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Woke-washing: “Intersectional” femvertising and branding “woke” bravery

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Purpose: This paper explores how and why “intersectional” feminist and Black social justice activist ideas are drawn on in marketing content related to the concept of being “woke” (invested in addressing social injustices). It considers which subject positions are represented as part of this and what they reveal about contemporary issues concerning advertising, gender, race and activism.

Design/methodology/approach: This research involves an interpretive and critical discursive analysis of “intersectional” feminist advertising (“femvertising”) and marketing examples that make use of Black social justice activist ideas.

Findings: Findings illuminate how marketing simultaneously enables the visibility and erasure of “intersectional” feminist and Black social justice activist issues, with the use of key racialised and gendered subject positions; White Saviour, Black Excellence, Strong Black Woman (and Mother), “Woke” Change Agent.

Research limitations/implications: This research signals how brands (mis)use issues concerning commercialised notions of feminism, equality and Black social justice activism, as part of marketing that flattens and reframes liberationist politics, while upholding the neoliberal idea that achievement and social change requires individual ambition and consumption rather than structural shifts and resistance.

Practical implications: This work can aid development of advertising standards regulatory approaches which account for nuances of stereotypical representations and marketing’s connection to intersecting issues regarding racism and sexism.

Originality/value: This research outlines a conceptualisation of the branding of “woke” bravery, which expands our understanding of the interdependency of issues related to race, gender, feminism, activism and marketing. It highlights marketing responses to recent socio-political times, which are influenced by public discourse concerning movements including Black Lives Matter and Me Too.

Reflecting on the idea of “marketing the brave” raises questions concerning the construction of brand narratives (Preece and Kerrigan, 2015), the characterising of bravery, and who is ascribed this trait. A key site of connected exploration is the nexus of consumer culture, inequalities and resistance strategies, including media representations and celebrity images which depict knotted racial and gender issues (Bobo, 2001; hooks, 1992, Jackson, 2014; Jerald *et al.*, 2017; Joseph, 2018; Sobande *et al.*, 2019a). Related studies analyse topics associated with gender, feminism, marketing (Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton, 2008; Catterall *et al.*, 2000; Maclaran, 2015; Otnes and Zayer, 2012) and commodity activism (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser, 2012). Although such research is expanding, there has been comparatively less consideration of matters to do with race, racism and the marketplace (Davis, 2018; Ekpo *et al.*, 2018; Grier *et al.*, 2019; Henderson *et al.*, 2016; Johnson *et al.*, 2019; Tadjewski, 2012).

There is a dearth of marketing scholarship situated at the crossroads of gender (sexism) and race (racism) studies (Gopaldas and DeRoy, 2015; Nölke, 2018), particularly with a focus on marketed depictions of Black people (Crockett, 2008). The work of Chakravartty *et al.* (2018, p.255) emphasises that “communication scholarship at large needs to pay more attention to the persistent marginalisation of racial and ethnic minorities in today’s complex media systems”. This paper is aligned with such a position and examines how commercialised notions of Black social justice activism and intersectional understandings of feminism and equality are drawn on as part of current marketing efforts. It unpacks how brands make use of such issues in the content of marketing that predominantly upholds the neoliberal idea that achievement, social change and overcoming inequality requires individual ambition and consumption, rather than structural shifts and resistance.

Based on critical discursive analysis of ten marketing examples produced by global brands (Gatorade, H&M, Nike, Pepsi, Ram Trucks, Smirnoff), this work scrutinises who and what is framed as brave in marketing tied to interdependent issues pertaining to race and gender. Such analysis is guided by studies of media texts, represented subject positions and encoded meanings (Borgerson and Schroeder, 2002; Crockett, 2008; Hall, 1993; 2003). It is also stimulated by the need for more studies of feminisms that have rarely been the focus of marketing research and nascent studies of activities that are dubbed feminist advertising (“femvertising”) (Sobande, 2019a).

The consumer culture context that the marketing under review is situated in is theorised as being a global one (Carpenter *et al.*, 2013) impacted by social capital attached to individuals and institutions appearing to be “woke” (Gray, 2019); invested in challenging structural injustices faced by the most societally marginalised – especially Black people of African descent. Although public discourse concerning the concept of “wokeness” varies, it includes reference to acts of resistance and solidarity in response to systemic racism, capitalism and structural oppression (Cauley, 2019; Gray, 2019; Guobadia, 2018), and has been the source of many media pieces that explore issues concerning privilege and social justice. At times, “wokeness” is particularly associated with courage, as embodied and expressed by activists and individuals who challenge discriminative power relations, principally those rooted in anti-Blackness (Murray, 2017). Therefore, the expression “woke bravery” reflects how societal conceptualisations of “wokeness” are tethered to conversations and contestations concerning courageousness.

The marketing of “woke” bravery, which involves brands invoking images and ideas that initially may appear allied with social justice sentiments, is a thorny and relatively recent topic of media coverage and academic enquiry. Brands and celebrities that are perceived to have appropriated social justice rhetoric and representations in pursuit of profit, have been critiqued: “How business and basic bitches killed ‘woke’: whose slang is it anyway?” (Guobadia, 2018), “The Problem With ‘Woke Bait’ and Social Justice Propaganda” (Blanco, 2019), and “Justin Timberlake’s Fake-Wokeness and Lack of Accountability Won’t Fly in 2018” (Rolli, 2018). Contrastingly, certain commercial organisations, including US magazine *Teen Vogue*, have been praised and have benefited due to perceptions of their active efforts to raise awareness of systemic and intersecting inequalities (Keller, 2017).

Current marketplace logics are influenced by activist issues and commercial ones, in conflicting ways that yield brand attempts to indicate a commitment to social justice via marketing that is inherently devoid of liberationist politics. Given insidious intersecting structural inequalities and marketers’ increasing attempts to target historically marginalised consumer groups (Johnson *et al.*, 2019), it is pertinent to explore how brands (mis)use marketised Black social justice activist ideas and intersectional understandings of feminism. The need for further related work is urgent, given that “racism and sexism remain defining forces in our culture” (Gray and Leonard, 2018, p.3) and which manifest in consumption contexts. This research explores how brands are tapping into discourse concerning “wokeness” and its association with bravery, how they are (mis)using ideas connected to

intersectionality and Black social justice activism, and how such activity involves invoking certain racialised and gendered celebrity identity myths in the process.

Feminism, Race, Intersectionality and the Marketplace

Many definitions of feminism exist because feminist politics contains within it a variety of perspectives and experiences (Banet-Weiser, 2018; hooks, 1982). Since “the dawn of its inception feminism has faced repeated criticism over a universalising construction of woman that in truth centres white privileged women” (Okolosie, 2014, p.108). Explanations of feminism often emphasise endeavouring to protect women’s rights, striving to dismantle patriarchy and structural oppression, and ensuring that all people are treated equally, regardless of their sex or gender identity. However, detailed analysis of feminism and marketing requires discussion of different feminist positions and resistance of “dominant ideologies which are characteristically masculine” (Woodruffe, 1997, p.667) and rooted in institutional whiteness and heteronormativity.

