An Exploration of the Relationship Between Brand Endorsement of Political Candidates/Causes

and Consumer Attitudes and Behaviors Toward the Brand

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Abstract

Though there has been extensive exploration into the multiple facets of brands, such as brand equity and identity, there has been little research into the influence of a brand's support of a political candidate or cause on consumers' brand approach or avoidance. This exploratory study gathered information through individual semi-structured interviews, focusing on consumer perceptions of brands supporting or opposing political candidates or causes, as well as the consumer's self-reported behavioral responses to brands based on their own political views. Participants were diverse in age, gender, and political beliefs. The interviews were analyzed using the Grounded Theory Method for themes on consumer tendencies. Results have indicated three major themes, suggesting there was recognized national political divide, and as a result, an unclear consensus on whether brands should be politically active. However, if a brand does partake in political activism in some manner, consumers would rather the brand take action towards the cause. Additionally, the more invested a consumer is in the cause a brand speaks about, the more likely they are to take action in response.

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There has been extensive research regarding brand image, especially regarding the topics of brand personality (Kim, Han, & Park, 2001; Malhorta, 1988; Johar, Sengupta, and Aaker, 2005) and brand avoidance (Hunt & Bashaw, 1999; Lee et al., 2008; Lee, Conroy, & Motion, 2009; Charmley, Garry, & Ballantine, 2012). However, there has been limited research on the impact of a brand's support of political causes or exhibition of political beliefs on the likelihood of consumers to choose or avoid that brand. Provided the increasing political tension in United States culture (Brownstein, 2017), and consumers becoming more responsive to brand behaviors (Westjohn, Singh, & Magnusson, 2012; Witt, 1969), it is extremely relevant to explore how consumers react to a brand's implicit or explicit endorsement of political candidates and/or causes.

In the past few years, we have seen several examples of mass consumer response to brands showing support for politically controversial topics. In 2012, after Chick-fil-A CEO Dan Cathy outwardly opposed same-sex marriage as LGBTQ+ equal rights movements were on the rise, thousands of consumers protested the company by refusing to purchase Chick-fil-A meals and strongly criticizing the brand on social media (O'Connor, 2014). While those who were outraged by the company's stance avoided their stores, those who were in opposition of same-sex marriage flocked stores, and on the day consumers from across the country had set to not dine at the restaurant, the company reported its highest day of sales in its history (CNN Wire Staff, 2012).

Conversely, Target Corporation has made strides recently to promote gender and LGBTQ equality through their announcement of new, more liberal store policies that allow transgender customers to use the restroom of the gender they identify with (Peterson, 2016), as well as their addition of gender neutral product lines that remove gender associations from aisle displays and offer toys and clothing for children that are not gender specific (Saini, 2015). This has sparked major controversy, resulting in consumers who are uncomfortable with these changes avoiding the

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brand altogether. Target has also benefitted from the praise and promotion of consumers whose beliefs align with the company's.

In August 2016, Colin Kaepernick, then of the San Francisco 49ers, remained seated as the National Anthem played during a preseason game (Branch, 2017). After the media and other athletes caught wind of Kaepernick's protest and the reasoning behind his actions, the story escalated as other athletes followed suit and sat or kneeled during the playing of the National Anthem in solidarity for racial inequality in the United States. These actions sparked major controversy, as the nation divided into whether this was a disrespectful act towards the nation's flag and history and the military who represent it. As consumers who did not support the National Football League's allowance of this behavior stopped watching NFL broadcasting, the league experienced a 9.7% decrease in viewership during the 2017 regular season (Rovell, 2018).

Additionally, as gun violence and control have come to the forefront of controversial political topics, the National Rifle Association has experienced extreme levels of opposition. In 2018, Publix Super Markets, Inc., offered financial support for a then-preliminary candidate, Adam Putnam, for the governorship of Florida (Contorno, 2018). While the corporation initially backed Putnam because of his involvement with the grocer as Florida's Commissioner of Agriculture, protests against the store following Putnam's comments calling himself a "proud NRA sellout" caused Publix to reconsider their donation (DiNatale, 2018). Additionally, Putnam's campaign offered a high salary position to the nephew of a Publix executive, raising further suspicion over the company's support of Putnam for governor (Contorno, 2018). The conflict surrounding Publix's financial support of the candidate originally started from Putnam's comments about the NRA, and later exposed other questions about the corporate connection.

Just as the movements for gun control caused Publix reconsider their association with the NRA, other of the companies have reevaluated and terminated their relationships, including Delta Air Lines, Enterprise Holdings, MetLife, and United Continental, among others. (Franck, 2018). However, with roughly 37 percent of voters reporting opposing stricter gun laws in a Quinnipiac University Poll (Sit, 2018), many companies are finding even if they discontinue support and association with the NRA, they will meet consumer opposition (Creswell and Hsu, 2018).

Consumer reaction to support of political candidates/causes can also occur within the context of celebrities, including actors, musicians, and athletes. Such celebrities have been using their stardom to advocate for their personal political beliefs for decades. In the most recent political election, candidates used celebrities as a marketing tool for their campaigns, having the endorsers join the politicians on the campaign trail at rallies and speeches. Formal supporters of Donald Trump included Kirstie Alley, Gary Busey, Jesse James, Loretta Lynn, Kid Rock, and Mike Tyson; supporters of Hillary Clinton included Christina Aguilera, Jon Bon Jovi, Mary J. Blige, George Clooney, Meryl Streep, and Morgan Freeman. (D'Zurilla, Kim, and Emamdjomeh, 2016)

Additionally, many celebrities show support or opposition to a variety of political topics. Sean Penn was one of the most well-known protestors against the Iraq Invasion in 2003 (ABC News, 2002). Both Leonardo DiCaprio and Ted Danson have worked as activists for ocean conservation and environmental concerns (Stanek, 2014). After President Donald Trump passed an executive order banning visas from seven Middle Eastern countries (Miller, 2017), dozens of celebrities responded via social media, at protests, and by fundraising both against (i.e., Kuman Nanjiani, Bella Hadid, Rosie O'Donnell) and in support of (i.e., Azaelia Banks, Scott Baio) the ban (Lang, 2017). As for musicians, Willie Nelson has been an advocate for legalizing marijuana (Casey, 2017), Lady Gaga speaks out for LGBTQ equality (Zak, 2009), and hip-hop artists such

as Kendrick Lamar and J. Cole have released albums highlighting mass incarceration and racism in the United States (Zaru, 2018).

In addition to Colin Kaepernick, athletes LeBron James and Brandon Marshall have also been prominent figures in raising awareness of racial inequality (Umoh, 2017). In 2004, Carlos Delgado, formerly of the New York Mets, protested against America's military efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq (Rhoden, 2004). In 2011, when the Boston Bruins met with the President of the United States following their Stanley Cup Championship, goalie Tim Thomas opted to not join the meeting, as he believed, "the Federal government has grown out of control, threatening the Rights, Liberties, and Property of the People" (Greene, 2012).

It is becoming more common to see brands, including celebrity brands, speak out in favor, or against, many controversial social and political candidates and causes (Scott, 2017). As the United States continues to polarize, consumers are vocalizing concerns and praises for the brands that take a stance on such things. Therefore, it is imperative for brands to better understand the effect their voices and actions related to this issue have on consumer approach and avoidance behaviors to the brand.

