

1 Setting the Scene

SOCIAL JUSTICE FOR SALE

In the summer of 2022, I found myself in Washington, D.C., a day after the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) overturned the landmark *Roe v. Wade* (1973) decision. June 24, 2022, marked the grim reversal of nearly five decades of a SCOTUS ruling that the US Constitution generally protects the liberty to choose to have an abortion. In response to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, reproductive rights organizers and reproductive freedom activists continued to mobilize with conviction and a commitment to equity and justice. In contrast, many brands made meager moves to affirm abortion rights advocacy—or to at least *appear* to be interested in these matters.

A flurry of news updates and social media posts had alerted me to which brands were simply wading into “the discourse of the day” and which were doing more than sharing a statement about yet *another* devastating “moment in history.” Editorial pieces pointed to various views on what brands should (not) do next. Writing for the industry-oriented website and publication *Marketing Week*, Tanya Joseph



Figure 2. “DEAR SCOTUS, FUCK AROUND AND FIND OUT” sign, Washington, D.C., 2022. Photo by author.

(2022) suggests that “Roe v Wade is not just a US issue, nor can brands assume it doesn’t affect them. Now is the time to stand up for your workers’ and consumers’ rights.” In the months prior to June 2022, Amanda—a UK journalist with seventeen years of industry experience—spoke to me about the potential for brands to take a stance on reproductive rights and a host of activist issues.

Amanda, who is a woman of “mixed” Black heritage, does “a lot of social commentary, I would probably call it pop psychology and then pieces on diversity, racism, inclusion, that kind of thing and then on the other side is beauty trends and all that wellness type of writing.” Amanda described brand responses to reproductive rights issues this way:

I think it depends on, in some ways, the size of the brand and the objectives of the brand. If you commit to being an activist, then you

will generally . . . the opposition, or whatever, of the cause that you are supporting . . . will *not* be your customer. So, I think you do start off losing a certain demographic. Again, it would depend on who you're targeting, like if you're pro-abortion in terms of pro-women's choice or just pro-choice, then there'll be people that aren't, and you would lose those people as customers.¹

As highlighted by the Black feminist media studies work of Timeka N. Tounsel (2022, 2), "Commercial entities market their goods and services by stitching them into the imagined lifestyles of their target consumers." Additionally, such commercial entities do this by connecting their goods, services, and overall image to certain social, political, and moral positions that they perceive as being upheld by their intended audience. Amanda's observations emphasize that the stance of brands on social and political issues is typically strategically aligned with their approach to target marketing. Put differently, brands tailor their stance, and how they communicate it, in ways that correspond with the perceived preferences and positions of their intended audiences—including, in some situations, the preferences and positions of their employees. My interest in these matters has led to me exploring facets of the relationship between morality and marketing, as well as the dynamic between activism and branding. Consequently, my book considers how morality is (re)defined in the marketplace.

I examine how brands struggle to be moral arbiters while drawing on digital culture and marketing and negotiating messages of supposed "social justice" (e.g., messages about addressing structural inequalities and intersecting oppressions). As such, my work is

1. As Amanda alludes, although some of the media, public, and political discourse regarding abortion and reproductive rights focuses on the experiences of women (e.g., by framing reproductive rights as being an issue of women's rights), it is not only cisgender women who will be denied legal access to abortions due to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. Trans men, nonbinary people, and individuals who are gender nonconforming can, and do, get pregnant. Accordingly, it is vital that the work of reproductive justice organizers and reproductive freedom activists be inclusive of the experiences of individuals with a wide range of gender identities and expressions, and such work must account for the intersecting nature of forms of oppression, including sexism, racism, colorism, transphobia, classism, ableism, misogyny, homophobia, and xenophobia.

shaped by Tressie McMillan Cottom's (2020) extensive research and writing, including "Where Platform Capitalism and Racial Capitalism Meet: The Sociology of Race and Racism in the Digital Society," which "puts forth that there are two turns in the political economy of race, ethnicity, and racism: networked capital that shapes a global racial hierarchy that varies across spatial geographies and the privatization of public and economic life" (441).

My work, past and present, is seeded and molded by critical race and digital studies (Hamilton 2020). This includes the formative research of internet studies scholar Safiya Umoja Noble (2018), which has been crucial to my understanding of, and subsequent work about, the digital lives of Black women in Britain (Sobande 2020). Noble's (2018) work on race, gender, technology, and the internet continues to impact many aspects of critical digital studies and informs elements of my understanding of the workings of power, agency, and oppression in different digital spaces. As I have highlighted in my previous writing, Noble's (2018) multifaceted work has been central to my ability to learn about and research a range of matters related to digital culture, injustice, and media—including, most recently, the digital self-branding practices of Black and Asian people working in the UK's creative and cultural industries (Sobande, Hesmondhalgh, and Saha 2022). Overall, while my book does not include an in-depth discussion of the particularities of algorithmic issues and their oppressive impacts, it is approached with an awareness of such forces that Noble (2018) has critically analyzed with clarity and impact, as discussed in chapter 3. More than that, my book, and the research that led to it, was made possible because of such expansive critical race and digital studies, including *The Intersectional Internet: Race, Sex, Class, and Culture Online* (Noble and Tynes 2016), and the research, writing, and digital alchemist work of Moya Bailey (2021) in *Misogynoir Transformed: Black Women's Digital Resistance*, which is crucial to understanding digital culture, technology, and connected

structural conditions, experiences of collectivity, and expressions of creativity.

The extant studies and work that my book draws on also include Naomi Klein's (2000) pivotal account *No Logo: No Space, No Choice, No Jobs*, which tackles the "New Branded World" and "The Triumph of Identity Marketing," among other topics. However, there have been numerous national and global shifts in the decades since then—not least the effects of the ongoing coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, which have amounted to such a tumultuous situation that it is now termed a state of "permacrisis." These societal changes and continued times of crises have significantly impacted branding practices, consumer culture, digital culture, activism, messages of morality, and their overlaps. Thus, mindful of the insights in *The Voice Catchers: How Marketers Listen In to Exploit Your Feelings, Your Privacy, and Your Wallet* (Turow 2021), in this book I account for the long history of how brands *watch* people and people watch them, while also grappling with recent changes to how these power relations unfold.

As companies in the US began stating their support for employees seeking to access abortion services in the summer of 2022, the limitations of their corporate communications and concepts of care were criticized and called out. There have been numerous comments about the hypocrisy of companies that have anti-abortion board members and staff. Many people also have voiced concerns about how employers might use the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* as an opportunity to ramp up surveillance of the health, reproductive activity, and privacy of employees—all under the guise of helping them to access abortion services. As existing scholarship explains, the surveillance approaches of various brands involve them using voice surveillance technology which is part of "the spiral of personalization that drives much of twenty-first century marketing" (Turow 2021, 11). In addition to strategically listening to you, as my title states, *Big Brands Are Watching You*—whether by tracking your shopping (Turow 2017), enlisting the oppressive power of

algorithms (Noble 2018), or tracing your digital footprints.² Accordingly, a through line that connects the themes covered in my book is analysis of how brands watch people and how people watch brands (watching *them*).

