From Promotion to Empathy: A Content Analysis of Brand Responses to Social Justice Movements

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Abstract

These days, when people post a hashtag online, the expectation is that companies will join the conversation and take a stand. This study looks at how ten big global brands shaped their responses during three high-profile moments—the Black Lives Matter protests, the Stop Asian Hate rallies, and the surge of Gaza solidarity. Leaning on Framing Theory and Brand Authenticity Theory, the authors read through eighty-four public statements scattered across Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and company press releases, noting patterns in the words used, the feelings stirred, and how honest the messages seemed. Four main frames popped up: Empathy & Action, Empathy Only, Solidarity Only, and Neutral Tone. Brands that mixed heartfelt language with specific promises-thats the Empathy & Action frame- scored the strongest trust from audiences. By contrast, blurbs that offered only symbols or kept a safe neutral tone felt shallow, triggering doubts and charges of performative activism. Platform also played a role; longer, detailed posts fit better on Twitter and in press releases, while image-first feeds demanded shorter, punchier lines. All of this drives home that talk must line up with real deeds if a brand wants to be seen as truly ethical, not just friendly in the moment. This research adds to the growing pile of articles about brand activism, realness, and online talk, giving marketers clear tips for balancing business goals, moral values, and the noisy conversation happening right now.

Keywords: Brand activism, content analysis, social justice, framing theory, brand authenticity, performative activism, digital marketing, corporate communication

Introduction

In the past few years, the way companies talk to the public has changed a lot. People expect brands to do more than just advertise their stuff; they want them to take clear stands on real-world issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020). During moments of high social tension-black protests, the #MeToo campaign, climate marches, and even overseas conflicts-firms have felt almost forced to speak up. Marketing has shifted from flashy promotions to genuine empathy, and staying quiet is often read as taking the wrong side (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2021).

Social-justice campaigns now set a new bar for what companies say-and dont say-on Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube (Phiri, 2019). Because posts appear in real time, the spotlight on both bold moves and total silence is intense. Many brands now use these channels to show support, push for change, or restate old promises. Yet the public can sniff out half-hearted gestures. Experts warn that performative activism crops up when a flashy

statement is issued but no real work or policy shift follows (Porter et al., 2021). When words and deeds mismatch, loyalty erodes and angry customers may walk away altogether (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Marketing scholars are now asking what it really means-and what it costs-when a company inserts itself into a modern social justice story. When brands speak out with obvious faith and passion, they can gain real authenticity and deepen customer loyalty (Hajli et al., 2021); yet the same act invites harsh charges of opportunism whenever the message feels disconnected from the firms history or everyday practices (Schmuck et al., 2021). This tug-of-war points to an urgent need for scholars to study how firms build their public stories, frame their ideals, and stir feeling during turbulent social moments.

To tackle that need, the present study pulls together a qualitative content analysis of corporate messages released during major global justice protests. By combing through tweets, ads, press statements, and videos from these flash points, the team hopes to spot common themes, familiar word patterns, and the emotional moves brands keep recycling. Ultimately, the project will judge whether the tone reflects a real hug of empathy or a slick, slightly warmer form of self-promotion. Mapping that shift deepens talks about ethical branding, trust, and the power companies have to steer public conversation in risky times.

Problem Statement

These days, people expect brands to take real stands on big social justice issues instead of sticking to the usual ads. Because of social media, that expectation is louder and harder to ignore; consumers now judge companies by what they say-and by what they actually believe (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Porter et al., 2021). Unfortunately, plenty of firms still slide into so-called performative activism: they post flashy statements but do almost nothing behind the scenes, giving the impression that their support is more about grabbing attention than about helping (Schmuck et al., 2021; Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2021). An obvious question then follows: when a brand talks the talk yet avoids walking the walk, how genuine and how ethical is its push into these movements?

Even though more people are talking about brand activism these days, very few studies have actually looked at what these brand messages say, how they sound, and the way they are planned. Hardly any research tries to tell the difference between a real heartfelt reaction and a clever way to sell more stuff. Because of this, we still dont know much about how companies walk the tricky line between customers wanting them to lead on ethics and

the firm's own need to protect their good name. To fill that hole, this project codes the way brands replied to big social justice events so it can map the tricks, steady themes, and trust people feel when they read the posts.

