporate discourse. Particularly, working as a marketing professional during BLM 2020 afforded first-hand experience of internal organisational decision-making regarding a public response to these events. As a result, I am particularly moved by the emancipatory axiology of critical theory that aims to redress social inequalities – especially the power imbalances that persist between corporate decision-makers and underrepresented individuals and groups, both within and outside organisations.

From a social standpoint, my motivation to investigate the issue of racism draws from experience. As a black woman raised in a middle-class, Western European cultural context I have experienced the effects of systemic racism in my professional and social life, but I am simultaneously aware that these experiences are moderated by socioeconomic privileges. Moreover then, I acknowledge that while racism is universally manifest, the social context I am investigating is primarily situated within the U.S., where the sociohistorical development of racism differs from my situated context. As such, I cannot make knowledge claims about the lived experiences of black Americans.

Acknowledging that my experiences and understanding cannot fully reflect social reality, I adopt a critical realist social ontology and interpretivist epistemology in this study. I concur with critical realism's pragmatic approach underscored by a judgmental rationality which recognises that, while social reality cannot be fully known, it is possible to evaluate the extent to which explanatory theories and accounts are plausible and increase understanding of the social world (Wiltshire, 2018). Judgmental rationality forms the basis upon which I have selected theories to explain the object of research, and concurrently leads me to accept that the conclusions of this study are also open to evaluation and improvement.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has explained the methodological decisions and procedures that are undertaken in this study, and how methodological choices are informed by theory and research aims. The next chapter builds on this by expounding the results of the analysis.

4. Analysis and Results

Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the main results from the critical analysis. The findings are divided into three main sections addressing the discursive construction and legitimation of each of the three main elements of corporate activism discourse, guided by their corresponding research sub-questions. Table 4.1 summarises the findings regarding the discursive constructions of the three elements of corporate activist discourse, which will be explained in turn in the subsequent sections of this chapter. During the analytical process, the Ben & Jerry's statement was found to largely contravene the identified conventions of corporate activist discourse. Accordingly, throughout the discussion of results, salient deviating evidence from the Ben & Jerry's statement is presented to demonstrate how this company differs in its approach to corporate activism.

Table 4.1

Summary of Discursive Constructions in Corporate Activist Discourse

Discursive construct	Types of meaning	Primary macro-strategies	Discursive strategies	Legitimation function
Social issue	Representation	Depoliticisation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conceptual abstraction • Agency suppression • Temporal boundary setting 	Broad acceptance of definition the issue
Company as issue manager	Identification	Self-justification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personalisation – empathy, fallibility, solidarity • Authorisation – Role authority, credential authority 	Consent to speak on the issue
Proposal for action	Representation Identification	Depoliticisation Self-justification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thematic abstraction • Evaluation – traditions, morality • Rationalisation – instrumental • Recontextualisation of corporate responsibility 	Consent to pursue favoured course of action, as justified agents of social change

4.1 Representations of racism

Analysis finds that the representation of racism in corporate activist discourse entails a macro-strategy of depoliticisation, which Fairclough (2013) describes as the “exclusion of issues and/or of people from processes of political deliberation and decision – placing them outside politics” (p. 241). The semiotic realisation of depoliticisation entails predictable discursive strategies that can be identified through certain linguistic features (Fairclough, 2013). Particularly, elements of the social are typically construed as non-agential, ahistorical, and as having categorical existence. This is evident in

representations of racism in nine of ten texts analysed. Racism is construed in ways that are abstracted from its historical, contingent, and agent-driven nature.

Agency suppression

All ten statements use various devices to articulate negative evaluation of racism. On the surface, this appears laudable and consistent with social norms. However, these stances are frequently based on an easily opposed construction of racism that circumvents its complex nature. Here it is important to distinguish between *non-racism* – defined by strategically stating opposition to extreme and overt forms of racism – and *anti-racism*, which critically acknowledges and challenges the everyday, structural, and ideological pervasion of racism in social life (King, 2016; Van Dijk, 1993).

Eight statements reference *systemic* racism, and typically use the abstract nature of the concept to evade attribution of agency. This conceptual abstraction approach helps companies to construct normatively self-evident, low commitment claims about racism. This is demonstrated by Expedia’s letter:

Extract 1:

What matters is that we as humans reject the killing of innocent people and the systemic racism that has plagued our country...we all must be a part of the solution and we each must rededicate ourselves to the cure.

Social actors are constructed as the universal “we”, to create a sense of commonality that is increased by invoking common humanity (“we *as humans*”). Meanwhile, the social agents responsible for killing and racism are suppressed. Systemic racism is discursively constructed as having non-contingent categorical existence. The plague metaphor further abstracts these issues and suppresses agency by connoting a widespread disease with a non-human origin. The reference to “cure” extends this metaphor while avoiding elaboration of what the solution entails. Here, the use of metaphor foregrounds the need for collective action to resolve racism. At the same time, it backgrounds the causal agency of social actors in sustaining racist social structures.

Agency suppression is particularly evident in discussions of racial violence. Most texts name at least one victim of racial violence, but in eight texts, responsible agents of racial violence are absent from the entire statement – as is the case in Intel’s memo, from which Extract 2 is taken:

Extract 2:

The senseless acts of racism and violence that recently took the lives of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, and threatened Christian Cooper are abhorrent and wrong.

Here “acts” are stated to have done the work of killing and threatening victims of racial violence. The nominalisation of these actions omits responsible agents. Additionally, using the phrasal verb “took the lives of”, instead of “killed”, softens the brutality of these events. The speaker uses alternative discursive devices to convey concern about racial violence without committing to condemnation of its

perpetrators. Intensifiers such as “senseless” and “abhorrent” convey a strong sense of lament. The morally evaluative term “wrong” adds further weight to the concern.

Blame attribution

Agency suppression allows speakers to avoid attributions of blame to other social actors on especially contentious topics. In the context of BLM 2020, police brutality is one such topic. Only two texts mention police. The Ben & Jerry’s statement forcefully demonstrates this:

Extract 3:

The police officer who put his knee on George Floyd’s neck and the police officers who stood by and watched didn’t just murder George Floyd, they stole him

Extract 4:

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

In Extract 3, reference to murder is more morally repugnant than killing or taking lives. “Murder” is used in verbal form to ascribe agency to police officers. The criminality of the act is enhanced by reference to theft. In Extract 4, culpability is extended to police brutality as a social practice, and white supremacy as a social structure. Beyond this extract, the entire statement emphatically places blame for systemic racism with white supremacy. This is a distinctive stance among texts analysed, especially as seven texts avoid the term “white” entirely. Bonilla-Silva (2012) coined the term “racial grammar” to describe the invisible racial hegemony in everyday social cognition and discourse that reinforces a notion of whiteness as the normative standard. Ben & Jerry’s disrupts this by not only foregrounding white dominance but confronting it.

In addition to attributing blame to others, there is a question of acknowledging corporate culpability. Companies are found to frequently decouple themselves from sociohistorical practices that structures that sustain racism. Racist practices and structures are construed in ways that place companies outside of these systems to distance themselves from blame, as in Extract 5 (Citigroup):

Extract 5:

These systemic problems will not go away until we confront them head on.

The Citigroup CFO construes the generic “we” on one side and systemic “problems” on the other. This demonstrates ideological squaring (Van Dijk, 2000), in which discursive constructions of *us* and *them* emphasise the positive attributes of the first-person collective and simultaneously cast others in a negative light. Asking readers to join in confronting a depersonalised opposition is less ideologically costly than acknowledging any agency, of companies or other social actors, in perpetuating systemic racism.

Self-presentation must be contextualised with consideration to corporate identity constructions beyond statements on BLM 2020. Consider Extract 6 (Ben & Jerry):

Extract 6:

Unless and until white America is willing to collectively acknowledge its privilege, take responsibility for its past and the impact it has on the present...the list of names that George Floyd has been added to will never end.

The othering of “white America” in this extract can be construed as placing the company outside this social structure. However, elsewhere on the corporate website, Ben & Jerry’s describes its corporate identity as “overwhelmingly white” (Ben & Jerry’s, n.d.). No other company was found to represent corporate identity in this confrontational manner.

Temporality

Racism entails current and recent events as well as long-standing practices and structures, and as such, discursive choices can provide insight to how the temporal boundaries of the discussion are set. Most statements ignore or make passing reference to the historical nature of racism. In some statements, the timescale of the issue is restricted to recent events, as in adidas’ press release:

Extract 7:

The events of the past two weeks have caused all of us to reflect on what we can do to confront the cultural and systemic forces that sustain racism.

The opening line of the press release restricts the temporal scope of the discussion to the previous fortnight. The use of present perfect tense (“have caused”) situates events in the past but also indicates continuity into the present, while the ongoing nature of racism is briefly acknowledged through the verb “sustain”.

In contrast to adidas, the Walmart CEO’s meeting remarks acknowledge both current events and long-standing practices:

Extract 8:

It’s important that we all understand that our problems, as a nation, run much deeper than one horrible event. Our nation has failed to fully acknowledge and resolve the root issues. Slavery, lynching, the concept of separate but equal and the other realities from our past have morphed into a set of systems today that are all too often, unjust.

