Co-brand partnerships making space for the next black girl: Backlash in social justice branding

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Abstract
Viral influence of consumer reviews can change the strategic intent of co-branding relationships between minority entrepreneurial startups and established corporations. When social justice positioning is involved, the intent is often to support minority businesses. We acknowledge this strategy as social justice branding. However, such alliances can trigger vitriolic responses. This backlash is an expression of free speech, and social media provides an obscure facilitative environment. The challenges of social justice branding are complex. We examine consumer online reviews of The Honey Pot and Target Corporation partnership, to understand the implications of social justice branding in practice. Using Leximancer analysis, we find that social justice branding elicits multiple emotions that empower action. Some consumers accepted the collaboration while others resisted. Analyzing the basis of the resistance revealed some consumers expressed racist and shameful behaviors displaying disagreement. Backlash reflected willful ignorance releasing pent up prejudices and disseminating viral-like negative information as weapons of retaliation against brands and marginalized communities. We contribute a conceptual model integrating theoretical frames of social justice, social marketing, brand activism and free speech elucidating the impact of consumer response to social justice branding. The findings and model add a lens to further explore race in the marketplace.

KEYWORDS
backlash, brand activism, co-brand partnerships, minority entrepreneurs, social justice branding, social marketing, social media

1 | INTRODUCTION
In February of 2020 Target Corporation (hereafter Target) co-branded with The Honey Pot (hereafter Honey Pot), a start-up owned by Beatrice Dixon, an African American entrepreneur, focused on creating feminine hygiene products. Target launched the “Founders We Believe In” campaign to support black business suppliers (Fluker, 2020). We recognize this strategy as social justice branding. In the television ad, Dixon stated she wanted her company to do well “so the next Black girl that comes up with a great idea could have a better opportunity” (Target Ad., 2020). Negative backlash erupted on Trustpilot, a global feedback platform. Backlash was rapid, Trustpilot’s screening could not keep pace, and the Honey Pot page was disabled (Trustpilot, 2020a). Consumers took advantage of the anonymity of social media and free speech, to unleash vitriol based on the meaning they ascribed to the social empowerment message about “the next Black girl.” Some comments were not a review of Honey Pot products, but commentaries on the social justice message in the commercial.

The viral influence and impact of consumer reviews can change the strategic intent of co-branding for startups like Honey Pot and established corporations like Target. Reichstein and Brusch (2019)...
argue that viral content (e.g., marketing and advertising) can impact consumer decision-making process. In the current environment where equity, diversity and inclusion are important, marketers are challenged with reimagining how to connect with consumers on a more meaningful level. Existing research has explored some elements of social justice in the context of consumer engagement and social activism through buying (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012); the role of blackness representations in advertising (Crockett, 2008) and branding "woke" bravery, as it relates to race, gender, feminism, activism, intersectionality and marketing (Sobande, 2020, p. 2723). Research is needed to address the influence of social justice branding strategy and theoretical frameworks that may extend our understanding of the relationships between social justice and consumer response behaviors.

The purpose of this study is to explore the concept of social justice branding. We draw on the novel partnership between Honey Pot and Target to understand the influence of social justice branding on consumer behavioral response by asking: What are the effects of social justice branding as a strategy to convey positive social values? How might social justice branding influence consumer perception of a company’s brand? What are the risks of alienating some members of the target market? Our contributions are three-fold. First, based on this emergent context, we connect the literatures of social justice, social marketing, and branding relating to consumer backlash. Second, from findings, we propose a conceptual model integrating these concepts, demonstrating how social justice branding disrupts existing knowledge of brands and justice. Finally, analyzing negative consumer responses to the collaboration and social justice marketing campaign, we advance current thinking on race in the marketplace.

2 | HONEY POT OVERVIEW

While many companies focus on either feminine hygiene or monthly menstrual care, Honey Pot is the first to create products for both. Dixon’s tagline, “made by humans with vaginas, for humans with vaginas” includes “trans-people and those who do not necessarily identify as female” (Cision Prweb.com, 2017). Dixon advocates that young black girls should have role models, and recognizes that businesses owned by African American women do not garner the same valuations as other businesses thereby needing support (Pullara, 2020). Co-branding between Honey Pot and Target, produced justice-conscious advertising that presented a unified approach by both companies as advocates for young black girls with entrepreneurial aspirations.