Research Objectives

1. To examine the rhetorical and emotional strategies used by brands in public responses to social justice movements.

2. To identify common themes and values in brand messaging across social platforms.

3. To assess whether brand responses reflect genuine empathetic engagement or are indicative of promotional motives.

4. To explore how brand messaging aligns with or deviates from established brand identity and past values.

Research Questions

1. What rhetorical and emotional strategies do brands employ when responding to social justice movements?

2. What dominant themes and values emerge in brand communications during social justice events?

3. To what extent do these responses reflect sincere empathy versus strategic promotion?

4. How consistent are these brand responses with the brand's prior identity and historical positioning?

Literature Review

The Rise of Brand Activism in a Socially Conscious Era

Around the world, protests and campaigns aimed at securing fair treatment for everyone have changed what shoppers want from the labels they buy. No longer seen only as sellers of goods, companies are expected to act like teammates in the cultural and political fights of the moment. Younger generations-Millennials and Gen Z in particular-are pushing brands to sign on (Corbisiero et al., 2022), even publicly, to causes like racial justice, gender fairness, green living, and open government (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017; Vredenburg et al., 2020). When a team takes such a stand, marketers call that brand activism, a choice that moves them far from bland, neutral ads to a bolder voice glued to shared values (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2021).

People usually set brand activism apart from traditional CSR work because it moves faster, takes bigger chances, and plays the political game head-on. Corporate social responsibility

still talks up donations, recycling, and charity in calm, friendly ways, while brand activism openly challenges broken systems and picks sides in fights the public has already split apart (Porter et al., 2021). That shift now gives every marketing plan a new must: showing an ethical face is no longer a bonus, its a ticket to the conversation. Brands that stay silent during big headlines risk being labeled complicit or cowardly, damage that can quickly slice away consumer trust (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

Performative Activism and the Dilemma of 'Woke-Washing'

Brand activism can boost a company's image, yet it also opens the door to reputational harm, chiefly when the effort reads as little more than a pose (Pöyry & Laaksonen, S.2022)). Performative activism specifically captures those flashy gestures or symbolism that show no real time or money behind them (Sobande, 2019). Similar critiques now go by the slang woke-washing, a label for brands that dress up in progressive language yet fail to alter policies or workplaces in any serious way (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Performative branding weighs heavily on ethically minded shoppers (Mogaji & Mogaj, 2021), who now study the gap between a brands words and the everyday choices it makes. Picture a fashion house tweeting about diversity while it quietly keeps a biased hiring board and an overseas factory using sweatshop labor; no one buys that story for long (Schmuck et al., 2021). When message and action dont line up, mistrust spreads, boycotts grow legs, and clips of the backlash explode across every corner of social media (Porter et al., 2021).

All of this highlights a nagging paradox in brand talk: communicating profit goals while staying true to real values. Experts keep pointing out that outside slogans must match what happens inside the company, a fit that Vredenburg and colleagues call inside-out congruence and that many view as the gold standard of authenticity.

Emotional Framing and the Role of Empathy in Brand Communication

Lately, brands have turned empathy into their go-to power move when talking about social justice. By showing solidarity with underrepresented groups or naming shared pain, companies add a human touch and link themselves to audiences on a moral plain (Chou & Tseng, 2021). True empathy in advertising goes beyond warm words; it demands listening to real stories, mirroring them back, and giving affected voices the spotlight they deserve.

Hajli et al. (2021) say that brands with emotional smarts spark more conversation and earn deeper trust, especially if those feelings sit side by side with clear, honest actions.

Framing messages this way also lets businesses show a bit of vulnerability, admit mistakes, and humble themselves qualities people now reward amid cancel storms, heat-of-the-moment politics, and nonstop media watching.

Still, experts warn that big-hearted words only count when they lead to real steps forward. A polished statement of support can quickly feel empty and be brushed aside if it isn't matched with visible change (Porter et al., 2021). That s why message-action fit matters so much; it decides whether fans see a brand as sincere partner or just quick opportunist.

Strategic Communication vs. Ethical Advocacy: A Theoretical Tension

Writers often point out a tricky line between companies that truly fight for whats right and those that only dress up a marketing pitch in activist lingo. While some brands seem passionate about fairness, others treat a good cause like any other product they can sell (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2021). This sliding trade has fueled a debate about whether real activism is slipping into being just a pretty logo or hashtag instead of an honest promise to change things (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2021). Experts01 argue that not every cause-driven campaign moves the needle or helps, especially if it skips over the bigger systems or doesnt empower workers on the inside.

