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**Achieving Brand Authenticity in the Age of Cancel Culture: Why Brands Can No Longer
Be Neutral Without Being Seen as Complicit**

by

Caitlin A. Paris

Advisor: Dr. Molly Rapert

**An Honors Thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Bachelor of
Science in Business Administration in Marketing.**

**Sam M. Walton College of Business
University of Arkansas
Fayetteville, Arkansas**

May 14, 2022

**“The brands who
get it right are
building a sense of
connection that’s
deeply based on
self-expression and
values.”**

Americus Reed II

Introduction

As cultural controversies arise, brands experience pressure from consumers and competitors to take a stance. The looming presence of cancel culture has increased this feeling, as users are quick to point fingers at organizations they think are falling short. However, increased brand engagement has created a gap between superficiality and moral accountability. When a crisis strikes, the media arena becomes filled with statements, pleas, and promises, but when the dust settles, those who lack action are quick to be criticized. Companies must strike a balance between focalized brand authenticity and short-term reactivity, in a culture where it is unacceptable to have one without the other.

Cultural controversies can arise from heart-wrenching situations. Consider the crisis in Ukraine, where many brands moved quickly to distance themselves from Russia (Hanbury, 2022b). Yet consumers' expectations of timeliness have become so compressed that they were voicing outrage within days if a company hadn't completed shutting down their Russia operations (Hanbury, 2022a). However, companies that move rapidly often find themselves making mistakes that negatively impact their relationship with consumers. For example, brands quickly capitalized on the Will Smith and Chris Rock slap during the most recent Oscars show, creating memes before the show was over (Bain, 2022). Consumer backlash to these memes was swift, and Sunny D, MealPal, and Fashion Nova were among brands that rapidly deleted these memes from the internet and issued apologies (Bain, 2022).

Four foundational areas form the basis for my exploration into this question. First, what is cancel culture and how does it employ woke-washing and backlash to attack brand image? Second, how does the modern-day company approach its long-term core values to ensure brand alignment during a crisis? Third, how does an unanticipated crisis inflict pressure to speak out? Finally, how do consumers respond to ingenuine efforts, and does it impact the overall company image?

Accordingly, this research is a multi-phase project which focuses on:

- The cultural phenomenon known as cancel culture and the shape it has taken on today's media landscape, focusing on social platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter
- Identifying companies' approach to core values and mission statements to establish brand reputation
- Analyzing responses as a form of issue and crisis management
- Consumer response to genuine versus ingenuine crisis management

This is a complex and fast-moving business challenge and while the literature is replete with soundbite examples, very little work has been completed which explores this topic in detail. Hence, I developed an in-depth approach that would allow me to drill deeper into this phenomenon. My research methods include a literature review, exploration of issue and crisis management in companies and brands, and a survey assessing consumer opinions on company intentions.

“Consumers feel they have been denied an existence that is real or **authentic and are going to demand products that reflect the renewed desire for what is authentic.”**

**Julie Napoli, Sonia Dickinson,
Michael Beverland, Francis Farrelly**

Literature Review

As cultural controversies arise, brands experience pressure from consumers and competitors to take a stance. The looming presence of cancel culture has increased this feeling, as users are quick to point fingers at organizations, they think are falling short. However, increased brand engagement has created a gap between superficiality and moral accountability. When a crisis strikes, the media arena becomes filled with statements, pleas, and promises, but when the dust settles, those who lack action are quick to be criticized. Companies must strike a balance between focalized brand authenticity and short-term reactivity, in a culture where it is unacceptable to have one without the other.

Four foundational areas form the basis for my exploration into this question. First, what is cancel culture and how does it challenge woke-washing and moral grandstanding used to maintain brand reputation? Second, how does the modern-day company approach its long-term core values to ensure brand alignment during a crisis? Third, how does an unanticipated crisis inflict pressure to speak out? Finally, how do consumers respond to ingenuine efforts, and does it impact the overall company image?

In the past year alone, several significant plights have challenged companies to vocalize political, economic, and social views like never before. A global pandemic, locust swarms, hurricanes, impeachment, and protests begged for business acknowledgement. Outreach channels, such as social media, became battlegrounds where one wrong step can provoke total chaos. As a result of these events, a fusion of movements including but not limited to Black Lives Matter, “Me Too,” and ANTIFA have formed the basis of cancel culture (Duque et al., 2021). The explosion of ostracism has sparked an age in which companies are forced to react, or watch their image be cancelled. Not only do companies have to worry about protecting their image, but approximately 60% of the U.S. population says that how a brand responds will influence whether they buy in the future (Menon & Kiesler, 2020). It is no longer acceptable to tread lightly and attempt to appeal to both sides of a conflict.

“Moral grandstanding” is a popular term that cancel culture uses to better categorize company response. One grandstands when one contributes to public discourse that aims to convince others that they are morally respectable (Tosi & Warmke, 2016). Moral grandstanding, in the realm of social media, is exacerbated by the echo-chamber effect, when users tend to isolate themselves among groups that align with their own values (Grubbs et al., 2019). Essentially, moral grandstanding is fueled by vanity, where one can issue a response and feel gratified because the response is applauded by those who agree. The action is a short-term fix, because those that morally grandstand are more likely to struggle in relating to others about moral issues (Grubbs et al., 2019). Consequently, the companies that issue inauthentic response efforts separate themselves farther from the very groups they may be trying to relate to.

Accordingly, this research is a multi-phase project which focuses on:

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- Identifying companies' approach to core values and mission statements to establish brand reputation
- Analyzing responses as a form of issue and crisis management
- Consumer response to genuine versus ingenuine crisis management

My project is focused on the four broad domains described below:

Research question 1: What are the authentic and inauthentic response efforts that corporations and small businesses turn to as a form of crisis and issue management?

I gathered information from a mixture of corporations regarding the practices they use for branding efforts during crisis. This includes local organizations as well as companies that have a previous history of strong brand authenticity. I created a summary of the approaches used, guidelines for what the companies is expected to follow, and more with the goal of identifying the best public relations approaches to maintain authenticity.

Research question 2: How does cancel culture identify and attack ingenuine branding efforts?

I gathered information from encounters in which a brand has been cancelled and how the cancel culture accounts go about doing so. Identifying how cancel culture approaches confrontation and gets others to rally behind them provides insight into the movement overall and how it affects business practices. I created a summary of methods used and common approaches that cancel culture uses, with an emphasis on social media.

Research question 3: Do inauthentic efforts influence customer perception and conversely, do authentic efforts boost customer loyalty?

I created a survey assessment in which participants can assess their experiences and perception about the businesses researched in RQ1. I measured the effectiveness of several companies' current strategies, identify the participants' perception of authenticity, and identify the participants' engagement and loyalty with those companies. While the focus of this question is to evaluate, I also identified the best practices that brands can use to establish authentic behavior.

Research question 4: What are the appropriate actions for businesses to take in times of crisis to maintain alignment with both company values and the customer?

After analyzing the responses to RQ3, I gathered information on which companies have the best perceived authenticity and identify which practices they use as a form of crisis management. This allowed me to describe the appropriate approaches that companies should resort to. I created a summary of the methods and the guidelines that allow for a higher level of perceived authenticity. I am also identifying, through my literature review, some precautionary ways that companies can institute trustworthiness for long-term reputation health.