The response of brands to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* is just one of many examples of the complex dynamics between branding, activism, social injustices, and politics. By analyzing other examples of brand practices and brand positionings (e.g., Ben & Jerry's, Brew-Dog, Levi's, Lush, Tony's Chocolonely), pop culture activity (e.g., the When We Were Young music festival), and issues of oppression (e.g., the force of racial capitalism), my book spans a wide range of pressing topics. Although each chapter deals with a different overarching theme, what they all have in common is a connection to questions and concerns regarding the role of brands and messages of morality in the marketplace and in the diverse societies that they are part of. As prior scholarship has noted, "moralism was a touchstone of the pre- and post-Brexit debate in the UK and the Trump election in the US" (Lentin 2020, 97), and moralism continues to be implicated in much contemporary public and political discourse in both places. So I turn my attention to this topic by focusing on morality in the marketplace.

From critically considering the history of nation-branding to scrutinizing the social construct of "culture wars," I detail the inter-related state of branding practices and political actions in this current moment. *Big Brands Are Watching You* draws on in-depth analysis of six research interviews with media, marketing, and retail experts, as well as four hundred responses to a survey on perceptions of alleged brand "woke-washing" and the relationship between consumer culture and activism. While the demographic of survey respondents

2. The title of my book is adapted from the slogan "Big Brother is watching you," featured in George Orwell's dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and relates to an ominous and omnipresent fictional character and symbol (Big Brother). I also chose this title because it marks a continuation of my thinking about forms of watching, gazing, glancing, and looking that can be part of experiences of digital culture and consumer culture, some of which I considered in "Watching Me Watching You" (Sobande 2017).

was varied, most of the responses ($n = 172$) were from white British people, and the majority of the four hundred responses were from people 26–35 years old, closely followed by those 36–45 years old. Therefore, the research survey responses particularly highlight the perspectives of people who are often referred to as being part of the generationally defined demographics of Gen Z (born 1997–2012), Millennials (born 1981–96), and Gen X (born 1965–80).

In addition to being informed by survey responses, my book is based on analysis of an abundance of archived material (e.g., Library of Congress and Smithsonian Institution Archives) and pop culture representations. The discussions and chapters ahead are also brought to life by reflecting on aspects of my own experiences (e.g., at the Museum of Brands exhibition in London and at the Tony's Chocolonely superstore in Amsterdam). Along with this analysis, the pages that follow feature some of my ponderings on the process of doing this work, including descriptions of my time spent in archives in Washington, D.C. Consequently, while my book is an account of how Big Brands are watching you and are marketing “social justice” and digital culture, it is also an invitation to consider different ways of doing, writing about, and reflecting on research. This scaffolding chapter introduces foundational concepts, theories, themes, and contextual details that are threaded throughout my book and provides an overview of the bricolage of experiences and research that has informed this work.

BEYOND BINARIES: ACTIVISM AND ADVERTISING

Many brands steer clear of commenting on social and political issues and pride themselves on their alleged neutrality. However, the number of those that take a very different approach has noticeably increased since the days of US ice-cream manufacturer Ben & Jerry's being deemed one of very few brands to take a stand on issues of injustice (Haig 2011; Kunda 2020; Littler 2008; Sobande 2019a).

Moreover, as Ben & Jerry's (2019) states on its website, "Systemic racism and criminal justice reform are big issues for a business to take on, but we've been advocates for social justice and equity throughout our 40 year history." Essentially, Ben & Jerry's is often framed as a "first mover" in terms of its decision to make its business model and ethos one that places social, political, and environmental issues at the center. Nowadays, many brands are eager to attempt to replicate such an approach and to tap into the zeitgeist, but they often lack the reputation and the grasp of social and political issues to cultivate a brand image that could be comparable to Ben & Jerry's.

Moving beyond simply focusing on Ben & Jerry's, while acknowledging the significance of what it is deemed to stand for, my book analyzes brand examples to critically examine the contemporary coupling of activism and advertising. This involves moving beyond a simplistic binary notion of the latter without diluting distinct differences between the two. Principles of activism and advertising are often at odds with each other. Still, there are times when there appears to be a dialogue between aspects of activism and advertising that cannot simply be characterized as adversarial or something to solely be suspicious of (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012). What I mean by this is that it is important to understand the relationship between brands and urgent social and political issues—including the dynamic between activism and advertising—as a fraught and fast-moving one that is at once filled with friction and alliances (Banet-Weiser 2018). Just as "coming to a definition or understanding of digital technology is an iterative process dependent on changes in technology, usage, history, and theory" (Hess 2017, 3), so too is the process involved in defining or understanding social justice and activism.

For example, mere minutes after the public announcement that SCOTUS had overturned *Roe v. Wade*, people were posting well-meaning instructions to immediately "delete your period tracking apps," to try to protect the privacy of menstrual and reproductive activity. But does such well-meaning advice, which focuses on

individual choices, amount to collective social justice efforts? Online writing that emerged during that time included discussion of the nexus of digital rights advocacy and reproductive rights activism (Slupska and Shipp 2022), as well as writing that praised certain brands for appearing to commit to supporting the fight for reproductive justice and freedom. Some people highlighted how data and use of social media are weaponized as part of the erosion of reproductive rights, while others urged individuals to think twice before tweeting on this topic and advised them to turn to “better” online platforms to “protect” themselves. At that time, I had headed to Washington, D.C., for a Race in the Marketplace (RIM) Research Network Re-Union in nearby Arlington, Virginia, where I was with other scholars, marketing practitioners, and activists who address critical issues regarding race and the marketplace, including issues of bodily autonomy, power, and agency.³

In between conversations at the RIM Re-Union, I caught glimpses of US press and pop culture reacting to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*—sometimes in ways that accounted for the racial, and outright *racist*, politics of the rolling back of reproductive rights. As mainstream media and political reporting on the SCOTUS decision played out, so too did independent and grassroots coverage emphasizing that the reversal of reproductive rights stems from imperialist, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy (hooks 1984)—a system within which Black people’s bodily autonomy has *always* been obstructed by political and legislative institutions. Relatedly, the insightful work of journalism and media studies scholar Meredith D.