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Brand Equity

Brand equity is a brand's strength in the market based on its marketing and financial values, as determined by the consumer's knowledge of the brand (Severi & Ling, 2013; Keller, 1993). Brand knowledge is a key determinant of brand equity, as the success of any brand is dependent on the consumer's familiarity with and understanding of it. Brand knowledge, or a consumer's understanding and familiarity with the brand, directly impacts consumer decision-making. Many models have been constructed to illustrate the memory formation and recall process, and the most widely accepted framework of these models is the associative model formulation (Krishnan, 1996). In these models, information on brands is stored in nodes, which are linked together in varying strengths. The links between the nodes vary in strength based on factors like the frequency of exposure to brand information and interest the consumer has in the brand information.

The two dimensions of brand knowledge that influence consumer retention of brand information are brand awareness and brand image. Brand awareness focuses on a consumer's familiarity with a brand and is important in consumer decision-making. It measures the likeliness of the customer recognizing brand images or recalling the brand in relation to the products it sells or cues associated with brand images. Its components, brand recognition and brand recall, are indicative of how likely a particular brand will come to the mind of consumers in their decision-making process. (Keller, 1993) Brand recognition is a consumer's ability to confirm exposure to a brand through cues, such as the brand name or logo. Brand recall is the consumer's ability to identify a brand through cues such as product category, need fulfillment, or another allusion to the brand's product or services. These elements of brand knowledge, when used to assess consumer awareness, indicate how well brands market their products or services.

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A brand's image is a consumer's perception of the brand through brand associations in the consumer's memory. Brand associations are the images a consumer relates to a brand's information nodes in their minds (Keller, 1993). For example, consumers may associate images such as princesses, firework shows, and the infamous Mickey Mouse with Walt Disney World (Westre, 2016). Images that cause a consumer to recall a brand could include the brand's logo or a similar image, words associated with the brand, similar products, or unique experiences or encounters that remind a consumer of a brand. Collectively, the individual associations consumers hold for a particular brand define the image of the brand for the market. Marketers can influence their brand image by creating associations through advertisements, celebrity endorsements, sponsorship of other products or brands, or through strategically implementing their non-product-related attributes (i.e., pricing packaging, product placement, etc.) (Biel, 1993). Using the dimensions of brand associations, marketers work to establish their brand's image by the type, favorability, strength, or uniqueness of the brand associations.

Types of Brand Associations. There are several approaches to assessing types of brand associations. Types of associations could be related to the brand's product category, the situations in which it is used, its attributes, and its consumer benefits (Farquhar & Herr, 1993). Associations could also be assessed by the level of abstraction, or how much information is communicated in the association (Alba & Hutchinson, 1987; Chattopadhyay & Alba, 1980). By this approach, brand associations can be categorized into three major types: attributes, benefits, and attitudes (Keller, 1993).

Attributes are the descriptive qualities a consumer uses to characterize a product or service, typically what is related to the purchasing of a product. Attributes can be product- or non-product-related (Myers & Shocker, 1981). Product-related attributes are defined as what parts the product

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is composed of or what tasks are necessary to perform a service. Non-product-related attributes are the external aspects of the purchasing process, including the price, packaging, portrayed user imagery, and usage imagery (as in, where and when the product may be used). While price and packaging are predetermined by the company, the user and usage imagery is developed by the consumer based on their perceptions on the type of people who use the brand and how those people use the product. Brands that forge affiliations with political causes could define the user imagery for consumers, which will determine the consumers' associations of the brand and their likelihood to approach the brand.

Brand benefits are the personal value consumers place on a brand's product or service attributes, based on what they think the brand will do for them (Park, Jaworski, & MacInnis, 1986). The motivation behind these benefits can be categorized as functional benefits, experiential benefits, and symbolic benefits. Functional benefits are the intrinsic motivations for purchasing and using a product, such as physiological and safety needs. Typically, consumers are motivated to purchase products with functional benefits to satisfy basic needs or to remove or avoid a problem (Rossiter & Percy, 1987). Experiential benefits are what consumers feel while using the product, typically choosing products that result in enjoyment or fulfillment. These products move beyond immediate needs for sensory satisfaction and cognitive stimulation. Symbolic benefits are associated with extrinsic values, such as satisfying the need for social approval and personal expression (Keller, 1998). Consumers will often choose brands for the symbolic benefits, selecting the brands they associate with social images they want to use to express themselves. As individuals' political views become more personally specific, there may be a tendency for consumers to select brands, whether it is a product, celebrity, or politician, that best represents and

understands their personal politics (Bennett, 2012). Because of this tendency, consumers are more likely to consider a brand's symbolic meaning before purchasing.

The third type of brand associations are brand attitudes, or a consumer's overall evaluation of the brand. This category is most influential in consumer decisions to purchase a product from a particular brand, as it acts as the consumer's collective view of the brand drawing from both the attributes and benefits of the brand. While there are many attributes associated with individual brands, and consumers may identify several benefits for a product, the attitude consumers have of a brand includes those opinions and views not captured by the other two types of associations.

Favorability. How favorably a consumer views a product or brand will determine the decision to purchase (MacKenzie, 1986). A marketer must create positive brand associations for consumers, offering the attributes and benefits that will satisfy their needs and form an overall favorable attitude towards the brand. A brand attribute's favorability is conceptually and empirically related to the consumer's evaluation of attribute importance; if a consumer does not think a particular attribute or benefit is valuable, they will not form any positive or negative opinions of the brand, as they do not believe it has a significant impact on themselves (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). Therefore, brands that may support political causes a consumer strongly opposes should prove less appealing to that consumer than to a consumer who does not feel as strongly about the issue.

Strength. A brand association's strength is dependent on how the information is encoded in a consumer's mind and how the memory of the product (its storage in the mind) is maintained (Krishnan, 1996). The strength is dependent on how much the consumer thinks about the brand and in what way they think about it. One way consumers may develop stronger associations is by contemplating the significance of the brand's meaning and its implications (Craik & Lockhart, 1972). By staying relevant in popular political topics, brands are creating another platform to

expose themselves to consumers. Additionally, by associating themselves with relevant political topics, brands are engaging consumers in a new conversation that can be personally significant to the consumer (Bennet, 2012). As politics continue to become a focal point of society, brand affiliations with political causes may resonate more with consumers who feel strongly about those topics, whether positively or negatively. Through alternate forms of exposure and engagement, such as through news sources or on social media, brands are creating new opportunities to strengthen consumers' brand associations and awareness.

Uniqueness. To distinguish themselves, brands must utilize unique associations that differ from those of other brands to form strong associations in the consumers' minds (Aaker, 1982). By clearly communicating distinct characteristics, whether product- or non-product related, brands will increase brand recognition and recall amongst others in the same product categories (Keller, 1993). Brands may use marketing tools to identify with a particular product category to form an association in consumers' minds. However, to avoid consumer confusion, the brand will then need to distinguish itself as a superior choice to decrease any competitive overlap. In relation to political associations, brands in the same product category may exhibit similar political views, diminishing any chance for the brands to distinguish themselves in regards to one cause or another. This would also increase the competition between the brands, as they would be attracting similar consumers.

These characteristics of brand association interact to develop a brand's image. A brand must distinguish itself as having favorable attributes and benefits, influencing the overall attitude consumers have towards it to fortify strong associations with the brand. The success of implementing a unique brand image will determine the level of consumer brand awareness, which will impact knowledge of the brand to determine brand equity.