Although the collaboration began positively, backlash and criticisms leveled at both companies were unforeseen outcomes. The uproar stemmed from Dixon’s articulation that a core part of her purpose in creating Honey Pot, was to create space and opportunity for “the next black girl.” Response from consumers held a myriad of emotions and characterizations of Dixon and Target as racist, an unanticipated spillover effect impacting both co-brands (Koschate-Fischer et al., 2019). This complexity of co-branding relationships is even further exacerbated when social justice is a core brand value. Considering current marketplace challenges and opportunities with respect to race, equity, and inclusion, we offer a transparent approach for both marketers and researchers interested in addressing social justice, building on the current literature. While the Honey Pot-Target relationship drew backlash, it is important to recognize that such adverse consumer response is free speech. Mediums through which these consumer expressions are disseminated can offer anonymity, as in case with social media. Lee and Li (2021) for example, examined the role of free speech in online media platforms that protect user identity as they spewed hateful and discriminatory content toward Chinese consumers amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Norms of civility that had prevailed in past media are largely absent from online free speech (Reader, 2012).

Using online comments, we illuminate free speech practices implicated in sexist and racist views in the larger culture (Gibson, 2019). Doing so, we also acknowledge that oppositional speech is free speech. Thus, it follows that Trustpilot, in defending the integrity of Honey Pot’s authentic consumer reviews, disabled their feedback site not to stifle free speech, but to address violations of user guidelines. Reagle (2013) noted that open commentary sites can be loaded with historical and cultural beliefs about other individuals, thus becoming sites for oppositional behavior. Such behavior, though authenticated as free speech, serves as a lens to examine consumer response to social justice branding.

3 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 | Social marketing

Early conceptualizations of social marketing as defined by Kotler and Zaltman (1971, p. 5) referred to “the design, implementation, and control of programs calculated to influence the acceptability of social ideas and involving considerations of product planning, pricing, communication, distribution and marketing research.” This definition addressed the commercialization and social good of a company’s offerings, influencing acceptability of social ideas that involve the marketing mix and contributing to profitability. Lost in such conceptualizations, was change to both individual and group behaviors, resulting in criticism and challenges in advancing a parsimonious definition. Eliminating ambiguities, Andreasen (1994, p. 110) defined social marketing as “the adaptation of commercial marketing technologies to programs designed to influence voluntary behavior of target audiences to improve their personal welfare and that of society of which they are a part.” This conceptualization of social marketing is based on the strength of a social idea being adopted, changing behaviors of the target audience. Smith (2006, p. 138) argues that “social marketing typically targets complex, often socially controversial behaviors, with delayed and distant benefits to audiences who often do not recognize they have a problem, much less are looking for a solution.” Social marketing has been explored across a range of domains and contexts including prevention of drunk driving.
(Cismaru et al., 2009), global health policy (Firestone et al., 2017), nonprofit marketing (Andreasen, 2012), effectiveness in fear appeals (Hastings et al., 2004), and communications to upstream decision and policy makers (Key & Czaplewski, 2017).

For social marketing to be effective, "the social marketer must define the change sought (e.g., a change in values, beliefs, behavior), segment the target market, and design social products that are buyable" (Holden & Holden, 1998, p. 176). Currently, with social media, social marketing movements and campaigns have included #MeToo, advocating solidarity for women, and #Black Lives Matter, to combat anti-black racism and police violence against African Americans (Poole et al., 2021). Social movements like these have a social justice call to action. However, when companies use these movements superficially to engender positive consumer perception, they are viewed as inauthentic and short-sighted or "woke-washing" (Sobande, 2020, p. 2731).

### 3.1.1 | Brand activism and social marketing

Current practices of social marketing includes brand activism, the branding efforts by businesses intended to "promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to make improvements in society" (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018, p. 554). Current research on brand activism includes political activism (Moorman, 2020), boycotts (Walansky, 2020), and woke-washing (Vredenburg et al., 2018; Sobande, 2020). Many companies have taken a public stand on divisive issues (Sibai et al., 2021) like Starbucks hiring refugees (Moreano, 2019), and Nike supporting athlete activism (Intravia et al., 2020). While some of these examples of brand activism represent company positioning, others like Honey Pot, are intended to create opportunities for equity. Wood (2012) argues that improving the world requires a campaign for social justice to change "the attitudes and behaviors of leaders and policy makers in addition to equipping practitioners with the tools and theories to deliver cost-effective, client-centered services" (p. 101). Success of social marketing as a movement or campaign requires branding to instill salience. Further, it requires contemplation of the target audience's readiness to change, and attitudes and values they hold, that will influence the effectiveness of a social idea branded to elicit behavioral change.

### 3.2 | Social justice

Social justice is the philosophy that all citizens should be able to lay claim to various forms of material equality (Fleischacker, 2004). Social justice is "fair distribution of society's benefits and responsibilities" (Morris, 2002, p. 365). The role of social justice then, is to ensure resources are made accessible to those disadvantaged by market distribution of assets (Fleischacker, 2004). Rawls (1971) argues that notions of justice were fused into the U.S. Civil Rights movement, emphasizing rights of people and moral principles of justice. These principles include racial discrimination, poverty, equity and equality. People often act in ways to achieve higher levels of justice in varied and dissenting ways based on their perception of a "referent other" (Gebhardt, 2008) or a different group of people.