A connection is made between present-day events and systems, and historicised practices and doctrines. There are indications, however, that this reference to history serves more to add emphasis to the message than to reflectively engage with sociohistorical systems of racist oppression. Firstly, racism is not mentioned in the extract, nor anywhere in the text up to this point. Instead there are vague allusions to “problems”, “issues”, and “systems”. The selection of extreme practices, such as lynching and slavery, emphasises severity but again, the agency of culpable social actors is suppressed, and the practices are nominalised.

4.2 Corporate identification

Personalisation

Analysis of corporate identity construction shows that all statements make use first-person narrative voice, thus giving companies a more human identity. As a discursive strategy, this can bolster legitimacy by allowing otherwise faceless corporations to give the impression of genuine care and concern by co-opting uniquely human traits. The following section highlights exemplars of three traits that were commonly used to personalise corporate identity – emotion, fallibility, and solidarity.

Emotion

Emotional devices are used extensively within statements. In some cases, this consisted of direct report of personal emotion, as demonstrated in the letter by Snap:

Extract 9:

I am heartbroken and enraged by the treatment of black people and people of color in America.

The use of singular first-person narrative voice increases personalisation. Use of extreme emotions (“heartbroken and enraged” as opposed to “sad and angry”) indicate strength of feeling.

In contrast to first-hand experience, some speakers intertextually relay the feelings of others to convey emotion. Consider Extracts 10 (Intel) and 11 (Johnson & Johnson):

Extract 10:

It's with a heavy heart that I write this note because I've heard from many of you who are feeling deep pain and sadness right now.

Extract 11:

I spent the weekend reaching out to black colleagues and friends, and their stories—like the father who drives behind his teenage daughter anytime she goes jogging because he fears for her safety—landed like a punch to the gut.

These examples demonstrate how the experiences of other persons are co-opted to build emotional intensity and prop up the speaker's emotions. In Extract 10, this is evidenced through hypotaxis – the unequal relation between the main clause and subordinate clauses (Fairclough, 2003). The speaker begins with his own emotions and, through subordinate conjunction (“because”), attributes these to the feelings of anonymised others. The speaker's emotions are expressed through metaphor (“heavy heart”) which contrasts with the more literal description of the feelings of others, unconsciously suggesting two levels of genuine emotion.

In Extract 11, the subordinate clause is parenthesised within the main clause. The speaker's actions are activated, while other actors are passivated and functionalised by their salient characteristic (“black”) to establish credibility. In the subordinate clause, the actors are also functionalised by their salient characteristics (“the father” “teenage daughter”), this time to increase emotional resonance. At the end of the main clause, the speaker's emotions are expressed through simile (“like a punch to the gut”), again contrasting with the literal fears of “the father”. In all, both

speakers recontextualise past conversations, appropriating the emotion and lived experiences of others, to supplement the intensity of their own emotions.

Fallibility

Some statements acknowledge corporate transgressions and weaknesses to pre-emptively assuage criticism of previous silence or controversies. For instance, H&M has been embroiled in multiple controversies over racism, most notably in 2018 when the company faced widespread backlash over a black child modelling a “coolest monkey in the jungle” hoodie (West, 2018). Issue managers will therefore have anticipated that addressing BLM 2020 would recall such incidents to the public conscience. Extract 12 from H&M’s news article states:

Extract 12:

We also acknowledge our past mistakes and they have made us acutely aware of how much we still need to learn. As a company, we are growing, but we can and must do better.

The use of plural first-person corporate voice (“we”, “our”) humanises the company while multiple techniques are used to de-emphasise corporate transgressions. Hedging is used (“we...acknowledge”) to mitigate the reference. Defining transgressions as “mistakes” alleviates culpability, while “past” creates temporal distance. There is more emphasis on discourse of renewal (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2002); the point is belaboured by clauses stressing growth, and improvement. The clauses “we are growing” and “we still need to learn” have a self-infantilising effect that stresses innocence as well as fallibility.

The imperative of renewal (“must do better”), is common in multiple statements. Expedia’s letter references this imperative five times, for example:

Extract 13:

I am not naive to the fact that we must do better

Modality is commonly used in discursive identity construction to convey a sense of commitment (Fairclough, 2003). Inherent within the word “must” is a sense of certitude and obligation, and as such, this modal term is used frequently in statements to give the impression of conviction. However, modal terms also usher in strategic ambiguity (Machin & Mayr, 2012). In Extracts 12 and 13, it is not clear from what authority the imperative to do better is commanded. Specificity and temporality about how and when these companies will “do better” is also omitted. Consequently, modal terms allow evasion and prevarication about power and responsibility. In all, the use of absolution and renewal tactics demonstrate how corporate activist texts are not solely oriented towards social change but also draw on discourses of reputation management.

Solidarity

Solidarity entails supporting and uniting with others, usually grounded in a common cause. It allows the companies to build legitimacy through the expression of committed support. CEO-authored statements make extensive use of this technique as in Extracts 14 (Walmart) and 15 (Intel):

Extract 14:

Let me say clearly to our Black and African American associates and communities, we hear you. We see you. I want you to know you are valued. You are loved members of our family. We need you to know you are not hurting alone. That I and others are hurting with you.

Extract 15:

To our black employees and communities inside and outside Intel, I hear you and see you. You are hurting deeply. You are angry. You are tired. When any part of our One Intel team is hurting, we all hurt. We stand with you and support you.

These extracts use very similar language and sentence structure to express solidarity. The addressees of both texts shift from global employees to black employees and communities. Sequences of short sentences create the impression of emphatic speech. The use of terms such as “family” and “team” bolster the sense of unity.

At the surface level, these extracts demonstrate a strong sense of support. However, a more detailed examination reveals some important considerations. In both extracts, the speaker oscillates between singular and plural first-person voice. As such, it is unclear whose voices are represented and particularly, who is included and excluded in the construction of the corporate “we”. Additionally, both CEOs also speak for the people they are addressing, reporting how black employees and communities feel without qualification. Speaking on behalf of others entails an implicit power relation that relies on the unspoken authority that executive leaders inherently possess. Both statements also seek to demonstrate empathy by expressing mutual feelings. However, mutuality leads to equalisation that obscures relations of power and fails to acknowledge how groups of people are affected differently by racism.

A noticeable pattern with these expressions of solidarity is that they consist almost entirely of platitudes – statements that attempt to sound profound but carry little meaning. The clauses “we see you” and “we hear you” are not meant in a literal sense, and essentially amount to an expression of acknowledgment and recognition. The metaphorical phrasing conceals the banality of low-commitment expressions. Platitudinal language is also evident in the intertextual appropriation of the social movement slogan, “Black Lives Matter” – which is used in five statements – exemplified by Extracts 16 (Intel) and 17 (PepsiCo):

Extract 16:

Black lives matter. Period.

Extract 17:

I want to be very clear: Black Lives Matter, to our company and to me.

The slogan is borrowed to show solidarity and awareness and thus build credibility in speaking out. While the simplifying and unifying functions of slogans are important for social movements (Denton, 1980) their utility in the context of a CEO addressing employees is questionable. It invites the question of why these speakers feel the need to affirm, and intensify, the normatively self-evident idea

that the lives of black people have value. This demonstrates the challenge of recontextualising the language of social movements within corporate discourse.

A further point to raise on expressions of solidarity focuses on its implications for in- and out-group construction, as illustrated by Extracts 18 (H&M) and 19 (adidas):

Extract 18:

We stand with and support the black community – today, everyday [*sic*] and everywhere to end racism in all forms.

Extract 19:

We recognize the immense contribution of the Black community to our success

The use of personal pronouns (“we”, “our”) and definite article (“the”) in these extracts create an othering effect that distinguishes between the company and “the black community”. Homogenisation and use of definite article (“the”) constructs black Americans as *the Other*, as is typical of the strategy of positive self-presentation (Van Dijk, 1993). In both extracts, the corporate “we” is the active agent, while black Americans are aggregated and passivated to discursively prop up companies as they seek approval for their banal support or recognition of black people. The seemingly subtle choice of phrasing reveals how in-group and out-group membership is constructed, and particularly, how corporate identity is unconsciously construed. Othering implies that black people are not included in the discursive construction of corporate self-identity. This can be understood as a demonstration of racial grammar; the “we” in this sentence is not simply the corporate “we”, but the *white* corporate “we” that reflects the typical social reality of Western corporations. As such, the discursive construction of corporate identity both reflects and reinforces the reality of social practice.

Authorisation

The second main category of identity construction is concerned with how legitimacy is established through discursive devices that enhance the authority of the speaker, or the company, in speaking out. Two salient sub-strategies are identified – personal authority and credential authority.

Personal authority

Personal authority refers to the legitimacy that is ascribed to an individual due to their role within an institution (Van Leeuwen, 2007). Such positions of authority typically do not need to be qualified or justified, as power is inherited and recognised within the status. Some statements use executive role identity to strengthen legitimacy. Consider Extract 20 from Johnson & Johnson:

Extract 20:

As the CEO of the world’s largest healthcare company, I must state unequivocally that racism in any form is unacceptable, and that black lives matter.

Role identity is established at the beginning of the sentence, and sense of authority is increased by reference to scale (“world”) and superlative (“largest”). The speaker infers that – but does not explain why – his role identity demands the expression of a non-racist stance. This example demonstrates how

personal authority is invoked to bolster legitimate power. As another example of non-racism, the sentiment expressed is unremarkable and relies on reference to authority to increase its sense of profundity.