Brand Personality

Based on the brand associations consumers develop, they will associate human characteristics to describe the brand, such as Pepsi being described as young, exciting and hip or Dr. Pepper as nonconforming and fun (Plummer, 1985). This humanization of brands, or brand personality, provides a way for consumers to identify with a brand and differentiate it from others (Kim, Han, & Park, 2001). The traits associated with brands are usually enduring and distinct from other brands, defining the brand's personality (Aaker, 1997). Consumers may associate personality traits to brands through direct interaction with the brands, or, more often, through word of mouth reports on the brand (Kim, Han, & Park, 2001).

Brand personality allows consumers to choose brands to represent themselves based on those brands that they identify as having traits similar to their self-concept (Malhorta, 1988). While brand personalities tend to carry lasting characteristics with them over an extended period, consumers are only able to identify particular traits within a brand if they are traits the consumers themselves activate regularly (Johar, Sengupta, & Aaker, 2005). If a consumer does not use the portrayed traits of a brand, the consumer is unlikely to identify with the brand and use it as a representative of him- or herself. As consumers continue to personalize their political views as a means of defining themselves, they are more likely to use brands to express not only personal style and preferences, but also their personal beliefs based on the symbolic values of the brand (Bennet, 2012). Based on this tendency, consumers may use their personal beliefs and views to define their personality traits, impacting their ability to identify the traits of a brand's personality.

Brand Avoidance

Just as consumers enthusiastically support brands they feel reflects their self-image based on a brand's attitude and personality (Hunt & Bashaw, 1999), they also reject brands, engaging in brand avoidance (Lee et al., 2008). Brand avoidance can occur for experiential, identity, deficit-

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value, or moral reasons (Lee, Conroy, & Motion, 2009). Consumers practice experiential avoidance when a brand they choose does not fulfill its brand promise, whether it is implicitly or explicitly stated. Identity avoidance occurs when a consumer does not find a brand symbolically appealing. This includes brands that seem inauthentic, especially when the brand is reaching a selective subculture (Charmley, Garry, & Ballantine, 2012). This sense of inauthenticity can apply to political subcultures, as some groups may feel violated by brands they do not believe to truly hold the same political or social values as themselves. Brands may also exhibit an unacceptable cost to benefits trade-off, which results in deficit-value avoidance (Dodds, Monroe, & Grewal, 1991). Consumers want to receive the service they pay for, and will cease using a company when they believe the price they pay for a product or service exceeds the benefit they receive.

Brands may also incur moral avoidance, which results from consumers viewing the brand as negatively impacting the greater societal good (Lee, Conroy, and Motion, 2009). Some consumers firmly believe views alternate to their own are detrimental to society (e.g., LGBTQ rights, kneeling for the National Anthem) and, as a result, openly oppose the brands that express those alternate views (e.g., Target Corporation, Colin Kaepernick). It is becoming more common for consumers to select brands that practice corporate social responsibility, regardless of what causes that may include (Nan and Heo, 2007). This growing concern of the social impact of a company indicates that consumers are looking more towards the abstract qualities of a brand, rather than singling out the need a brand fulfills.

Brands are dependent on their image and associations to establish a lasting rapport with consumers. Through the brand's attributes, benefits, and attitudes, consumers develop perceptions on what the brand represents and how it will impact them, and use these images to form a brand personality and select those brands that portray traits the consumer personally identifies with.

Studies show consumers are looking beyond the human characteristics they associate with brands for more substantial symbolism (Malhorta, 1988; Bennet, 2012). As politics are becoming an integral part of everyday life, and are becoming more personalized to individual beliefs, it is necessary to explore the impact brands' affiliations with political causes on consumer buying habits.

Method

Procedure

This is an exploratory study seeking to identify, from an emic perspective, the impact of brand support for or opposition towards a political candidate or cause on consumers' brand approach or avoidance. Data will be collected through semi-structured individual depth interviews (see Appendix A for the Discussion Guide) designed to foster an open discussion of each participants' opinions on the brands they use, their association with politics, and how that impacts their brand attitudes and behaviors. Individual interviews will allow participants to fully divulge their beliefs with minimal threats to validity that may stem from the presences of others (for example, in focus groups). The interviews will be recorded via audio, and analyzed using a NVivo, a qualitative analysis software program. Utilizing the Grounded Theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), each interview will be analyzed following its completion for recurring or new themes using the open coding model (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The Discussion Guide has the potential to be edited following the analysis of any interview so that further interviews may touch on any topics or themes uncovered to that point. As per the Grounded Theory method, there is no predetermined number of interviews. Interviews will cease upon informational saturation (i.e., when the researcher is confident that no new themes are being uncovered). The themes, as well as illustrations of each theme gleaned from the data set, will help to provide an initial understanding of the effects of brand endorsements of political candidates and causes on consumer approach and avoidance toward brands. Prior to data collection, IRB approval was sought and received for the study and this procedure.

Sample

The sample for this study was assembled via a non-probability convenience sample. The participants were all adults and diverse in age, gender, and political affiliation. The political affiliation of the participants was self-indicated, with the participants reporting in the interview whether they have conservative, moderate, or liberal views on economic policy and social policy and what their political affiliations are (i.e., Republican, Democrat, Independent, Green Party, etc.). The sample size was determined once information saturation is achieved.

Results

During this exploratory study, ten interviews were conducted, including six females and four males. Among these participants, four identified as conservatives (Republican), four identified as liberals (Democrats), and two identified as moderates. Ages ranged from 21-years-old to 76-years-old, with a majority of participants (six) being under the age of 35-years-old. All participants were Caucasian, and one participant identified as Hispanic.

The interviews conducted during this study revealed the following major themes regarding consumers' attitudes towards brands' involvement in politics: (1) There is not a clear consensus as to whether brands should advocate for political causes and candidates, but because of a recognized national political divide, there is a sense of discomfort over brands' political involvement. However, (2) if a brand does partake in political activism in some manner, consumers would rather the brand take action towards the cause, rather than depend on monetary donations. Additionally, (3) the more invested a consumer is in the cause a brand speaks about, the more likely they are to take action in response.

The national divide causes mixed opinions of brands' political involvement

Throughout the interviews, it was clear all participants recognized a national political divide. Of the ten participants interviewed, eight referenced a political divide within the United States, with participants over the age of 45-years-old alluding to an increase in national divide from what they remember as young adults. Peggy, a liberal female in her sixties, explained the following:

Bernthal: Have you ever, do you tend to pay attention or not to when those athletes or entertainers you know become vocal about any political candidates or causes? Because they are seemingly, arguably, increasingly more vocal about it.

> Peggy: I guess, you know, in the past not so much, because I think in the past politics, there
> was not the divisiveness there is now. I'm a Democrat. I was a Republican at one point in my
> life and then I kind of realized I associated more with that party, and my whole voting life I've
> voted across party lines. I've picked who I thought was the best candidate at that time. But in
> today's environment, I think I'm more polarized in my views because of, the division is not,
> it's very different now. I feel much stronger opposed to certain candidates than I have ever had
> at any point in my life, so now, you know, I wouldn't go stay at a Trump hotel, and I wouldn't
> go- but I've never felt, so- it's been a more moderate disagreement than it was now.

Among younger participants, a national divide was referenced in relation to social media
interactions and conversations with friends and family. Some of the younger participants do not
feel comfortable publicly sharing their political opinions because of the discomfort these
arguments may cause. Jennifer, a 30-year old moderate female, explained her social media activity
in regards to politics.