When seen through the lens of critical marketing or cultural studies, brand action usually sits inside a neoliberal bubble where Identities, values, and politics are packaged and sold to beat the competition (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Because of this setup, even well-meaning ads can end up sounding depoliticized and self-serving if they highlight corporate milestones instead of listening to local voices.

Still, brands prove their worth anytime they help spotlight an issue or rally people behind an idea. When a response comes from real transparency, a pinch of humility, and values that match everyday operations, it can steer the public talk and show the world what good corporate citizenship looks like firsthand (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

Research Gap and Rationale for Content Analysis

Despite growing academic and practitioner interest in brand activism, there is a lack of empirical, systematic studies that analyze how brands communicate during social justice movements. Much of the existing research is conceptual or anecdotal, focusing on case studies or media reactions. There remains a significant gap in understanding the rhetorical structures, emotional cues, and narrative strategies brands employ across platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube.

Moreover, few studies compare messaging across industries or assess how brand responses align (or conflict) with their public reputation and historical positioning. As social justice messaging becomes more prevalent, the need for critical, data-driven analysis grows. A qualitative content analysis offers a rigorous approach to unpacking the language, symbolism, and intent embedded in these corporate responses.

Theoretical Justification

This study looks at the way companies talk about social justice by using Framing Theory, first introduced by Erving Goffman in the 1970s and later updated by Robert Entman in the 1990s. At its heart, framing theory argues that speakers dont just relay facts; they spotlight certain details and bury others, quietly steering how an audience will understand a story. For a brand, every framing choice-who it speaks to, what tone it picks, which messages it amplifies-is crucial because it shapes not only content but also impact.

Entmans four-part model-problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation-gives a clear toolkit for pulling apart advertising statements. When researchers run a brands message through these lenses, they can tell whether the company is doing no more than nodding at an issue or actually laying down a moral claim and a path forward. A remark grounded in empathy that also promises workplace change reads very differently than a generic show-of-support line with no follow-through. By holding each response against the frames, scholars can trace the rhetorical moves and emotional signals the brand deliberately weaves into its reply.

When protests spark in a city or online, people demand more than a nice advertisement from companies; they expect to see real responsibility (Porter et al., 2021). In that heat, the way a business "frames" its words can make the difference between being praised for honesty or slammed as fake (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Because of this, framing theory serves as a useful tool for looking at how new campaigns promote values, steer public opinion, and ride—or stumble over—the mood of the moment.

To dig deeper into whether a message comes from the heart, the research turns to Brand Authenticity Theory (Beverland & Farrelly, 2010). That lens separates talk that merely sounds good from talk that is backed by real action. By checking clues like continuity (steady behaviour over years), credibility (being truthful), and integrity (matching accepted ethics), analysts can tell if a company is feeling with customers or simply polishing its name. Together, framing and authenticity give a strong framework for judging not only what brands

say but also whether those words click with peoples moral and emotional core.

Together, these theories offer a strong analytical lens to explore the symbolic, moral, and strategic dimensions of brand responses. They enable the study to critically examine whether brands are truly shifting from promotion to empathy—or merely reframing their promotional strategies to fit a more ethically conscious consumer landscape.

Methodology

This study analyzes videos, tweets, and posts to see how companies respond to social justice events online, looking for the hidden feelings, symbols, and strategies that shape each message. Built on an interpretive lens, the qualitative content analysis helps researchers move beyond surface meaning and catch the subtle ways language and images mix during heated political moments. By doing so, it shows how brands try to sound real while weighing their audience's trust.

Guided by classic Framing Theory, the project examines how firms choose, spotlight, and judge issues in public conversation (Entman, 1993; Goffman, 1974). Following Entman's four tasks—naming a problem, pointing to causes, passing moral judgment, and recommending action-the team created a coding guide to track each step. To take authenticity a step farther, the research layers in Brand Authenticity Theory, treating continuity, credibility, integrity, and symbolic engagement as clear signs of how honest audiences believe the brand (Pettey, 2023).

Researchers pulled together examples of how brands reacted to three big social-justice moments: the renewed Black Lives Matter push in 2020, the #StopAsianHate rallies in 2021, and worldwide talk about the Gaza crisis in 2023-2024. Those events were picked because they flooded news feeds, sparked global conversations, and attracted a large stream of brand messages on social media. From that mix, thirty multinational companies were chosen, hailing from fields such as clothing, tech, finance, and restaurants. A brand made the cut only if it published a public reply within thirty days of each movements peak chatter and if the message appeared on official, easy-to-find digital pages like Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, or a corporate news release.