Much public discourse concerning feminism primarily platforms the perspectives of cisgender women, whose gender identity corresponds with societal expectations of the self-identification of individuals assigned the sex “female” at birth. The experiences of trans and non-binary people have often been side-lined and even actively excluded as part of various strands of alleged feminist thought. Challenges to the erasure of such experiences include the significant scholarship of individuals such as Green and Bey (2017, p.438), which “deeply engages prevailing notions of Blackness and transness, and radicalizes how these are understood with respect to feminism”.

Among feminist stances are ones based on decidedly Black feminist and intersectional understandings of oppression (Emejulu and Sobande, 2019; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 2017; Davis, 1981), which stress how anti-Black racism overlaps with classism, sexism, experiences of migration, dis/ability, sexuality and other power relations. The word “misogynoir”, coined by Moya Bailey, and further developed by both Bailey and Trudy (2018), refers to Black women’s experiences of interconnected anti-Black racism, misogyny, heteronormative sexism, and other interrelated forms of systemic oppression. Misogynoir was referenced in a viral 2016 Twitter post by white American singer-songwriter Katy Perry, and

the term has moved through consumer culture in ways that rarely credit the term to the Black women who developed this crucial concept (Bailey and Trudy, 2018).

Black women's experiences of oppression, and articulations of them, have commonly been (mis)used by mainstream popular culture, which does little, if anything, to address structural inequalities that Black women face. Relatedly, feminist advertising (often dubbed "femvertising") has been the subject of analysis of how women are represented in marketing imagery, as well as how brands attempt to appeal to them (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Sobande, 2019a).

Media and marketing frequently regarded as femvertising includes images and cues intended to signal a brand's support of women's equality and empowerment, on a neoliberal and representational level (Dobson and Kanai, 2018). A clear example of how feminist ideas have been decontextualised and recontextualised via consumer culture is the co-optation of Black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde's (1988) notion of "self-care" and its radical potential. Lorde's (1988) political position, which is undergirded by critiques of anti-Black capitalism, is often reduced to marketing messages which insinuate that self-care exclusively starts and ends with consumerism.

Although femvertising has been the focus of previous research, there is still a paucity of such studies that emphasise the intersecting nature of systemic oppression. Consequently, while this paper is shaped by longstanding recognition of how women are objectified as part of marketing and media (Otnes and Zayer, 2012), it is particularly influenced by work on the pervasiveness of visual racism and mediatised stereotypes associated with Black women and girls (Bobo, 2001; Jerald *et al.*, 2017; Noble, 2018). It is also enabled by writing on the consumption and commercialisation of Black culture and anti-racist ideas (Collins, 2000; Cottom, 2019; Crockett, 2008; Douglas, 2012; hooks, 1992).

Advertising and media are key sites of cultural production that are shaped by and shape issues concerning race and Black life (Davis, 2016; Sobande, 2017), because capitalism and racism are intrinsically interwoven (Davis, 1981). Given advertising's influential role in reflecting and contributing to cultural phenomena, including due to its persuasive and political power, it is important to analyse (mis)representations in the content of it. This includes the role of celebrity images and identity myths (Chatman, 2015; Cocker *et al.*, 2015; Fleetwood, 2015; Jackson, 2014; Sobande, 2019b) and marketing's negotiation of contemporary social justice movements.

The Black Lives Matter (BLM) social justice movement was established in response to anti-Black structural oppression, violence and police brutality, resulting in the killing of Black people (adults and children) (Anderson and Hitlin, 2016; Freelon *et al.*, 2016), including Tanisha Anderson, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, and Trayvon Martin, to name but a few. The associated Twitter hashtag #BlackLivesMatter has contributed to a global movement underpinned by the work of Black queer women, founded and steered by Patrisse Khan Cullors, Opal Tometi and Alicia Garza.

When considering how brands attempt to align themselves with social justice ideas, it is crucial to note that the capitalistic nature of modern society means that “what is moral is often determined by what has economic value” (Cottom, 2019, p.20). Hence, brands navigate pressures to present themselves as being concerned with racism, sexism and interdependent oppression, yet, in pursuit of profit. Resultingly, BLM and various iterations of Black social justice activism and racial politics have captured the interest of celebrities and brands (Jackson, 2014), as has the associated digital activity of Black people who participate in the online phenomenon referred to as “Black Twitter” (Clark, 2015). The related work of Crockett (2008) on marketing Blackness is highly relevant to analysis of such activity, as it outlines how commercialised depictions of Blackness and Black cultural identity involve “promotional strategies reliant on persons and other symbolic and material representations socially and historically constructed as black (e.g. speech and phonetic conventions, folklore, style, fashion, music, usage of the body, and the black physical form)” (Crockett, 2008, p.245).

This paper builds upon analyses of the cultural productive powers of advertising, in addition to burgeoning work on Black social justice movements, feminism and how these issues influence marketplace dynamics. Just as BLM has attracted the interest of famous people and corporate marketers, so too has the Me Too movement and different forms of feminism. The Me Too movement gained global attention after #MeToo went viral on Twitter, as a result of online posts highlighting instances of sexual harassment and assault, and in response to publicised sexual abuse allegations against film producer Harvey Weinstein. In the process of #MeToo being covered as part of mainstream media, it became apparent that despite its inception in the press often being credited to famous white women (actor Alyssa Milano and former actor Rose McGowan), #MeToo, was, in fact, a result of the

evolution of a Black woman's (Tarana Burke) overlooked labour and activist efforts (Garcia, 2017).

The frequent erasure of Burke's role in the establishment of the Me Too movement reflects intersecting oppression in action. It encompasses how the public face of high-profile feminist issues is often that of a white cisgender woman (Okolosie, 2014), whose experiences are positioned as being normative in contrast with those of Black women (hooks, 1982). That said, the term "intersectionality" (Crenshaw, 2017) which refers to interlocking forms of oppression, particularly those that affect Black women, has gradually acquired a buzz among media and marketing professionals (Coaston, 2019), often resulting in dilution and distortion of the concept.

When accounting for adoption of the language of "intersectionality" among marketers and acknowledging how BLM and #MeToo have influenced advertising, it becomes clear that analysis of contemporary marketing reveals much about (dis)connections between advertising and activism related to gender and race. This research is spurred on by calls for more intersectional analyses of associated issues (Davis, 2018; Gopaldas and DeRoy, 2015; Nölke, 2018). It is bolstered by prior insightful work on Black identity, activism, fame and consumer culture, including Jackson's (2016) in-depth analysis in *Black Celebrity, Racial Politics, and the Press: Framing Dissent*.

How are brands endeavouring to tap into discourse concerning "wokeness" and its association with bravery? How are brands (mis)using ideas connected to intersectionality and Black social justice activism, and in ways that invoke certain racialised and gendered celebrity identity myths in the process? Driven by such questions, this paper closely inspects contemporary marketing examples yielded by global brands that appear to have attempted to leverage "woke" credentials.

Methodology

Marketing is based on social practices and commercial activities which involve signs and cues that contribute to advertising content and global consumer culture (Carpenter *et al.*, 2013). This paper's critical approach (Burton, 2001) involves a focus on interpretivist discursive analysis of filmed marketing material (Borgerson and Schroeder, 2002; Crockett, 2008; Hall, 1993). Such analysis entails examining the content of marketing examples and explanations of them offered by those behind their creation. This enables understanding of

racialised and gendered subjectivities in adverts deemed to be part of “intersectional” femvertising and “woke” marketing attempts, as well as analysis of how these relate to certain brand narratives (Preece and Kerrigan, 2015).