> Burrows: Do you take any sort of action on social media, or anything like that?
>
> Jennifer: I am really not involved. I mean I'm definitely on social media, but I am not a big- I
> don't like to 'like' Facebook groups, I don't like to engage in the political commentary, I don't
> like to fall down the Facebook political commentary on news articles. With Twitter, I don't
> follow a lot of people, I'll go look up things. I don't like to 'retweet.' I just don't like to fall
> down that hole, because to me, that's the social media political commentary hole, where there
> are just so many things that can happen, and I'm not here for it. I like to read about these things,
> and I'll kind of like, keep it inside, but I don't fall down that extra, 'if so and so says something,
> I'm going to like them more.' I just continue to live my life. And I don't know if that makes
> me a good person or not, but I'm just very passive about it.

In relation to this sense of a national divide, there was not a clear theme as to whether participants
thought brands should become publicly involved in political causes. While a few participants did

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assert that brands have the constitutional right to voice an opinion, many felt unsure as to whether they should utilize that right. Elizabeth, a millennial conservative female, expressed indecisiveness, as she appreciates brands have the right to express their views, but feels uncomfortable if the brand's opinion feels forced onto her.

> Burrows: Could you tell me what you think about brands publicly supporting political candidates.

> Elizabeth: Well, to be honest I have mixed emotions. I feel like they're free to do so, I'm all for freedom of speech, freedom of association. Sometimes, it makes me slightly uncomfortable when I feel the brand becomes more politically active than it is an actual brand itself, however, you know what, it's America, everyone is free to do and express, and if I owned a company, I would want to be able to support or, whatever I want to be able to. If that makes any sense. So I'm okay with it, it makes me a little uncomfortable when you know like, sometimes if I feel like their opinion is necessarily being forced on me, like if I'm in a store and it's extremely obvious, sometimes it makes me uncomfortable, but I'm not going to stop supporting it. If that makes sense, you know? Just because I disagree does not mean it affects my behavior towards my brand. So like, you know, if I were to disagree with the political affiliation of a company, I'm not going to boycott, or anything like that.

While Elizabeth was generally neutral about brands supporting political causes and candidates, Levi, a 47-year-old conservative male, expressed that companies should not become politically active.

> Levi: Also let's take Dick's Sporting Goods for instance. They're putting money towards gun control issues, and that's hurting their business. And that's not only hurting business, it's also hurting people that work for them that are employed by them. That could very well affect their livelihoods. That's why I believe it should be… it's alright I mean if you believe in a cause

that's why we've got a constitution to say 'hey it's my freedom of speech' but yeah, I think that companies should not be in that... it should be neutral. It should be behind the scenes.

Bernthal: Is there any other reasons besides that it has the potential to hurt their employees by hurting the business?

Levi: Plus, it causes more division in this country that we already have now, so.

Levi acknowledges that brands do have a constitutional right to express their opinions, but he believes by supporting political causes, brands may cause harm on both their business and employees and cause greater national divide. Participants also saw harm with brands supporting political candidates because of the questionable relationships they form. One concern was the favoritism that could result for the support of a political candidate, as mentioned by Peggy.

Burrows: Okay, so just to begin, tell me what you think about brands publicly supporting political candidates. [...] More specifically looking at one who's running for office, or who may be in office as well.

Bernthal: For example, Publix and Adam Putnam as an example. [...] So separate, just a company, a brand endorsing for the candidate specifically, as opposed to cause. But a candidate.

Peggy: Okay, yeah. I mean, I don't object to somebody endorsing a candidate. But when you read further, like in the case of Adam Putnam, where the amount of money that they put toward the candidate and then it's seemed to be that they hired someone that was related to one of the top people at Publix, and then gave a young man a very high paying job that seemed to be kind of a conflict of interest. So when you get into the weeds and see all of that it makes me uncomfortable to read that and disappointed in the candidate.

Burrows: And why is that?

Peggy: Well because you think that he has some obligation to that corporation that has given him so much money, you know um, they um, in his role as the um head of the department of

agriculture, his department directly inspected some areas of Publix operation. So you think, and then hiring a relative, it just makes you feel that their beholden to that company in some way, you know. So, it was a lot of money.

Burrows: And so within that, what about that conflict makes you feel uncomfortable?

Peggy: Well, I mean I don't like the amount of money that is put by any entity towards political candidates, that kind of just makes me uncomfortable in general. I believe there needs to be some kind of campaign finance regulation because, when money, you know, is put towards candidates to get them elected, and other candidates don't have that same opportunity to buy ads and promote themselves, I think it's an unfair advantage and I just don't like it.

The concern that both the brands and political candidates are receiving other benefits was mentioned by other participants, as it is a belief that brands (specifically corporations) are looking to benefit, mainly monetarily, from supporting a political candidate. One participant expressed the same concern towards brands supporting political causes. When discussing what political causes or candidates that brands should support, Stephanie expressed that she believes brands should only support political causes directly related to their products or services. When looking further at brands that use their company values as a reason to support certain political causes, she stated the following:

Stephanie: I think [brands using their values as a reason to support political causes is] a stretch. I think it's fine that they're a Christian organization, I mean so is Hobby Lobby. There are plenty of places that I think we would be surprised that are Christian-based companies. But, why, what is the point? Then I start looking at, well what are they getting out of it? What are the people at the top—I just get suspicious. So then, are you getting something from this? Are you getting, you know, kickback or something like that? If you're going to donate something to a politician or to a cause, and then if that cause is associated with a politician, and they get into office, what are you getting from them? Because that's not—you're not just giving because

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you agree, you're getting something back. That's how all these companies work. So, what are you getting from it?

In addition to seeing companies receive a benefit from their support of a political candidate, participants also mentioned that by supporting a political candidate, a brand is supporting everything the candidate stands for. One participant expressed concern over the generalizations a brand's support can cause:

> Burrows: So to begin, tell me what you think about brands supporting political candidates.
>
> Gary: So when it comes to brand supporting political candidates, and you said this could be an individual brand or an organizational brand?
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> Burrows: Mhm, yep.
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> Gary: I'm kind of in the middle. I think that they can, that they should take stance on certain issues, but when it comes to a specific candidate, to me a candidate is representing several issues, and so to take a stand with a candidate, you're taking stand with all those issues even though, if you might only align with one. But, I do see it also being almost impossible in our society these days, like Taylor Swift for example. She talks about what she looks for in a candidate and all of the sudden, the media takes that and they say 'okay Taylor Swift says to vote Democrat.' Taylor Swift never said to vote Democrat, she said 'these are the values I look for in a candidate for me to vote for them.'

Gary's concern over brands supporting political candidates primarily lies with the media and public interpretation of brands' stances, rather concern over brands taking a stance in general. While other participants saw the national divide and media coverage of that divide as reasons for brands to refrain from political involvement, Gary expressed that brands should get involved in because of the media coverage.

> Gary: I would say to support political candidates. But just to keep in mind everything that goes along with those political candidates is that all of the sudden you're attaching yourself to. But

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even as an individual and as citizens, we're going to agree with some things with the candidates we vote for and we won't on other things. So, it's kind of unfair to hold them to a standard. But they are kind of held on a standard unlike anybody else because they have a recognizable brand, and that things that they say or do are going to come across as different compared to just an individual. So, I'd say that they should be involved and not so much silent, because I think for too long they've been silent.