Overall, researchers collected and saved a total of eighty-four separate brand posts in text form for close study. The archive contains tweets, press statements, website notes, and captions from video clips. Each item was tagged with key details-the brands name, industry type, publication platform, release date, and format-for quick reference. This labeled

collection now serves as the foundation for a careful reading that will reveal framing tricks, main themes, and persuasive moves.

The data were analyzed using NVivo 12 software following a deductive-inductive coding process informed by Mayring (2014). Initial coding employed Entman's framing categories, followed by open coding to identify emerging rhetorical and emotional themes. These initial codes were refined through axial coding to reveal underlying structures in brand messaging and ultimately synthesized through selective coding into broader analytical categories. In addition to framing analysis, secondary codes based on Brand Authenticity Theory were applied to assess emotional tone, consistency, and alignment with brand history. Particular attention was paid to the presence of empathetic language, symbolic references, and calls to action.

To ensure reliability, a second trained coder independently analyzed 20% of the sample using the developed coding scheme. Inter-coder reliability was established using Cohen's kappa, which yielded a score of 0.81, indicating a high level of agreement and methodological consistency. The iterative coding process and audit trail of coding decisions enhanced the transparency and reproducibility of the analysis.

This study upheld rigorous qualitative standards of trustworthiness. Credibility was established through peer debriefing and cross-platform triangulation of data sources. Dependability was supported by maintaining detailed documentation of the analytical process. Reflexivity was addressed through the researcher's reflective memos, which were used to critically engage with personal biases and theoretical preconceptions. Transferability was ensured by providing thick descriptions of the social context, platform conventions, and brand histories relevant to the selected sample.

As the data comprised publicly available corporate communications, no human subjects were involved, and institutional ethical approval was not required. Nevertheless, all materials were cited appropriately, and brand content was used strictly within the boundaries of academic fair use.

Analysis and Findings

This section presents the results of the qualitative content analysis conducted on 84 brand responses to three major social justice movements: Black Lives Matter (BLM), Stop Asian Hate, and the Gaza conflict. Drawing upon Entman's (1993) framing theory and Beverland and Farrelly's (2010) brand authenticity model, the findings reveal clear patterns in how

brands construct meaning and communicate empathy across different digital platforms.

Framing Strategies: From Symbolism to Substantive Action

The content analysis identified four dominant framing strategies across brand statements: *Empathy & Action*, *Empathy Only*, *Solidarity Only*, and *Neutral Tone*. These strategies differ not only in rhetorical construction but also in their capacity to generate perceived authenticity and trust.

The most robust and highly rated strategy was Empathy & Action, used by brands such as Nike, Adidas, and Starbucks (Scalvini, 2024). These messages combined emotionally resonant language with tangible commitments, including financial donations, internal reforms, and partnerships with advocacy groups. For example, Nike's campaign during the BLM protests acknowledged systemic racism and encouraged reflection through the adapted slogan, *"For once, don't do it"*. These messages fulfilled all four of Entman's (1993) framing functions: identifying the problem, attributing cause, providing moral evaluation, and offering solutions. Prior research confirms that action-based advocacy is more effective in building consumer trust and brand equity (Porter et al., 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

In contrast, brands such as Apple and Microsoft adopted an Empathy Only frame, expressing solidarity and emotional support without committing to structural or financial changes. Although these messages demonstrated affective alignment with public sentiment, they fell short in terms of perceived sincerity due to a lack of actionable content. Hajli et al. (2021) emphasize that emotional branding can enhance engagement, but without structural alignment, it risks being dismissed as superficial.

Brands like Amazon, Coca-Cola, and Unilever relied on Solidarity Only framing, issuing brief messages or hashtags with little context or call to action. While symbolically supportive, these messages lacked depth and coherence with brand history, thereby aligning with what scholars describe as *performative activism* or *woke-washing* (Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Such surface-level engagement may offer temporary reputational shelter but risks long-term brand damage if audiences perceive it as insincere.

The Neutral Tone strategy—exemplified by Google's response to the Gaza conflict—attempted to balance humanitarian concern with non-committal language. These statements often called for "peace" or "unity" without addressing power dynamics or naming specific injustices. Mukherjee and Banet-Weiser (2021) argue that neutrality in the face of injustice can itself be a political act, often interpreted by consumers as moral evasion or corporate risk

aversion.