Social justice is operationalized in several ways. For example, in communication it amplifies "the agency of oppressed people—those who are materially, socially, politically and/or economically under-resourced" (Jones & Walton, 2018, p. 242). In this study, social justice draws together subjective treatment of individuals and marketplace dynamics. Existing studies focus on consumer inequality, racial discrimination, racial profiling, and stereotyping, and have offered some solutions for radical change (e.g., see Henderson et al., 2016). In this respect, our aim is not to provide an exhaustive account of social justice, rather to draw on the premise in application to branding. In the marketplace, social justice being sought by individuals and advocates, becomes political. Social justice theories suggest "people's subjective satisfaction with outcomes, authorities, and rules, and their behavioral choices, are not only affected by concerns about maximizing personal gain. They are also independently influenced by people's judgments about what is "fair" or "just" (Manstead et al., 1995, p. 572). In some cases, advocacy for social justice brings resistance and controversy which is discernible in the way individuals claim their right to free speech. The impact of free speech is often examined weighing its value against social justice (Redish, 1982). Rothmund et al. (2014) suggests beliefs about social justice, intersect psychology and political ideologies.

#### 3.2.1 | Intersectionality

A significant element of social justice is intersectionality as multiple identities (e.g., a woman's identity—black, female, heterosexual, mother, wife) have an impact on how people experience society and culture. Intersectionality originates in Black Feminist Thought, suggesting that oppression must be examined at the intersection of race and gender. Collins (2015) argues that often social justice work requires individuals to operate within spaces where they experience gender, religion, family roles, and other elements of their identities as mutually dependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. Research on intersectionality and marketing raised critical questions about how women and minorities are represented as consumers in marketing (Steinfield et al., 2019).

Intersectionality is certainly not constrained by identity contexts but rather, it exposes "how single-axis thinking undermines legal thinking, disciplinary knowledge production, and struggles for social justice" (Cho et al., 2013, p. 787). Although ineffective, one approach companies use in their communications is "face" representation. For example, showing the face of African Americans in advertising to represent race. This reflects what Crockett (2008, p. 245) calls "marketing blackness...strategies that incorporate blackness representations in the form of signs, which may include black people or other symbolic and material artifacts of black cultural life." In some cases, the representations are stereotypic. Recognizing this practice,
Johnson and Grier (2012) examined the intended effects and consequences of race-based stereotypes in advertising. They found that members of the group featured in the stereotyped portrayal feel offended. Conversely, non-stereotyped viewers tend to be ambivalent to race-based portrayals. Davis (2020) acknowledges that “on occasion contemporary advertisers commit some gaffes regarding race or ethnicity—typically involving imagery—which produces intense backlash, generating compelling debates in society and reflecting poorly on the advertiser’s image and reputation.” Poole et al. (2021) point to high-profile brands that have experienced public chastisement for poorly conceived use of race signifiers in their ads. Wei and Bunjun (2020) examined attempts by companies to distance themselves from unwelcome associations from racist groups. These studies and similar arguments are reflected in the growing body of research on race in the marketplace (see rimnetwork.net), which highlights the necessity to understand how the target audience will reflect poorly on the advertiser’s image and reputation.

Race equity. Further, it reveals the importance of understanding the growing platforms of social justice in branding and co-branding.

3.3 | Social justice branding

Consumers choose products and brands for their utilitarian values and symbolic benefits (Albert et al., 2013). Consumers will identify with brands the "degree to which the brand delivers on important identity concerns, tasks, or themes, thereby expressing a significant aspect of the self" (Fournier, 1998, p. 364). In social branding, companies hope to motivate consumers to change their behaviors, disrupting current perceptions, and encouraging them to act differently. Such is the case of Honey Pot's branding for social change, which includes multiple aspects of diversity, equity and inclusion, all tenets of social justice.

Consumers today are politically and socially conscious, which makes employing a co-brand strategy with a social justice platform noteworthy. The core of social justice branding is justice theory which emphasizes understanding “what people think is right and wrong, just or unjust, fair or unfair,” and “how such judgements are justified by the people who hold them” (Tyler et al., 1997). Social justice branding extends social branding theory by suggesting that branding can work to influence consumers to take action that will create justice by advocating for fairness, equity, and inclusion (Park & Allaby, 2013, p. 397). While social branding seeks to change consumer behavior, social justice branding introduces a disruptive branding concept which challenges how consumers perceive an issue of justice in the marketplace. This disruption is a critical part of the change intended by the company employing social justice branding.