As a key component of critical marketing approaches is interdisciplinarity (Burton, 2001), the discourse analysis involved in this research is influenced by Black feminist media and cultural studies work (Bobo, 2001) which affirms that the close reading of media texts can expose issues of power, race and gender. Recent advertisements (2015–2018) that draw on commercialised notions of equality, intersectional understandings of feminism and Black social justice activism, were sought and analysed. This involved identifying examples which allude to issues regarding oppression concerning people’s racial and gender identities, as well as wider social movements. These were then interpretively studied by analysing visual, textual and audio components of the filmed adverts. This process was informed by a critical theoretical framework that accounts for interdependent racist and sexist structural forces (Emejulu and Sobande, 2019; Crenshaw, 2017).

Analysis involved notes being made on “form, subject, style, genre, medium, colour, light, lines and size” (Gurrieri *et al.*, 2016, p.1458). Such observations concern potentially encoded messages that the adverts communicate (Hall, 1993). Various social cues depicted were analysed; dress, mannerisms, facial expression and tone of voice. This analysis drew on ethical representational conventions delineated by Schroeder and Borgerson (2005); face-ism, idealisation, exoticisation and exclusion, and which have been further explored by Gurrieri *et al.* (2016).

The ascent of the term “woke”, beyond its reference to waking from a physical state of sleep, can be attributed to Black activism that originates in the US, with Cauley (2019) noting that the term first appeared in print as part of African American Vernacular English usage in 1942. While the concept of “woke(ness)” has transcended the boundaries of North America, discussion of it in relation to consumer culture is particularly prominent within US media and marketing (Gray and Leonard, 2018; Watson, 2017). Taking this into consideration, the examples analysed in this paper reflect the work of global brands but include content that is predominantly US-oriented in nature.

Data Sample

The ten examples chosen for analysis (Figure 1.) were selected because they foreground various identities and feature celebrities specifically associated with issues regarding anti-Blackness, racism, sexism, and transphobia, even if in contentious ways. This presents the opportunity to explore how the self-brands of celebrities can contribute to corporate brands' construction of "woke" bravery.

This process involved identifying brands' intentional use of rhetoric and representations that are strongly associated with Black social justice activism and intersectional understandings of feminism and inequality (e.g. words, images and sonic articulations of iconic famous Black athletes, women, and activists). Applying these criteria involved determining that each example had been responded to and framed in media coverage of it in ways that explicitly emphasise its marketing messages concerning issues including feminism, Black social justice activism, and/or equality. Thus, the sample studied includes advertising content with a global reach, which has received media attention that positions it in proximity to discourse concerning "wokeness".

As the incisive work of Jackson (2014, pp.2-3) illuminates, matters "deeply rooted in questions of social power, such as those involving race, protest, and fame, have particularly strong cultural frames given the symbolic power with which such issues are historically and culturally coded". The related notion of celebrity identity myths captures the myriad ways that a celebrity is constructed and understood as embodying certain experiences and associated ideologies, including those related to race, gender, class and sexuality. Such myths "are created, shaped, interpreted and utilised by media, celebrities and consumers" (Cocker *et al.*, 2015, p.503). The data sample at the core of this paper consists of adverts that feature celebrities who bring a host of associations and histories concerning race, gender and politics with them (Chatman, 2015), as this enables analysis of the role of celebrity images and identity myths (Cocker *et al.*, 2015; Fleetwood, 2015; Jackson, 2014; Sobande, 2019b) in the branding of "woke" bravery.

While "wokeness" is a fluid concept that is a source of much contestation, it remains one that has been operationalised by marketers and is therefore worthy of consideration as part of critical marketing studies. Brand marketing approaches can range from subtle nods to "wokeness" by using language and visual symbols associated with social justice movements but without naming or actively supporting them, to explicitly attempting to communicate the brand's alleged "woke" credentials by declaring their support of specific social justice movements and activists, including in the form of financial contributions. For this reason,

analysing issues to do with “wokeness” and branding requires an understanding of “wokeness” that is attuned to variations of its expression in the marketplace.

The sample of examples identified (Figure 1.) include representations of individuals from different racial backgrounds and with different gender identities.

Brand	Year	Advert	Weblink
Gatorade	2015	Unmatched	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3K_4LfzKPko
Gatorade	2017	Sisters in Sweat ft. Serena Williams	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uGtLWQsQ8HU
H&M	2016	For Every Victory	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9d3ftvAi_bE
Nike	2018	Voice of Belief/Just Do It: Serena Williams	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C5ZDl4epfbM
Nike	2018	Until We All Win	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MT1Fy7OuAyY
Nike	2017	Dream Crazy	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E48hHS-5HyM
Nike	2017	Equality	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWsUrMfDaG4
Pepsi	2017	Live for Now	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dA5Yq1DLsMQ&t=12s
Ram Trucks	2018	Built to Serve	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tVz1xa7S4Q4
Smirnoff	2018	Who Wore it Better?	https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWk8-7Q2neE

The adverts span from 2015–2018, which reflects the point at which the language of “woke(ness)” entered mainstream media and marketing spheres; with “woke” becoming an Oxford English Dictionary entry in 2017. The sample consists of filmed content, in recognition of Crockett’s (2008) observation that televised marketing provides an expansive variety of signifiers for analysis, including visual and audio-based ones. As part of an intention to explore how the examples analysed contribute to overarching brand narratives, in the case of two brands (Gatorade and Nike) several examples of advertising produced by each of them were studied.

Analysing several adverts by the one brand (Gatorade and Nike) that feature the same celebrity (Serena Williams) provides the opportunity to further reflect on how the individual and iconic image of famous people contributes to ongoing “woke” branding attempts. Given Sobande, F. (2019), “Woke-washing: ‘intersectional’ femvertising and branding ‘woke’ bravery”, *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol. ahead-of-print No. ahead-of-print. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EJM-02-2019-0134>

the strong history of activism implicated in sports, sports-related marketing also presents a prime source of analysis as part of research regarding the branding of “woke” bravery (Gatorade, Nike and H&M).

Overall, analysis involved iterative identification of, and comparison between, key subject positions and underlying narratives included in the examples under review. This was shaped by Hall’s (1993, p.95) assertion that “discursive ‘knowledge’ is the product not of the transparent representation of the ‘real’ in language but of the articulation of language on real relations and conditions”. Therefore, key identified themes and language used to describe them connect to the content of the adverts analysed (visual, audio, the brands and celebrity identity myths that they are associated with), as well as societal race and gender relations that exist beyond the confines of such marketing.

Analysis of the data sample and connoted meanings was guided by studies of race and the marketplace that embrace an analytic lens underpinned by critical race theory, which accounts for the normativity of whiteness (Burton, 2001; 2009; Daniels, 2015; Davis, 2018; Johnson *et al.*, 2019) and white supremacist capitalist patriarchy specifically (hooks, 1992). Consequently, analysis spawned identification of four subject positions connected to issues of race and gender. These play a role in how marketers draw on ideas related to intersectional understandings of feminism, Black social justice activism, and equality, as part of the branding of “woke” bravery: (1) *White Saviour*, (2) *Black Excellence*, (3) *Strong Black Woman (and Mother)*, (4) *“Woke” Change Agent*.