Overall, these four broad research questions will form a scope for understanding the cancel culture phenomenon and why authentic behavior is vitally important to today's consumer.

Brands that exhibit established authenticity are thought to be driven by integrity, quality, moral virtue, and intrinsic love of their product versus an economic profit (Napoli et al., 2014). Second, through branding examples and a survey, I will gain insight to the set of approaches that companies can use to maximize brand authenticity. Such knowledge can assist in forming the future practices and communication strategies that enforce brand honesty (Napoli et al., 2014).

By learning these approaches, I hope to offer a map that builds upon the best branding efforts, allowing both companies and consumers sustained authenticity.

Research Methods

The research methods include a literature review, exploration of issue and crisis management in varying brands and corporations, and a survey assessing consumer opinions on company intentions.

To create the survey, I developed questions through the Qualtrics program provided by the University of Arkansas. I completed Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocol and received approval for survey implementation. Survey results are based off 434 respondents' answers with 58.8% being females and 41.2% being males. 22.1% of respondents were college freshmen, 12.1% of respondents were sophomores, 19.5% of respondents were juniors, 31.6% of respondents were seniors, and 14.7% of respondents were graduate students. The majority of respondents are Sam M. Walton College of Business students at 87.6% of total participants. 6.7% of respondents were Fulbright College of Arts and Sciences students, 4.1% of respondents were College of Education and Health Professions students, and 1.5% of respondents were in the College of Engineering.

**“It’s easy to
be **cynical**.
In fact, these
days it’s kind
of trendy.”**

President Barack Obama

Bucket #1: What are common feelings about cancel culture and how do consumers define cancel culture today?

To explore this topic further, we will look first at the macro topic of cancel culture. Based on my literature review, I developed survey questions to prompt respondents to 1) explore how they define cancel culture, 2) answer what causes are important to them, and 3) generalize feelings about cancel culture. As mentioned earlier in the thesis, cancel culture has been formed from a fusion of movements including but not limited to Black Lives Matter, “Me Too,” and ANTIFA (Duque et al., 2021). I developed the following questions that examine respondent perceptions of cancel culture today and the issues that are most important to them:

“There is a lot of talk today about ‘cancel culture.’ What does the term ‘cancel’ mean to you?”

The word cancel has taken on a completely new meaning to 21st century consumers. Before the rise of this social phenomenon, cancel was simply a word defined as “to stop doing or planning to do (something)” (Merriam-Webster, 2022). As shown by the survey results, many respondents still associate this word with its direct meaning.

**There is a lot of talk today about "cancel culture."
What does the term "cancel" mean to you?**

*“Cancel means
"stop" to me. Or quit
doing something.”*

*“Cancel in general
to means to stop
something/someone.”*

*“It means
stop or get rid of.”*

Even though this interpretation still rings true, respondents also defined the word cancel in a new light when thinking of the phrase “cancel culture.”

**There is a lot of talk today about "cancel culture."
What does the term "cancel" mean to you?**

*“An attempt to silence
a brand or a person
by socially shaming
people who support
them.”*

*“Bringing attention to a
person, place, or company for
doing something against the
current social standard
and putting them in a place
to be called out or "canceled"
on social media.”*

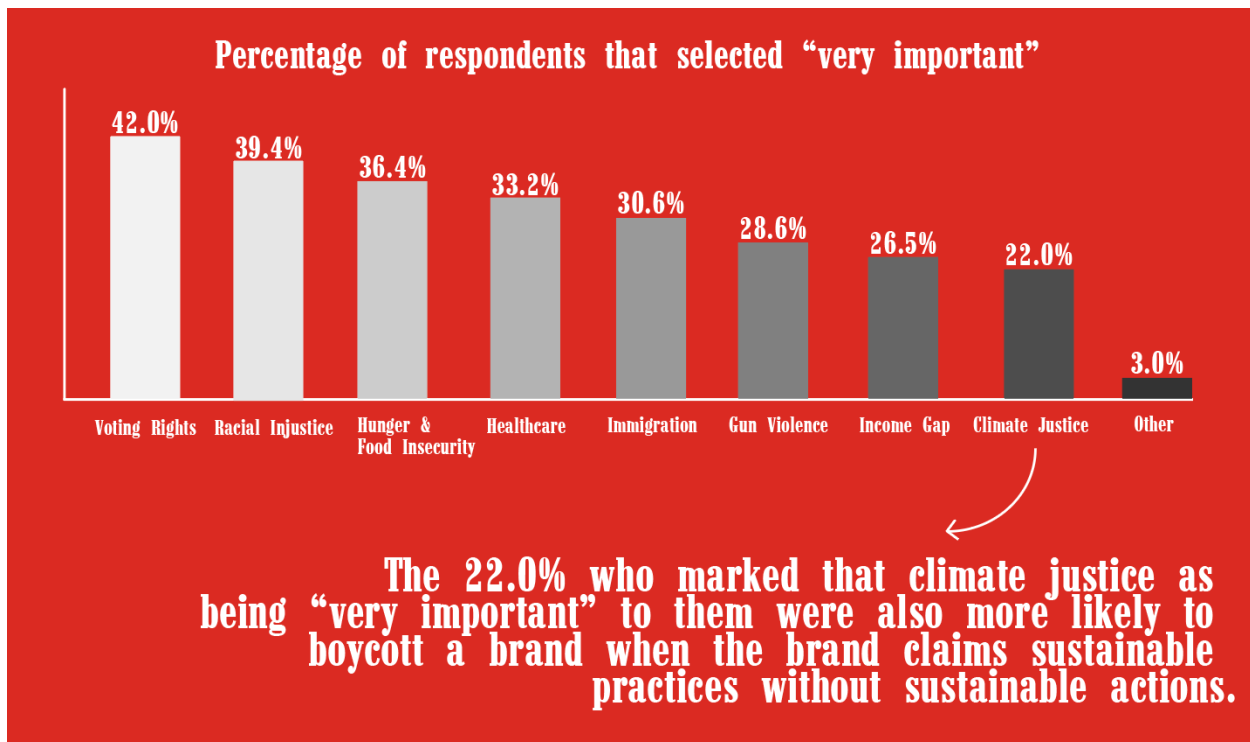
*“Refusing to
associate with
someone/something
due to problematic
views.”*

Of 406 respondents who interacted with this question, 56.2% entered a definition of what the word cancel means to them. The other 43.8% entered no definition or wrote “I don’t know.” Most respondents were able to recognize this word and connect it with the broad meaning of cancel culture. This demonstrates a basis of understanding among respondents and speaks to the validity of other survey questions.

The 43.8% of respondents that entered no definition or wrote “I don’t know” had higher rankings for their likelihood to boycott brands. These respondents also answered that it would take longer for them build trust for a brand after that brand had been cancelled. This shows that those who were unable to define cancel or were unsure of what the word means regarding cancel culture are quicker to boycott brands and more distrusting of them overall. This conclusion is food for thought, as it shows that those who are confused on cancel culture, are overall more skeptical of brand authenticity.

“Which of the following causes are most important to you?”

This question asks respondents to rate several causes as being very unimportant, somewhat unimportant, neutral, somewhat important, and very important. The causes listed include climate justice, hunger and food insecurity, racial injustice, healthcare, immigration, voting rights, gun violence, income gap, and other.