The unusualness of Honey Pot and Target co-brand disrupted consumers’ current notions about what is just and fair. Honey Pot products produced by women for women, is a disruption intended to change how consumers identify who should create feminine care and hygiene products, ingredients and management of such companies. This challenges traditional notions of corporate giants mass-producing for the sake of profitability regardless of fairness, equity and inclusion. Sobande (2020) notes that limited marketing scholarship examines gender and race/racism, while examining interdependent relationships between black social justice activism, oppression, and equality.

In summary, social justice branding empowers thoughts and actions of fairness, equity, and inclusion. From a sociocultural perspective, it challenges normative thought and disrupts beliefs regarding exclusiveness. As a marketing strategy, social justice branding causes unease, disrupting consumer knowledge perceptions of justice and the brands that employ it.

4 | RESEARCH METHOD

The purpose of this study is to understand the influences of social justice branding on co-brands and consumer purchasing. Given the importance of the consumer voice, we take a qualitative approach to capture consumer sentiments as their lived experiences expressed in online reviews. Online platforms provide avenues for freedom of speech. These platforms allow consumers to submit reviews and recommendations, which influences other consumers’ patronage (Lee et al., 2008). Individuals often utilize online information to make offline purchasing decisions. Research reveals that online consumer feedback is both willingly given and received rating product effectiveness (Leskovec et al., 2007). The value online reviews provide is irrefutable and can now be monitored in real-time, revealing to marketers opportunities and threats for brands (Christodoulides et al., 2021). Phillips et al. (2017) acknowledged the novelty of using consumer online reviews as a source of data. For this study, we engaged a consumer review platform to source data allowing for an in-depth view of consumer thoughts and beliefs about a social justice branding partnership.

4.1 | Data source and collection

Data was sourced through Trustpilot, a free speech consumer review website, which gave us access to reviews of Target and Honey Pot dated February 1 through March 31, 2020, excluding demographic information about reviewers. Before the partnership, reviews of Honey Pot products were readily available. After Target broadcasted the commercial, Trustpilot’s site was besieged. First, were positive and negative comments reflecting use of the product. Then comments transitioned to mainly negative, which is the primary segment of data used in this study. This approach follows Hollebeek and Chen (2014) that most user-generated social media comments are negatively valenced. Trustpilot’s algorithm and human moderators detected an onslaught of unruly user behavior and disabled the site. Data from Trustpilot included a numerical rating given by consumers for each review, based on relevance and likeability. A rating of five (5)
designates excellence and a rating of one (1) designates a bad review (Figure 1). Any consumer response with designation of 1 or 2 was selected as they represent the most negative reviews that would give insight into the influence of the social justice branding message.

4.2 | Data analysis

Online reviews have limitations, and are challenging to interpret (Robson et al., 2013). To minimize these challenges, we used two data analysis approaches. First, we used Leximancer, an automated textual content program, which allowed us to identify concepts, themes, and their relationships. Secondly, we engaged in open coding through iterative reading, which is a systematic, repetitive, and recursive steps-based analytical approach, to analyze qualitative data (Mills et al., 2010). Sotiriadou et al. (2014) contend that choosing a combination of tools for qualitative analysis adds more rigor in a study. As no human bias is interjected, Leximancer is objective (Sotiriadou et al., 2014), and is among the most advanced tools with distinctive elements of analysis and visual representation (Nunez-Miri et al., 2016). Leximancer works without the need for coding by the user and automates the identification of concepts and interrelationships (Sotiriadou et al., 2014). "Leximancer uses word occurrence and co-occurrence counts to extract major thematic and conceptual content
directly from an input text” (Angus et al., 2013). The data \((N = 147)\) were uploaded into Leximancer with syntax errors eliminated. The output contains seed words, which are terms clustered together with high-level themes occurring frequently—similar to “lexemes” (Rossolatos, 2019). Leximancer also produced a cognitive map which is “highly nonlinear and very contextualized” (Leximancer.com). The cognitive map is a conceptual representation of the data that we then interpreted. Seed words are presented as large bubbles (Figure 2). The more co-occurrence of a term, the larger the size of the bubbles. Further, bubble theme colors are “heat-mapped” (Wilk et al., 2019) with red representing the most predominant theme and purple representing the least.

Four high-frequency themes emerged: black, product, Target and company. We examined these co-occurrences to determine the contextual pathways that map to specific sub-themes in the data to understand interrelated relationships between each concept and themes. For example, the pathway identifies a connection between the concept “black” through “racist” and “racism” and ending at the concept bubble Target (Figure 2). Based on the direction of the pathways, two authors independently and iteratively read the data, engaging in open coding. We then compared the semantic links of themes and concepts with specific related context segments of the data. The strongest emergent themes were further analyzed to determine alignment with Leximancer themes.