While Gary stated he believes brands should get involved, another participant commented that it seems as though brands now have a harder time not getting involved in politics.

Burrows: Tell me what you think about brands publicly supporting political candidates.

Kevin: I think in this day and age it is hard to not endorse a political candidate when you stand for something, right? When you stand for any number of things and the values that you espouse as a company. I think in this day and age, in 2018, it is also hard with social media and everything else to remain neutral because people are always looking for guidance through this tumultuous political landscape. A thing that comes to mind is I hear a lot of backlash from Taylor Swift up until this election of not taking a stand of not saying something on her platform, and I think that just goes back to the fact that we're looking for those people with those platforms to stand up and say this right this is wrong.

Burrows: So what do you think about those same brands supporting political causes?

Kevin: Again I would say that political causes and candidates are intertwined. It's hard for you to especially in this polarizing landscape to support a political cause without supporting a political candidate. I think they are very much mutually exclusive in the sense that if you support same sex marriage and trans rights it's hard to support a Republican candidate like Mike Pence, who actively doesn't support those people and espouse those same values.

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Again, citing the national political divide, Kevin suggests not only are brands having a more difficult time not getting involved in politics, but that he sees an expectation from the media and general population for brands to get involved.

While most participants examined the societal ramifications of brands becoming political activists, a couple of participants focused on the impact politically active brands have on their own lives. One expressed aggravation over brands becoming politically active:

> Burrows: So to open, can you tell me what you think about brands supporting political candidates? Publicly supporting.
>
> Jennifer: Yeah, you know it's an interesting time that we live it. I, without sounding insensitive, I'm just kind of annoyed by it, because I think that it really creates a lot of unnecessary conflict. Because, I mean I think of Chick-fil-a and Hobby Lobby, and like the Papa Johns thing. When they come out, and create all this conflict, I mean at the end of the day, I just want to eat Chick-fil-a. I just want to shop for craft supplies. So for me, it's just like, 'why do you gotta be like that? Why do you have to drag this into it?' Because on one hand, it's good that people are having the conversation, but on the other hand, why can't we just separate these businesses for consumer goods and retailers from all this political dialogue?

On a personal level, Jennifer feels that brands are involving their consumers in a political conversation they may not be actively choosing to partake. Another participant, Stephanie, also supports this sentiment, and expresses that products and services should be for the public, and not narrowed based on political beliefs.

> Burrows: Do you think the more involved with the product the political action is, the less likely you are to either support it or to feel any sort of affinity towards it?
>
> Stephanie: Yeah, I think the more involved with the product it is, the more I'm just like, 'oh my god, I just don't want to deal with that.' And I just want to shut it out, so, rather than, you know for instance with the football, rather than hear them out and say, 'what are they doing?

Oh this football team is trying to do this, that's awesome.' And I might look into it, I might

donate, I might get involved. I'm like, I don't want to hear about it, because I have very

conservative family members and I have very liberal family members, and so for me it's a

constant fight on my Facebook, it's a constant fight when I talk to them, because it gets brought

up. And I don't like that. I don't want to talk about it, I already hear all of it all the time, I don't

need it from the products in my life as well. So I don't want to get involved in the argument. I

would rather just be able to make my own decision and just do it, than have to be like, 'well if

you're going to watch the NFL, you're going to have to be a part of this.' Because you are,

whether you agree with it, don't disagree with it, talk about it or not, you still are involved in

it in some way. And I don't want to be involved in that kind of- I don't want to be part of the

discussion with everyone in my life, you know?

At the personal level, both Jennifer and Stephanie expressed that the national political divide has

demonstrated itself in multiple areas of their lives, and they would rather have the products they

consume not politically active. Although he previously asserted in his interview that brands have

the right and should participate in politics, Jake agreed that he also does not want politics directly

involved in the products he consumes. When discussing the example of Colin Kaepernick and

other NFL players kneeling during the National Anthem at regular season football games, he

expressed the following:

Burrows: So do you feel there would be a different way that he potentially could demonstrate

the same protest, but that follows the rules? And if so, how would you follow that?

Jake: Yeah, before the National Anthem. But the thing is, these people, they want this attention.

And they want the camera on them during the playing of the National Anthem. You don't see

them demonstrating after the season is over, or on their own before the game or in their private

life. No, they want a stage. And, yeah, if it's done outside the confines of what's stated, what

they should be doing is standing for the National Anthem, and they do it because they want a

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stage, they want a camera on them. I don't mind them demonstrating beforehand, I don't wanna see it. That's not what I pay for, that's not what I go to the game for. I go to see them play a football game. I'm not interested in their personal opinions or political opinions.

Burrows: Okay, so let's say that, for example, before the game you get there early and they're doing a warm up, and the teammates are wearing t-shirts that support this cause. How would you respond to that, as opposed to immediately before the game starts?

Jake: I don't care. But, it must be uniform. See, where the NFL got into hypocrisy, they didn't like Tim Tebow put John 3:16 underneath his eye, because that was his opinion, religious, which a lot of people complained. Well, and they took that complain seriously and they made him not do it. They should've done the same thing with Kaepernick, if they're going to be non-hypocritical and consistent in the enforcement of their rules. But before, I don't care.

Burrows: So it's more about the content that you're there for?

Jake: Yeah, and the time. I'm there for the game. But the game starts with the National Anthem.

Jake's statements reflect a general sentiment of the participants that, regardless of the political action being taken by brands, they do not want to feel a brand's beliefs are being forced on them or interfering with their interactions with a product.

Overall, participants agreed that brands have a constitutional right to express their political beliefs and support candidates or causes. However, with the acknowledgement of a national political division, participants were divided on whether they felt brands should make these expressions. The most significant sentiment participants expressed was discomfort towards brands becoming politically active, likely stemming from politics being discussed and argued more publicly now than it has been in the past. Although there was not a clear consensus of how politically involved brands should be, all participants did express their response processes when brands do make political statements.

Consumers prefer brands take action when supporting political causes or candidates

Another significant theme that developed during the interviews was, if a brand were to take a political stance, consumers would prefer they take an action towards that stance, rather than only offer a monetary donation to a cause. While there were many specifications as to how the participants prefer a brand to act when taking a political stance, there was a significant preference of brand action over monetary compensation. Based on how she selects brands that are politically involved, mainly those in opposition to her own views, Elizabeth stated the following.

> Burrows: Okay, so would you say that the company's actions, you value them more than their monetary donations or things that they say?
>
> Elizabeth: Absolutely. I would say, 'how do they treat their employees? What kind of community involvement do they have monetarily, but are the starting foundations for education, human rights, all those kinds of things?' I think that's what I base my opinion off of more than actual political association and vocalization and money giving.

For Elizabeth, similarly to other participants, continuing to support brands that oppose her own political beliefs has caused some cognitive dissonance she has had to process through before she could continue support of the brand. Part of her decision to continue supporting a brand stems from the way the brand supports a political cause, and how that interacts with other parts of the brand's actions. Jennifer reiterated this sentiment in valuing the actions a brand takes.

> Burrows: Okay, so when someone comes out for a cause, political or charitable, from what you said it seems the actions matter more than just the monetary involvement.
>
> Jennifer: Oh, for sure. And I don't know- obviously money helps. But, actions speak louder than words, and than a check. At the end of the day, I still don't expect a celebrity to do anything just because they're a quote unquote celebrity, but yeah, if they're going to do it, yeah I'm going to look at the way you do it.