The branding of “woke” bravery: key subject positions

White Saviour

Since Burton (2009, p.349) affirmed that “whiteness has rarely surfaced as a theoretical category in consumer research”, scholars including Davis (2018) have expanded understandings of such issues, by accounting for how the normativity of racial whiteness in the “Western” world contributes to marketing. The subject position of the “white saviour” has been so prolifically represented in film that it has been referred to as a genre of its own (Murphy and Harris, 2018). However, there has been less critical consideration of depictions of the “white saviour” in marketing and advertising.

The subject position of the “white saviour” foregrounds the perspective of a white

person who is conventionally framed as selflessly and authoritatively aiding allegedly disempowered Black people and/or non-Black people of colour. This subject position connotes hierarchical colonial relations, without challenging associated issues to do with racism, colonialism and white supremacy. The “white saviour” features in contemporary marketing examples including Pepsi’s first global campaign – Live for Now (2017), which exemplifies how brands are attempting to tap into public discourse concerning the concept of being “woke”.

Celebrity brands and identity myths are connected to market logics (Cocker *et al.*, 2015), including entwined issues of gender and race (Jackson, 2014). Pepsi’s Live for Now campaign features model and television personality Kendall Jenner; a member of the well-known Kardashian family, who have consistently documented their lives on reality television. Jenner’s self-brand is one moulded in relation to her family’s collective public image which has been punctuated by critiques of their emulation of Black culture, as well as their embracement of “hypersexual and hyperfeminine gender performances” (Monteverde, 2016, p.153). Jenner’s celebrity status and what it signifies cannot be removed from what her presence in Live for Now symbolises.

Jenner first appears in the Pepsi advert in a scene that focuses on her being assisted by a Black woman at a photo shoot. Jenner is the most prominently placed individual in Live for Now, despite strategic inclusion of what Crockett (2008, p.253) might term as being a multiracial ensemble, who are primarily depicted as protesters. Live for Now includes close range shots that focus on an impassioned musician (who catches Jenner’s eye) and a photographer wearing a Hijab (both, non-Black people of colour). Such individuals find themselves drawn to a protest occurring near Jenner’s photo shoot, seemingly as a result of their creative-related frustrations, instead of an investment in the inferred social justice issues behind the march.

Accompanying the advert is the anthemic reggae style track “Lions” by Skip Marley (grandson of Jamaican singer-songwriter Bob Marley). The song includes lyrics that refer to people being part of “the movement, this generation” and whose rights have been taken away. Such music provides an audio-based Black cultural reference (Charles, 2016; Crockett, 2008) which serves as another cue that invokes ideas concerning Black activism. It is in the latter half of this Pepsi advert that Jenner decides to join the racially mixed protest crowd that is visible from her photo shoot. In doing so, she dramatically removes her blonde wig, without explanation, and abruptly hands it to the Black woman assisting her. Such a move

immediately frames the Black woman as passive, subservient and inconsequential, in contrast to Jenner's portrayal as pro-active and authoritative.

As Jenner loses the wig, the advert moves to a close-up shot of her face (face-ism) (Schroeder and Borgerson, 2005). This further emphasises Jenner's central role in such marketing, as does how she is shown being photographed by the white photographer at her shoot, and the photographer wearing a Hijab, who too joined the protest. Jenner is possessor of the normative white gaze (Hall, 2003) through which the protest scenes are primarily viewed in this advert. She is also that which is idealised and gazed at; a famous slender-bodied cisgender white woman. Pepsi's Live for Now strongly invokes the subject position of the "white saviour", inadvertently or otherwise.

Although the cause underscoring the protest in Live For Now remains a mystery, the depicted standoff between protesters and police, paired with the advert's representation of Black people and use of Black signifiers (Crockett, 2008), connotes Black Lives Matter (BLM) and media coverage of the movement. In Live for Now, as Jenner confidently strides through the protest crowd, she grabs a can of Pepsi before receiving a nod of approval from the man who motioned to her to join the march in the first place, as well as being fist-bumped in support by a Black man. Such interactions quietly reinforce overlapping racialised, gendered and heteronormative ideas, as Jenner is depicted as being a white woman emboldened by admiring Black men and non-Black men of colour.

Jenner presents the Pepsi can to a police officer who is facing off with the protesters. Unlike the people who surround her at the protest, many of whom are not white, it is implied that Jenner has the power and fearlessness (bravery) to effectively diffuse tensions between protesters and the police. As the police officer in question sips from the can presented to them, the crowd erupts into celebratory cheers, with many Black people and non-Black people of colour embracing one another. Such images are further testament to Jenner's framing as a saviour to be admired (idealisation) (Schroeder and Borgerson, 2005).

In Live for Now, Jenner is represented in ways that position her as simultaneously being a glamorous celebrity who embodies conventional notions of (white) femininity, as well as an everyday citizen appearing to help Black people and non-Black people of colour (Murphy and Harris, 2018). The advert closes with a scene featuring Jenner flanked by a group of racially diverse protesters, solidifying her status as a "white saviour" at the centre of an advert regarded as being inspired by recent Black social justice activism.

The subject position that Jenner symbolises (“white saviour”) upholds neoliberal “colour-blind” and “post-racial” ideologies (Joseph, 2012; 2018), which imply that people can transcend race, racial differences and issues concerning racism, simply by choosing to do so, or as Pepsi would have us believe, by offering another a branded drink. Backlash to Live for Now, which was driven by social media and the online voices of Black people, was so significant that Pepsi pulled the advert, with the proliferation of headlines highlighting the oxymoronic nature of such corporate activism: “When Being Woke Goes Wrong: Pepsi, Black Lives Matter & Conscious Branding” (Watson, 2017), and “Pepsi Pulls Ad Accused of Trivializing Black Lives Matter” (Victor, 2017).

It is precisely due to the existence of marketing attempts such as Live for Now, which illustrate the persistence of race-related marketing activity (Ekpo *et al.*, 2018; Grier *et al.*, 2019; Henderson *et al.*, 2016; Johnson *et al.*, 2019; Tadjewski, 2012), that the language of “woke-washing” has entered consumer culture and mainstream media domains (Davies, 2019). Pepsi’s failed marketing approach exemplifies risks involved in brands attempting to position themselves as “woke”, particularly with the use of depictions of Blackness that merely serve as a backdrop to framing a famous white celebrity as being brave. Analysis of examples which centre famous Black individuals facilitates understanding of other racialised and gendered subject positions that surface as part of the branding of “woke” bravery.

Black Excellence

The notion of “Black excellence” contrasts with the subject position of the “white saviour”, the latter of which depends on ideas concerning the need for white individuals to assist, and even, save, allegedly subservient and disempowered Black people and non-Black people of colour (Murphy and Harris, 2018). “Black excellence” is often attributed to Black people who are regarded as being notably self-determined and exceptional, when faced with adversity. The notion contrasts with mediatised and marketised depictions of “blackness as deviance” (Crockett, 2008, p.253). Instead, it is more aligned with aspirational ideas concerning Black respectability politics and perceived socio-economic success (Crockett, 2017; Higginbotham, 1993).