In the “other” section, 19 respondents manually entered causes that they felt were important to include such as, “education access,” “data privacy,” “LGBTQIA+ justice,” and “supply chain practices.”

After analyzing these conclusions, voting rights is the cause that respondents feel is most important to them. However, racial injustice follows right behind it, with 39.4% of respondents feeling that the cause is “very important.” Both causes are common and broad approaches that brands take to rallying behind a cause. This shows that it is important for marketers to keep these two causes in mind when reaching out to a consumer audience. However, even though respondents prioritized these causes, these causes may not align with a brand’s values and missions. Future questions explore the trade-off between prioritizing consumer-favorite causes or causes that have clear association with a brand.

“Do you have firsthand experiences with ‘cancel culture?’”

There were 284 respondents who answered this question. 77.1% of those people answered that they do not have firsthand experiences with cancel culture. However, the 22.9% who answered that they do have a firsthand experience with cancel culture had a higher average time span for the time it takes them to build trust after that brand has been cancelled.

Although many respondents did not have firsthand experiences with cancel culture, it is important to call out that those who did have firsthand experiences took a slightly longer time to rebuild trust with a brand after they had been cancelled. From this, it is understood that personal experiences with a brand who is thought to be in the wrong at some point in time, can damage loyalty. Marketers who can insulate their customers from negative brand experiences will in turn increase trust.

If the respondent answered “yes” to previous question, then they were asked to “please describe your lived experience with ‘cancel culture.’”

This question was prompted as a follow-up question, allowing the respondents who said that they have had a firsthand experience with cancel culture to explain their experience.

Please describe your lived experience with “cancel culture.”

“I am a Conservative, and my fellow students cancel me for my views, without taking the time to understand what they are or why I feel that way.”

“I have stopped buying certain brands when I feel they do not do what they should to treat animals or the environment as they should.”

“The threat permeates where I work. If you were to express a “wrong” opinion, you risk inciting protests from activists and “punishment” from administrators.”

As some of the examples show above, many respondents have not only had lived experiences with brands and cancel culture but have feared cancel culture for their own personal beliefs. Clearly, cancel culture is an extremely broad term, that some respondents see active in their

personal lives. Cancel culture fits a plethora of definitions, but one can see that no matter what platform the phenomenon exists in, the nature of the term is highly unfavorable.

36 respondents gave their own explanation of their personal experiences with cancel culture, but many more gave explanations on instances in which they no longer associated with brands after a cancel incident.


Do you have personal experience in which you no longer purchased/interacted with a brand after they were considered to be "cancelled?" If so, explain why.

Of 168 respondents who answered this question, 63 respondents gave specific instances in which they no longer purchased/interacted with a brand after they were cancelled at some point in time. The chart below represents commonalities among those answers and explanations for the lost brand association:


“  - LGBTQ rights not respected.”

“I never listened to his music before, but after the  Fest, I won't ever listen to Travis Scott's music.”

“I no longer purchase from **SHEIN** or similar companies. I now purchase all my clothing from small businesses or sustainable companies even though they are pricier, it's for the better of the humane world and environment.”

“  brand and product due to their practice of illegally pumping and collecting water, leading to famine and water shortage in multiple regions around the world.”

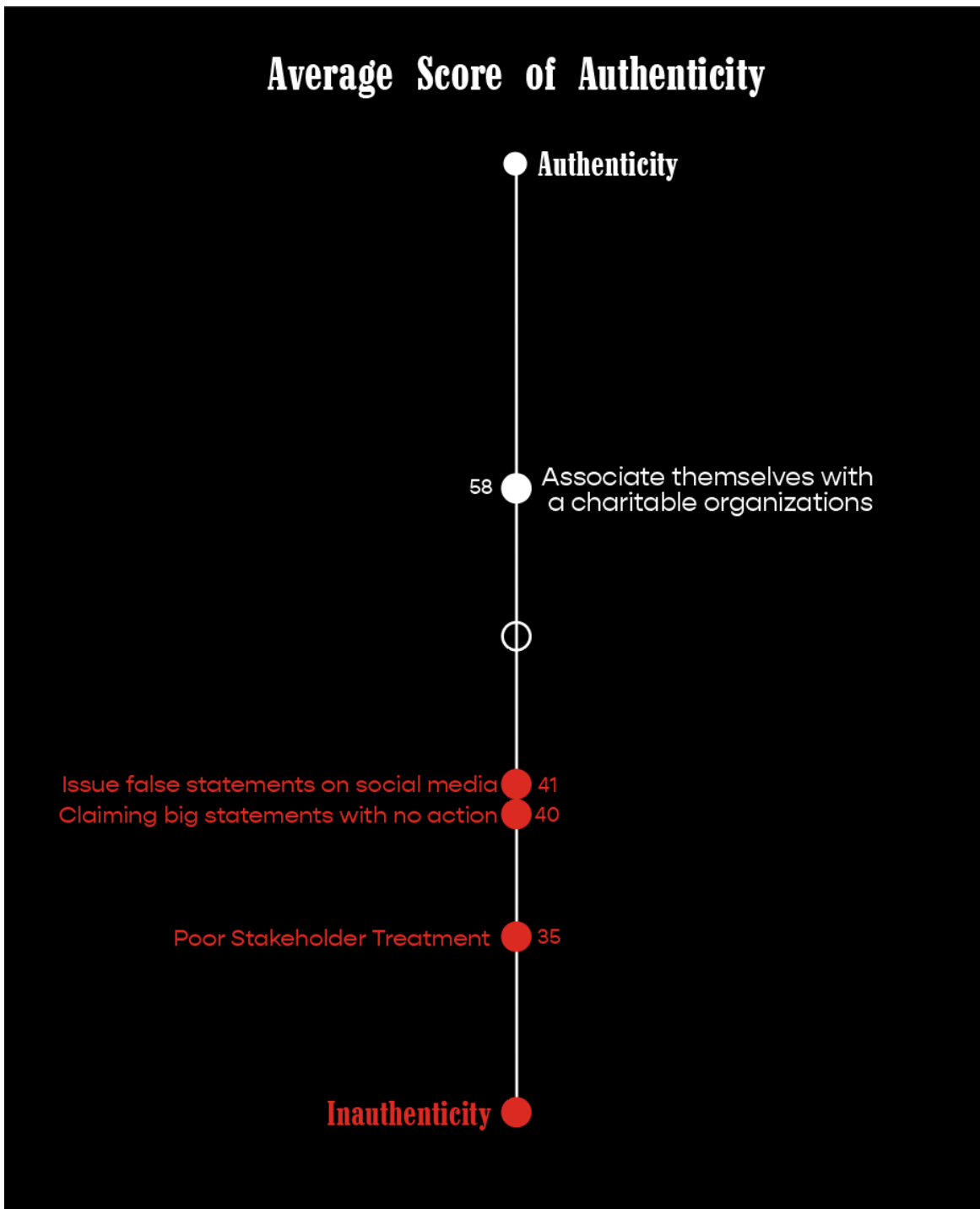
“  is unfair to smaller competitors and treats workers poorly.”

“  after it was revealed they use slave labor to make clothes, as well as American companies who use slave labor in the prison system.”