3. The RIM Research Network is an international and transdisciplinary research network dedicated to knowledge production on the historic, contemporary, and future interactions of race in the marketplace through scholarship and practice. In addition to being a vital source of research related to the topics of race and racism in the marketplace, RIM is a scholarly community of people whose encouragement and friendship has been central to the trajectory of my research and writing. RIM’s “come as you are” ethos has always heartened me and has been a source of much support, particularly when I first began to do academic research. Were it not for meeting members of the RIM Network at the inaugural RIM Forum at American University in Washington, D.C., in 2017, I would not be the researcher, writer, and person that I am today. In fact, attending the 2022 RIM Re-Union in Arlington was one of the main sources of inspiration that kept me going while working on this book during several difficult years. Thank you to RIM and everyone who is part of such a welcoming space. More information about RIM can be accessed at www.rimnetwork.net/.

Clark (2020, 89) affirms the significance of “discursive accountability practices,” which “are the creations of Black counterpublics that are conspicuously absent from the American public imaginary.”

Clark (2020) contends that the oppressive American public imaginary “holds a lofty vision of newspaper op-ed pages, radio shows, town-hall meetings, and the like as forums of debate where a multiplicity of discursive publics are equally empowered to engage in debate and the free expression of ideas. This simply isn’t so.” Hence the creation of Black “digital accountability praxis” (Clark 2020, 88), including online posts that critically outline what activist and academic Loretta J. Ross and historian and curator Rickie Solinger (2017, 2) refer to as being “the powerful role of colonialism and white supremacy in determining reproductive destinies.” Informed by Clark’s (2020) work, in addition to a wealth of scholarship from critical studies of race and the marketplace, and specifically, *Black media experiences*, I examine how the attitudes and actions of brands in the US and the UK have become part of conversations about “wokeness,” “cancel culture,” “publics,” and mediated and marketed expressions of politics and morality.

The tapestry of televised responses to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in the days that followed it included the Black Entertainment Television (BET) Awards 2022 “In Memoriam” section of the night, which dramatically opened with a black screen that featured the striking and capitalized words “ROE v. WADE” in white lettering (Aniftos 2022). Elsewhere, advertisements by the nonprofit organization Planned Parenthood rapidly responded to the SCOTUS overturning and contributed to the momentum of pushback against it. Some celebrities spoke out about the ruling, while the silence of others spoke volumes (Ng 2022). Some individuals took to the streets to protest, while various people’s activism was less public in nature but no less impactful. The day after the derisive decision of SCOTUS, many brands watched and waited (and then watched some more) before carefully commenting on what ensued or before choosing to keep their voices down (Daniels 2022; Kho 2022; Robinson

2022; Alcántara 2022). Yet in the months leading up to the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, some brands had decided to comment on this issue sooner rather than later.

Reporting for global media platform and marketing website *The Drum*, Kendra Clark (2022) notes: “A number of brands that recently introduced policies to expand employees’ access to reproductive care in light of restrictive state-level legislation like Texas’s Senate Bill 8 have remained mum on the leaked US Supreme Court draft opinion indicating that *Roe v. Wade* is poised for reversal. However, a small contingent of brands are voicing support for abortion rights—and putting their money where their mouth is.” Many brand responses to activism and community organizing are symptomatic of the sticky position of brands in the context of neoliberal racial capitalist societies, where consumption is often mistaken for, or actively (re)presented as, social action.

Sometimes it seems as though social justice is for sale (Rosa-Salas and Sobande 2022), and that “commodity activism” (Littler 2008; Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012) has expanded to such an extent that activism is societally assumed to entail a form of consumerism. Then again, some businesses (e.g., Ben & Jerry’s) have appeared to express their support of activism in ways that align with their well-established values, without portraying themselves as corporate saviors, or at least without predominantly being viewed as such. As Rebecca Stewart (2020) reports for *The Drum*, “where other brands posted a black square on their Instagram grid [in response to racism and in support of Black Lives Matter (BLM)] or faced a backlash from consumers over ‘tone deaf’ watered down declarations that seemed incongruous to their past behavior, Ben & Jerry’s did not come to play.” When reflecting on this, questions about morality in the marketplace arise, such as who and what drives the moral positions that brands espouse, and how is digital culture implicated in this? Such questions are considered throughout my book.

Many brand responses to activism and social movements exist within an ecology of branding and marketing activities that have been

associated with the notion of being “woke”—invested in addressing racism and a myriad of social injustices (Dowell and Jackson 2020; Kanai and Gill 2020; Sobande, Kanai, and Zeng 2022). Some of this industry activity has also been dubbed “woke-washing,” which can refer to how brands (mis)use matters of social injustice—particularly Black activism—to manage and improve their own images (Sobande 2019a, 2022a). As my book addresses, woke-washing is sometimes used to describe the actions of brands that are perceived as framing themselves as supporters of certain grassroots movements and collective organizers, but that do not do anything substantial to aid such work. The expression “woke-washing” stems from critical discussions about the relationship between brands and social justice issues in a contemporary context that has been shaped by a surge in the global visibility of the BLM social and political movement. Although the concept of woke-washing can be engaged in generatively critical ways, it can be an unproductively ambiguous term that at times obfuscates the specific issues, individuals, and collective movements that brands frame themselves as supporting. So when discussing the concept of woke-washing, it is vital to specify and reflect on who and what is being referred to, why, and with what impact.

If brands exist because of capitalism and its racist, colonial, and oppressive roots, and if “race is constitutive of organizational foundations, hierarchies, and processes” (Ray 2019, 26), is it possible to regard brand woke-washing as anything other than another cynical process that keeps commercial organizations going? Oscillating between critical discussion of terms such as woke-washing and the brand practices that they are sometimes used in reference to, I call for more attention to be paid to context—from the political context(s) within which the term operates, to the scholarly context(s) that theorizing on woke-washing and morality ping-pongs back and forth between.

Debates and discussions pertaining to woke-washing have surged in recent years. They have moved from peripheral digital spaces to

the heart of many marketing industry and academic conversations that attempt to unpack the corporatization of collective organizing, such as the commercialization of LGBTQIA+ Pride and Black History Month events. In an article for *Quartz*, senior reporter Sarah Todd (2020) poses the question on many people's minds: "If everybody hates wokewashing, why do companies still do it?" As Todd's piece demonstrates, the answer to this is far from being simple, but perhaps also the answer to this has changed since 2020. Besides the potential for brands to accrue profit based on perceptions of their interest in social justice issues, as is discussed in this book, the reasons for the rise of woke-washing also relate to the idiosyncrasies of digital culture and the boiling over of the contemporary socio-political climate, including the rise of "pejorative discourses of identity politics" (Richmond and Charnley 2022, 2).