5 | FINDINGS

Through the dual-analysis process, five overarching themes emerged; justified release of suppressed prejudice, empowered acceptance and resistance, racist and shameful behavior, willful ignorance and retaliation. Justification occurs as a result of the facilitative environment, characterized by free speech, anonymity and social media. In combination, the facilitative environment and strength of the individual’s resistance or acceptance of social justice branding, allows some consumers to feel empowered to respond. These responses expressed support for the co-branding relationship or rejection of social justice messaging. Acceptance manifests as openness and defensiveness of the social change intent. However, rejection appears as racist and shameful behaviors, willful ignorance and retaliation. Elaborating on each of these themes, combined with extant literature discussed in our literature review, results in our conceptual model of the impact of social justice branding.

5.1 | Justified release of suppressed prejudice

The facilitative environment is an ecosystem where suppressed ideals are released. The environment allows consumers to feel justified in expressing feelings they may not otherwise voice. Some respondents expressed prejudicial resentment. The reverberation of the comments seemed like release of suppressed discriminatory intolerance toward Honey Pot’s owner as an African American, and Black people in general:

The black community is absolutely NOT the only people subjected to racism. Where I’m from I wasn’t white enough for the whites. I wasn’t ethnic enough for the ethnic. If I wrote my whole story on here I’d have people in an uproar and I’m not trying to do that. Oversensitive, entitled, self pitying, childish individuals always playing the victim. That’s great lady. You’re successful and hats off to you. But you seriously killed it with YOUR RACIST IGNORANT SELF. This little Jew girl will never purchase any of your products. And I’ll never give Target another cent of my hard-earned money.

This reflects overtness in unburdening thoughts tightly held about black people. It highlights the negation of the historical context of societal and cultural prejudice that constrained the positive progression of this group. Crandall and Eshleman (2003) note, prejudice of this type reflects “negative evaluation of a social group or a negative evaluation of an individual that is significantly based on the
individual’s group membership (p. 414). Individuals judge the world around them from their limited view, but do not express these views until they believe it is acceptable to do so.

The Justification Suppression Model (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003) suggests that individuals hide prejudiced feelings and actions until they find the right moment to justify their bias. When consumers feel uncomfortable with concepts like social justice branding, their resistance sparks justification to act. Freedom to express opinions regardless of the content being received by others as distasteful or not, is facilitated by the internet, social media and the anonymity it provides. These factors help facilitate empowerment and outspokenness to release suppressed biases without consequence.

5.1.1 | Free Speech

Concepts of free speech are grounded in the Constitution affording citizens the freedom of expression and rights to protest (Lindner & Nosek, 2009). Emboldened by free speech, people cross thresholds of civility, and appropriateness (Graf & Harn, 2017) as evident below:

It’s funny how it’s ok for black people to be racist but if there was a white person only product you people would chimp out.

Comments like these seem to denote that black people who speak out against racism are like chimpanzees (i.e., “would chimp out”). Using animalization to describe behaviors or to categorize a group of people, is a form of desocialization and dehumanization (Albarello & Rubini, 2012). “Explicit racial prejudice is a reliable predictor of the free speech defense of racist expression” (White & Crandall, 2017, p. 413). Free speech with malicious intent is more likely to occur when anonymity is evident.

5.1.2 | Anonymity

Extant research has addressed the concept of anonymity in online commentary (Graf et al., 2017; Reader, 2012). Researchers argue that content that people spread on social networks is usually public and can be seen by many people, unlike traditional word of mouth (Reichstein & Brusch, 2019). Decisions about sharing information and the interaction behaviors of individuals typically changes as a result of self-presentation concerns drawing them to be more comfortable with making comments anonymously (Baker et al., 2016). From a psychological standpoint, theories of deindividuation may be ideal structures to study aggressive behavior and online anonymity. Studies indicate that deindividuated consumers feel less responsible for their actions thus liberating them to act more ant-socially and antagonistically (Festinger et al., 1952). Concealing their identity behind a keyboard may empower consumers to write defamatory statements.

5.1.3 | Social media

Online review platforms play a significant role in how companies gauge customer satisfaction and brand loyalty (Dwivedi et al., 2019). Individuals can turn to social media to post immediate feedback. Consequently, companies have recognized the value of online comments and have enlisted the services of social media specialists to police and manage these sites.

5.2 | Empowered acceptance and resistance

Some consumers accepted the collaboration and welcomed its intent. These consumers were open to the collaboration pushing at the margins of social intolerance toward a more socio-inclusionary change. For example:

Excellent products!!!! 5 STARS but the way this bogus forum is set up you can only see the Racist reviews first... I am a White Woman and I am utterly disgusted by White people on this thread. You're Insecurity and inferiority are so transparent it's ugly. You've always had the whole damn pie and start shaking in your raggedy boots when Black entrepreneurs own a successful business. You need to pipe down!