The following extract from the Citigroup blog post also refers to personal authority in a different way:

Extract 21:

Even though I'm the CFO of a global bank, the killings of George Floyd in Minnesota, Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia and Breonna Taylor in Kentucky are reminders of the dangers Black Americans like me face in living our daily lives.

Like Extract 20, personal authority is inherently invoked by stating the CFO role and is intensified by reference to scale (“global”). At the same time, the CFO seeks to establish commonality and equality with other black Americans, as evidenced by the preposition “like” and the first-person plural “our”. However, the emphasis on role in the first clause invites questioning given that the expression of commonality does not require it. “Even though” functions to create contrast and imply something unexpected. The implication is that the threat of racial violence is in defiance of the social norms expected of the CFO role. Thus, by contrast, it is implied that the danger of racial violence is not unexpected for black Americans who do not occupy such social positions. By making this norm violation the salient focus, a status distinction is created between the black CFO and black Americans in general.

Credential authority

Credential authority borrows from Van Leeuwen’s (2007) concept of expert authority, in which legitimacy is ascribed to intellectual experts. In credential authority, “expertise” on an issue need not be intellectual and can be possessed due to relevant qualities such as background, experiences, or accomplishments that indicate suitability to speak on an issue. Unlike personal and expert authority that are inherent within a role, credential authority is typically non-obvious and is therefore expounded in text. Another distinction is that credential authority can be possessed by organisations as well as persons. Individual credential authority is expressed in Extracts 22 (Expedia) and 23 (Snap):

Extract 22:

I grew up in Greenwich Village in NYC in the 70s and I can tell you that in many ways my community and society seemed to have more racial diversity and acceptance than our country does now.

Extract 23:

I was made aware of the struggle for freedom, equality, and justice from a young age. My father served as the general counsel of the Christopher Commission...created to investigate racism and excessive force in the Los Angeles Police Department following the Rodney King beating here in Los Angeles in 1991.

In these extracts, the speakers – who are both white – use their background to qualify their authority to speak on issues related to racism. In Extract 22, the speaker references Greenwich Village, a location famed in American culture for its bohemianism, counterculture, and social movements during the 20th century (Strausbaugh, 2013). This aspect of his background functions to permit the speaker to make an authoritative knowledge claim (“I can tell you”) about race relations in 1970s America. The speaker does not elaborate any justification for this claim, relying on the presumed self-evidence of cultural myth. However, the use of abstraction (“many ways”) and hedging (“seemed to”) betray a lack of conviction in this knowledge claim. The claim relies on fallacy of anecdotal evidence – making an unsubstantiated generalisation based on personal experience alone, since simply living in a particular place does not impart capacity to understand or define the experiences of other people in the same society.

Extract 23 shows the first sentences of a five-paragraph account within Snap’s internal letter that the CEO dedicates to retelling his encounters with the struggle for racial justice. Much like Extract 22, reference to social context presumes the reader’s knowledge of sociocultural history that is used to prop up his stated long-standing awareness of racial injustice. However, this credential authority claim entails a fallacy of honour by association – as the speaker assumes his credentials by invoking the credential authority of others, and there is no elaboration of how this relation entails the speaker’s own social awareness. This is a recurrent fallacy in the Snap letter:

Extract 24:

At Stanford, I lived in Ujamaa my Senior year, a dorm on campus that is dedicated to the black community (and in which the majority of residents are black).

Extract 24 is a variation on the non-racist “I have black friends” trope, that uses association to imply the absence of prejudice (Winslow, 2004). Parenthesis is used to over-explain and add emphasis to this association. As with Extract 22, there is a presumption that living alongside others entails shared understanding of their experiences.

As well as individuals, companies can gain credential authority to speak, or be spoken on behalf of, on social issues. Multiple statements made use of this by reporting a history of engagement on issues related to racism. Ben & Jerry’s reports their credentials on the BLM movement specifically:

Extract 25:

Four years ago, we publicly stated our support for the Black Lives Matter movement.

Here temporality specifies length of engagement, and the referenced 2016 corporate statement on BLM is hypertextually linked to back up the claim of a history of engagement. PepsiCo references a much longer history to report their credentials on racial equality:

Extract 26:

The journey for racial equality has long been part of our company's DNA, going back to our first Black sales team in 1947 and the legacy of Harvey Russell.

The journey metaphor suggests progress towards the goal of racial equality. Additionally, the metaphor of “DNA” is a classic use of corporate jargon to suggest that the attainment of this goal is fundamental to corporate culture. Reliance on metaphors in Extract 26 contrasts with the straightforwardness of Extract 25. Hypertextuality is also used here to back-up the claim with evidence. The linked webpage states “PepsiCo has a strong legacy of leading in diversity practices, starting in the 1940s as a pioneer in hiring African American salespeople” (PepsiCo, n.d.). PepsiCo’s credential authority is thus based on historic actions that are recontextualised in the present day as evidence of a long-standing commitment to diversity. However, representing the act of hiring one black sales team as a diversity effort is questionable, especially as diversity – as an organisational concept – was non-existent in the 1940s. The recontextualisation of this historical act to add weight to PepsiCo’s present-day credentials is illustrative of tokenism, the limited and symbolic inclusion of minorities used to mask inequality (Greene, 1990).

The invocation of credential authority is particularly indicative that the self-justificatory function of corporate activist discourse entails a promotional message. In constructing identity as legitimate social issue advocates, companies and corporate personnel simultaneously seek to improve their public image through positive self-presentation by referencing experiences and anecdotes that are often only tangentially related to the issue at hand. Such credentials are typically embellished by fallacies or metaphors so as to obscure their tenuous connections to anti-racism. The exception in this case is the statement by Ben & Jerry’s, where the invocation of credential authority is more informative than performative since their credentials are stated straightforwardly and their previous support for BLM is clearly relevant to the issue at hand. Extract 25 is consistent with an unconventional characteristic of the Ben & Jerry’s statement: there is little evidence of the self-justification macro-strategy and considerably more of the text is dedicated to discussing the issue of racism and actions to address it.

4.3 Discursive construction of transformative action

The proposal of actions is the third main element of corporate activist discourse and forms the central communicative objective of corporate activist texts. This section first explains how the legitimisation of actions proceeds through multiple discursive strategies to present a favourable course of action in line with organisational interests. In representing actions and constructing corporate identity, strategic depoliticisation backgrounds racism entirely in favour of consensus-seeking constructions of social change. The operationalisation of this discourse and implications for the limitation and obstruction of socially transformative action are then discussed. The section ends with a discussion of how the Ben & Jerry’s statement differs in its approach to transformative action.

Thematic abstraction

An outline of the discursive progression of texts helps to explain how depoliticisation of social change is construed through discourse practice. Speakers typically begin by defining racism as a social issue through strategically managed representations of racist events, practices, and structures. Next, to mediate the process of moving from the “is” of racism to the “ought” of resolving it, the discussion becomes increasingly abstracted to broader societal themes that diminish the salience of race – for example, social inclusion and equality. This mediating step allows companies to finally propose actions that purport to achieve broad and depoliticised definitions of social change, while backgrounding the issue of racism entirely. To demonstrate this discursive progression, it is useful to examine what is here referred to as the *thematic turn* in corporate activist texts. The thematic turn is given by the strategic shift in discourse from racism to abstract issues. In some texts, this turn is more evident than others. Consider Extract 27 from Citigroup:

Extract 27:

Racism continues to be at the root of so much pain and ugliness in our society from the streets of Minneapolis to the disparities inflicted by COVID-19. As long as that's true, America's twin ideals of freedom and equality will remain out of reach.

I'm proud to work at Citi, an organisation that cherishes diversity and inclusion and is willing to stand up for those values when they are threatened, whether it's working to close the gender pay gap in our industry or calling out the violence of white supremacists in Charlottesville.

This extract begins with a discussion of the ongoing prevalence of racism as a social harm. In the second sentence, recourse to widely accepted cultural and moral goods serves as the justification for action. The speaker then presents Citigroup as an agent of social change, legitimating this claim by reference to values of diversity and inclusion (D&I). The introduction of D&I allows the speaker to move into more familiar corporate territory. However, it also engenders false equivalence between D&I and anti-racism, by equivocating between improving internal organisational practices and responding to an external racist event. Consequently, the contentious issue of racism is transmuted into the less political concept of D&I, which is in turn recontextualised to represent corporate responsibility practices as evidence of activism.

Extract 27 provides evidence for the justification to act and the construction of social change agent identity as two legitimating steps that predicate presenting the favoured course of action. Additionally, it demonstrates how corporate responsibility practices are recontextualised to infer pre-existing commitment to transformative action. The following section explicates these three steps of thematic abstraction in more detail with examples from other texts.

Justification to act

As stated, discussion of actions typically involves a shift in discourse from a description of social issues to a proposal of what ought to be done in response (Fairclough, 2013). The “ought”

entails a value judgement, and therefore, taking action is justified by invoking certain values. The justification to act draws on widely accepted cultural and moral discourses to achieve broad social assent.