My work affirms that the market logic that underlies much advertising and, as a result, woke-washing, is simultaneously molded by the hegemony of whiteness and the marketability of "difference," such as commodified signifiers associated with Black and "mixed-race" identities, but which are (re)presented through the oppressive lens of structural "white sight" (Mirzoeff 2023). Even when marketing—whether it is deemed woke-washing or not—does not depict white people, the dominance of whiteness can play into the parameters within which the marketing is made and within which meanings are ascribed to it (Thomas, Johnson, and Grier 2023). Structural whiteness in the UK and the US does not disappear just because a marketing campaign is populated with Black and brown faces. Nor does the whiteness that pervades many forms of popular and consumer culture pause because a brand claims to be invested in anti-racism. The structurally white gaze that guides many marketing and branding strategies may not always be visible, but its unmistakable presence can still be felt and fathomed. Hence the need to critically analyze how power and meaning-making takes shape in the marketplace, including how scholarly work can be entangled with a proprietorial "white sight" (Mirzoeff 2023) and racial capitalism.

“WOKENESS” AND MORALITY: MEANING-MAKING
IN THE MARKETPLACE

The term *woke*—which originates from Black American activism, writing, consciousness-raising, and culture—is now frequently used by many non-Black individuals and institutions as a reductive and often plainly racist proxy for anything/anyone not racialized as white. I am critical of the casualness with which *woke* is used to allude to matters regarding race, racism, and Black lives, in ways that fundamentally are at odds with caring about Black people and that foreground the perspectives of anyone *but* them. I recognize that the word *woke* has become part of political jibing in the UK and the US and is frequently used to dismiss views and people associated with leftist positions but has also been used pejoratively by some who identify with or are identified as leftists (Richmond and Charnley 2022). However, to reduce such issues of the warping of *woke* to amounting to a “culture war” would be to fall into the trap of perceiving it as a purely polarizing term, as opposed to acknowledging that its appropriation by predominantly white media, marketplace, and political spheres (which run the full political gamut) also serves other functions.

I argue that the label *woke* and its derivatives are often used in ways that reflect the proprietorial pulse of whiteness—from academia to the advertising industry. So present-day pejorative uses of *wokeness* are emblematic of “the racial politics of the Western episteme” (Towns 2022, 9), which is an oppressive context within which “Whiteness is a credential” (Ray 2019, 26) and is equated with expertise and authority, including the brazen entitlement to declare what *wokeness* is while dismissing it. Amid its many controversial framings, the concept of *wokeness* and commentary on it have become marketable (e.g., the cottage industry of “*woke* marketing”) and tethered to capitalist notions of expertise, as well as the Western currency of “white sincerity”: capital that can be accrued by white people and organizations racialized as white (Ray 2019), who are perceived as having

sincere and “good” intentions even if such supposed sincerity involves self-servingly speaking “for” (aka *speaking over*) Black people.

Many commercial organizations and marketing industry professionals frequently use the term *woke* in ways that obfuscate its genesis and confuse capitalist activities and corporate spin with collective racial justice work and grassroots liberationist efforts. The fact that the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM) (2020) in the UK published an article on “when brands go woke” illustrates that the term has entered the lexicon of the corporate world. Within marketing industry conversations, woke-washing has sometimes been typified in ways that dilute the digital dimensions of its DNA, including how brands have become more attuned to, but have also reframed, digital forms of activism, “social media call outs” (Clark 2020, 88), and the overall societal impact of Black digital creativity and communications. Therefore, my book pays attention to how digital culture and its racial politics function in ways that are implicated in current uses and understandings of the term *woke*, the notion of woke-washing, and the semantics therein.

When interviewed as part of research for my book, Aaron—a white man who is a journalist with ten years of experience and is based in the UK—spoke in detail about contemporary uses of the term *woke* and adjacent expressions:

“Cancel culture” and “woke,” often there’s an inherent negative association with them. The idea of being socially aware is often portrayed as “woke” to people who think it’s not necessary almost, I suppose. They kind of view it as a pejorative term, that comes with quite a lot of baggage and is pretty loaded. Again, it’s that stereotyping . . . this kind of “woke”/“gammon” dichotomy, I suppose, which is interesting.⁴ And so that idea of “woke,” I think, is quite a loaded term now. I don’t actually know if I ever thought it was used without a kind of raised eyebrow, or

4. In addition to being a word used to describe a traditional pork steak meal, *gammon* is a tenuous term that has gained traction in certain British political, media, and digital spheres over the last decade. The term is typically—although not exclusively—used in reference to the flushed face of a person voicing political perspectives that are associated with a right-wing position and bigoted views.

at least my memory has been so telescoped by just everything happening at five thousand miles an hour, that it's now difficult to remember a time when it [woke] was ever not used like that.

As the words of Aaron allude to, the meanings and associations that have been ascribed to the concept of wokeness in recent years include those that “uncritically stem from an understanding of the term that is tethered to its [white] mainstream appropriation as an expression of disdain that is used to disapprove of something and/or someone” (Sobande 2022a, 41). Building on this point and the illuminating work of Michael Richmond and Alex Charnley (2022) on “identity politics,” the subsequent chapters explore a variety of examples of brands implicated in the “culture wars” and taking part (for better or worse) in social advocacy.

Aaron's words during his interview emphasize that notions of wokeness—and the commonly accompanying concept of “cancel culture”—are often associated with political polarity: “You have people who feel they are socially conscious and aware. People that are often left-wing or centre-left in terms of their political belief, thinking that people on the opposite side of the political spectrum are non-reformist pigs who throw around words like ‘woke’ at them as kind of insulting.”

Just as social analysis and cultural politics scholar Jo Littler (2008, 3) argues that “different perspectives that are taken on the subject of CSR [corporate social responsibility]” do not “map neatly onto a simple left/right political grid,” notions of wokeness cannot be comprehended by merely focusing on a reductive left/right binary. Often “wokeness emerges from a murky mixture of rhetorics that invoke individualist empowerment, resilience, and success” (Prins 2022, 104), in ways tied to neoliberal notions of productivity and progressiveness. Along these lines, when interviewed, Aaron alluded to the reality that beyond how wokeness and cancel culture are thrown around as pejorative terms are complicated power and

political relations that are cloaked by the clickbait culture of consumerism. Such power dynamics include, but are not limited to, those present in “scholarly contortions of ‘woke-washing’ which appear to be imbedded in an intention to defend brands, while establishing individuals’ expertise in ‘woke marketing’ or while claiming to ‘guard’ against criticism of corporate social initiatives (CSIs) and business ethicists” (Sobande 2022a, 40).

Wary of the potential of inadvertently reinforcing whitewashed understandings of the marketplace and notions of wokeness, I use woke-washing critically and with ambivalence, including to assert that advertising activities referred to as woke-washing are ultimately bound to “neoliberal racial capitalism” (Ransby 2018, 117). The terms woke-washing and *woke capitalism*, alone, cannot capture the insidious power relations that relate to how brands engage with, or disengage from, issues of social injustice and histories of oppression. When we begin with an analytical starting point built upon the critical idea that capitalism can never *be* “woke,” we move beyond surface level discussions about inequality and the marketplace and toward a more rigorous analysis that resists the idea that liberation can be realized through consumer culture.