Throughout the interviews, many criteria were mentioned for what participants look to for the actions of a brand. One of the more significant assertions was that brands should act in a way that is respectful to all people. A main example used was the protest led by Colin Kaepernick to kneel during the National Anthem before NFL regular season games. While two participants were supportive of the manner in which the protest was conducted, six participants expressed opinions similar to the following.

> Bernthal: Tell us a little bit about what you think about the NIKE Colin Kaepernick ad and what's going on there. How do you feel about it? Has it changed? I noticed you were wearing one of NIKE's products.
>
> Levi: Yeah.
>
> Bernthal: Jump back. So, does, just open-ended. How you feel about it?
>
> Levi: Well it goes back to, I guess I could answer a previous question there was about negative impacts there. NFL, when they started that whole taking a knee, I think they should- Colin Kaepernick should have went another avenue. What was stopping him- this is why I like Tony Dundee so well, because I liked his response in an interview I watched a couple weeks ago, I believe it was. He was saying he would never allow his players to do that. If he wanted to speak out, he would've gave them his microphone time during a press conference. To me, that's what Colin Kaepernick should have done. I- and ever since that, I have boycotted the NFL. I have not watched an NFL game in three years.

In the interviews, only three participants expressed disagreements with the political stance of Kaepernick; however, a total of six participants did explain that they would have preferred Kaepernick to demonstrate his stance in a different manner, as they felt it was disrespectful. Recommendations for what participants would have preferred include speaking out in external interviews, wearing clothing representative of the political cause before or after a game, or posting their opinions via social media outside of game day. Ultimately, those who felt uncomfortable with

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the way Kaepernick protested would have preferred him act outside of the entertainment they were viewing.

In addition to the actions of the brand being respectful to others, consumers want the regular actions of the brand to reflect their interest in external causes. Typically, participants focused their responses on the brand's treatment of others, namely employees within a company. When discussing a brand's support of political causes, such as LGBTQ+ rights or racial equality, participants were critical of the brand's support based on how they treated their own employees. To explain this point, Gary used the example of Netflix and their involvement with the LGBTQ+ community.

> Burrows: In general, do you feel that brands should begin showing political support either one
>
> way or another? Whether it's about a candidate or a cause. Do you feel one way or another
>
> about that?
>
> Gary: Yeah, I feel like they should, but mostly, I would come from the place that their
>
> employees feel supported. Because you know, the happier the employees, the better your
>
> company is going to be. Netflix is able to be as successful as it is because they make sure that
>
> every member of its staff feel supported and included, and that it's not going to tolerate any
>
> insightful or hateful rhetoric. But at the same time, it's not, I mean it could potentially push out
>
> people who maybe do not support or agree with the LGTBQ community based on their religion
>
> or what have you. But based on how open people feel, whether it be to talk about their sex
>
> lives, whether it being two women or a man and a man, since they feel so supported and it's
>
> just a part. Even with the trans community, it's still a new community that's coming out of the
>
> LGBTQ community that, you know, if I see a trans woman or a trans man, I'm going to feel
>
> uncomfortable, even though they're not pushing it on me, but because I see it, I might not
>
> necessarily want to see it, but now I'm seeing it, so now I'm feeling uncomfortable and I'm
>
> going to leave. So then it kind of comes from the place of, 'okay how do we support our

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> underrepresented population that have faced discrimination or hateful rhetoric or actions, but
>
> at the same time,' and I kind of feel funny saying it, 'but support those people, you know, that
>
> have their beliefs and want to stick with it.' And it's not that they're hateful, but they just don't
>
> agree with it. So how do we support them without forcing them to do something that they don't
>
> want to do?

Through his example, Gary acknowledged that different individuals have different beliefs, and he

asserts that a brand, or in this case, a company specifically, should be accepting of those beliefs.

Beyond the treatment of employees, participants also examine the operational processes of brands

to decide whether to continue supporting the brand based on expressed political stances. Elizabeth

articulated that how a company treats their employees and operational processes impacts her brand

selection process.

> Burrows: Are there any other factors that you can think of that may act as either barriers or
>
> something that opens a pathway for you to begin using a brand? You've mentioned
>
> foundations, certain political causes you feel strongly about.
>
> Elizabeth: I would say, if I see an article or I have personal experience or knowledge of the
>
> way a company treats its employees or treats people or actually makes a difference, not just
>
> giving money to a candidate or cause, I feel like they have a positive impact on people, that's
>
> what I look at.

Elizabeth also expressed an example of when a company's treatment of its production process

impacted her overall view of the company.

> Elizabeth: I would say one of the biggest things that I would like to be able to do would be to
>
> have more control over where my products- my biggest concern over purchasing something is
>
> feeling guilty about where my products are coming from, when it comes to sweatshops and
>
> those sorts of things. You know, that's something I should've mentioned. You know, with

Apple. Their buildings in other countries where people commit suicide regularly, that's

something that I feel strongly about companies not acting, rather than the way they're acting.

Burrows: Okay, so more so how companies treat employees or, even as far back as production.

Elizabeth: Yes, I would say that's something that's bothered me. To me, silence and not doing

something to me is more of a political statement than giving money to a campaign or something,

because if you're actually failing to treat people as human beings, I feel like that's more of a

political statement of itself. Even if it's in your production, because you're putting your bottom

line ahead of people. And that's kind of one of the reasons I have approached companies, if

they support a political cause, I tend to think, 'just because they're supporting this, they're

probably doing this for some monetary reason,' and that sounds really shallow, and rather than

actual political opinions. Because sure, Apple can support you know, human rights

organizations, but if they're not actually going back to the original source, and attempting to

change the way their company actually functions, are they really for human rights?

Based on both Gary's and Elizabeth's opinions, they are open to brands having some sort of

political belief, but the way the brand operates internally is a determining factor as to whether they

offer support, or even neutrality, towards the brand. Essentially, the political involvement of the

brand should reflect the culture of that brand, and not just offer monetary support to a political

cause or candidate. Although many participants acknowledged that a brand providing monetary

support to a political cause or candidate may be necessary, it is the actions that accompany the

monetary support that is significant to consumers. When discussing celebrities becoming

politically active, one participant noted her response to the actions as being more significant than

a monetary donation.

Burrows: So, the method in which entertainers or celebrities use their platforms, how do you

view that?

Jennifer: I mean, again, at the of the day, I'm here to see your talent. I think that you're a good actor or musician or whatever, but I do recognize that they certainly have a platform and that they're certainly influential people. I think that if they choose to use their platform, cool. Do I think that celebrities are obligated to use their platform? No. And I have seen in times of chaos or strife or whatever, people have said, 'why isn't somebody coming out and saying something?' I don't think that they're obligated to use their platform at all. If they choose to, go for it. […] And if they utilize their platform in a good way, then that does lead to me respecting them more.

Burrows: And what would you consider a good way?