Similarly, many rated their positive empowerment views as 1 (a bad review), to increase the likelihood that their comment would not be ignored. Others expressed more resistance and were less accepting of the disruption, resulting in vehement disagreement with the co-brand message and intent:

Target is digging themselves a hole. It's racist against whites, browns, and blacks and all women. I'll never use the product. I am sick of all things racist.

Black girls are empowered using this product... I guess white girls aren't. I'll be letting Target know about this racist company.

Researchers have argued “resistance to change can be the cause of difficulty when too strong or too weak. Resistance to change has affective, cognitive, and behavioral components that create a psychological resistance to making a change in particular situations or overall changes in one’s life...” (Forsell & Åström, 2012, p. 1). Data reveals consumers’ level of psychological resistance influences receptivity of social justice branding. Further, those who feel that the collaboration carries no racist or ill-intent, will more likely demonstrate weak resistance and may feel more empowered to respond in a positive way. However, those who interpret the collaboration and messaging as supporting a racist view, will strongly resist the social justice change being proposed, and feel empowered to react negatively and reject the brands.
5.3 | Racist and shameful behavior

Some sentiments suggest that the co-brand collaboration demonstrated behavior Target and Dixon should be ashamed of. Being called-out for what consumers view as questionable and shameful behavior can go viral. Shame reflected disappointment in Target for advertising content that some believe is racist and segregating:

Disappointing that racism is being used in a commercial. I won’t buy this product for that very reason. Shame on you for allowing it to be aired.

With a commercial like this you are part of the problem, not part of the solution. For this reason alone will not purchase your product. Shame on Target for airing this commercial.

Why does it matter if a girl is black, Mexican, Asian, or white? You should want all women to be inspired, not just black girls. Shame on you Target for allowing this.

Interpreting the commercial as conveying racist imagery and classifying the company as racist, became public sentencing. Customers vowed to disassociate from Target, which can negatively affect brand image and profitability:

Wow!!! Such a racist and sexist commercial...Would not purchase...shame on Target for letting it air!

Very racist statements in this ad. Assumes all difficulties in establishing a new business are due to racist reasons. Shame on you Target for allowing this commercial to air.

Rude and racist, how about saying the next girl instead of the next black girl. Target should be ashamed that they are supporting racism.

While Target is an established company which increases the chances of recovering from the backlash, Honey Pot has yet to develop significant positioning in the marketplace. With little thought expressed about the value and benefits Honey Pot products bring to female consumers, the label of "racist" as a descriptive classification is levied at multiple layers—the owner, the products, and the brand.

Yes! Keep the racism alive. Got to love it when the poor black people feel so mistreated like they’re the only ones. They want to sit there and say we had it hard...it’s okay to say what we said. But you can’t say it because you’re white and any obstacles you faced in life, you have to deal with in silence.

Some hold strong beliefs that others have also suffered, time has passed, this history should be forgotten, and those affected should "get over it." According to Wieland (2017, p. 106) "willful ignorance can be seen as ignorance that is due to one’s own will rather than to external barriers. You are ignorant not because it’s excessively difficult to know better, but because you do not want to know better even though it’s relatively easy to do so." Willful ignorance “occurs when individuals realize at some level of consciousness that their beliefs are probably false, or when they refuse to attend to information that would establish their falsity” (Alicke, 2017). Stereotyping Honey Pot as a “racist” company allowed individuals to remain willfully ignorant. Connecting to prejudice racism is defined as ways of thinking, structures, individual acts, institutional, arrangements, and practices that reproduce racial inequalities (Golash-Boza, 2016).

Subsequently, “we cannot separate the construction of race from the reproduction of racism...Racism refers to both (1) the ideology that races are populations of people whose physical differences are linked to significant cultural and social differences and that these innate hierarchical differences can be measured and judged and (2) the micro- and macro-level practices that subordinate those races believed to be inferior” (Golash-Boza, 2016, p. 131). Classifying a thing as racist implies deplorability and condemnation. For example:

I would have considered buying from this company if it hadn’t been for the racist commercial. What a shame that it couldn’t have boosted all women. It’s a shame that being a racist has to be thrown in.

Target is digging themselves a hole. It’s racist against whites, browns, and blacks and all women. I’ll never use the product. I am sick of all things racist.

Condemning both company and brands as racist, expresses unjustified disapproval. Those making the statements intend to sully the character and reputation of both companies, without having authentic concern or motivation to dismantle racism in society. Two tenets of willful ignorance evident in the data are gaslighting and intentional harm.