In recent years, the concept of woke-washing—brands simultaneously pursuing and performing wokeness—has been taken up in ways that yield ineffective and oppositional perspectives of profit-making, politics, and their pairing. Ambiguous analyses of the marketplace have oversimplified the workings of wokeness and the notion of woke-washing and have seldom critically scrutinized the racial politics of consumer culture and the academic spheres that comment on it. At times, “‘woke’ becomes visible as aspirational corporate culture aligning itself with social justice values; ‘woke’ is a desirable brand identity packaging socially progressive affects in consumer form” (Sobande, Kanai, and Zeng 2022, 4). Also, just as cultish language involves terms that once had a positive meaning being “recast to signify something threatening” (Montell 2021, 6), the notion of being

woke has been reframed in numerous ways that have resulted in wielding the word as a dismissive expression and a catchall phrase. Turning to aspects of Amanda Montell's (2021) *Cultish: The Language of Fanaticism*, I consider why and how elements of contemporary discourse on wokeness appear to reflect a tacit acceptance of morality being (re)defined in the marketplace.

My research survey yielded a range of responses that capture some of the different ways that people perceive woke-washing, as well as the different ways that brands comment on and/or contribute to social justice work:

A brand can easily respond or contribute to social justice especially if they have enough wealth and have an ulterior motive such as approval. Whilst it appears beneficial from the surface, it is unlikely to be the case. One example is that companies can easily change their logo for Pride month to show they stand for Pride and the LGBT community but it is also likely that large companies employ people with homophobic and transphobic views regardless.

—South Asian (gender undisclosed), UK (18–25 years old)

I don't really have a problem with that if there is a genuine interest in and concern about a topic. And, also, that it is appropriate for the brand to comment on a given topic. There are things in the world that still need to change, and brands do have a platform which they could use to make others aware of such things. What I do not like is when brands jump on to a current topic for the sake of being perceived as relevant or trendy. Or when a serious subject is trivialized into some form of pop culture that can be nicely marketed, but then loses its original meaning or intent.

—mixed-race woman, UK (36–45 years old)

While wokeness is considered throughout my book, I approach this matter in a way that accounts for how terms such as woke-washing are still relatively insular, in the sense that many people are not familiar with them. This was indicated by survey responses such as the following, which are suggestive of different degrees of awareness, and perspectives, of the concept in the UK:

Never heard of it [woke-washing]! I think a woke is someone who is a bit of a wimp and unable to make their own decisions without influencers and advertisers telling them what to think.

—white woman, UK (46–55 years old)

Never heard of it, but i think it is when a brand uses marketing to take a stance regarding social issues to make a profit

—white man, UK (36–45 years old)

I hadn't heard of it before but I think it's a good term. I see it to mean brands that present themselves as socially/politically progressive and engaged in current events but are actually insidious and responsible for poor labour conditions, donations to conservative "charities," etc.

—white woman, UK (18–25 years old)

Not exactly familiar, but I know what woke is, so I would understand it as re-writing history through a woke lens? Or possibly creating an agenda/campaign with a woke angle.

—white non-binary person, UK (age undisclosed)

I've never heard of "woke washing". Maybe selling ice cream in rainbow colours as though the company is identifying with LGBTQ+ ?? Because it's "on trend[.]"

—white woman, UK (46–55 years old)

In contrast with many of the comments made by UK survey respondents, several US survey respondents offered explanations of their understanding of woke-washing, which highlighted that this was not a term that they were new to. Some of those comments also alluded to people's perceptions of wokeness being connected to the concept of cancel culture. As one person bluntly put it when describing what they believe woke-washing means:

It means getting rid of people who have issues.

—white man, US (36–45 years old)

Although based on the results of this survey there appears to be more exposure to the notion of woke-washing in the US than in the

UK, the majority of the four hundred people whom I surveyed had not heard of the term woke-washing before. This is a reminder of the fact that concepts and terms that are common within certain academic and industry spaces may not be as widely used as is sometimes assumed. Then again, since embarking on writing this book, societal use and visibility of the word *woke* has risen, with Google Trends indicating that searches of the term in the US peaked in spring 2023.

A scholarly preoccupation with wokeness can result in accounts of contemporary branding practices that play into the problematic and predominantly conservative notion of “culture wars.” So throughout this book I critically contextualize concepts such as wokeness, cancel culture, culture wars, and scholarly analysis of them, *hopefully*, without overstating their relevance to present-day brands and profit-making and without wielding wokeness to position myself as the arbiter of it. Woke-washing may be best understood as more of a buzzword and timely expression than a term that will endure and enter most spheres of public life. But messages of morality, which are entangled with discourse on wokeness in the marketplace, have a long and steeped history that my book reckons with.

A BRICOLAGE APPROACH: FROM ARCHIVES TO EXHIBITIONS

Politics, morality, and marketing have collided and combined in a multitude of ways, for many decades. On the day after the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, while wondering about how the notion of wokeness might be invoked as part of discussions that followed, I walked past the windows of an assortment of D.C. shops, bars, and restaurants that had declared their pro-choice position and their dismay at the actions of SCOTUS. As my eyes scanned the sprinkling of statements, symbols, and signs that businesses had chosen to display, I paused to ponder the different ways that politics has been implicated in

advertising and markets throughout history. Accordingly, I headed to the Smithsonian Institution Archives and the Library of Congress Main Reading Room. There I learned more about the history of advertising and politics in the US and the UK—including their interconnections and tensions.

During my time in D.C. in 2022, I immersed myself in reading about the climate of capitalism and global relations from the 1940s to the 1990s, while I considered what had (not) changed since then. I thought about all that had led to a point in time that Littler (2008, 2) documented in the early 2000s, when “ethical consumption, fair trade, consumer protests, brand backlashes, green goods, boycotts and downshifting” had finally become “familiar consumer activities—and in some cases, are almost mainstream.” I also noted how the development of digital technologies and the trends spawned by them in recent years had impacted the course of consumer culture. Overall, the methodology of the research at the helm of my book is based on embracing bricolage—in terms of both using a diverse range of research methods and analyzing a diverse range of marketing material, artifacts, and representations.

Recalling the rise of brand backlashes and efforts to hold advertisers accountable, while at the Library of Congress Main Reading Room I sifted through folders of correspondence between British advertising icon David Ogilvy and a cast of characters from the industry, politics, and media in decades gone by. I noted the frequency and capitalization of terms such as “Big Boys,” “high powered bunch,” “The Ladies,” and “ad man,” all of which revealed much about the gender politics of those times. I studied photographs and ephemera from the launch and development of advertising groups and organizations, wondering what it was like to be one of relatively few women involved in them, let alone what it was like to be the only Black woman there. Pouring over the details of black-and-white depictions of boardroom meetings, I identified raced and gendered power relations on display and surveyed the semiotic subtleties of body language, style, and facial expressions.