Cultural values

As demonstrated by the Citigroup blog post, fulfilment of traditional American ideals is a strategy used to justify the need for redress to bring about social change. Both Snap and Ben & Jerry's make use of this strategy:

Extract 28:

we should create a process that reflects American values and helps our nation to make the necessary change and heal... United in the striving for freedom, equality, and justice for all.

Extract 29:

We have to use this moment to accelerate our nation's long journey towards justice and a more perfect union.

The “we” in these extracts refers to the American “we”. The use of modal terms “should” and “have to” creates an imperative to act. There is a strong emphasis on common American identity (“our nation”). In the Snap letter, Americanism is a belaboured theme; the speaker repeatedly stresses values such as “freedom” and “equality” that are essentialised in liberal democratic ideology. In Extract 29, allusion to the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution (“justice”, “a more perfect union”) adds gravitas as change is presented as an ongoing “journey” of progress within the existing social order. The invocation of tradition in these extracts entails a strong sense of American idealism that romanticises the struggle for racial justice, by glossing over the persistence of racism in American social structures in favour of a patriotic unity narrative. Hoffmann et al. (2020) note that *American Dream* rhetoric is so powerfully culturally embedded, that its political nature as a tool of neoliberal ideology is elided and “an agonistic contest becomes impossible” (p. 170).

Moral values

Van Leeuwen (2007) explains that the legitimation function of moral discourses is due to the commonsense cultural status of moral values that helps to ensure widespread assent. Several statements use moralisation to justify remedial actions. For instance, some speakers directly reference moral action, as demonstrated by Expedia:

Extract 30:

We all must look in our hearts and do what is right – that is how change happens.

Consistent with a common linguistic theme, this sentence uses the modal “must” to give the appearance of certitude. Modality is combined with morality as the speaker references a deontological obligation to do what is right. Still, it is unclear exactly what actions are to be taken or what constitutes “right” action, and this is therefore a moral platitude.

An example of less direct reference to moral values comes from Snap:

Extract 31:

We are standing with all those who stand for peace, love, and justice and we will use our platform to promote good rather than evil...we must embrace profound change. Not merely a change in our country, but a change in our hearts. We must carry the light of peace and share the embrace of love with all humankind.

This extract demonstrates extensive use of moral abstraction (Van Leeuwen, 2007). Here the goal of social change is interpolated in moral discourse and distilled to qualities that espouse abstract ideals. To emphasise its rightness, change is abstracted from the contentious issue of racism and instead recontextualised in the pursuit of acceptable moral virtues such as peace, love, and justice. The conflict between good and evil is a classic literary device used to distinguish between right and wrong but, in this context, it sets up a simplistic binary understanding of social reality, that purports to resolve social issues through recourse to moral platitudes.

Identity construction as social change agents

The second legitimating step before presenting a course of action is that companies explain why they are the right actors to bring about social change. This identity construction process is distinct from the previously discussed identification as spokespersons on racism. Here, companies seek positive self-presentation as activists. Justification of social change agent identity uses the strategy of instrumental rationality (Van Leeuwen, 2007), by discussing action in terms of purpose and goals, and presenting agents as goal-oriented. For instance, the Johnson & Johnson CEO issues the following task to employees:

Extract 32:

If recent events have been a revelation to you, let that serve as a challenge to step up and do more as peaceful and determined agents of change—a challenge I myself am determined to embrace.

In this extract, social change agency is located in the individual personnel that make up the company. The speaker asserts his own social change agency through implicit assertion of authority. Hortative mood (“let that...”) authoritatively exhorts employees to take action, while intensification (“I myself”) stresses an implied deviance from the norm as entailed by a CEO acting as an activist. However, the purposeful action is intransitive and ambiguous (“step up and do more”). Repetition of “determined” strengthens the sense of commitment, although, in the second instance of the term, predictive modality commits the CEO to a weaker truth claim than the alternative, “I will embrace”.

The Walmart CEO locates social change agency in the company itself:

Extract 33:

To influence and lead change, we are going to use the power of Walmart to invest resources and develop strategies to increase fairness, equity, and justice in aspects of everyday life.

Authority is also invoked here through elaboration of leadership, power, and resources of the company. The sentence begins with the objective of social change, followed by the steps that will lead to achievement of this goal. Presenting outcomes in terms of acceptable and ambiguously construed moral goods entails depoliticisation of transformative action to address racism.

Recontextualisation of corporate responsibility practice

Discursive analysis finds that companies recontextualise existing corporate responsibility practices in discussions of proposals for action, in order to give the impression of deep and long-term commitment. This process is partially discursive, as corporate responsibility discourses and texts are appropriated in the discursive construction of corporate activist actions. However, it is also important to recognise the non-discursive function of this. Considering the operationalisation of this discourse in practice, the co-optation of actions that are already being carried out by corporate CSR functions lowers the costs for companies to commit to transformative action and helps to maintain the status quo. Consider Extract 34 from Walmart:

Extract 34:

Like all of our sustainability efforts, social justice and equity are essential parts of our core business.

Equivalence is constructed between sustainability and social justice but not elaborated. The aim is to demonstrate commitment to social justice by juxtaposing this with the broader CSR practice of sustainability. Intel's memo uses more explicit recontextualisation of CSR:

Extract 35:

More broadly, though, we have a greater responsibility to drive change in the world. That is why our 2030 corporate responsibility strategy and goals include a deep focus on diversity and inclusion

This extract begins by setting up the corporate “we” as agents of change at a global level. An implicit value assumption moralises social change as a responsibility. Intertextual reference to Intel's 10-year CSR strategy is used to imply anti-racist actions through D&I. However, while this is indirectly reported as a “deep focus”, the hypertextually linked news release does not mention the term “diversity”. The concept is only briefly alluded to through the aggregation and passivation of underrepresented groups in the goal of “achieving greater levels of women and minorities in senior and technical positions” (Intel, 2020). Such language functionalises prospective employees into a managerial objective, a means to an organisational end.

What is evident in the discursive constructions of all three steps of thematic abstraction – justification to act, identity construction as social change agents, and recontextualisation of corporate responsibility – is how the objective of social change is expressed while excluding the issue it purports to solve. The term “racism” is entirely absent in Extracts 28 to 35 and, in all but one source text, the issue is not mentioned again beyond the extracted section. Accordingly, it becomes evident how the backgrounding of racism and depoliticisation of social change performs strategic functions consistent with the pursuit of organisation mission. By excluding the contentious nature of racism and

transformative action, companies can ensure that their proposals achieve broad acceptance by external publics, reinforce positive self-representation, and lower the cost of commitment to social change.

Obstructing social transformation

The foregoing discussion explains how companies set preferred courses of action and maintenance of the status quo through strategic discursive moves of depoliticisation and exclusion of racism. This process limits the possibility of social transformation. In the remainder of this section, it is argued that the depoliticisation not only limits social transformation but actively impedes it by contributing to the propagation of racism.

Externalising responsibility

Most companies are found to construct actions as philanthropy and positive action measures *in place of* anti-racism efforts to address root causes of racism. Disengaging with confrontational causal factors, companies opt for more easily accepted positive action solutions that focus on socioeconomic outcomes (Van Dijk, 1993). This sets up a false equivalence between promoting social mobility for black Americans and eliminating systemic racism that oppresses them. Consider Extract 36 from PepsiCo:

Extract 36:

So today, I am announcing the next step in PepsiCo's journey for racial equality: a more than \$400 million set of initiatives over five years to lift up Black communities and increase Black representation at PepsiCo. These initiatives comprise a holistic effort for PepsiCo to walk the talk of a leading corporation and help address the need for systemic change.

Noticeably, the nominalisation of “Black representation” backgrounds PepsiCo as the agent responsible for creating the implied conditions of underrepresentation. The phrasing is also evident of the aggregating and passivating language used in Intel’s discussion of diversity (Extract 35). The representation of actions is centred around PepsiCo and their ongoing “journey”. The clause structure reveals that the primary goal is to affirm the company’s identity as a “leading corporation” while the achievement of “systemic change” is subordinated, hedged by the verb “help”.

The theme of “lifting up” black people and communities as stated in Extract 36 is recurrent. For instance, adidas and H&M refer to black empowerment (adidas, 2020; Helmersson, 2020). These statements focus on actions that may indirectly relieve some effects of racism, but do not confront causal structures and agents. Approaching solutions in this way implicitly externalises responsibility to black Americans for the racism that oppresses them. It insinuates that systemic racism and racial violence can be resolved if black Americans simply have better socioeconomic prospects. Consistent with the pervasion of racial grammar, systems of white racial dominance within American society are concealed to allow the status quo to remain intact. Thus, companies position themselves as altruistic philanthropists relieving aggregated black Americans of socioeconomic burdens that are not ascribed

a cause, but simply presumed to exist. The externalisation of responsibility is consistent with Van Dijk's (1993) critique of elite liberal discourse on racism:

euphemism and agentless passivity are combined to conceal the precise role of the white group in this process of "imposing handicaps." Indeed, this formulation could even be read as if their [black] race were the cause of the handicaps, and not white U.S. citizens and institutions (p. 192).