5.4 | Willful ignorance

Some comments indicated that consumers held complete conviction in what they said. Semblances of falsity were embedded in thoughts expressed, contradicting widely held normative societal and cultural beliefs. Accordingly, some consumers choose to be willfully ignorant to the truth:

Some tried to gaslight Honey Pot and Target, attempting to dissuade positive thoughts and incite negative perceptions about the collaboration and social justice branding. Gaslighting, a term used by psychologists “refers to a specific type of manipulation where the
manipulator is trying to get someone else (or a group of people) to question their own reality, memory or perceptions" (DiGiulio, 2018).

Those wanting to justify their own racism often try to place racist claims on others and on discourse that refers to racial justice:

This commercial totally fuels racism holy sh**. I cannot believe Target is airing this CRAP, and furthermore how dare she make the statement for the next black girl why should the color of her skin matter- totally racist and inappropriate. all of you supporting this because the term is used should all be ashamed of yourselves. The commercial is disgusting. Everyone is sick of the race card. give it up already. I wouldn't even accept this product if it were given to me free. bleh enough already.

That "everyone is sick of the race card" reflects a gaslighting statement. In this environment it insinuates herd minimization through electronic mobbing, where one individual or a small group projects fatigue onto others with the aim of inciting support and outrage. The end goal is to nullify claims of racism for society, not just for Honey Pot. Therefore, if it can be conveyed and believed that racism does not exist in this context, then we can question its existence anywhere.

Gaslighting can take on a life of its own impacting those who use social justice branding and the co-brand partners. Co-branding around social justice, companies must understand that associations, positive or negative, can be leveraged against both brands:

Please use a little bit of common decency, courtesy, and tact; decouple your racial/political activism from your retail business. I guess I’m grateful for Target giving me some insight into the off-putting race politics of Honey Pot. That being said, I’m no longer buying these products. #GetWokeGoBroke

Shame on you Target, shame on you for promoting racism in 2020! This is just another reason a lot of people I know will never step foot in a Target store!

Koschate-Fischer et al. (2019) argues that the existing literature lacks insight on unforeseen negative spillover effects on the reputation of the established brand. Here however, we find that opinions and beliefs held about Honey Pot are transferred onto Target. Secondary associations of the campaign being racially motivated, are leveraged onto the Target brand, detracting from the company’s positive reputation and brand image. Customers calling the co-brand racist adds pressure and increases demand for a cease and desist of the strategy. This disrupts Target’s intention of communicating social and community responsibility in partnering with minority companies. The impact can have long-term implications affecting future customer relations and profitability. Further, if not firmly committed to social justice values, Target and other companies may be dissuaded from supporting entrepreneurs who use social justice branding.

5.4.2 | Intentional harm

Another use of willful ignorance in consumer responses, are reviews intended to be inflammatory and hurtful. These reviews reflect falsehoods conveyed as truths about Honey Pot products or the company, and expressions that reproduce notions of inequalities. Some respondents made comments suggesting that the products were made for animals and not humans:

This really puts the poo in shampoo. What’s worse, it made my hair smell disgusting! I will never buy this brand again! Terrible!

It works! I’m a white girl and I used it to get the bugs out of my head and take away that god awful dog smell that we get at the end of the day. So basically, this product is safe to use on animals as well!

Honey Pot does not include shampoos or hair care in its product line of offerings sold in Target or through the company’s website.

5.5 | Retaliation

Retaliation is commonplace in today’s marketplace and is the result of perceived betrayal. Customers believe the business has intentionally violated their normal relationship (Grégoire & Fisher, 2008). When consumers feel that a company has committed a moral infraction, one emotion they may experience is anger, driving them to seek ways to retaliate (Komarova Loureiro et al., 2018). Retaliation is the act of a customer attempting to punish a firm for damages that they believe the firm caused (Bechwart & Morriss, 2003; Grégoire & Fisher, 2008). Consumers may punish the perceived offending company by publicly criticizing them, berating their employees, and “fraudulent complaining” (Komarova Loureiro et al., 2018 p. 186) all in the pursuit of reestablishing fairness and justice for themselves (Haidt, 2001). Fraudulent complaining was evident in our case study of Honey Pot and Target co-brand. While deceptively claiming that Honey Pot products favored black girls, consumers threatened to discontinue or avoid using the products and to boycott Target:

I was an avid fan and enthusiastic user of Honey Pot products. But recent marketing efforts with Target have highlighted a racially motivated component to the company that I am not only uncomfortable with, but outright disagree with

Racist ad. I will not use this product nor shop at Target
Target and Honey Pot were victims of consumer brand sabotage (CBS), intentional, aggressive behavior whose singular goal is to tarnish a brand (Kähr et al., 2016). Online commenters labeled both companies as racist and seemingly (in the second example below) felt compelled to assert to Dixon that they too matter, something Dixon never disputed in the ad:

Shame all the way around!!! So basically, Target opened the doors for future black girls based on the commercial to achieve exactly what? Why specify black? Racism I guess will never end!!! Definitely I will not buy products from a company that’s racist and cater to their own people.