The term “Black excellence” encompasses the experiences of Black individuals, whose personal and professional status is regarded as challenging stereotypical and white supremacist assumptions of their incompetence and inferiority. As such, while the concept of

“Black excellence” may be applied in ways intended to uplift Black people and recognise their achievements, it often reinforces individualistic and classed notions of what constitutes excellence and valuable Black life; academic qualifications, financial gains, institutional awards and publicly presented accolades. It is for this reason that operationalising the concept of “Black excellence” can in fact considerably contrast with liberationist politics that affirms that Black people need not prove the worthiness of their lives to white individuals and through structures rooted in institutional whiteness, in pursuit of their freedom. After all, the road to Black liberation is not paved with palatability and respectability.

Discussions to do with “Black excellence” are far from being confined to Black communities, as they have piqued the interest of contemporary marketing and media practitioners: “From Kendrick’s Pulitzer to Beychella: how the mainstream woke up to black excellence” (Marshall, 2018). Despite this, there is relatively scarce critical marketing scholarship on the entanglements of “Black excellence” discourse and consumer culture. At this point, turning to one of the examples analysed provides insight into how brands draw on images and ideas associated with “Black excellence”, as part of efforts linked to the branding of “woke” bravery.

Gatorade’s *Unmatched* (2015) is a prime example of encoded messages concerning “Black excellence”, in the service of brands. The one-minute advert opens with footage of world ranked professional tennis players Venus and Serena Williams, pausing to smile for a camera in between being trained by their father (Richard Williams) when they were children. Parts of such footage feature in several adverts, including Nike’s *Voice of Belief/Just Do It: Serena Williams* (2018). The continual reuse of this footage conveys how Serena Williams’ iconicity and the story of her ascent has become a mythologised resource that marketers’ frequently call upon. Nike’s *Voice of Belief/Just Do It: Serena Williams* advert is markedly similar to Gatorade’s *Unmatched*, with one of few significant differences being the former’s lack of Serena’s spoken words; epitomising the power of Serena’s visible talent and stardom. In contrast to the absence of conversation in Nike’s *Voice of Belief/Just Do It: Serena Williams*, early on in Gatorade’s *Unmatched*, an off-screen and English-accented interviewer asks a young Serena: “If you were a tennis player, who would you want to be like?” The advert cuts to a shot focused on a “Compton Blvd” sign, as the accompanying, and initially, ominous, piano-based music begins. This is followed by a fleeting shot of young Serena powerfully hitting a tennis ball, as her hunched-over father closely observes her technique.

The advert then moves to a glimpse of footage shot from a car that appears to be driving through Compton.

Those who are regarded as embodying “Black excellence” are often positioned as having transcended environments, that due to overlapping racism and classism, have often in a derogatory manner been referred to as “ghettoes” [sic]. The opening of *Unmatched* immediately establishes the idea that Serena Williams started out training as a young Black girl in Compton; one of many predominantly Black American areas which has been demonised as part of moral panic infused media coverage. The advert’s emphasis on where Serena started out and the implied bravery that her professional journey has involved is affirmed by statements released by the agency (TBWA/Chiat/Day LA, USA) behind its creation. Such commentary refers to Serena as being “raised on the hardscrabble courts of Compton, California”, which involved her fighting her way to where she is: “from down and out”.

Subsequent to initial footage of Serena on a Compton court, the rest of Gatorade’s *Unmatched* is made up of a patchwork of key moments in her world-known career; footage from Serena’s professional debut and winning matches, an image of her on a Sports Illustrated cover, an audience member holding a “strong is beautiful #Serena” sign. The advert’s transition from documenting a moment in Serena’s career marred by concerns regarding her ability to make a comeback, is facilitated by footage of her sitting off court and sipping from a Gatorade bottle. Thence, Gatorade is positioned as aiding the “intensity” and “passion” of a Black woman and athlete who has come to be recognised, as one of, if not, *the*, “greatest of all time”.

In *Unmatched*, “Black excellence” is mobilised in a way that symbolises issues related to hardship, without Gatorade taking the risk of explicitly addressing intersecting issues concerning racism, sexism and classism. *Unmatched* closes by returning to young Serena being asked “if you were a tennis player who would you want to be like?”, to which she replies: “I would like other people to be like me”. Gatorade’s *Unmatched* has all the ingredients of marketing messages buttressed by ideas connected to “Black excellence”; depictions of Black social mobility and reference to the struggles that precede it (from the Compton court to world tournament courts), as well as a focus on public validation and institutional support of the Black individual in question (crowd cheers and sports commentator praise). Serena is undoubtedly positioned as being brave; a characteristic most commonly associated with mythologised images of physically strong white cisgender men,

rather than the depiction of a grinning young Black girl which opens and closes the content of Unmatched.

Unlike similar adverts that Serena features in, in Unmatched there is no verbal mention of issues related to anti-Black racism and sexism that she has faced. Instead, Unmatched champions Serena's success in a way that stops short of overtly acknowledging specific and enmeshed structural inequalities that she has encountered, including her constant scrutiny and surveillance in relation to a hegemonic white gaze (Douglas, 2012). In contrast with Pepsi's Live for Now approach, Gatorade's Unmatched does not seem to attempt to tap into Black social justice activist issues to frame the brand as being "woke". Rather, Unmatched can be interpreted as existing on a spectrum of "woke" marketing attempts, including those more akin to drawing on depictions of Blackness that stem from a "corporate black aesthetic" (Crockett, 2008, p.261), as part of the construction of brand narratives based on neoliberal and aspirational ideas, instead of anti-racist ones.

As has been observed, throughout history there has been a "hyperpolicing and surveillance of Black women's bodies, from the daily toll of microaggressions Black women face to the exhaustion of our current political moment" (Gray and Leonard, 2018, p.3), and the extensiveness of stereotypical and hypersexualised imagery generated by internet search results (Noble, 2018). Analysis of Gatorade's Sisters in Sweat ft. Serena Williams (2017), provides a chance to further consider how ideas connected to race, gender, and famous Black women, contribute to advertising that may be regarded as being part of a brand's "woke" marketing and femvertising attempts. Even the title of the advert explicitly draws attention to the famous athlete at its centre ("ft. Serena Williams"). Moreover, analysing Sisters in Sweat, while recognising that Unmatched made the way for it, presents the chance for deeper consideration of the influence of specific celebrities in a brand's "woke" marketing approach.

Strong Black Woman (and Mother)

Sisters in Sweat opens with soft-focus footage of the face of Serena Williams' baby daughter (Alexis Olympia Ohanian Jr.), who appears to lie beneath a baby mobile made up of star and cloud shapes. The advert then moves to a panned out shot of Serena, wearing a long, flowing and muted outfit, which contrasts with the vibrant and eclectic styles that she is known for sporting, on and off court. Serena cradles and caresses her daughter by the brightly lit French windows of a baby's nursery room. The narration of the advert is based on words of support

and encouragement spoken by Serena to her daughter: “baby girl, I won’t mind if you play tennis badly...”, she says. Serena’s voice is accompanied by a rearranged version of Alicia Keys’ track “Girl on Fire”; another anthemic song, which became strongly associated with media and marketing messages concerning women’s empowerment.

As well as focusing on Serena offering words of advice to her baby daughter, *Sisters in Sweat* features images of young girls and women, particularly those who are not white, taking part in different sports. Among the comments made by Serena, between shots of her kissing her daughter and in-action sports footage, are statements about how “sports will teach you to be strong” and offers the chance to “discover the power and grace of your body”. When remarking on the bonds that sports creates between girls and women (“sisters in sweat”), Serena speaks of sports teaching “the strength of your allies...whether she shares the colour of your skin or the colour of your jersey”.