Generalisation and stereotyping

Assumptions about the socioeconomic status of black Americans perpetuate racial stereotypes and generalisations. Consider Extract 37 from Walmart discussing a proposed centre for racial equity:

Extract 37:

Because we want to address systematic racism in society head-on and accelerate change...The goal of the center is to help advance economic opportunity and healthier living, including issues surrounding the social determinants of health, strengthening workforce development and related educational systems, and support criminal justice reform with an emphasis on examining barriers to opportunity faced by those exiting the system.

Self-presentation of Walmart as an altruistic agent of social change is achieved through repeated emphasis on the narrative of aid ("advance", "strengthening", "support"). Implicit within Walmart's proposals is the generalising presupposition that people who are oppressed by systemic racism necessarily lack social mobility in areas of wealth, health, and education. Intersectional social categories that affect socioeconomic conditions are overlooked. Hardships are thus essentialised as a racial trait, ignoring that racism does not solely or universally manifest through socioeconomic hardship.

The discussion of criminal justice also entails stereotypical criminalisation of black Americans while preserving the social order. In discussion of criminal justice, racist practices and agents within this system are excluded. Instead the focus is on "those" presumed black criminals, and "examining", but not removing, the non-agential "barriers" that impede their re-integration into society. Thus, the political matter of criminal justice reform is suppressed, in favour of addressing the lack of post-incarceration socioeconomic opportunities, while leaving the system itself intact.

Much like the Walmart remarks, multiple statements present the amelioration of socioeconomic conditions as the only route to social change, embodying a "there is no alternative" strategy (Esposito, 2011; Fairclough, 2003). This is a typical move of depoliticisation, that seeks to remove contestation from processes of social change and focuses instead on resolving issues within the existing social order. Distilling racial equality and justice to matters of socioeconomic fulfilment espouses the market fundamentalism of neoliberal ideology that supposes that all social problems can be resolved through market rationality (Esposito, 2011).

Politicisation

The findings show that the Ben & Jerry's statement largely eschews the typical strategies of corporate activist discourse, although cultural values are invoked in the closing line of the statement to broaden the appeal of their stance. This statement's approach to the issue of racism and transformative action places these constructs firmly within politics. Rather than recourse to CSR and philanthropic quick-fixes, actions specifically address agents and structures that perpetuate racism. A range of social actors are discursively included in the process of change, rather than the proposition of a singular course of action taken on by the company alone. Consider Extracts 38 and 39:

Extract 38:

First, we call upon President Trump, elected officials, and political parties to commit our nation to a formal process of healing and reconciliation. . . the President must take the first step by disavowing white supremacists and nationalist groups that overtly support him

Extract 39:

Third, we support Floyd's family's call to create a national task force that would draft bipartisan legislation aimed at ending racial violence and increasing police accountability.

Extracts 38 and 39 stand in contrast to previous examples, in that the issue of racism remains clearly present in the proposal of transformative actions. Instead of abstracting discussion to the objective of social change, proposals focus on concrete actions to tackle racist practices and structures such as white nationalism, racial violence, and police brutality. Additionally, many social actors are activated alongside the company, including then-president Trump, officials, and the family of George Floyd. Exhortative ("we call upon") and imperative ("the President must") language is used to urge and demand action from political elites. The "healing" metaphor is not used to evade specifics but is immediately followed by an elaboration of how this can take place. References to reconciliation and bipartisanship are indicative of the liberal ideal of political consensus-seeking through deliberative, democratic discussion in the public sphere. Thus, from a liberal perspective, the statement espouses politicisation. However, from an emancipatory agonistic perspective, the orientation towards consensus and the suggestion that racism can be ended within the existing social order must be challenged. While the statement calls for a political process of change, the proposed tasks of redressing racism are allocated to powerful political elites, thus excluding disempowered people and their perspectives from decision-making processes.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has discussed the main results of the analysis, accompanied by noteworthy examples from the texts in the research sample. The findings presented capture the conventions of corporate activist discourse as identified in this study by patterns that emerged from analysis. The final chapter discusses the main conclusions that are drawn from these findings.

5. Conclusion

Chapter overview

The present study has explored how corporate activist discourse has addressed the issue of racism in response to BLM 2020. Particularly, the strategic function of corporate activism has been analytically critiqued in order to understand its implications for social transformation. The findings have revealed how companies deploy discursive constructions and legitimations that protect and advance organisational interests at the expense of social change. This study provides a preliminary starting point for understanding the conventions of corporate activist discourse, which has emerged as a discernible discourse type but has not been extensively researched. Ultimately, there is a need for further critical scholarship that scrutinises the label of “activist” as applied to companies. Additionally, the researcher calls for further research to develop models to ameliorate the practice of corporate activism informed by critical perspectives.

5.1 Answer to the research question

This study has set out to answer the research question: *How do companies strategically manage the social issue of racism in corporate activist discourse?* From the results of the analysis, the answer to this question is based on salient patterns and findings that emerged through critical analysis as conventions of corporate activist discourse on BLM 2020. The study concludes that the strategic management of racism in corporate activist discourse is typically characterised by a macro-strategy of depoliticisation. Based on the findings, depoliticisation with respect to corporate activism is given by the strategic exclusion of perspectives, issues, and people from public discussion that seeks to preserve organisational interests and maintain the dominant neoliberal social order. The macro-strategy of self-justification was found to reinforce and be reinforced by depoliticisation. In line with Fairclough’s (2013) idea of promotional culture, corporate activist discourse serves an underlying function of positive self-presentation and reputation management for companies.

The crucial role of discourse in the realisation of these strategies is given by the way in which representational and identificational meanings are worked together to create preferred discursive constructions of issues, companies, and actions. Additionally, in accordance with the SIM model, discursive strategies of legitimation were used to justify preferred constructions of these concepts that might otherwise be subject to contention. Preferred constructions were necessary to manage the issue of racism in a way that ensured assent from external publics, increased reputational benefits, and excluded contestation while minimising the cost of redressing the issue. In short, the management of racism functions to engender organisational benefits that ultimately improve the bottom line, while minimising threats to the pursuit of organisational mission. This was made clear through analysis guided by the research sub-questions. Each research sub-question addressed one of the three discursive constructs of corporate activist discourse and analysis revealed how the macro-strategy of

depoliticisation mutually reinforced self-justification and legitimation strategies in the processes of meaning-making and justification.

The Ben & Jerry's statement is the exception to the typical conventions of corporate activist discourse identified in this study. As the company embeds social justice in its organisational mission (Ben & Jerry's, n.d), the pursuit of their organisational mission is not threatened by taking a confrontational anti-racist position and committing to social change. The case of Ben & Jerry's indicates that the strategic management of racism by social activist companies presents less harmful obstruction to social change. However, from an agonist perspective, Ben & Jerry's statement does not go far enough to embrace conflict. Thus, the emancipatory agonistic critique persists in challenging the hegemonic dominance that is reinforced when companies embrace corporate activism while maintaining the neoliberal status quo.

5.2 Summary of research findings

In line with Fairclough's (2013) formulation of the semiotic realisation of the depoliticisation macro-strategy, racism was found to be discursively represented as non-contingent, ahistorical, and non-agential. Depoliticised constructions of racism also reinforced corporate self-justification. In accordance with Van Dijk's (1993) finding that elites strategically distance themselves from racism, companies suppressed their participation in the reproduction of white racial dominance in Western society. While companies paid lip-service to admonishing systemic racism, there was little acknowledgement of the agent-driven causes of these systems.

Through discursive constructions of corporate identity, companies and executives legitimised themselves as equals sharing common humanity with the reader and, paradoxically, also as leaders in a position of authority over the reader. This finding supports Fairclough's (2003) idea of *mixed identities*, that navigates the incongruence between "the leader and the 'normal person'" (p. 181), driven by a focus on building an aesthetic public image. The findings also support Fairclough's (2013) theorisation that the ambiguous and fluid "we" identity is important for depoliticisation, as it allows the speaker to "dedifferentiate potentially antagonistic identities" (p. 246) by making ideological claims on behalf of diverse social groups. Thus, identity constructions reinforce the macro-strategy of depoliticisation, smoothing over potential conflict by authoritatively claiming to represent the perspectives of comparatively disempowered constituencies.

Discursive justifications for transformative action were accompanied by the introduction of the social change agent identity. Identification as social change agents also reinforced the strategy of depoliticisation, indicated by thematic abstraction that increasingly backgrounded the political issue of racism and simultaneously constructing harmonistic meanings of social change. The justification for socially transformative action was found to draw on external discourses that carry hegemonic ideological weight, helping to foster consensus and reduce contestation. This finding is in line with the legitimatory function of moral and cultural discourses that has been theorised in critical

scholarship (Hoffmann et al., 2020; Van Leeuwen, 2007). As well as this ideological function, interdiscursivity performed a pragmatic function, drawing on the discourse of corporate responsibility practice to reduce commitment to action.

Finally, the overarching strategy of depoliticisation, and its underlying neoliberal ideology, were found to propagate social harms by reproducing racist practices and attitudes, despite claims to the contrary. The findings particularly provide evidence for Van Dijk's (1993) explication of elite liberal discourse on racial issues. Such discourse is characterised by paternalistic constructions of the majority-minority group relationship that typically lead to the reproduction of stereotypes, including stereotypes of criminality and hardship. These assumptions and stereotypes were prevalent in texts analysed, demonstrating the dominance of the white liberal perspective in corporate activist discourse.

