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
(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. 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, BrewDog, 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 interrelated 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.

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 over-turning 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 antiracism. 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

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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.