Jennifer: A lot of celebrities adopt causes they feel passionate about, and that's kind of the charity or the ways that they choose to do their community service. Cool, great, that's awesome. But then there's the celebrities that are actually on the forefront, that are actually, physically doing the work. And then there's the celebrities that are just dropping the dollars. And then it's like, 'okay, we get it, we know that you have a ton of money, but what are you actually doing?' Again, it's the kind of thing where it's like, no I don't think you're expected to do anything, but I do appreciate when I actually see them, either getting down in the nitty gritty and physically doing the work, or be actually making educated statements with back up. […] And then there's like, can't think of anybody, somebody when a hurricane happens and they say, 'I'm donating a million dollars.' And then there's some celebrity like, Lin Manuel Miranda was flying people out of Puerto Rico, and then he went to Puerto Rico to perform *Hamilton* himself. I think there's a difference between that and then just saying like, 'here's a million dollars.' I mean obviously the million dollars is useful, but it's the action. I appreciate it. Again, it's not a requirement for me that you're doing these things just because you're a celebrity. But when I see them do it, it's very- I appreciate it.

As an explanation for why consumers are in favor of a brand taking action, some participants alluded to their distrust of a brand offering purely monetary support. A common expectation communicated by participants was that when brands, specifically corporations, offer support to a political candidate or cause, consumers expect that the company is receiving some sort of benefit for their support. This is fundamentally described in a quote mentioned previously by Stephanie, explaining, "When [brands] come out, and create all this conflict, I mean at the end of the day, I just want to eat Chick-fil-a. I just want to shop for craft supplies. So for me, it's just like, 'why do you gotta be like that? Why do you have to drag this into it?'"

When a brand does show support for a political cause, consumers tend to care less about what the cause is, and look more towards what the brand is doing to demonstrate their stance. Based on the theme that emerged through this study, consumers prefer brands take action and demonstrate their stances through their operations, whether as a corporation or celebrity. From the brand's actions, or lack thereof, consumers will make a purchase decision.

Consumers react to brands' political involvement based on their investment in a cause

Although whether a brand takes action when becoming politically involved is an influential factor for consumers, whether they will avoid the brand is dependent on their personal investment in the political cause or candidate being addressed. Therefore, if a consumer is strongly opposed to a cause, they are more likely to avoid using a brand that demonstrates support. Conversely, if a consumer strongly supports a cause, they are more likely to show loyalty to a brand that shares their views.

From the case example of Colin Kaepernick's protest during NFL regular season games, there is a clear scale of participants' responses towards the NFL brand based on how strongly they

felt about the political cause. Two participants showed strong opposition to the actions of Colin

Kaepernick, and explained their reasoning for boycotting the NFL as a result. As suggested by

Marie, the main reason she began boycotting was the disrespect she felt Kaepernick expressed

towards the American flag.

> Burrows: Has there ever been another instance where you reacted [by boycotting] a brand when
>
> they supported a cause that you don't agree with?
>
> Marie: Well right now I'm boycotting the NFL because of the knee, you know, the knee
>
> bending. I don't with the knee bending business, because that's against our American way.
>
> We've always been patriotic and respectful of our flag. And I don't think that the public should
>
> be subjected to a few athletes that don't respect the flag and our country.
>
> Burrows: So how exactly are you boycotting the NFL?
>
> Marie: I just don't watch the football games anymore that are professional. I only watch college.

Another participant, Levi, expressed the same objection to Kaepernick's actions, and, as a result,

avoided the NFL brand:

> Levi: Colin Kaepernick should have went another avenue. […] Ever since that, I have
>
> boycotted the NFL. I have not watched an NFL game in three years.
>
> Bernthal: Had you been a fan of the NFL prior to that?
>
> Levi: Oh yeah, every Sunday I'd watch at least two or three games.

While there are other participants who feel similarly to Marie and Levi, they did not feel as strongly

towards the cause and did not boycott the NFL. Elizabeth explained her disagreement with

Kaepernick's protest, and response to the conflict.

> Elizabeth: Well for the most part, I am not really a sports person. Don't really participate and
>
> watching it, just it's not my thing. However, I really didn't take a stance either way because
>
> I'm very big on, you know patriotism and I feel like you respect the flag and national anthem,
>
> however, just because I disagree with what he did doesn't mean that it would make me boycott

the NFL if I was an NFL fan. If it was a TV show that I actually like to watch, and it was an

actor on that TV show, just because they did that I wouldn't boycott it. If I disagree with them

doing that, however, like I said, even if I disagree with you, I don't want to say anything against

you doing that, because I want to have that same privilege to express my opinion or make a

political statement, or not make a statement or make a statement. But the NFL didn't affect me

personally, however, I just took the opinion of it's a free country.

Other participants who disagreed with Kaepernick's actions, but were not as strongly opposed,

also continued supporting the NFL, as long as they had previously supported the brand. As it came

to participants who were in support of Kaepernick's protest, they expressed continued use of the

brand as well, and in one case, went on to support other brands that supported Kaepernick.

> Burrows: Based on that opinion, how has that influenced your selection of brands?
>
> Kevin: It's something that I think about a lot. I think the biggest thing that I'm thinking about
>
> right now is Nike and having Colin Kaepernick as the face of their new campaign. As someone
>
> who completely understands and values the protest that it is in the NFL, when Nike did that I
>
> was kind of shocked but I was also like wow this is a company that is not afraid to stand up
>
> and support their values and truly live out those values that they talk about and that they say
>
> are important values for their company.
>
> Burrows: So how would you respond to that?
>
> Kevin: I was super excited. I'm a huge fan of Colin Kaepernick from the beginning. I think that
>
> he is a phenomenal athlete and I think when I saw that I got super excited. I'm quite active on
>
> my social media when it comes to things that I care about and I was very much sharing and
>
> excited about Nike's campaign with Colin Kaepernick.

For Kevin, because he already felt strongly about Kaepernick's political actions as a celebrity

brand, as well as the political cause of racial equality, he demonstrated further support of

Kaepernick's brand beyond continuing to watch the NFL by positively posting about Nike on

social media. When paralleled to the Levi's and Marie's opposition driving them to avoid the NFL brand, Kevin's support of the NFL and Nike brands demonstrates that the investment a consumer feels towards a political cause drives their response to a brand's position on that cause.

Other factors were influential in the participants' responses to brands becoming politically active. One example often mentioned throughout the interviews was Publix's support of former Florida governor candidate, Adam Putnam. While the participants were divided on their stance towards the issue, those who were strongly opposed felt they did not have the opportunity to oppose the brand.

> Burrows: So, we talked earlier about Publix and their financial support of Adam Putnam and when it came out that he's a very big supporter of the NRA, there was quite a bit of uproar about it. How did you respond to that?
>
> Peggy: Yeah, I don't like that, I don't like that for them. And he, you know, he's somebody that we kind of know because he lives in Bartow and we're from Bartow and we live there, but, yeah he wasn't going to get my vote.
>
> Burrows: How did it make you feel about Publix?
>
> Peggy: I guess I'm still shopping there.
>
> Bernthal: You do still shop there?
>
> Peggy: Yeah, I do still. There's not much choice in Bartow, you have that or Walmart.

Peggy expresses great disagreement towards Publix's support of Putnam throughout her interview, but as she mentioned, she still shops at Publix grocery stores, as the only other option is Walmart, a brand she also expressed opposition towards. Other participants also expressed that in the area in which they live, Publix is the only grocer available nearby. As a result, when consumers do not have alternate options, they continue to support a brand they strongly disagree with.

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In some cases, participants expressed that the effort involved to switch brands based on political beliefs. In these instances, the effort necessary may require finding a brand that matches the convenience, quality, or cost of the brand they currently use.

Burrows: What usually brings you back [to a brand]?