I examined attempts to advertise the UK in the US and the US in the UK—observing the use of telling phrases such as “a very Scotch Scotsman.” I smiled at naïve questions in 1950s letters that queried why Scotland might want to set itself apart from the UK, while I revisited more contemporary writing about how “some of the constituent parts of the United Kingdom are already establishing their own, distinct nation-brands” (Dinnie 2008, 52). In agreement with Keith Dinnie’s (2008, 230) claim that “there is still a widespread misperception that the UK and England are interchangeable terms,” it is important to note that even now such terms are sometimes used as though they mean the same. Essentially, nascent forms of nation-branding were on display in the full folders and brimming boxes of papers and pieces of the past that I accessed when analyzing archived material in D.C. To be precise, such nation-branding approaches appeared to dovetail with the development of political issues, wars, and what would become known as globalization and “The Fight for the Global Commons” (Klein 2000).

In the months before my time at these US archives, I had interviewed six people about the relationship between advertising and activism. Over Zoom calls during the COVID-19 crisis, I heard from journalists, brand strategists, business development managers, advertising directors, and retail experts who spoke candidly about consumer culture, digital culture, and social justice. Additionally, prior to and after inspecting archived material in D.C., I analyzed media and marketing representations, from televised pop culture depictions of corporations (e.g., *Industry*, *Partner Track*, *Severance*, *Succession*, and *The Bold Type*) to publicity surrounding the platinum jubilee pudding competition, which was part of societal celebrations of Queen Elizabeth II’s seventy years as head of state in the UK. It was during that time that I also surveyed people about their thoughts on social justice and brands in the US and the UK, spending hours analyzing which brands they praised, which brands they criticized, and how all of that linked to ideas and assumptions about advertising, activism, and morality (e.g., “I really don’t like large

conglomerates run by billionaires who are actively destroying our planet and exploiting people—e.g. amazon, Tesla, etc.”).

By the summer of 2022, while working my way through archived boxes of papers and images in D.C., I was reminded of the importance of accounting for the history of advertising when analyzing present-day consumer culture. Among archive collections that I studied were folders of writing about the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Advertising History, which was “housed in the Archives of the National Museum of American History in Washington D.C. With the goal of documenting major trends and developments since the advent of electronic media, the Center selectively acquires materials, papers, and oral histories that illuminate modern advertising history.” Such efforts on the part of the center involved them working “with agencies and corporations to compile detailed case studies of successful national campaigns” (American Association of Advertising Agencies 1992, 11), including for Campbell's soup, Marlboro, Nike, Pepsi-Cola, and Cover Girl makeup.

The significance of the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Advertising History is apparent when reading statements from the early 1990s, such as, “Advertising has a central place in American history, but until recently, America didn't have a central place for advertising history” (American Association of Advertising Agencies 1992, 11). While thinking about similar activity in the UK, I reflected on the Museum of Brands (2020a) in London and its promotional material, which confidently states that “we have all grown up with brands, forming close bonds with our favourite sweets, crisps, breakfast cereals and even washing powders.” As outlined on the Museum of Brands website, over “fifty years ago consumer historian Robert Opie began to unravel the fascinating story of how consumer products and promotion had evolved since Victorian times. By 1975 Robert had enough material to hold his own exhibition, *The Pack Age*, at the Victoria & Albert Museum.” The Museum of Brands (2020a) provides an overview of how the work of Robert Opie developed: “In 1984 he opened the first museum devoted to the history of

packaging and advertising in Gloucester. In the early 2000s, the collection needed a new home. With the help of global brand agency pi Global and founding sponsors Cadbury, Twinings, Vodafone, Diageo, Kellogg's and McVities, the Museum became a charity in 2002 and opened in Notting Hill, London."

In addition to presenting exhibitions of archived brand and marketing material, through its use of social media the Museum of Brands is demonstrating how digital technology has influenced consumer culture—including experiences of the museum itself, which are documented and promoted using #livingbrands.

During the summer of 2020 the Museum of Brands opened an exhibition, *When Brands Take a Stand*—originally slated for March of that year but delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The exhibition was described as presenting posters, packaging, and TV commercials, and it examined the different ways that brands have responded to social and political issues. According to Chris Griffin, CEO at the Museum of Brands, "We want to amplify the debate around the relationship between brands, people, culture and society, and how these interact with each other. Brands and advertising agencies have a platform to influence, and with that comes responsibility. This initiative dives into these complex relationships" (Museum of Brands 2020b).

Terms such as *amplify* and *elevate* frequently feature in discussions and debates about the role of advertising, marketing, and brands in addressing social issues of inequality and injustice. For example, an *Ad Age* article on racism and the industry includes expressions such as "Elevate Black Voices" (Craft 2020) and professes that "it should go without saying, but one of the first steps in addressing racial inequality in advertising is to ensure that Black and POC [people of color] peers are given the same platform to contribute as their white colleagues have long had the opportunity to do." Yet, as my book considers, and as is elucidated by the vital scholarship of Patricia A. Banks (2022) in *Black Culture Inc: How*



Figure 3. “BLACK LIVES MATTER—BLACK TRANS LIVES MATTER” sign on the side of the Human Rights Campaign building in Washington, D.C., 2022. Photo by author.

Ethnic Community Support Pays for Corporate America, the industry's focus on amplifying and elevating is sometimes symptomatic of its preoccupation with visibility and publicity, as opposed to a commitment to doing work that is essential to tackling systemic forms of oppression.

The Museum of Brands's launch of *When Brands Take a Stand* was preceded by a sharp rise in the number of brands commenting on the BLM political and social movement, issues of antiblackness, and police murdering Black people in the US, such as George Floyd. During such times, Ben & Jerry's responded in ways that resulted in praise. Reporting for *The Drum*, Stewart (2020) writes: "The brand didn't stop at the stark statement. It also issued a series of four 'concrete steps' to dismantle white supremacy, including calling on President Trump to commit the US to a formal process of healing and reconciliation, asking Congress to create a commission to study the effects of slavery and discrimination from 1619 to the present and supporting the Floyd family's call to create a national task force that would draft bipartisan legislation aimed at ending racial violence and increasing police accountability."