Chick-fil-A, SHEIN, Nestle, Amazon, Walmart, Nike, Travis Scott's "Astroworld," Disney, and Starbucks were among some of the most popular brands called out in respondent answers. These brands are arguably some of the biggest brands in the world and have taken several cancel culture hits in the eyes of consumers. However, respondents are picking up on these instances, and it is undoubtedly affecting the way they approach purchases. This goes to show that scandals can begin to chip away at brand reputation and overall perceived authenticity.

Of the situations listed below, please rate which situations would lead you to believe that a brand was acting inauthentically. (0 - the brand is acting inauthentically, 100 - the brand is authentic)

This question asks respondents to score situations on a scale of 0 to 100 in which they would view the brand as acting inauthentically. 0 on the scale equates to “the brand is acting inauthentically” while 100 equates to “the brand is authentic.”



Across all four situations, a brand associating themselves with a charitable organization or foundation is seen as authentic by respondents. This conclusion provides marketers a glimpse of positive brand association and the benefits that it can have when it comes to consumer

perception. It is important to note that, while using the score of 50 as a middle mark, the average score for this action was 58, not an extreme score that proves total authenticity. Brand association must be done in an honest way to avoid potential skepticism and ensure consumer trust.

Bucket #2: Values and missions drive brands. How do brands uncover their identities and convey them to consumers?

After defining cancel culture through the eyes of survey participants, next is to investigate how brands discover their own brand identities and convey them to a consumer audience. This group of questions asks respondents about brands they feel are doing a good job at conveying causes that are important to them.

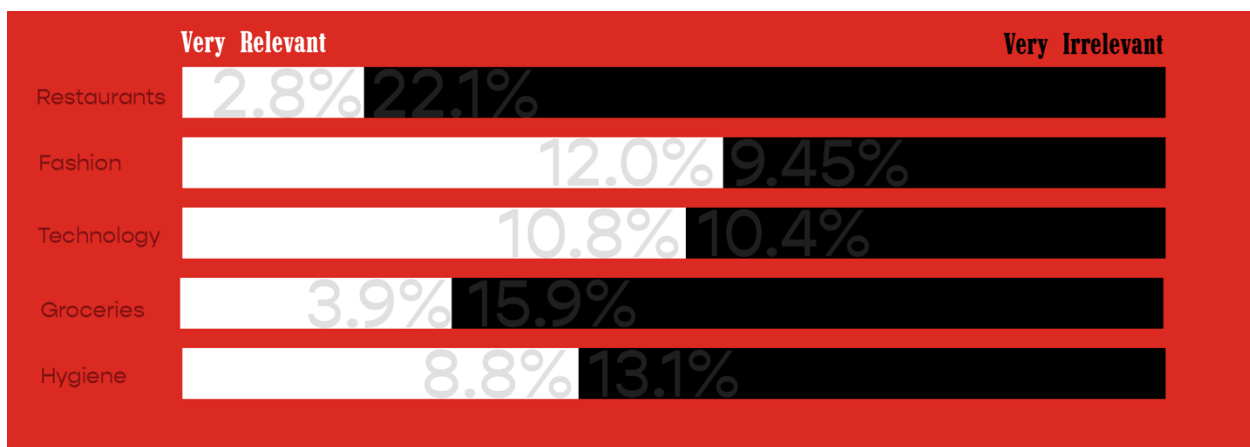
What is a brand that you feel has a strong brand authenticity? Why?



The ten brands listed to the right were the most listed for brands with strong authenticity. There were also some smaller, lesser-known brands listed including BeautyCounter, Bombas, Chewy, Girlfriend Collective, Osprey, and Tecovas. These brands are key players in the world of branding, and clearly respondents can pick up on these efforts.

Of the examples below, which do you feel are most necessary to associate with a cause?

This question asked respondents about the categories of restaurants, fashion, technology, groceries, and hygiene products.

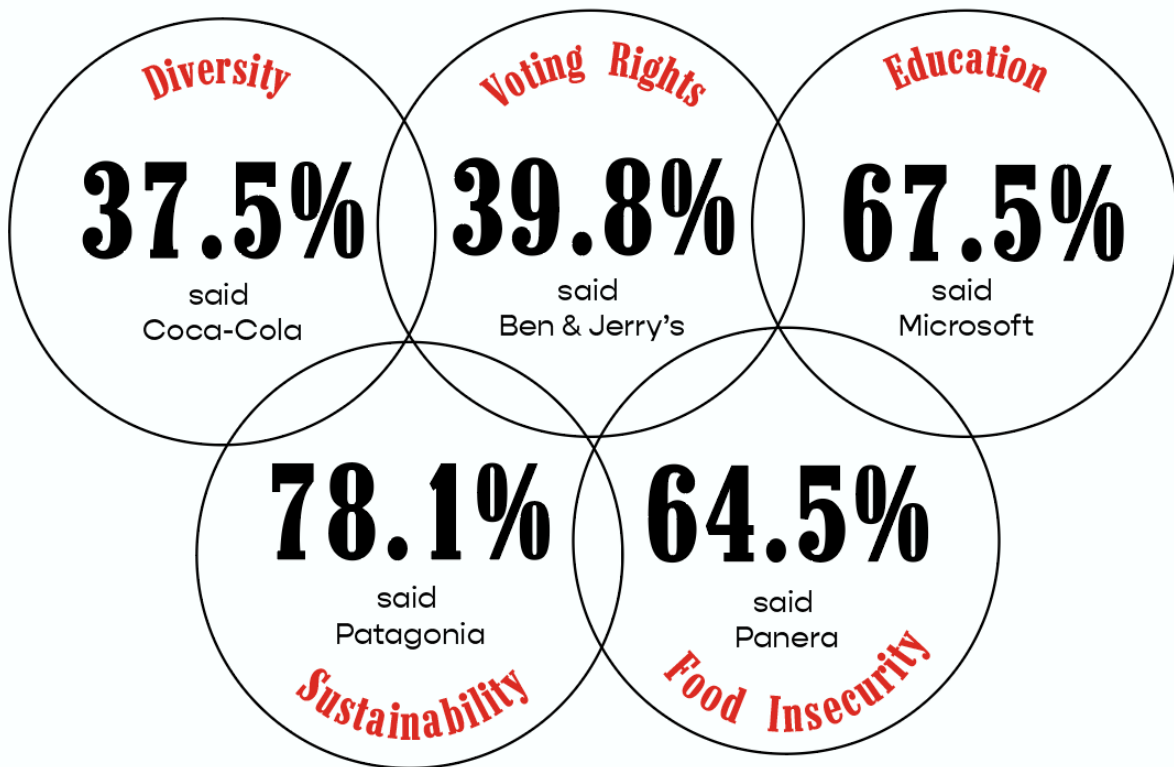


Fashion was selected as the most relevant category to associate with a cause when compared to the other options. However, a significant amount of people said that it would be very irrelevant

to associate causes under the categories of restaurants and groceries. One could conclude that consumers find fashion to be a strong representation of their personality, therefore leading them to care about the causes behind the brands they are wearing. From this, marketers can understand that personal representation plays a role in how consumers view cause-related marketing while purchasing. This idea refers to Americus Reed’s term, “identity loyalty,” meaning that consumers can become so associated with a brand to the point that they begin to see the brand as a part of who they are. (Reed II, n.d.)

I have listed several causes below on the right-hand side. There is only one brand that matches with each cause. For each brand on the left, drag it into the box that you think is the cause that the brand actively supports.