Platform-Specific Framing and Perception

The analysis further revealed platform-dependent variation in framing strategies and their perceived authenticity (Cutolo & Kenney, (2021). Platforms such as Twitter/X and official press releases allowed brands more space for nuanced framing and comprehensive messaging, making them more conducive to empathy-action framing. Starbucks' detailed press release on racial equity efforts illustrates how formal communication formats can bolster authenticity and message complexity (Porter et al., 2021).

Conversely, Instagram and YouTube—often used for visual or short-form content—were more frequently associated with symbolic messaging, slogans, and hashtag activism (McCallum, 2025). These formats, while visually impactful, tend to constrain elaboration and thus often failed to achieve strong framing across Entman's (1993) four dimensions. As Schmuck et al. (2021) observe, short-form, image-driven content may generate visibility but lacks the depth required to establish brand sincerity in ethically charged contexts.

Patterns of Authenticity: Evaluating Sincerity in Brand Messaging

Applying Beverland and Farrelly's (2010) model of brand authenticity revealed that perceived sincerity was strongly linked to three factors: message-action congruence, historical continuity, and emotional credibility. Brands that had a documented history of engaging in social causes—such as Nike—were evaluated more favorably because their current messaging aligned with prior advocacy. This aligns with Vredenburg et al.'s (2020) concept of "inside-out congruence," where external messaging is rooted in internal practice and values.

On the other hand, brands with no prior record of activism or inconsistent messaging (e.g., Amazon) were seen as opportunistic, especially when statements lacked emotional nuance or operational follow-up. Porter et al. (2021) emphasize that *activist message authenticity* depends on both linguistic framing and organizational behavior. Thus, even emotionally rich messages were judged as insincere if not supported by credible brand history or concrete action plans.

Interpretive Summary: From Promotion to Empathy?

The analysis substantiates the central argument of this study: while many brands have shifted from promotional language to empathetic expression during social justice movements, this transition is meaningful only when it includes structural action and aligns with brand identity.

Emotional branding alone is no longer sufficient in an era of activist consumers and digital accountability. Brands that combined empathy with action-oriented communication demonstrated higher levels of perceived authenticity and moral credibility. In contrast, brands that relied solely on symbolic support or neutrality were often perceived as disingenuous or risk-averse.

This distinction echoes wider debates in the literature about the commodification of social justice and the blurred line between ethical branding and corporate opportunism (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2021). The findings affirm that consumer audiences are not merely receptive to brand empathy—they are evaluative, critical, and increasingly informed about the moral integrity behind corporate messaging.

Conclusion

This study looks at how big, world-famous brands have reacted to recent social justice campaigns by using two ideas, Framing Theory and Brand Authenticity Theory, as guiding lenses. By reading and comparing 84 public statements from companies about three well-known issues—Black Lives Matter, Stop Asian Hate, and the Gaza fighting—the authors found that every brand spins, shares, and backs up its moral message in very different ways.

The results show a clear pecking order in the way brands frame their takes. Firms that chose the Empathy & Action frame-a mix of moving words and real promises-gained praise for being more genuine, trustworthy, and in sync with what today s shoppers want. On the other hand, brands that stuck with simple cheers or polite, quiet language opened themselves to accusations of hollow activism or woke-washing, proving again that in an age driven by ethical spending talk without real deeds won't cut it.

By sharing these clues, the research adds useful detail to the wider conversation about brand activism, showing how the way brands frame a message and the social platform they pick shape how people read its honesty. It also backs the view that being authentic grows from more than stirring feelings; it draws strength from a brands long history, whether its core values match the claim, and whether customers see clear follow-through. Because of that, emotional pulls must sit inside bigger, steady, and ethical plans if companies want to escape doubt and protect their names.

Importantly, the researchers found that the channel a brand uses can shape how its message is read. On Twitter and in formal press releases, companies could use more words, tags, and context, so their empathy felt layered and honest. In contrast, image-first sites like

Instagram nudged brands toward quick, polished posts that seemed positive on the surface but often lacked real depth. Because each platform pulls a different kind of storytelling out of a brand, marketers now need to match both what they say and how they show care.

In short, moving from loud ads to quieter, empathetic outreach isnt just a new catchphrase; it asks brands to step up as responsible social players. But talk alone wont cut it-organizations must back those words with steady actions and clear proof that they push for fairness. So for anyone crafting campaigns today, the lesson is straightforward: serve a crowd that expects honesty, and authenticity will protect the bottom line as much as the brands reputation.

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