The buzz of brand commentary on such issues prompted critique of the hypocrisy of brands that claim to be "anti-racist" and "allies," but whose track records tell a distinctly different and shady story. Terms including *woke-washing* and *woke capitalism*—often outlined in nebulous ways—were in the orbit of such brand responses to racism. Some of this brand activity was indicative of "the affective entanglements of 'wokeness' with whiteness, the valorization of visibility, and neoliberal identity culture" (Sobande, Kanai, and Zeng 2022, 1), which is digitally mediated, and sometimes takes the form of the self-branding practices of influencers who are keen to appear invested in activism. By spring 2022, and with the aim of critically analyzing how "brand activism" is being narrativized, I visited the Museum of Brands and what remained of *When Brands Take a Stand*. Although the museum was different in scope and scale to the Smithsonian Institution's Center for Advertising History, both play

an important part in the archiving of advertising in their national locations, also meaning that they may be part of the bigger picture of nation-branding in the UK and the US. For that reason, consideration of the work of the Museum of Brands, and analysis of archived material about the history of advertising in the US, features throughout the chapters of my book.

CONCEPTUALIZING CULTURE: CRITICAL THEORIES OF MEDIA AND MARKETS

When, why, and how are technologies of branding entangled with ideas about, and experiences of, activism, digital culture, morality, and markets? My grasp of this question is formed by embracing aspects of Black media philosophy that “take seriously the racial implications of Western media philosophy’s ‘we’ and ‘our’” (Towns 2022, 9)—a “we” and “our” that are typically wedded to whiteness. In the incisive words of Armond R. Towns, who conceptualized Black media philosophy, “Black media philosophy requires recognition of the racial politics of the Western episteme and a complex understanding of the projects that challenge such an episteme” (9). My book brings Black media philosophy into conversation with Black digital studies, critical studies of race in the marketplace, and analysis of the histories of different nations. In turn, I focus on some of the numerous meaning-making processes that are part of experiences of popular culture, politics, messages of morality, and the work of brands.

Rather than “accept that an advertisement’s meaning will be precisely determined and encoded during its production, and then decoded by the public in a way that can be accurately predicted,” I recognize “the unpredictability of what happens when advertising texts containing unstable cultural content” (Bradshaw and Scott 2018, 12) circulate in consumer culture. I also recognize that some people “deploy advertising texts and products as building blocks of identity, forging a coherent subjectivity that aligns with the imposed

parameters communicated through popular culture” (Tounsel 2022, 1). Key changes in recent decades that have affected advertising, activism, and their intermingling include the rise of social media and digital remix culture, which “results in commentary that reflects different public conversations, contestations and concerns about the current state of politics and society” (Sobande 2019b, 153). Focusing on such changes and their impact on branding practices and expectations of them, I critically examine the ongoing ways that big brands are watching you (watching them).

The road to revolution is not paved with brands’ “good intentions,” but much marketing material appears to claim otherwise. The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* coincided with LGBTQIA+ Pride Month, so during that time there was a mass of marketing material that alluded to many matters related to gender, sexuality, *and* reproductive rights. Allusions to the alleged activist attributes of brands seem to be everywhere, yet actual evidence of such activism is often illusionary if not completely absent. From mission statements that frame brands as freedom fighters to advertising that positions them as altruistic, the message that brands care about social injustice has become a hallmark of twenty-first-century marketing and media (Littler 2008). Put differently, the illusion of “brand activism” has made itself at home in contemporary consumer culture, so what are some of the ways that these issues can be discussed and analyzed without reinforcing simplistic perspectives of what constitutes branding, advertising, and activism? The chapters that follow take up this question and more.

Big Brands are marketing themselves in ways that reflect the politics of marketing *and* the marketing of politics. Hence, I scrutinize attempts to portray brands as purposeful, moral, and even activist, to consider what such activity reveals about the recent history of branding, activism, and geopolitical power relations that the US and the UK are embroiled in. Shaped by the crucial edited collection *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times*, I examine how digital developments have impacted dynamics between brands,

consumers, and social justice issues, including “the contradictions inherent in grafting philanthropy and social action onto merchandising practices, market incentives, and corporate profits” (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012, 1). Critical of the rise of claims that “we love purpose-driven brands” (Hieatt 2014, 7), I articulate some of the power dynamics that are masked by notions of “brand purpose.” Consequently, I conceptualize the ways that brands negotiate different ideas about, and expectations of, morality.

The expansion of scholarly writing on wokeness, as well as brand activism, cannot be understood without grasping the details of digital culture. Specifically, it is essential to acknowledge and understand the societal significance of *Black* digital culture and “to grapple with how internet, consumer, and celebrity culture is implicated in contemporary understandings and expectations of social justice work” (Sobande, Kanai, and Zeng 2022, 10). Although it features discussion of how institutions have tried to build a bridge between branding and activism, my book is *not* an account of “good or bad” “brand activism,” nor is it about what brands should “do better.” Instead, *Big Brands Are Watching You* is a critical analysis of the fraught, fluid, yet sometimes firm and even “fruitful” relationship between consumer culture, digital culture, and social justice in the US and the UK. By parsing this I elucidate how such dynamics reflect the entangled histories of these different geocultural locations and their global power(s). Thus, I account for how entwined histories of colonialism, racism, and capitalism (Harris 2021) are apparent in the forms of marketing and branding approaches that tap into social justice rhetoric that may be intended to shield brands from critique.

Shaped by work that affirms “that within contemporary culture it is utterly unsurprising to participate in social activism by buying something” (Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012, 1), the subsequent chapters detail elements of the relationship and differences between what is societally perceived as branding and activism. Moving beyond asserting that all branding efforts and activist attempts are innately antithetical, but also without confusing branding for

activism, I consider how the development of influencer culture has molded marketing, activism, and their (de)coupling. In doing so, I call for more critical research on influencer culture that will move beyond a conveniently cursory nod to intersectionality and take to task the pervasiveness of the lens of “white sight” (Mirzoeff 2023) in both the influencer industry and academia.

BOOK BREAD CRUMBS: THE PATH AHEAD

A decade ago a friend of mine who worked in advertising in the UK used to entertain me with stories about the clueless ways that many industry practitioners were attempting to engage and understand the internationally impactful Black American “online phenomenon ‘Black Twitter’” (Clark 2014, viii). Over phone calls filled with loose lips and laughter, my friend would regale me with vivid accounts of agencies obnoxiously dismissing the existence and cultural force of Black Twitter: the collective and societal impact of what Black people were saying, doing, and sharing on the microblogging site. In the years since then, numerous agencies and brands have invested in new roles that specifically focus on Black digital audiences, intersectionality, and the construction and maintenance of a brand’s Twitter presence and online voice with the intention of appealing to Black people.