Sisters in Sweat avoids reiterating various neoliberal “drives for perfection” (Dobson and Kanai, 2018, p.1) that have been at the root of various femvertising depictions of women. Instead, as the title of the campaign suggests, such advertising attempts to use gendered notion of solidarity which firmly positions *Sisters in Sweat* within a corpus of femvertising that still upholds “cultural mythologies of powerful ‘can-do’ girls” (Dobson and Kanai, 2018, p.1). The advert is part of a burgeoning body of contemporary marketing campaigns that are targeted at women and which promote messages of strength and sisterhood that are intended to encourage them to take part in sports and physical activities. The advert epitomises femvertising which is based on “themes that resonate within an economy of visibility, such as empowerment, confidence, capacity, and competence” (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

Sisters in Sweat involves an undercurrent which idealises women’s potential to self-empower and support one another, while affirming that being both a strong woman and a mother, need not be mutually exclusive aspects of a woman’s life. Its fleeting reference to issues related to race (“colour of your skin”) as part of an advert that focuses on a famous Black woman, means that *Sisters in Sweat* provides a slight disruption to the femvertising status quo. It does not explicitly claim to be based on an intersectional understanding of oppression. Nevertheless, *Sisters in Sweat* signals acknowledgement of the racialised nature of women’s experiences but in a way that may be read as promoting post-racial politics (Joseph, 2018), including inter-racial and “colour-blind” allyship, as opposed to anti-racist ideas. Serena’s image in *Sisters in Sweat* becomes part of marketing messages that more

closely resemble the neoliberal logic of much of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2018) than intersectional understandings of gender and race politics.

Contrastingly, Nike's *Until We All Win* (2018) features Serena in an advert that more directly deals with connected issues of race and gender, with Serena reflecting on how she has "never been the right kind of woman...oversized and overconfident. Too mean if I don't smile. Too Black for my tennis whites. Too motivated for motherhood". *Sisters in Sweat* is one of many under-studied examples of how depictions of Black women are increasingly being used amidst spheres of corporate and commodity feminism that have often been synonymous with idealised images of white women. Such changes in representation arguably do little, if anything, to push forward intersecting anti-racist and feminist work. Nevertheless, the (soft) focus on Serena Williams as both a mother and an athlete in *Sisters in Sweat*, results in a depiction of her which may be interpreted as reframing the stereotypical subject position of "the Strong Black Woman" (Jerald *et al.*, 2017); portraying Serena as a strong Black woman and mother, yet, without solely defining and confining her image through reference to this.

Although *Sisters in Sweat* focuses on Serena's determined words of encouragement directed at her daughter regarding women's strength and commitment to championship, it also foregrounds messages about the strength of bonds between women (as mother and daughter, as friends, as teammates). The advert affords Serena a fuller spectrum of traits and emotions than often made available to Black women in media and marketplace depictions (Author 2017; Author *et al.*, 2019; Douglas, 2012). Still, the question that remains is: to what extent can such images benefit Black women and intersectional understandings of feminist movements, if at all?

In both *Unmatched* and *Sisters in Sweat*, the celebrity image of Serena Williams serves as a means for Gatorade to tap into issues concerning "Black excellence" and popular feminism, while maintaining on-brand aspirational notions of individual achievement and consumption. Such adverts evade the promotion of explicitly political messages; Black activist, intersectional, and otherwise. The fact that they do this, yet in ways that signal an awareness of related issues and "woke(ness)", reflects the expansiveness of contemporary economies of visibility; cultures within which profit-oriented logic almost always trumps potentially resistant and activist ideas (Banet-Weiser, 2018).

"Woke" Change Agent

Of the marketing examples analysed, Nike's Equality (2017) includes some of the most blatant references to issues related to racism ("colour") and discrimination. Although there is less of a focus on the individual success of any one Black athlete in Equality, underlying messages to do with "Black excellence" are still hinted at; transcending race and class-related obstacles to achieve success. Clear comparisons can be made between elements of Nike's Equality and Gatorade's Unmatched, with the former being marketed as encouraging people to apply "the fairness and respect" that they witness in sport, to settings "off the field". Equality, which is literally a black and white advert, is based on the idea that "worth should outshine colour" and "opportunity should not discriminate". It foregrounds a predominantly Black cast of athletes, including world-famous ones such as Serena Williams, LeBron James, Kevin Durant and Gabby Douglas.

As the innovative scholarship of Charles (2016, p.89) on Grime music highlights, "the African diaspora have used sounds and music according to their priorities; and in doing so, have created spaces for resistance to slavery, colonialism and racial oppression". Nike's Equality advert features a version of Sam Cooke's "A Change is Gonna Come", performed by Alicia Keys. As the original song is regarded as a Civil Rights anthem, as well as being synonymous with the election of the first African American president of the United States – Barack Obama, the use of the track in Equality immediately connotes Black activist ideas and issues of racial (in)equality.

Equality also includes a poetic narration by actor Michael B. Jordan (who contrary to some reports, is not the son of NBA star Michael Jordan). Both Jordan and LeBron James roundup Equality by remarking that if people can be equals "here" (in sport), then they can be equals everywhere, before the advert displays the words "equality has no boundaries". Equality heavily relies on the iconic image of famous Black athletes, the songs of famous Black singers and musicians, in addition to the spoken words of a famous Black actor. The advert reflects how brands draw on such depictions of Blackness (Crockett, 2008) to allude to their support of social change, which as Cooke's song insinuates, "is coming".

To regard Equality as a brave move on the part of Nike, would be to overlook their gradual mainstreaming of depictions of Blackness (Crockett, 2018a, 2018b; 2018c), as part of what Crockett (2008, p.261) has previously termed as being "a corporate black aesthetic". Instead of reflecting the risk-taking or brave nature of Nike, the branding of "woke" bravery at the centre of this example involves Nike referring to the bravery of Black people; including

those visually depicted and those memorialised in Cooke's lyrics. A call for "change" is emphasised throughout the advert, with the individuals referred to constructed as being "woke change agents"; people with the capacity to use their agency as part of efforts related to social change.

The subject position of the "woke change agent" is a relatively ambiguous one, aligned with brands' efforts to imply that they are committed to assisting forms of social change, often without specifying how this will be achieved or exactly what sort of social change is being implied. The previously discussed subject position of the "white saviour" (Murphy and Harris, 2018) can be regarded as a possible subset of that of the "woke change agent", as can other subject positions such as that of the "Black freedom fighter", which is signalled to in Nike's Dream Crazy (2018) advert, as well as Ram Trucks' (2018) Built to Serve.

Nike's Dream Crazy, comparably to Equality, features a cast of numerous athletes. Narrated by professional American football player and activist Colin Kaepernick, Dream Crazy arguably marks the continuation of Nike's efforts to establish itself as being a "woke" brand, which offers products that they frame as being "an authentic cultural resource" (Crockett, 2008, p.261), due to their connections to Blackness and the "coolness" that is often attributed to it.