Elizabeth: I've got to say product quality, convenience, and cost. I would say that those three things are the driving forces. And location, which would be the same as convenience kind of along those lines for me. And habit, I would just say kind of habitual, you get into a rut of the companies that I frequent, frequently. I mean for example those restaurants are kind of things I frequent. When it comes to clothes, Target is kind of like my go to, and I don't even necessarily branch out a lot because I get into a habitual, convenient little rut because I'm used to a certain monetary cost, time cost, and quality of- or lack of quality of products.

When other participants reviewed the factors they examine when selecting a brand, most mentioned similar features to Elizabeth. Representative of other participants who expressed similar sentiments regarding changing brand support, Stephanie used the following example.

Burrows: Okay, have you noticed any specific brands that you remain loyal to or that you buy from often? It doesn't necessarily have to be a store, it could be where you go to eat, or things like that.

Stephanie: Yes. I mean for instance, Amazon. It's easy, it's right there. I know their CEO is not the greatest person, I know that they're kind of taking over the world, and I don't necessarily agree with it, but it is there and it is easy, and I can get my stuff the next day. So that does, that would make me go to Amazon over somewhere else. I do try to support local and non-big business, because I think it's really important, but at the end of the day, if I need something or want something, and I want it in the next couple days, I'll be impatient or lazy. But I do try, if I am given the option of like, like when I go to Target. I will buy Target's own brand versus a

big name brand. Not necessarily because I want to support Target, just because I know it's

good and it's cheaper.

When she considered Amazon's brand, Stephanie noted that she did not agree with the actions of

the CEO of the company, but that did not deter her from continuing to use Amazon for its

convenience. Although she did not use an example of a specific instance of a political stance, other

participants felt similarly when continuing to use brands with differing political opinions.

Based on the interviews conducted during this study, there is not a strong indication of

whether consumers are more likely to act decisively towards a brand if they are in opposition or in

support of the political cause a brand supports. Overall, consumers actively respond to a brand

based on its actions and their own investment in the political cause or candidate.

Discussion

This exploratory study examined consumer responses to brands becoming publicly involved in the political spectrum. The themes that emerged from the participants' responses reflected consumers' interactions with a brand's image, specifically their associations and perception of the brand's personality. Through examining the major themes of the study, a basic understanding of how a brands' associations adapts when that brand supports political causes or candidates.

Because of the political divide participants sense within the nation, they exhibited discomfort towards brands becoming involved politically. Typically, as theorized by Keller (1998), consumers select brands that provide the symbolic benefit of representing their personal values to develop the social image the consumer would like to display. As the current political environment causes discomfort among consumers, if a brand adopts a political cause, consumers may develop negative associations with that brand, rather than view the symbolic connection to a political cause as a benefit. As some participants expressed that the tension revolving around political tensions causes them to want to keep their opinions to themselves, there may be hesitation to support a brand that supports a political cause or candidate. This hesitation, based on participants' responses, could be attributed to a desire to not associate one's self with a specific political belief, as there is the potential for responses from others, both positive and negative. Due to the tense political climate many consumers are sensing, the potential for this confrontation may cause more discomfort over selecting a brand that is politically active than if the consumer were selecting a brand solely based on whether the brand has similar views.

While consumers feel unsure about whether brands should take political stances, the brands that are politically active are developing more complex associations for consumers. The more

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regularly a brand acts in support of a political cause or candidate, the stronger the association to that cause will be in a consumer's mind. Therefore, the association to a particular cause will develop a brand's personality, in the consumer's mind, to the extent of consumers automatically assuming the connection when they recall a brand's image. Examples of this mentioned throughout the interviews include Nike's brand image to "just do it," even when a topic or stance may not have high acceptance among consumers; Target's and Netflix's acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community through their human relations policies; and, in contrast, Chick-fil-a's strong Christian values in support of traditional marriage. Through the associations developed in these brands' public relations, consumers have adapted their view of the brands' personalities. As a result, consumers may experience hesitation when approaching these brands and making the decision to select, as several participants recounted.

Since a significant theme extracted from this study showed that consumers would prefer a brand to take action if the brand were to show support or opposition towards a cause, the strength of the association is dependent on how often and integrated the brand's action is. When the example of offering a monetary donation was considered, participants expressed that this demonstration did not adequately show support for the cause. Based on this assertion, for consumers to feel a brand truly supports (or opposes) a political cause, it may be necessary for the brand fully adopt the cause into its culture. Otherwise, consumers may not believe the brand is being genuine and become suspicious of the brand's reasoning for supporting a political cause, which may cause avoidance of the brand overall. The correlation between how a brand invests in a political cause and consumers' brand associations may be a critical area for future exploration, as this may uncover a critical dimension of brand associations.

Based on the last major theme from this study, the consideration of whether a consumer will select or avoid a brand is dependent on how invested the consumer is in a political cause. While the consumer may base the decision to avoid a brand on the manner in which it becomes politically active, it is more likely the consumer will depend on their own feelings towards the relevant political cause. As shown through participants' responses, the more strongly opposed a consumer is towards a political cause, the more likely they are to avoid that brand. The consumer sees the brand as having a negative association because of the support they demonstrate towards a cause they oppose. This avoidance can either be based on an identity avoidance, as the consumer does not support the brand's personality, or based on moral reasons, depending on how the consumer factors morality into their political opinion. From the results of this study, the reasons for a consumer's avoidance of a brand in relation to political involvement vary by case. Some participants did not want to directly associate with a brand that opposed their own views because they did not feel that brand represented their own beliefs. However, other participants boycotted brands because they did not morally agree with the brands' stances. How and for what reasons consumers actively respond to brands' political involvement is crucial to understand what drives their selection and avoidance behaviors. In relation to the potential future studies exploring the actions of brands consumers best respond to, it would be beneficial to explore the dynamics between the actions of a brand and how a consumer feels about the political cause to uncover potential correlations.

While the major themes from this study offer the potential for future studies that delve into consumers' responses to brands' involvement in politics, there is the potential to explore consumers' opinions based on lesser themes. While there was not a normal distribution of the ages of the participants in this study, there were traces of generational differences in how consumers

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feel about brands' involvement in politics. As all participants over the age of 47-years-old mentioned a difference in political polarity in comparison to when they were each a young adult, the views of younger generations may differ in how they approach the symbolic benefits and personalities of brands. Additionally, exploring the involvement of the media in branding and politics may reveal further themes that show direct impacts on consumer responses to brands. A few participants made mention of media involvement in the national political division, and there was a tendency for older participants to mention an increase in this media coverage. While these potential themes were not significant results among the represented sample, further exploration may be necessary among larger samples to identify other underlying themes.

As an exploratory study, the major themes uncovered offer future potential for studies to be conducted on the consumer responses to brands supporting political causes and candidates. However, several limitations should be explored in future studies. All of the participants were from the same geographical location in Lakeland, FL, and many were of similar socioeconomic backgrounds. All of the participants had received some undergraduate education at minimum. Additionally, all of the participants identified as Caucasian, with one participant identifying as Hispanic. These limitations in the sample recommend there may be significantly differing approaches to politically active brands from consumers of different socioeconomic, educational, and racial backgrounds.

Overall, the themes revealed in this study provide a basic framework regarding how consumers view politically active brands. Future explorations of this topic will likely reveal complexities among these fundamental themes, providing further understanding of the integration of typically non-political brands and political causes and candidates.

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