Whether it is with the use of Twitter (which was rebranded as X) hashtags or by sharing video-recorded footage on platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, Black women have been creatively harnessing the affordances of digital media as part of many aspects of their lives (Bailey 2021; Gray 2020; Sobande 2020; Steele 2021; Tounsel 2022). However, the ways that brands watch and respond to this are sometimes cause for concern. Analysis at the center of my book offers a critical account of some of these issues, including by turning to the pointed words of media, marketing, business, and retail professionals, who might typically be assumed to lack a critical take on

these matters. Inspired by collective efforts to tackle systemic power relations, I have spent much time doing work that critically focuses on structural forms of watching and being watched. So I arrived at writing this book with the aim to author something that would bring together many of my ongoing critical considerations of *who* and *what* brands watch, and *when*, *how*, and *why* they do so. The title of this work may initially be interpreted as ominous—I am a horror film fan, after all. However, as I hope my work conveys, there can be a power in staring back at structural forces that categorize, monitor, surveil, track, and target. There can also be power in naming such processes, critiquing the turning tides of notions of morality in the marketplace, and refusing the ruse of brand activism.

The shelf life of many products may be short, but the complicated relationship between brands and social justice issues is a deeply entrenched one. In the chapters that follow I contend with contradictions at the core of consumer culture. It is vital that analysis of the politics and cultural impact of advertising avoid reinforcing what Bradshaw and Scott (2018, 12) refer to as “reductive understandings of intentionality.” Their crucial work features a call for scholars to ensure that their critical analysis of advertising does not treat advertisers and their intentions as a homogenous and fixed entity. As Bradshaw and Scott (2018, 12) put it: “We must avoid imagining a mythical monolith called ‘advertisers’. Behind this term are brand managers, account executives, sales managers, copywriters, art directors, television producers, actors, musicians, set designers, casting chiefs, distributors, and multiple others who struggle over the competing objectives, strategies, and designs that clash, mesh, and crystallise into a final campaign. In place of what is often a dense thicket of personal, political, economic, and aesthetic ends, it is simply too reductive to assume that advertising exists for a single goal: to sell stuff.”

Taking heed of such words, my understanding of advertisers and their varied intentions is outlined in chapter 2, which draws on the perspectives of interview participants and survey respondents,

including by combing through their comments on brands (e.g., the multinational brewery and pub chain BrewDog). Chapter 2 theorizes how morality manifests in the marketplace (e.g., “brands’ moral impositions” and “single-use social justice”). Alongside that, the chapter examines parts of the political foundations of the US and the UK marketplace(s), focusing on forms of nation-branding and how marketers construct and court different cultural sensibilities, including during periods of perceived public mourning (e.g., in the aftermath of the death of British monarch Queen Elizabeth II).

As part of my critique of nation-branding and the politics of marketing, chapter 2 discusses the branding activity that surrounded the UK’s pudding competition, which was part of its 2022 celebration of the platinum jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II, months before she died. As well as dealing with the nuances of nation-branding, chapter 2 also explores the ways that notions of “the business case for” (*commercial imperatives*) and “the moral case for” (*moral impositions*) are used interchangeably in certain consumer culture contexts. Although the chapter critically discusses the impacts of “racial capitalism” (Robinson 1983), I also reflect on some limitations of this term and its varied uptake in recent years.

My analysis of the relationship between nations and brands features discussion of celebrities’ denouncing July 4 (also referred to as American Independence Day) in 2022. Previously, in collaboration with Akane Kanai and Natasha Zeng, in “The Hypervisibility and Discourses of ‘Wokeness’ in Digital Culture” we have argued that “the iconic ‘woke’ subjectivities that circulate, the affective circulation of irony, authenticity and what we note as ‘white sincerity’ require further analysis” (Sobande, Kanai, and Zeng 2022, 4). We have acknowledged “the fluid and increasingly contested nature of notions of ‘wokeness’ and the need to bring care and clarity to the ways in which ‘woke’ is operationalized” (Sobande, Kanai, and Zeng 2022, 10). Drawing on that point and bringing chapter 2 to a close is a discussion of the role of white sincerity in celebrity brand responses to social and political issues, such as the part that such

responses play in some of the ways that morality is perceived in media and the marketplace.

Chapter 3 continues conversations about the politics of marketing, analyzing how the business of activism, antagonism, and aging connects to and disconnects from various perceptions and experiences of digital culture, social justice, and the work and impact of creators and creatives. I consider various examples of the idolatry and inconsistencies of influencer culture, paying particular attention to the expanding industry of virtual—aka computer-generated imagery (CGI)—influencers. Additionally, I discuss perceptions of the nexus of BLM and influencer culture, while considering the extent to which social movements can be(come) brands. Prior scholarship includes claims about critiques of brands that frame such critiques as amounting to little more than an unjust court of public opinion. However, as I discuss, the power dynamics that shape critiques and their impact are more complicated than that. Thus, chapter 3 considers how Hall's (2013) concept of the "circuit of culture" relates to public discourse regarding antagonism, wokeness, and alleged culture wars.

Chapter 3 also focuses on the portrayal of fictional brands and their corporate culture in the TV shows *Industry*, *Partner Track*, *Severance*, *Succession*, and *The Bold Type*. Following this discussion are my reflections on the role of Big Tech and marketed nostalgia in recent emo trends in consumer culture. Namely, drawing on my experience of attending the When We Were Young (WWWY) music festival in 2022, I discuss how certain subcultures, and the age/stage of life associated with them, are being revisited and reimagined in the process of how Big Brands are watching you. The remainder of chapter 3 unpacks a range of messages of morality in popular culture and the marketing of it, including by considering what the marketing and branding of the Netflix series *You* suggests about the construction of an online brand voice in the age of "social justice" selling.

Finally, chapter 4 synthesizes the key arguments that are the bedrock of my book, while pointing to the always incomplete nature of

knowledge and the need for continued curiosity and critique. It does this by journeying through the following sections: “Past the Marketplace of Morality,” “Marketing and Moral Arbiters,” “Beyond Wokeness as an ‘American Import,’” “Vying to Be the Vanguard in the Digital (and Virtual Influencer) Age,” and “Watching the Watcher.” The tempestuous relationship between digital culture, the marketplace, and social justice has been the subject of much insightful scholarship (Banks 2022; Littler 2008; Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser 2012; Sobande 2020, 2022a). Among such accounts are examinations of brand impression management techniques that hinge on brands’ performance of proximity to, or distance from, politics and activism. Extant work has analyzed the far from altruistic attitudes of brands, but rarely has such research focused on the perspectives of consumers, pop culture, and media and marketing practitioners in both the UK and the US, while also analyzing past and present-day media and marketing representations from both locations.

Big Brands Are Watching You is my attempt to bridge gaps between critical studies of branding, consumer culture, digital media, sociology, and the marketization and monetization of morality and social (in)justice. While I examine how the commodification and corporatization of activism has changed during the first quarter of the turbulent twenty-first century, I also consider why, and how, communications in general have shifted during this time. Over the course of four different yet linked chapters, I explore when, why, and how brands in the US and the UK turn to digital tools and trends to align themselves with social justice movements, messages of morality, and notions of nation, while they watch *you* (watching *them*).