Kaepernick's narration of Dream Crazy includes statements such as "if you're born a refugee, don't let it stop you from playing soccer for the national team at age 16", which is coupled with footage of Canadian professional soccer player Alphonso Boyle Davies, who previously lived in a Ghanaian refugee camp. As well as paying homage to the success of Black athletes such as LeBron James, in reference to Serena Williams, Kaepernick says "...and if you're a girl from Compton, don't just become a tennis player, become the greatest athlete ever". Such a comment is yet another example of how brands draw on implicit messages related to "Black excellence", exceptionalism and the iconicity (Grier *et al.*, 2019) of Black celebrities, as part of "woke" marketing efforts which demonstrate how brands promote the idea of "the marketplace as a site of racial equality, signified by black actors in high status roles as part of multiracial ensembles" (Crockett, 2008, p.253).

Dream Crazy comes to an end by focusing on Kaepernick as he walks through a city. Earlier on in the advert, Kaepernick encourages viewers to "believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything", which is coupled with footage of his turned back while he

looks at a building that an image of the US flag is projected onto. This speaks to how the image a Black celebrity can be closely connected to forms of racial politics and activism (Jackson, 2014), and how corporate brands draw on what may be perceived as authentic celebrity brands (Banet Weiser, 2012; Preece, 2015; Sobande, 2019b).

Kaepernick's patriotism has continually been called into question by critics of his Black activism and his refusal to stand and recite the national anthem during NFL matches. His representation in *Dream Crazy* is that of a "woke change agent", linked to ideas of Black freedom fighting, and whose commitment to anti-racist politics has come at the cost of his NFL career: "believe in something, even if it means sacrificing everything". However, while Kaepernick's representation in the advert can be interpreted as Nike's attempt to draw on the "embodied cultural capital" (Crockett, 2008, p.253) of a famous Black athlete and activist, other adverts analysed in this paper illuminate brands' use of disembodied expressions of Blackness, in pursuit of capitalist inspired social messages.

Brands' use of disembodied expressions of Blackness relates to marketing content which emphasises narrations by Black people, without particularly focusing on visual representations of them. The disembodied and somewhat excluded presence of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Ram Trucks' *Built to Serve* is a key example of such a marketing approach, as its narration is based on a sermon of King's. The advert, which aired during the 2018 Super Bowl US football championship, opens with a black screen which features white text that reads: "Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. February 4. 1968", followed by "spoken 50 years ago".

Built to Serve features footage of various people, particularly white men, working in service of others; a construction site worker, a teacher, rescue teams, soldiers. The advert's message is presented as dismissing the idea of pursuing individual greatness and recognition, in favour of pursuing ways to serve others: "But recognise that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant". Ram Trucks refer to the advert in question as being "in the spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.", due to it reflecting that "Ram truck owners also believe in a life of serving others". Such an advert decontextualises the words of King, in ways that strip the underlying Civil Rights activist sentiments of much of what he had to say. This marketing is indicative of "the strategic role blackness representations play in US advertising" (Crockett 2008, p.245), including by so ambiguously hinting at issues related to social change, that their potential connection to those concerning anti-racism is (un)tethered.

It is not only depictions of Blackness that are drawn on as part of brands' efforts to

position them as being “woke”, through representations of the subject position of the “woke change agent”. In addition to attempts to indicate their acknowledgement of Black consumer audiences, brands have responded to contemporary gender and feminist identities and issues in ways that have resulted in some moving away from solely depicting cisgender individuals. One of such examples is H&M’s sportswear For Every Victory (2016) campaign, which includes an advert narrated by famous white trans woman, retired Olympic athlete, and parent to Kendall Jenner – Caitlyn Jenner.

In For Every Victory, Jenner speaks of having “fought to belong and for the right to be different”, such as when referring to feeling “trapped by my body” and stating that “to keep going no matter the obstacles is what victory looks like, whether you’re representing your country or yourself”. For Every Victory’s encoded idea that change is within the grasp of individuals who choose to grab it, is one that subtly links to ideas regarding patriotism (“representing your country”). Such a theme underpins much sports marketing, including other examples analysed in this paper, such as Nike’s Dream Crazy.

It is by pairing ideas of patriotism with those related to overcoming forms of adversity associated with racism, sexism, and, at times, transphobia, that brands attempt to construct and make use of the subject position of “woke change agent”. In the case of For Every Victory, Jenner’s ongoing journey as a celebrated athlete and trans woman is reframed as being a more universalised and idealised one of individual determination and competitive success. Although notably different in their tone, with For Every Victory involving an attempted sincerity that is replaced with a tongue-in-cheek feel in Smirnoff’s Who Wore it Better? (2018), both adverts feature representations of famous trans women. They do so within an overarching narrative that pays a nod to ideas concerning the American Dream and patriotism, while also benefiting from a potentially implicit connection to notions of trans women inclusive equalities-oriented activism.

In Smirnoff’s Who Wore it Better?, actor Ted Danson is seen sporting a blue suit jacket and red tie, accompanied by actor and Black trans rights activist Laverne Cox, who wears a slightly different version of the eye-catching ensemble. The 15 second clip features Danson referring to Smirnoff vodka as being made in America “for everyone, no matter who you are, where you come from or what you look like”, before a windswept Cox appears in view and finishes the sentence with “...or who wore it better”. As the advert closes, Smirnoff’s logo appears, paired with text that reads “Proudly made in America”.

For Every Victory and Who Wore it Better? allude to issues of inequality, including those related to transphobia. Despite this, such adverts are ultimately examples of how brands may do so in strategically ambiguous ways that maintain the dominance of a more general marketing message connected to patriotic ideas related to individualistic notions of pride, rather than the dismantling of intersectional and structural oppressive forces.

The subject position of the “woke change agent” is a very malleable one that enables brands to depict historically under-represented and oppressed individuals, as a means of virtue signalling, rather than explicitly calling out specific and overlapping social injustices. In the words of Banet-Weiser (2012, p.4), branding “has extended beyond a business model; branding is now both reliant on, and reflective of, our most basic social and cultural relations”. Therefore, with the use of a theoretical framework that stems from critical marketing studies, critical race theory, and Black feminist approaches, this paper analyses campaigns, including those that on the surface, may seem to push against the idealisation of conventional gender roles, as well as racism and the normativity of whiteness in the “Western” marketplace (Burton, 2009; Daniels, 2015; Davis, 2018; Hall, 2003). As is highlighted, upon closer inspection, such marketing reflects the contradictory ways that brands enable the visibility and erasure of social justice activist issues and images, particularly those to do with feminism and Black social justice activism.

Discussion

Analysis of the marketing examples under review is not based on an aim to determine whether such content and the brand behind it *is* “woke”. Instead, this work is approached from the critical perspective that “woke(ness)”, which is arbitrarily (un)defined and measured in society, is something that a brand can only strive to perform and project. It is something that brands may appear to do, but which they can never possess, or be. When this is the starting point of work such as this paper, pressing and guiding questions include: How are brands making use of intersectional understandings of feminism, equality and Black social justice activist messages as part of their marketing approaches? Who and what is framed as being the “brave” in such examples of the branding of “woke” bravery? What does this reveal about the interdependency of issues of race, gender, activism and marketing activity?