Survey participants were asked to match brands to causes to analyze level of knowledge about common cause-related brand efforts. The brands listed included Ben & Jerry’s, Microsoft, Patagonia, Coca-Cola, and Panera. As for the causes, the options include sustainability, food insecurity, diversity, voting rights, and education.

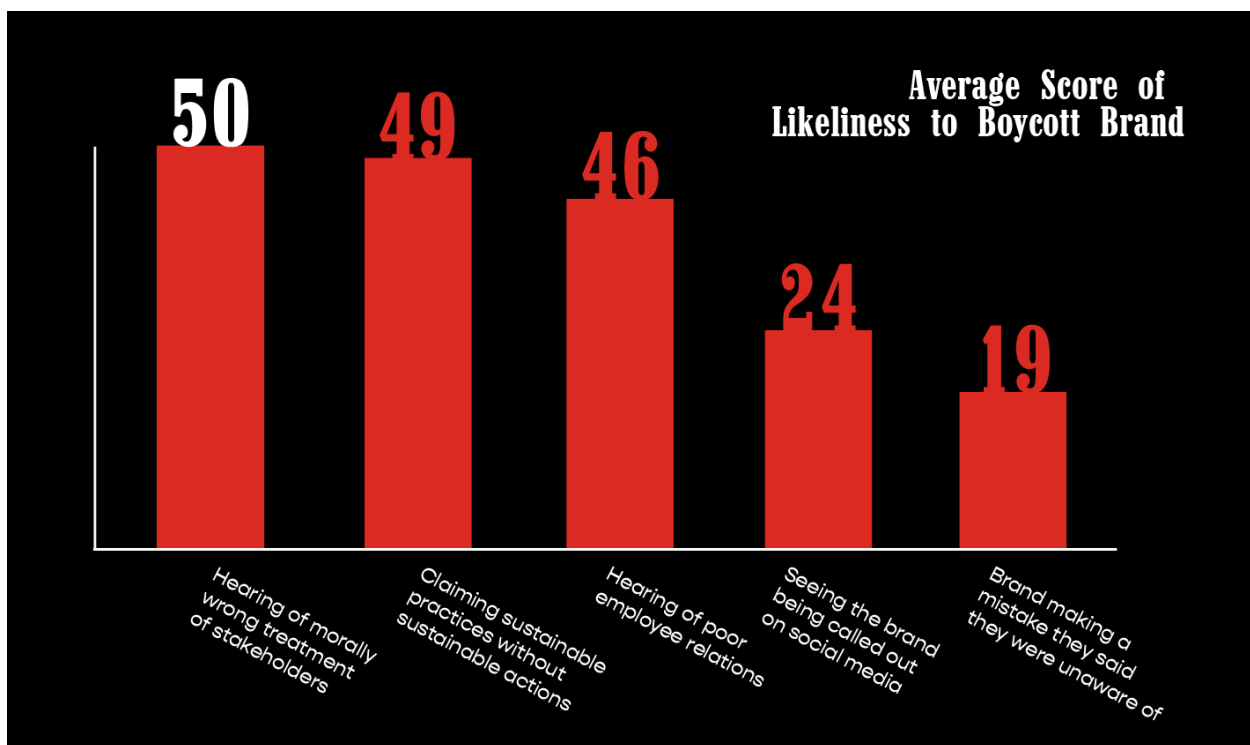


The participants that matched these brands with these causes were correct. Patagonia, Panera, and Microsoft had the most matches which means consumers can clearly associate their brands with the causes they promote the most. Fewer respondents were able to associate Coca-Cola with diversity and Ben & Jerry’s with voting rights. This could be because both Coca-Cola and Ben & Jerry’s are known for taking aggressive stances on a multitude of causes, therefore leading consumers to be more hesitant to associate the brand with just one.

Bucket #3: Knowing what we know about cancel culture, do brands' values play a role in consumer loyalty and purchasing patterns?

Now that it has been established how consumers define cancel culture and their level of awareness when it comes to causes those brands support, marketers need measure how those perceived values play into consumer behavior. If consumers are aware of a brand's identity, what importance does that play in their path to purchase? Additionally, if consumers are aware of a brand's identity and that brand were to be cancelled, what impact does that have on their overall loyalty? The following questions assess respondents' thoughts over these topics.

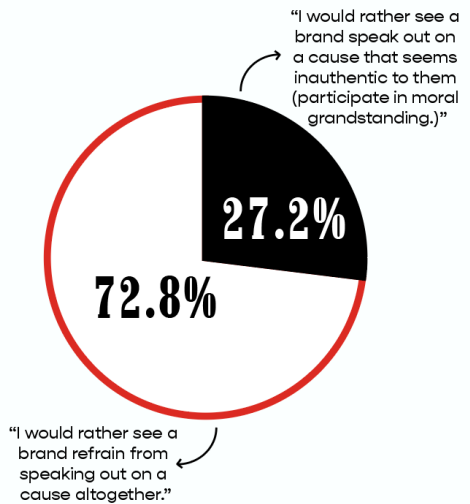
Of the following situations listed below, please rate your likeliness to boycott a brand after each situation described. (0 - I would definitely not boycott the brand, 100 - I would definitely boycott the brand)



Respondents were asked to rate their likeliness to boycott a brand after a variety of situations. Overall, the lowest scoring situation (meaning the situation in which respondents would be less likely to boycott a brand) was if a brand made a mistake that they said they were unaware of. This lends a sense of credibility to brands, showing that consumers may be receptive to public apologies or statements if they are seen as genuine apologies. The situation that respondents had the most apprehension about was if they were to hear of a brand treating their stakeholders poorly. Even though this was the situation with the highest average likelihood, the score still fell right in the middle of the spectrum. This shows that consumers may be neutral about the situation and not fall in the extremes of definite boycotting.

Often times brands will speak out on causes that are disconnected from their company values. Would you rather see a brand speak out on a cause that seems inauthentic to them (moral grandstand) or refrain from saying anything at all?

Most respondents answered that they would rather see a brand refrain from speaking out on cause altogether instead of one that seems inauthentic to them. At its core, moral grandstanding is rooted in vain, because the one grandstanding is attempting to get others to make desirable judgements about them (Tosi & Warmke, 2016). Often, brands participate in moral grandstanding to persuade consumers to have positive connotations with the brand. But this question shows that consumers would rather have an authentic approach than just any approach at all. Marketers can conserve resources by finding a cause that resonates with both their audience and brand identity and investing in it, because consumers can identify the fake.



Think about brands' values, morals, and sense of identity...

Situation	Percentage of respondents that selected "strongly agree" or "somewhat agree"
"Brand identity is extremely important for a brand to establish."	68.7%
"I am familiar with companies' identity/morals/values that I currently purchase from."	45.2%
"I want to know about a brand's identity/morals/values before purchasing."	43.8%
"It is important to me what others say about a brand's reputation."	37.3%
"If I saw a brand that spoke on a topic different from their core values, it would deter me from purchasing from them."	27.8%
"When I know of a brand that has been "cancelled," I don't purchase from them."	19.9%
"I will only purchase from a brand that shares the same values I do."	17.1%
"I look at brands' core values/mission statements before purchase."	13.0%

Respondents’ answers to these situations helps give context into the importance consumers place on brand identity when it comes to their purchasing decisions. Less than half of respondents want to know or currently know about brands’ identities, morals, or values they have purchased from or have considered purchasing from. Also, respondents are not deterred by brands that have differing values from them and will continue to purchase from these brands.