Racist company that I would never support! White lives matter!!!

Retaliation at a granular level can be cathartic for some consumers as they exert personal power against the company. For a well-established firm like Target, consumer retaliative behaviors may be less effective resulting in no corrective action (Huefner & Hunt, 2000). Consumers who have a strong brand-connection with Target, may feel the company is changing the relationship without their consent. Retaliation against Target in this case is based upon subjective interpretation of the co-brand being racist and resistance to social justice efforts. For startups like Honey Pot, consumer retaliation may truncate the receptivity and growth of the brand, stymying the formation of positive consumer-brand relationships and curtailing profitability. While researchers have considered how companies should respond to retaliation by consumers, (Copulsky, 2011; Grégoire et al., 2010), a public statement from Target could not be found, while Dixon refuted being racist, declaring she would not change what she said (Grant, 2020).

6 | CONCLUSION

This novel study about backlash to social justice branding demonstrates the significance of marketing, its influence on consumers, and the risks and implications for both company and brands. We advance a conceptual model of social justice branding that integrates the literature of social marketing, social justice, free speech, and consumer behavior, contributing to both theory and practice. Positive effects of social justice branding are evident in the empowerment of those not resistant to the messaging. Acceptance of social justice branding may manifest in advocacy and defense of the strategy ameliorating controversial thoughts and actions of those not open to change. Extending the work of Koschate-Fischer et al. (2019) on spillover effects, our findings demonstrate that co-brand outcomes can be marred with free speech backlash potentially tarnishing the image of both company and brand.

Social justice branding influences consumer perceptions of not only the brand, but also the company’s stance on justice. This change in perception can shift consumer patronage from support to disdain and vice versa. Furthermore, crisis communication strategies may be needed to refute characterizations of being racist or colluding in the promotion of racism. Consequently, risks of social justice branding must be anticipated and scrutinized in advance of engaging in co-branding. While alliance-related effects can be positive, the potential for unanticipated negative outcomes impacting the co-brand partnership should be expected (Koschate-Fischer et al., 2019).

Attracting otherwise unreachable market segments, a social justice branding platform may speak to socio-cultural morals and resonate positively to empower consumers. This empowerment illustrates the connectedness of social justice branding and brand activism which is driven by “concern for the biggest and most urgent problems facing society” (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018, p. 554). However, while social justice branding can be a source of empowerment for those open to adopt its social significance, it can also be weaponized by those who view it as betrayal. As found in this study, gaslighting and viral-like dissemination of negative information are weapons of retaliation. As such, online platforms interject new concerns for social justice branding, in that reviews allow for quick response and potential for misunderstanding. When consumers suppress prejudiced emotions and feelings, social justice branding and online reviews provide an opportunity for those with unfavorable preconceived opinions and intent, to act.

Social justice branding in the Honey Pot case sparked responses of racism and claims of empowerment. Companies must consider these implications in a society where the facilitative environment speeds disruption. Consideration must be given to potential target markets that may be lost versus those that could be gained. For social justice branding to be successful as a strategy, the commitment of the brand to the social justice message must be strongly linked to the brand’s purpose, and continually affirmed and communicated.

6.1 | Limitations and future research

There are limitations to this study. First, data were online consumer reviews from a single source. This presents a limitation in our study sample, as this is only one source of consumer comments. A comparison of consumer reviews through other online review platforms may offer differences in the thoughts expressed with respect to the co-branding relationship and messaging conveyed in the Honey Pot commercial. Second, social justice branding as a marketing strategy has received little attention in the literature. As such, the theories could be expanded to include other factors like moral conflict and distributive justice. Future studies could test our conceptual model and empirically assess influences of social justice branding on consumers and other outcomes. Third, consumers who may not post
online reviews may respond differently when anonymity is not guaranteed. As such, prejudices that they may hold may not be as readily discerned. Future studies could adopt other research methods that would allow investigators to uncover underlying biases. Lastly, demographic descriptions of the sample were excluded from the Trustpilot data. As demographic differentiations were not included, this limitation prevented variation in response by gender from being discovered in our analysis and findings. Target’s recognition of African American businesses spearheads a larger effort for diversity, equity, and inclusion, and serves as a benchmark for other firms with similar co-brand interests.

The content of this study has not been published nor submitted for publication elsewhere.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from Trustpilot. Restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license for this study.

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