This research is situated within interdisciplinary conversations to do with the influence of feminism and Black activism, including understandings of how “Black women must contend with traditional femininity ideologies, such as expectations of passivity

and sexiness, as well as gender ideologies specific to Black women, such as assumptions about the Strong Black Woman (SBW)” (Jerald *et al.*, 2017, p.609). Additionally, this work is rooted in observation of how, just as marketing knowledge and consumer research is “gendered in unrecognised ways” (Catterall *et al.*, 2000, p.369), it is also racialised; influenced by the normativity of whiteness in the marketplace, as well as many studies of it (Daniels, 2015; Davis, 2018; Johnson *et al.*, 2019; Grier *et al.*, 2019).

Such work is aligned with the scholarship of Burton (2009, p.350), who outlines the merits of drawing on whiteness theory, the purpose of which “is to ‘race’ whiteness and to denaturalise dominant ideologies, discourses and practices that make whiteness almost invisible”. Consequently, among key subject positions unpacked in this paper, is that of the “white saviour” (Murphy and Harris, 2018), which requires further analysis as part of developing consumer research that attends to depictions of both Black and white people.

The examples analysed highlight how brands tap into issues concerning commercialised notions of feminism, equality and Black social justice activism, as part of marketing that primarily upholds the neoliberal idea that achievement and social change requires individual ambition and consumption (Dobson and Kanai, 2018). In turn, such marketing that may appear to fall into categories including “intersectional” femvertising and “woke” branding, can reinforce the very ideas that intersectional understandings of feminism and Black social justice activist ideologies are intended to tackle; including the misguided notion that Black women can simply overcome structural barriers by being determined.

Inspired by Joseph’s (2018) perceptive analysis in *Postracial Resistance: Black Women, Media, and the Uses of Strategic Ambiguity*, this paper focuses on how brands are attempting to market themselves as being “woke” in ambiguous enough ways that they neither explicitly state nor deny their stance on significant socio-political issues concerning racism, sexism, transphobia and interlocking forms of oppression. The marketing efforts analysed do not merely involve brands implying that certain people featured in adverts are brave, due to reasons linked to racism, sexism, transphobia and activism. Instead, to varying degrees, the branding of “woke” bravery can implicitly position brands as being brave; risk-taking for appearing to align themselves with famous individuals and social movements that may be strongly associated with the divisiveness that accompanies iconicity (Grier *et al.*, 2019).

The subject positions outlined in this work articulate how overlapping issues concerning race and gender influence the marketing strategies of brands, including in ways that involve foregrounding whiteness, even as part of marketing that heavily alludes to Black activist and Civil Rights ideas and icons (e.g. Pepsi and Ram Trucks). This analysis emphasises how neoliberal notions of self-determination and meritocracy (e.g. “Black Excellence”), in addition to patriotism and post-racialism (Who Wore it Better?, Sisters in Sweat), can be encoded in adverts intended to signal brands’ support of structural change and inequalities, but in intentionally generalised ways. Aspirational ideas regarding competition and individual achievement have played a significant part in the history of advertising and celebrity brands. However, their use in the context of marketing that is linked to contemporary issues of inequality, can decontextualise related social justice activism and dilute informed public discourse regarding such issues.

Conclusion

This paper sheds light on “woke” marketing approaches and subject positions used as part of them, including those that draw on depictions related to specific Black social justice and political stances (BLM and Civil Rights activism). It contributes to conversations concerning brands’ use of images of famous Black women, by stressing how representations of such individuals may be used in ways, intentionally, yet, subtly, linked to intersecting issues pertaining to racism and sexism in advertising (“intersectional” femvertising). Such research signposts that while previously, representations of Blackness in marketing contributed to content which often evades depictions of racial inequality (Crockett, 2008), the unfixed and evolving ways that marketers make use of such portrayals includes more explicit references to racism and entangled injustices.

Many consumers expect companies to take a stand on socio-political issues. This is indicated by a study based on the perspectives of 1000 UK consumers, which found that up to 80% of consumers would stop using a product or service provided by a company if they disagreed with the company’s response to a specific issue (Hickman, 2018). The same study indicates consumer wariness of how brands capitalise on socio-political issues as part of their marketing spin. Hence, brands continue to face mounting pressure to present themselves as being socially just, yet in ways that seem authentic and evidenced by substantive actions, rather than their surface-level image. The examples analysed in this paper and the subsequent discussion of issues concerning race, gender, intersecting inequalities and branding, points to

the need for bodies regulating advertising to adopt nuanced approaches to what constitutes ethical standards for advertising.

Put simply, brands should be held to account for attempting to market themselves as being concerned with issues of inequality and social injustice (woke-washing), including in ways that involve stereotypical representations, particularly when the brand's actions do not indicate any sustained commitment to addressing such matters of injustice. More effective governing of the standards of marketing and advertising requires regulatory frameworks that include understandings of issues concerning racism and sexism, which account for the intersectional nature of structural oppression and the specific stereotypes that certain social groups, such as Black women, face.

It is also imperative that marketing managers do not mistakenly equate the mere inclusion of representations of structurally marginalised identities in marketing, with activism or indication of a strong socio-political stance. Given the structural nature of oppressive forces linked to racism, sexism and transphobia, addressing these issues requires much more than representational politics. Thus, brands that are seriously invested in aiding efforts to address social injustices cannot simply do so in the form of marketing content, and instead, must assess their approaches to issues including the principles underpinning their in-house labour practices, production methods, and sources and uses of profit.

This work builds upon Crockett's (2008) detailed writing on brands' reliance on representations of Blackness, Jackson's (2014) vital analysis of Black celebrity, racial politics and activism, and Joseph's (2018) rigorous research regarding post-racial discourse, Black women and strategic ambiguity (Joseph, 2018). It is also notably shaped by Gray and Leonard's (2018) cutting-edge edited collection on issues concerning "wokeness", gaming and facets of consumer culture, as well as in-depth accounts of how whiteness is operationalised as part of marketplace activity and studies of it (Burton, 2009; Davis, 2018). This paper contributes to ongoing consumer culture work related to "a convergence of powerful contemporary racial and gendered dynamics and histories" (Gray and Leonard, 2018, p.3), in an era within which discussions of Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, continue.

The intersectional approach to this analysis deepens understanding of relatively under-explored topics connected to marketing depictions, including images of Black motherhood (Chatman, 2015; Crockett, 2008) and representations of the "white saviour" in contemporary advertising. Examples analysed, such as Pepsi's Live For Now campaign and powerful social media criticism that it sparked, demonstrate the lack of nuance and fragility

of many contemporary brand attempts to use issues concerning racism and social justice activism as inspiration for their marketing material; including due to the rising ability of critics to amplify their perspectives online. Such a case is but one example of brand activity that has contributed to discussion of “woke-washing” within the marketing world. There is a need for continued consideration of the socio-cultural significance and varied manifestations of seemingly “woke” branding approaches. As a result, questions worthy of further consideration include: (1) What constitutes the appropriation of social justice activist ideas and images amidst marketplace dynamics? (2) In what way does such activity impact social justice movements, and why?

Due to rising rhetoric and representations related to “woke(ness)”, and industry roles including Director of Intersectional Marketing (as advertised by Sony Pictures in 2018), this work is timely and relevant to marketing scholars and practitioners. Aligned with the view that “Feminist theory and research incorporates the twin aims of social criticism and social change” (Catterall *et al.*, 2000, p.369), this paper is intended to spur on scholarly and industry conversations and action concerning advertising standards, which are sensitive to the intricacies, subtleties and stereotypical depiction of issues related to activism, race and gender in the marketplace.

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