While a significant number of participants said that brand identity is extremely important to establish, not many answered that they would look at brands’ core values or mission statements before purchasing. Not to mention, the outside influence of peers or cancel culture has minimal effect on perceived reputation and purchasing behavior.

This gives insight that consumers want brand identity to exist, but their purchasing behavior is not easily swayed by unexpected core values or morals. Overall, it appears that respondents have a sense of respect for brands that exhibit strong identity, an apprehension to give up on brands that are dragged into the cancel culture arena, and a willingness to interact with brand identities that may be unaligned with their own.

Of the following situations below, please select if your level of agreement...

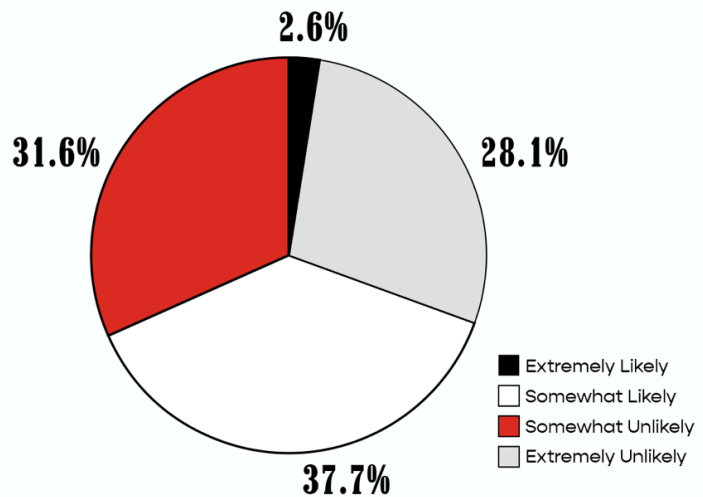
Situation	Percentage of respondents that selected “strongly agree” or “somewhat agree”
“If I saw a brand speak up in an authentic way, I would most likely recall that brand when shopping.”	77.0%
“If I saw a brand speak up in an authentic way, I would most likely interact with them in the future.”	76.5%
“If a brand were to remain silent on an issue they were being “cancelled” for (i.e. no response back), I would still purchase from that brand.	46.2%

Less than half of respondents said they would still purchase from a brand that remained silent on an issue the brand was being cancelled for. It has previously been established that consumers have respect for brands with strong identities, and it is evident here that consumers also value brands that are willing to explain potential wrongdoings. When it comes to issue management, audiences expect a quick form of response. It is vital for marketers and public relations experts to be prepared for this type of proactiveness.

Authentic actions also speak volumes to brand recall. A significant number of respondents say they would recognize and most likely interact with brands that spoke up in an authentic way. Therefore, not only is it imperative to issue a quick response in times of turmoil, but a response that is genuine to the company.

If a brand demonstrated a value for a long period (a.k.a. that characteristic was considered to be a part of their brand identity), would you be more or less likely to boycott/"cancel" them?

Not many respondents would be extremely likely to boycott a brand, even if the brand demonstrated a value that was a part of their identity. However, the remainder of respondents were fairly split among their decision. Most respondents answered that they would be overall unlikely to cancel a brand when looking at those who answered, "somewhat unlikely" or "extremely unlikely." Therefore, participants feel that a brand demonstrating a long-term value would make them less likely to boycott that brand. This idea is essential to branding in today's marketing landscape. Brand's must enter the marketplace with strong identities and values at the forefront. By doing this, consumers can better understand a brand's personality and begin forming a relationship with the brand. When a customer begins to see themselves as a part of a brand, it begins to make it very hard for that customer to change, because you are asking them to change who they are (Reed II, n.d.).

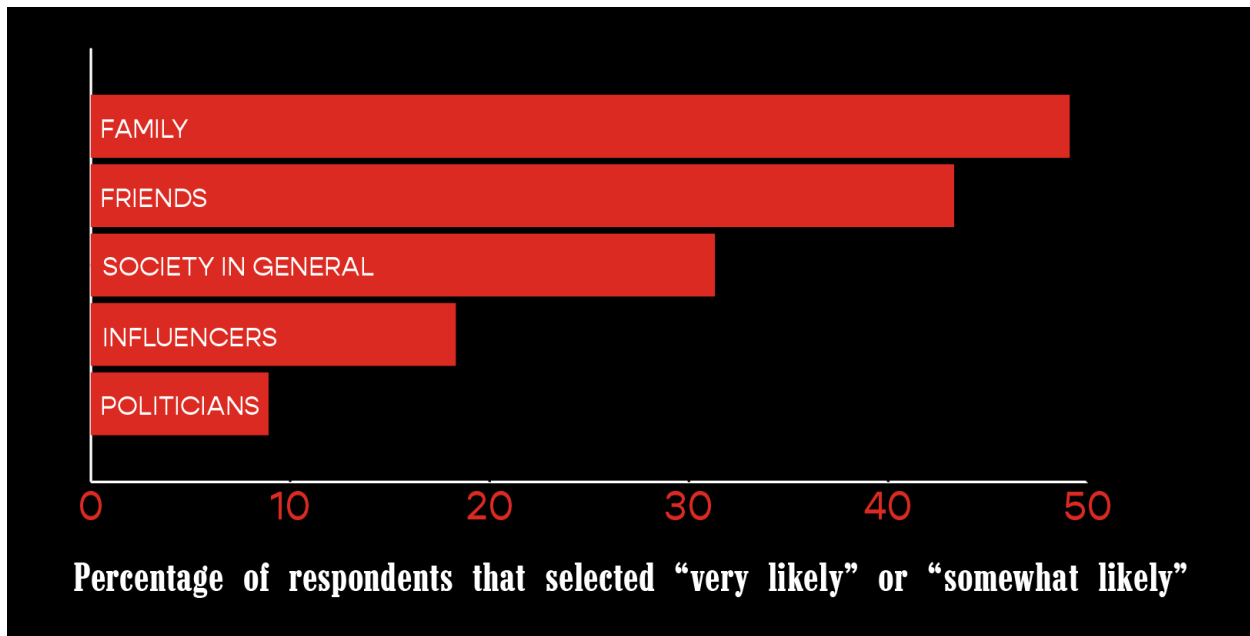


Bucket #4: When consumers perceive that a brand is acting incorrectly, how do consumers respond and what actions can the brand take?

Clearly, consumers value the existence of a brand identity and find that brands with an established presence are less likely to be boycotted. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of cancel culture still exists. When users are made aware of wrongdoings, there is bound to be backlash in some form or another. It has been proven that there are proactive measures a brand can take to protect themselves from serious rejection, but what becomes of a brand that is found inapt? Respondents were asked the following questions to measure their feelings on these ideas.

How likely is it that you would "cancel"/boycott a brand if you see the following groups "cancelling" that brand?

For this question, respondents had to measure the likelihood of them canceling a brand if they saw the following groups canceling that brand: friends, family, influencers they follow, politicians, and society in general.