In accordance with Ciszek and Logan's (2018) discussion of Ben & Jerry's as a company that embodies corporate political advocacy, the Ben & Jerry's statement was confirmed to be a deviant case, mostly breaking with the identified conventions of corporate activist discourse. The company's statement was found to use fewer discursive strategies that engender depoliticisation and self-justification. The statement espoused the political nature of racism, ascribing blame for racist social structures and practices to white racial dominance. Accordingly, the company proposed inherently political actions and sought to include a wide range of social actors.

5.3 Theoretical and practical implications

The findings of this study indicate that there is a need to critically examine how the normative ideas about corporate activism in academic scholarship are reflected in organisational practice. The results suggest that the conceptual distinction that scholars have drawn between the CSR and corporate activism is blurred in discursive and organisational practice. In their statements, many companies recontextualised corporate responsibility practices, such as sustainability and D&I, while representing these practices as actions of corporate activism. In operationalising this discourse as organisational practice, the integration of corporate activism within CSR departments, that focus on stakeholder deliberation and organisation mission, is likely to protract the depoliticisation and marketisation of actions to address social issues.

At the theoretical level, scholars have asserted that CSR is differentiated from corporate activism by its focus on issues that are widely accepted by stakeholders. However, the present study finds that it is exactly this broad societal acceptance that companies aim for when engaging in corporate activism. Furthermore, most statements were found to be significantly dedicated to corporate self-positioning, and this promotional function of corporate activism indicates that the practice may be more driven by improving the bottom line than has been suggested in literature. The pertinent theoretical contention is not to establish whether companies are primarily driven by social or organisational objectives. Rather, given that companies are at least partly driven by strategic

organisational interests, there is a need for more scholarship that critically considers the implications of this for the ability of corporate activism to achieve social change.

The study advances emancipatory agonism as a potential avenue for further critical examination of the impact of corporate activism on social change. While analysis found that the approach taken by Ben & Jerry's has the greatest proximity to embodying the social change orientation of social movement activism, from an agonistic perspective this approach still entails the exclusion of contestation and maintains the dominance of powerful elites. The agonistic critique therefore draws out the difficulty of integrating emancipatory social transformation within corporate practice. A question therefore arises of how agonism can develop critical *praxis* with regard to corporate activism. That is, how agonism can inform the amelioration of corporate activism in theory but also in practice. Given that the theoretical ideal of unimpeded conflict and contestation is impractical for social interaction, there is a need for research that further addresses how agonistic theory can be practically applied to corporate activism.

In the discussion of theoretical debate (see Chapter 2) it was noted that PR scholars have begun to develop ways to apply agonism to public communications. One potential avenue for greater exploration in research is the social integration model of PR (Macnamara, 2015). This model is anchored in practical steps to foster the inclusion of diverse perspectives by consulting external PR advisors less prone to conflict of interests, instilling an organisational culture of openness to conflict and opposition, and implementing mechanisms to facilitate active listening and engagement with publics. While the approach proposed by this model is far from being realised, Macnamara (2015) explains that continued external pressure on companies to justify their social beneficence indicates the need for academic research to "make space for new theories and models" (p. 344) that address how corporate communication practices can promote social benefits instead of sustaining the dominance of organisational interests.

5.4 Social implications

In the three-dimensional framework of CDA adopted in this study, analysis of social practice uncovered the societal implications of the hegemonic ideological perspectives embedded in corporate activist discourse. Conventional actions proposed in corporate activist discourse were not found to be socially transformative. Rather actions either promoted social stagnation, through a reliance on the maintenance of existing practices, or were socially regressive by reinforcing racist practices and structures and reproducing racist attitudes through stereotypes.

What underlies the social harms engendered by the discursive and non-discursive practice of corporate activism is the dominant neoliberal market ideology that underlies modern-day corporate activity. The notion that corporate activism is oriented towards positive social change does not give due attention to the antagonistic relationship between social movement activism and the neoliberal order (Della Porta & Diani, 2006). This conflict is captured by Friedman's (1970) polemic on the

social responsibility of business, in which he decries corporate claims to promote social goodwill as “tactics approaching fraud” (para. 27) and famously concludes that the only responsibility of a company is “to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits” (para. 33).

The conclusion of this study therefore concurs with Hoffmann et al.’s (2020) suggestion that scholars have been too hasty in ascribing the “activist” label to companies. Far from embodying the activist objective of social transformation, companies strategically place themselves in the neutral middle ground. Companies straddle controversial social issues by appropriating the language and identity of social activism to give the appearance of an emphatic stance. At the same time, these stances are designed to avoid causing offence by concealing causal agents and structures. The advocacy embraced by most companies might therefore more accurately be described as *tactivism* – a neologism that is proposed here to capture the preoccupation with both *tact* and *tactics* in corporate activist discourse. Tact is evident in the ways companies skilfully manoeuvre social issues in ways that foster consensus and avoid confrontation. Tactics embody the fundamentally calculated approach to corporate activism that seeks to further organisational objectives governed by the ideology of neoliberal capitalism. As the SIM model explains, corporate activism involves careful planning from the moment an issue is identified. Companies that proceed from the perception that social movement activism is a threat to their organisational mission that must be managed, will impose limitations on actions to bring about social change. This study concludes that the inextricably strategic nature of corporate activism, when motivated by organisational interests that maintain the neoliberal social order, necessarily impedes social transformation.

5.5 Limitations and suggestions for future research

The present study has used critical discursive analysis of ten exemplary corporate activist texts on BLM 2020. The results have identified salient discursive and non-discursive strategies that are deployed to manage the issue of racism. However, it is necessary to consider the limitations of this study and how these might be addressed in future research.

There are important limitations surrounding the generalisability of the results for understanding corporate activism. The sample size of ten statements was influenced by the practical limitations of the CDA method. The sample is a small portion of the body of corporate statements published in response to BLM 2020. Additionally, anti-Black racism is just one of a wide range of social issues that corporate activism addresses, and there may be salient similarities and differences in the ways other social issues are managed. Furthermore, the study focuses on the primary genre of corporate statements as a textually rich medium of corporate activism. However other media, such as advertising and social media communication, are also common vehicles for corporate activism that may espouse unique discursive approaches. Accordingly, it cannot be ascertained that the results of the study are generalisable to corporate activist discourse more broadly. Rather, the present study has proposed several strategies of corporate activist discourse, and further CDA research – exploring

other texts, genres, and issues – is needed to evaluate the robustness of these strategies in the discourse of corporate activism.

An improvement for future research would be to utilise methodological triangulation. While the present study takes a multidisciplinary, multi-theoretical approach, it remains bounded by the method of textual CDA. Multimethod studies can integrate different methods to compensate for the potential weaknesses of each approach and increase the trustworthiness of the results. CDA contributes an important perspective that critiques power and hegemony and uncovers hidden ideology, and this can be combined with other methods to provide more holistic insight to corporate activist discourse. For instance, future studies could employ methods such as thematic analysis that allow for the identification of salient and recurrent themes across a larger sample of texts. Furthermore, quantitative content analysis can facilitate analysis of large corpora, providing more objective identification of linguistic features within texts.

CDA studies have been proposed as an empirical basis for ethnographic research (Wodak & Meyer, 2001). Ethnography can usefully consider and evaluate the social situatedness of decision-making and textual production in corporate activism. As few studies have considered the strategic planning process that goes into producing corporate activist texts, it could be useful to conduct ethnographic observation of internal practices within organisations and conduct in-depth interviews with practitioners. This could help to develop a concept of issues management that goes beyond theorisation to understand how this is realised in practice. Additionally, ethnographic research may help to more precisely understand organisational motivations for engaging in corporate activism.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge limitations of the researcher's subjective cultural understanding. Self-reflexivity was necessary to be diligent about the influence of the researcher's own perspectives and to be wary of establishing unequal power relations by asserting subjective interpretations as objective knowledge claims. However, while care was taken to be fully introspective throughout the analysis, this remains an etic study, based on an outsider's perspective of oppressed social groups. Thus, it is important to encourage future research that foregrounds the important perspectives provided by researchers from within social groups most proximately affected by the social issues that companies seek to manage.