Survey respondents are most likely to boycott a brand when they see their family and friends also canceling that brand. Respondents were less trusting with influencers they follow and politicians. This goes to show the power of word of mouth. It is important for marketers to create positive brand experiences that the consumer wants to share with others, because consumers can also be quick to share negative experiences. Tapping into the relationships that shoppers have with others can be a way to mitigate boycotting.

What do you believe are appropriate actions a brand can take when they are "cancelled?"

“What do you believe are appropriate actions a brand can take when they are "cancelled?"

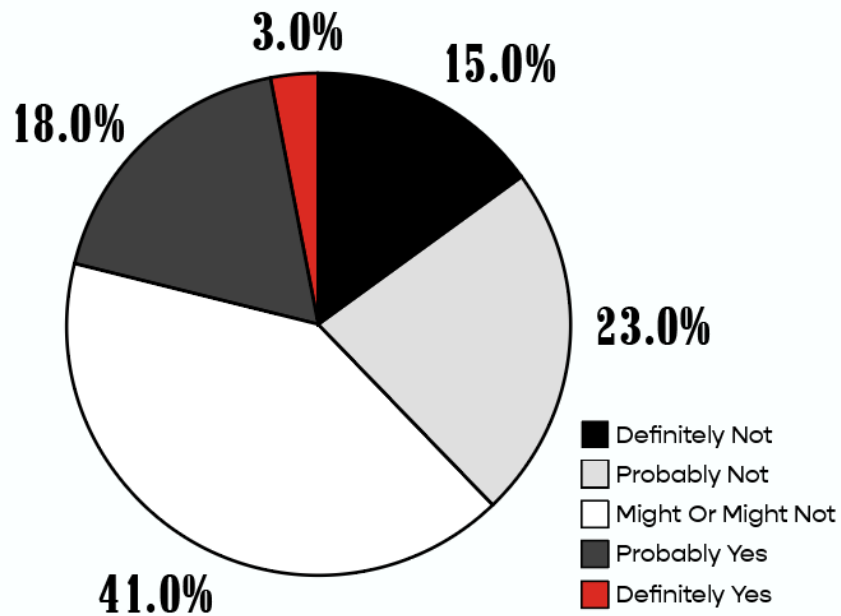
<p><i>“Address the situation and show steps they are doing to fix it.”</i></p>	<p><i>“Confront the issue in an authentic manner and take action to move past it.”</i></p>	<p><i>“Stick to their values. Too often you see brands appeasing the people who are cancelling them and adjusting their values. I like and purchase from brands who stick to their values. It seems more authentic.”</i></p>
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Of 177 entered responses, the word “apologize” was mentioned 29 times, the word “statement” was mentioned 24 times, and the word “authentic” was mentioned 19 times. When a brand messes up, survey participants, and humans as a whole, value the power of a sincere apology. The idea seems juvenile, but many times brands can get caught up in the steps they feel like they need to take to recover. An apology that is simple and effective, holds a significant amount of

weight. Brands need to stick to their core values, acknowledge the situation with a sense of sincerity, and take action to prove otherwise.

Do you follow up on brands after they are cancelled and issue a statement ensuring change?

Most respondents answered that they would not (meaning they either answered “definitely not” or “probably not”) follow up on brands that were cancelled. However, a large portion of respondents answered that the “might or might not” check up



on brands, which leads to the conclusion that follow up most likely depends on the consumer’s relationship with the brand being cancelled. It is up to brands to hold themselves accountable for the changes they may be making, knowing that consumers are watching their actions from afar.

How long does it take for you to trust a brand after they have been "cancelled?"

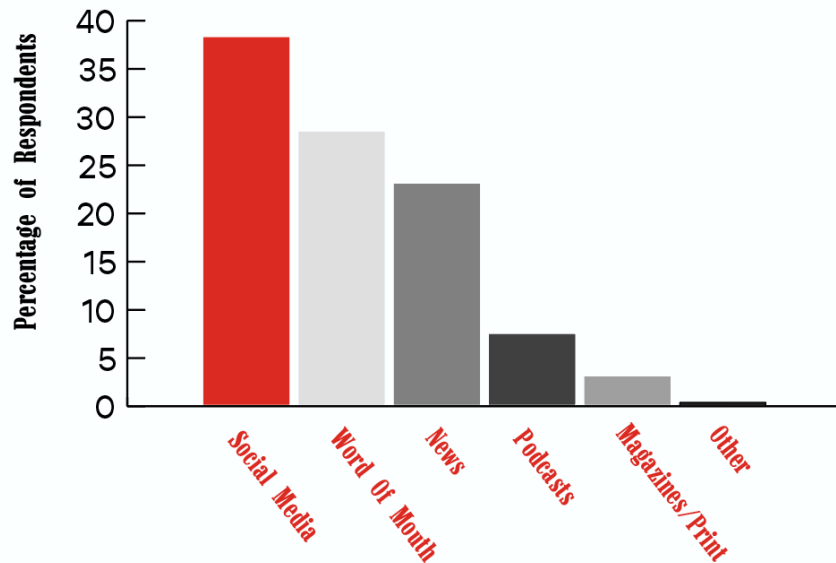


It takes the average survey respondent less than 6 months to rebuild trust with a brand after they have been cancelled. However, a brand being cancelled does affect consumers’ confidences slightly. This proves that, if handled correctly, brands can reestablish a relationship with their audience somewhat quickly. Of course, it all depends on what steps the brand takes during those months that really make the difference. Consumers overall are willing to maintain interaction with brands, even after potential missteps. It takes the respondents who answered that they would probably follow up on brands after that brand had been cancelled the longest time to rebuild trust, as this group might be more skeptical in what the brand has to say and weary of promises.

Miscellaneous Bucket: External factors may influence individual perception about brand reputation. What is the source of those outside opinions?

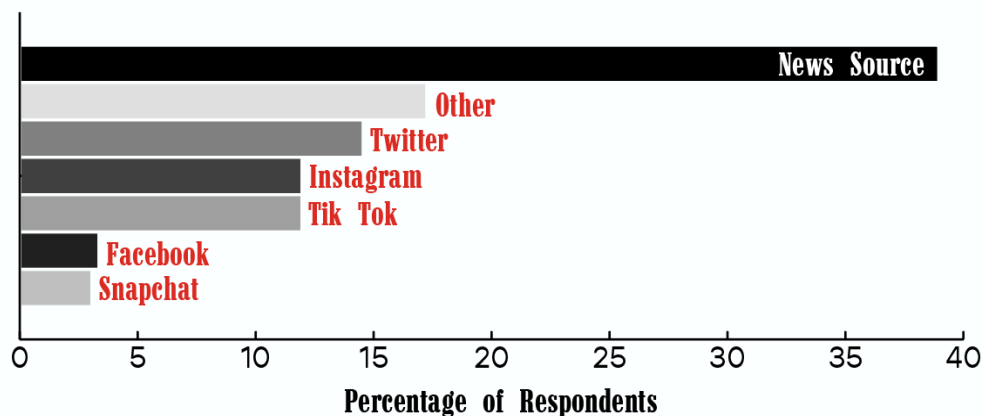
How do you become aware that a brand has been "cancelled?" (Select all that apply.)

Most respondent become aware that a brand has been cancelled on social media. Word of mouth and news were the next most common answer. Podcasts and print were the least chosen platforms. Branding is constantly changing, and channels that were once popular may not be so popular anymore. For brands that want to monitor their name as it regards to cancel culture, the best place to start would be social media.



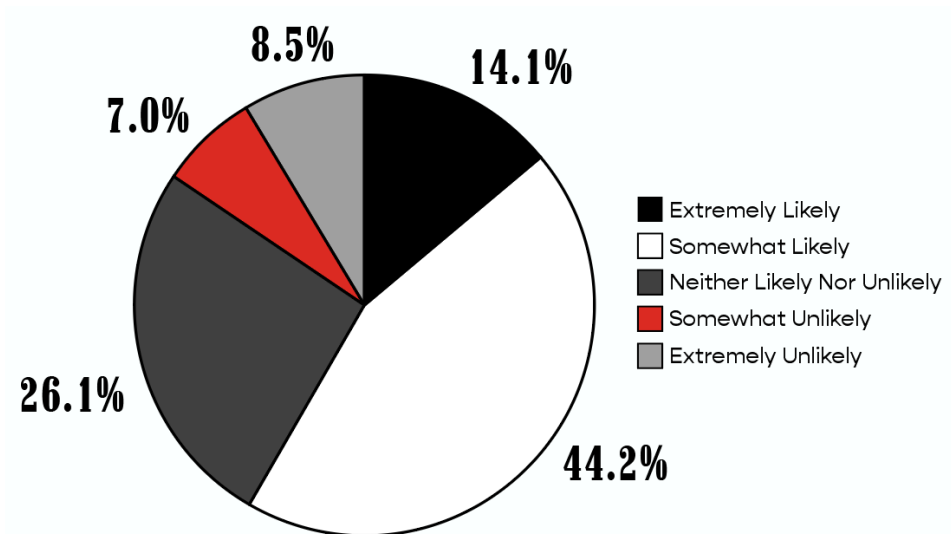
Which platforms do you trust to give accurate information about brands/companies acting inauthentically? (Select all that apply.)

Most respondents trust news sources versus other platforms to give them accurate information about brand inauthenticity. Of the social media channels, Twitter was trusted the most for reliable information. Criticisms and callouts can come from a plethora of places, but for brands to know claim on which platform will be the most accepted can be beneficial. Also, knowing that your consumers may see something on Snapchat or Facebook and be less likely to believe it can build brand confidence.



After a brand is "cancelled," how likely are you to talk about that brand with friends, family, or peers (positively or negatively)?

Overall, respondents are likely to talk about that brand with friends, family, or peers whether it be positive or negative. This conclusion only reinforces the impact that word of mouth has on branding initiatives. All types of brand experiences will be talked about, and it is the marketer's job to promote the brand through positive experiences.



“But brand DNA is about walking the walk, not talking the talk, and it isn't necessary to communicate explicitly what it's made up of.”

Mark Ritson

Limitations

Most of my research limitations come from the structure and implementation of my survey. First, the survey was distributed to students at the University of Arkansas, which does not account for the feelings of older or younger age groups or those of college-aged students at other universities. Not to mention, other consumers in a different life stage will have different thoughts and experiences than that of college-aged participants. Additionally, younger people most likely have a better understanding of what cancel culture is and how they define it. An older crowd of respondents might be unaware of the nature of cancel culture.

Next, survey demographics represent a skewed representation of genders, grade levels, and colleges at the University of Arkansas. Of those who selected a gender, there were more females than males. Of those who selected a grade level, there were the most senior participants out of any other class level, including graduate students. Also, a significant number of respondents came from the Sam M. Walton College of Business. The survey was mainly implemented through the Walton College of Business's email distribution list, which includes all students with a Walton College of Business major. This could create a distorted view of survey data, considering that business students most likely know more about the relationship of cancel culture and business. Not to mention, these students have learned a significant amount of looking through the eyes of a consumer, while other students may still approach the topic as a true consumer.

Finally, the survey included several questions that reiterated similar topics; therefore, respondents could have become tired of answering and stopped focusing on the survey, or left the survey incomplete. As with any survey, there are a multitude of extraneous variables that could have affected a respondent's answers such as noises, technological difficulties, confusion on question wording, or other distractions.

Conclusion

Personal Conclusions After Conducting Research

One conclusion I have come to after conducting this research is the importance of clear and concise survey prompts. I created and implemented my survey through the University of Arkansas's Qualtrics site which features many question types and options for gathering data. I enjoyed that my survey included a variety of response options, but when it came to analyzing data, I felt overwhelmed. If I had the chance to go back and change some questions, I would include more straightforward options for respondents to choose, therefore creating clear-cut data. Nonetheless, answers with some of the deepest meaning came from the words of survey participants. In summary, it is important to strike a balance between data efficiency and deep meaning in survey implementation.

Another personal conclusion I have come to after conducting this research is the importance of a timeline. I began brainstorming ideas for my thesis in April of 2021 and laid out a timeline for the project's future. By starting early, I was able to take it one step at a time and direct all my focus on each step of the process. I constructed an idea, created a literature review and an

overview of my research methods, built a survey, received IRB approval, deployed my survey through a group of channels, and analyzed my results. Sticking to the timeline I created at the very beginning help kept the pace of the project manageable and taught me the importance of doing a little bit at a time. For future projects, I will lay out a timeline to ensure success.

Finally, I would like to thank the University of Arkansas Honors College for supporting this research with a research grant. This work would not have been possible without the help of the honors college program.

Brand Authenticity and Cancel Culture Implications

The first takeaway as it regards to marketing is that consumers expect brand identity in today's brand landscape. Consumers want to know what your brand stands for and they want it to align with everything about your business. Consumers should be able to build a relationship with your brand through positive experiences and develop that brand through continued loyalty. However, my findings also supported the idea that consumers do not necessarily have to share the same values as a brand to still interact with them. Brands today are highly focused on appealing to a wide audience through association with a variety of causes. But consumers would rather see a brand care about a cause that is authentic to them and has long-term meaning to the company. Brands that nail down their core values at the start and can show it are able to grow with their audience, society, and culture at large, without ever forfeiting what they believe in.

My second takeaway from my research is that consumers have a little bit of grace when it comes to cancel culture. Cancel culture seems looming and ominous, but cancel culture and brands are both made up of humans. Treat them well and manage their expectations, and consumers seem to understand that everyone has missteps from time to time. There are steps for marketers to take to be proactive when it comes to protecting brand reputation, but authenticity comes from being unapologetic about the things your brand believes in. True sincerity holds a significant amount of weight to consumers who are now in shopping arena packed with tons of options. John Stuart Mill developed the theory of the marketplace of ideas, which essentially says differing beliefs exist in a transparent, open public discourse and the truth will eventually emerge (Gordon, 1997). The 21st century branding landscape is a marketplace of ideas, and consumers can filter out the truth, even with the phenomenon of cancel culture.

Finally, brands should know that it is always better to take ownership of a mistake, then to not. Consumers not only expect, but demand an explanation for wrongdoings, because consumer/brand relationships are so much more personal. Apologies should be authentic and in genuine regret to make sure that your audience is able to forgive you. Brands should not only apologize but take the necessary steps to atone for their mistakes. The following list includes some of the steps that marketers can take when they find themselves in the cancel culture arena:

- C**ommit to the values of your brand
- A**pologize with sincerity
- N**avigate a clear plan for moving forward
- C**ommunicate with your audience along the way
- E**valuate your responses carefully
- L**isten to other voices, but with caution

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