References

- adidas. (2020, June 9). *Message from the adidas Board: Creating Lasting Change Now*.
<https://www.adidas-group.com/en/media/news-archive/press-releases/2020/message-adidas-board-creating-lasting-change-now/>
- Arlington Research. (2020). *Black Lives Matter: Credibility and authenticity*.
<https://www.arlingtonresearch.global/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Arlington-BLM-Report-V1.pdf>
- Atewologun, D., & Mahalingam, R. (2016). Intersectional Reflexivity: Methodological Challenges and Possibilities for Diversity Research. *Academy of Management Proceedings*, 2016(1), 16059.
<https://doi.org/10.5465/ambpp.2016.16059abstract>
- Ben & Jerry's. (n.d.). *How We Do Business*. Retrieved 9 May 2021, from
<https://www.benjerry.com/values/how-we-do-business>
- Bhagwat, Y., Warren, N. L., Beck, J. T., & Watson, G. F. (2020). Corporate Sociopolitical Activism and Firm Value. *Journal of Marketing*, 84(5), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022242920937000>
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (1997). Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation. *American Sociological Review*, 62(3), 465–480. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2657316>
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2012). The invisible weight of whiteness: the racial grammar of everyday life in contemporary America. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 35(2), 173–194.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2011.613997>
- Botan, C. H., & Taylor, M. (2004). Public Relations: State of the Field. *Journal of Communication*, 54(4), 645–661. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2004.tb02649.x>
- Bowman, E. (1990). Strategy Changes: possible worlds and actual minds. In J. W. Fredrickson (Ed.), *Perspectives on strategic management*. Harper Business.
- Boyd, J. (2000). Actional Legitimation: No Crisis Necessary. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 12(4), 341–353. https://doi.org/10.1207/S1532754XJPRR1204_3
- Braithwaite, T. (2020, June 5). How companies decided that black lives matter. *Financial Times*.
<https://www.ft.com/content/6bd46c48-ee90-42b8-af70-78d949025c1d>

- Breeze, R. (2011). Critical discourse analysis and its critics. *Pragmatics*, 21(4), 493–525.
<https://doi.org/10.1075/prag.21.4.01bre>
- Breeze, R. (2012). Legitimation in corporate discourse: Oil corporations after Deepwater Horizon. *Discourse & Society*, 23(1), 3–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926511431511>
- Brennen, B. (2013). *Qualitative research methods for media studies*. Routledge.
- Burkart, R. (2018). On Habermas: Communication and Understanding – Key Concepts for Public Relations. In Ø. Ihlen & M. Fredriksson (Eds.), *Public Relations and Social Theory* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Campo-Flores, A., & Jamerson, J. (2020, June 18). Black Lives Matter’s Years of Pressure Paved Way for Sudden Police Overhaul. *Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/black-lives-matters-years-of-pressure-paved-way-for-sudden-police-overhaul-11592516422>
- Carvalho, A. (2008). Media(ted) Discourse and Society. *Journalism Studies*, 9(2), 161–177.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700701848162>
- Ciszek, E., & Logan, N. (2018). Challenging the dialogic promise: how Ben & Jerry’s support for Black Lives Matter fosters dissensus on social media. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 30(3), 115–127.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2018.1498342>
- Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2012a). Fringe public relations: How activism moves critical pr toward the mainstream. *Public Relations Review*, 38(5), 880–887.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2012.02.008>
- Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2012b). *Managing corporate social responsibility: a communication approach*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Coombs, W. T., & Holladay, S. J. (2018). Social issue qua wicked problems: The role of strategic communication in social issues management. *Journal of Communication Management*, 22(1), 79–95.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/JCOM-11-2016-0093>
- Cukier, W., Bauer, R., & Middleton, C. (2004). Applying Habermas’ validity claims as a standard for critical discourse analysis. In B. Kaplan, D. P. Truex, D. Wastell, A. T. Wood-Harper, & J. DeGross (Eds.), *Information Systems Research: Relevant Theory and Informed Practice* (pp. 233–258). Springer US.

- Davidson, S. (2016). Public relations theory: An agonistic critique of the turns to dialogue and symmetry. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 5(2), 145–167. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2046147X16649007>
- Della Porta, D., & Diani, M. (2006). *Social movements: an introduction* (2nd ed). Blackwell Publishing.
- Denton, R. E. D. (1980). The rhetorical functions of slogans: Classifications and characteristics. *Communication Quarterly*, 28(2), 10–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463378009369362>
- Dodd, M. D., & Supa, D. (2015). Testing the Viability of Corporate Social Advocacy as a Predictor of Purchase Intention. *Communication Research Reports*, 32(4), 287–293. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08824096.2015.1089853>
- Edgecliffe-Johnson, A., & Rogers, T. N. (2021, May 5). Are CEOs living up to the pledges they made after George Floyd’s murder? *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/67e79b20-bc41-4cb0-992f-a28e3eaa5695>
- Eilert, M., & Nappier Cherup, A. (2020). The Activist Company: Examining a Company’s Pursuit of Societal Change Through Corporate Activism Using an Institutional Theoretical Lens. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 39(4), 461–476. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743915620947408>
- Esposito, L. (2011). Neo-Liberalism and the New Market Society. In J. W. Murphy & K. A. Callaghan (Eds.), *Toward a post-market society*. Nova Science Publishers.
- Fairclough, N. (1993). *Discourse and Social Change*. Wiley.
- Fairclough, N. (1995). *Media discourse*. Hodder Arnold.
- Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing discourse: textual analysis for social research*. Routledge.
- Fairclough, N. (2005). Peripheral Vision: Discourse Analysis in Organization Studies: The Case for Critical Realism. *Organization Studies*, 26(6), 915–939. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840605054610>
- Fairclough, N. (2013). *Critical Discourse Analysis : The Critical Study of Language*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315834368>
- Forliti, A., & Baenen, J. (2020, May 27). Four Minneapolis officers fired after death of black man. *Associated Press*. <https://apnews.com/article/us-news-ap-top-news-ahmaud-arbery-arrests-mn-state-wire-9157e1bdc0f99797bc25e6f243aa19>
- Fossen, T. (2008). Agonistic Critiques of Liberalism: Perfection and Emancipation. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 7(4), 376–394. <https://doi.org/10.1057/cpt.2008.15>

- Foucault, M. (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Pantheon Books.
- Friedman, M. (1970, September 13). A Friedman doctrine-- The Social Responsibility Of Business Is to Increase Its Profits. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/09/13/archives/a-friedman-doctrine-the-social-responsibility-of-business-is-to.html>
- Ganesh, S., & Zoller, H. M. (2012). Dialogue, Activism, and Democratic Social Change. *Communication Theory*, 22(1), 66–91. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2011.01396.x>
- Greckhamer, T., & Cilesiz, S. (2014). Rigor, Transparency, Evidence, and Representation in Discourse Analysis: Challenges and Recommendations. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 13(1), 422–443. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691401300123>
- Greene, L. S. (1990). Tokens, Role Models, and Pedagogical Politics: Lamentations of an African American Female Law Professor. *Berkeley Women's Law Journal*, 6(1), 81–92. <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/berkwolj6&i=87>
- Grunig, J. E. (2001). Two-Way Symmetrical Public Relations: Past, Present, and Future. In R. L. Heath (Ed.), *Handbook of Public Relations* (pp. 11–30). SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452220727.n1>
- Grunig, J. E., & Grunig, L. A. (2000). Public Relations in Strategic Management and Strategic Management of Public Relations: theory and evidence from the IABC Excellence project. *Journalism Studies*, 1(2), 303–321. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700050028271>
- Grunig, J. E., & Repper, F. C. (1992). Strategic Management, Publics, and Issues. In J. E. Grunig (Ed.), *Excellence in public relations and communication management*. L. Erlbaum Associates.
- Habermas, J. (1984). *The theory of communicative action* (Vol. 2). Beacon Press.
- Habermas, J. (1993). *Justification and application: remarks on discourse ethics*. MIT Press.
- Habermas, J. (1998). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: an inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (T. Burger, Trans.). MIT Press.
- Heath, R. L., & Palenchar, M. J. (2009). *Strategic issues management: organizations and public policy challenges* (2nd ed). Sage Publications.

- Helmersson, H. (2020, June 1). *We stand with and support the black community – today, everyday and everywhere*. H&M Group. <https://hmgroup.com/news/we-stand-with-and-support-the-black-community-today-everyday-and-everywhere/>
- Hoffmann, J., Nyborg, K., Averhoff, C., & Olesen, S. (2020). The contingency of corporate political advocacy: Nike's 'dream crazy' campaign with Colin Kaepernick. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 9(2), 155–175. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2046147X20920802>
- Hoppner, J. J., & Vadakkepatt, G. G. (2019). Examining moral authority in the marketplace: A conceptualization and framework. *Journal of Business Research*, 95, 417–427. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2018.07.045>
- Intel. (2020, May 14). *Intel Launches First Global Challenges, Marks a New Era of Shared Corporate Responsibility*. Intel Newsroom. <https://newsroom.intel.com/news-releases/intel-launches-first-global-challenges-marks-new-era-shared-corporate-responsibility/>
- King, L. (2016). Black History as Anti-Racist and Non-Racist. In T. Husband (Ed.), *But I Don't See Color: The Perils, Practices, and Possibilities of Antiracist Education* (pp. 63–79). SensePublishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6300-585-2_6
- Kishan, S. (2021, March 29). Banks, J&J Ask Shareholders to Vote Against Racial Audits. *Bloomberg.Com*. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-29/banks-j-j-ask-shareholders-to-vote-against-racial-audits>
- Kotler, P., & Sarkar, C. (2018). *Brand Activism: From Purpose to Action* (2nd Edition). IDEA BITE PRESS.
- Leeper, R. V. (1996). Moral Objectivity, Jurgen Habermas's Discourse Ethics, and Public Relations. *Public Relations Review*, 22(2), 133–150. [https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111\(96\)90003-X](https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111(96)90003-X)
- L'Etang, J. (2005). Critical public relations: Some reflections. *Public Relations Review*, 31(4), 521–526. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2005.08.011>
- Machin, D., & Mayr, A. (2012). *How to do critical discourse analysis: a multimodal introduction*. SAGE.

- Macnamara, J. (2015). Socially integrating PR and operationalizing an alternative approach. In J. L'Etang, D. McKie, N. Snow, & J. Xifra (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of critical public relations* (pp. 335–344). Routledge.
- Madden, S. (2019). The issue with issues management: Considering the emotional and gendered core of issues. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 8(3), 299–317. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2046147X19872240>
- Manfredi-Sánchez, J.-L. (2019). Brand activism. *Communication & Society*, 32(4), 343–359. <https://doi.org/10.15581/003.32.4.343-359>
- McGregor, J. (2020, June 1). Nike, Netflix, Levi Strauss and others are speaking out in support of the Black Lives Matter protests. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2020/06/01/with-protests-silence-is-not-an-option-corporate-america/>
- Moffitt, M. A. (2011). Critical Theoretical Considerations of Public Relations Messaging Around the Globe: Tools for Creating and Evaluating Campaign Messages. *Journal of Promotion Management*, 17(1), 21–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10496491.2011.553775>
- Moorman, C. (2020). Commentary: Brand Activism in a Political World. *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 39(4), 388–392. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743915620945260>
- Morrow, S. L. (2005). Quality and trustworthiness in qualitative research in counseling psychology. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52(2), 250–260. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.52.2.250>
- Motion, J., & Leitch, S. (1996). A discursive perspective from New Zealand: Another world view. *Public Relations Review*, 22(3), 297–309. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111\(96\)90051-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111(96)90051-X)
- Motion, J., & Leitch, S. (2007). A toolbox for public relations: The oeuvre of Michel Foucault. *Public Relations Review*, 33(3), 263–268. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2007.05.004>
- Motion, J., & Weaver, C. K. (2005). A Discourse Perspective for Critical Public Relations Research: Life Sciences Network and the Battle for Truth. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 17(1), 49–67. https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532754xjpr1701_5
- Mouffe, C. (2000). *The democratic paradox*. Verso.

- Mukherjee, S., & Althuizen, N. (2020). Brand activism: Does courting controversy help or hurt a brand? *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 37(4), 772–788.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2020.02.008>
- Mumby, D. K. (1989). Ideology & the social construction of meaning: A communication perspective. *Communication Quarterly*, 37(4), 291–304. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463378909385551>
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*, 2nd ed. Sage Publications, Inc.
- PepsiCo. (n.d.). *Celebrating Our History | Diversity & Engagement*. Retrieved 19 May 2021, from <https://www.pepsico.com/about/diversity-and-engagement>
- Place, K. R., & Vardeman-Winter, J. (2013). Hegemonic discourse and self-discipline: Exploring Foucault’s concept of bio-power among public relations professionals. *Public Relations Inquiry*, 2(3), 305–325. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2046147X13494965>
- Ramsey, P. (2015). The public sphere and PR: Deliberative democracy and agonistic pluralism. In J. L’Etang, D. McKie, N. Snow, & J. Xifra (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of critical public relations* (pp. 65–75). Routledge.
- Schott, B. (2020, June 22). Brands Just Faced a Big Test on Instagram. Here’s How They Did. *Bloomberg.Com*. <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2020-06-22/top-100-brands-responded-on-instagram-to-george-floyd-s-killing>
- Shacknai, G. (2020, June 8). UOMA Beauty’s Sharon Chuter Is Holding Brands Accountable With ‘Pull Up Or Shut Up’. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/gabbyshacknai/2020/06/08/uoma-beautys-sharon-chuter-is-holding-brands-accountable-with-pull-up-or-shut-up/>
- Sibai, O., Mimoun, L., & Boukis, A. (2021). Authenticating brand activism: Negotiating the boundaries of free speech to make a change. *Psychology & Marketing*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21477>
- Simon, B. (2011). Not going to Starbucks: Boycotts and the out-scouring of politics in the branded world. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 11(2), 145–167. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469540511402448>
- Sobande, F. (2019). Woke-washing: “intersectional” femvertising and branding “woke” bravery. *European Journal of Marketing*, 54(11), 2723–2745. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-02-2019-0134>
- Strausbaugh, J. (2013). *The Village: 400 years of Beats and bohemians, radicals and rogues: a history of Greenwich Village* (First edition). Ecco.

- Sumagaysay, L. (2021, May 29). Companies that declared solidarity after George Floyd killing may be ‘woke washing,’ shareholder advocates warn. *MarketWatch*.
<https://www.marketwatch.com/story/companies-that-declared-solidarity-after-george-floyd-killing-may-be-woke-washing-shareholder-advocates-warn-11621960301>
- Takeuchi, D. T., & Gage, S.-J. L. (2003). What to Do with Race? Changing Notions of Race in the Social Sciences. *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry*, 27(4), 435–445.
<https://doi.org/10.1023/B:MEDI.0000005482.58402.44>
- Target. (2016, April 19). *Continuing to Stand for Inclusivity*. Target Corporate.
<http://corporate.target.com/article/2016/04/target-stands-inclusivity>
- Tucker, H. (2020, May 13). *Global 2000 Highlights: Inside The Numbers Of The World’s Largest Public Companies*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hanktucker/2020/05/13/global-2000-highlights-inside-the-numbers-of-the-worlds-largest-public-companies/>
- Tyma, A. (2008). Public Relations Through a New Lens—Critical Praxis via the Excellence Theory. *International Journal of Communication*, 2, 193–205.
<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/commfacpub/27>
- Ulmer, R. R., & Sellnow, T. L. (2002). Crisis management and the discourse of renewal: understanding the potential for positive outcomes of crisis. *Public Relations Review*, 28(4), 361–365.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111\(02\)00165-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0363-8111(02)00165-0)
- van Dijk, T. (2000). *Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach*. SAGE.
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446217856>
- van Dijk, T. A. (1993). *Elite discourse and racism*. SAGE.
- van Leeuwen, T. (2007). Legitimation in discourse and communication. *Discourse & Communication*, 1(1), 91–112. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1750481307071986>
- Vredenburg, J., Kapitan, S., Spry, A., & Kemper, J. A. (2020). Brands Taking a Stand: Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing? *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, 39(4), 444–460.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0743915620947359>
- West, S. (2018, January 19). H&M faced backlash over its ‘monkey’ sweatshirt ad. It isn’t the company’s only controversy. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and->

entertainment/wp/2018/01/19/hm-faced-backlash-over-its-monkey-sweatshirt-ad-it-isnt-the-companys-only-controversy/

Wettstein, F., & Baur, D. (2016). “Why Should We Care about Marriage Equality?”: Political Advocacy as a Part of Corporate Responsibility. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 138(2), 199–213.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-015-2631-3>

Widdowson, H. G. (1998). Review Article: The Theory and Practice of Critical Discourse Analysis.

Applied Linguistics, 19(1), 136–151. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/19.1.136>

Wiltshire, G. (2018). A case for critical realism in the pursuit of interdisciplinarity and impact.

Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 10(5), 525–542.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2018.1467482>

Winslow, M. P. (2004). Reactions to the Imputation of Prejudice. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*,

26(4), 289–297. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15324834basp2604_5

Wodak, R. (2001). The Discourse-Historical Approach. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (pp. 63–94). SAGE.

Wodak, R., & Meyer, M. (2001). *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. SAGE.

Zienkowski, J. (2017). Reflexivity in the transdisciplinary field of critical discourse studies. *Palgrave*

Communications, 3(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2017.7>

Appendix A: List of corporate statements analysed

Table A1

Summary of corporate statements in sample with links to original sources

Statement title	Company	Primary Genre	Date published	URL
“We Must Dismantle White Supremacy”	Ben & Jerry’s	Company statement	June 2, 2020	https://www.benjerry.com/about-us/media-center/dismantle-white-supremacy
“Making a Difference in Racial Equity”	Walmart	Meeting remarks	June 5, 2020	https://corporate.walmart.com/equity
“Creating Lasting Change Now”	adidas	Press release	June 9, 2020	https://www.adidas-group.com/en/media/news-archive/press-releases/2020/message-adidas-board-creating-lasting-change-now/
“The Sidelines are Not an Option; Intel Pledges \$1M to Address Social Justice, Racism”	Intel	Internal memo	May 31, 2020	https://newsroom.intel.com/news/bob-swan-note-to-intel-employees/#gs.15tquj
“A Message from Johnson & Johnson Chairman and CEO Alex Gorsky About Recent Events in the United States”	Johnson & Johnson	Internal letter	June 2, 2020	https://www.jnj.com/latest-news/a-message-from-johnson-johnson-ceo-alex-gorsky-about-recent-events-in-the-united-states
“We stand with and support the black community – today, everyday and everywhere”	H&M Group	News article	June 1, 2020	https://hmgroup.com/news/we-stand-with-and-support-the-black-community-today-everyday-and-everywhere/
“CEO Peter Kern Letter to Employees”	Expedia	Internal letter	June 3, 2020	https://blog.lifeatexpediagroup.com/inclusionanddiversity/ceo-peter-kern-letter-to-employees/expedia
“We Stand Together”	Snap	Internal letter	June 1, 2020	https://newsroom.snap.com/we-stand-together
“PepsiCo's Racial Equality Journey”	PepsiCo	CEO statement	June 16, 2020	https://www.pepsico.com/about/diversity-and-engagement/racial-equality-journey-black-initiative
“I can't breathe.”	Citigroup	Blog post	May 29, 2020	https://blog.citigroup.com/2020/05/i-cant-breathe/