Brands and Social Justice Movements: The Effects of True versus Performative Allyship on Brand Evaluation

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ABSTRACT   Following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, many brands tried to convey their support of #BLM (Black Lives Matter) on social media (Blackout Tuesday). Some brands engaged in performative allyship (expressing allyship in words only), whereas other brands expressed support through words and deeds (true allyship). This research tests whether true versus performative brand allyship matters to consumers. We show that for the period following Blackout Tuesday, true ally brands performed better than performative ally brands and neutral brands (staying silent). Two experiments show that true ally brands are evaluated more positively than performative ally brands and that this effect is mediated by self-esteem and self-brand connection but moderated by race (greater effect of true allyship for Black consumers than White consumers). These findings suggest that brands have little to gain from acting as performative allies, and even less so toward the communities most affected by social injustice.

> We didn't ask for that.
> —Donté Stallworth

Consider the following: after the NFL announced that they were going to include "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (accepted by some Black Americans as an unofficial anthem), former NFL player Donte Stallworth said, "We didn't ask for that." Despite the NFL's pledge to donate $250 million over the next 10 years to fight systemic racism, Stallworth outlined the changes that Black employees of the NFL and Black citizens were requesting: more diversity in the form of more Black owners, more Black coaches promoted to upper management, and better monitoring of discrimination within the league (Moore 2022). Similarly, the CEO of Morgan Stanley hired two Black executives after protesters began meeting outside his Manhattan apartment during the 2020 protests. The company claimed these two hires were the beginning of a dramatic shift in how the company would handle race relations. However, Morgan Stanley is ranked lowest when it comes to African American leadership representation recorded by the big five US banks (Noonan 2021). We posit that these examples illustrate performative allyship by brands.

Performative allyship is the practice of symbolically or outwardly speaking out about social justice causes through words, posts, and shallow gestures but doing little to improve the conditions that plague marginalized groups. Donté Stallworth's powerful words highlighted the need for the NFL to go beyond symbolic gestures designed to generate positive optics to create policies that will effect real and positive change (e.g., increasing minority representation through hiring practices, requiring Black and White coaches to be paid the same). In contrast, *true allyship* refers to the proactive

measures that organizations take to attempt to improve the lives of those marginalized groups. These measures can be instantaneous (changing a racist logo with an explanation to consumers; Veresiu 2023) or long term (require equity among Black and White employees; Bone et al. 2023). Our research focuses on how brands can enact true allyship to avoid controversy and effect change. These brands do not just "talk the talk" but also "walk the walk." In the modern-day social media environment, brands cannot afford to have any missteps and should look for ways to make sure they do not happen.

In this research, we address the question of whether true versus performative allyship matters. More specifically, do brands pay a price when they attempt to perform allyship rather than committing to true allyship messages and behaviors? In addition, is there a penalty for doing nothing? Finally, does the perception of these two approaches change depending on the race of the consumer?

CONCEPTUAL DEVELOPMENT

The Origins of Allyship

Historically, some brands have taken a stand for social justice initiatives (e.g., Nike). After the murder of George Floyd, responses from corporations ranged from blacking out Instagram profiles to public statements of support. These responses did little to address the very real problem of police violence against people of color. Nardini et al. (2021, 112) state that real social change "happens, not by chance occurrence, but rather by linking individuals, organizations, and their networks together in a common cause and shared purpose." Many social movements start at the grassroots level but larger-scale movements that rely on modern communication tools and include a more global perspective may be more effective (Crutchfield 2018). Nardini et al. (2021, 121) emphasize the need for "diverse—and sometimes adversarial—organizations" to work together on a common cause. Businesses can use the "power of their brands to advance a social movement)." Conversely, brands' attempts to be inclusive can backfire by using alienating identity appeals (Kim et al. 2023). Nardini et al. (2021, 121) also encourage businesses to provide the "power and resources to advance the movement's purpose and goals on a larger scale" and note Peloton, Coca-Cola, United Health, and Warby Parker as powerful examples. Research in this volume emphasizes that resources and initiatives need to be implemented properly to avoid delegitimization (Veresiu 2023), power asymmetries (Bone et al. 2023), and stigmatized identity cues (Rank-Christman and Wooten 2023).

Consumers and brands can be true allies if they are dedicated to taking on a particular issue in the long term. Kristofferson, White, and Peloza (2014) coined the term "slacktivism," referring to consumers who were willing to perform some short-term, relatively risk-free tasks to signal support to their social groups while lacking the motivation to do the subsequent, necessary work. Similarly, many firms were left flat-footed–unable, unwilling, or unsure whether or how to contribute to social justice movements. Large firms find it difficult to incorporate Diversity and Inclusion Engaged Marketing (DIEM) practices because of an overemphasis on shareholder wealth and the lack of connection among different divisions (Kipnis et al. 2021). Smaller firms are challenged to reroute resources to DIEM initiatives when margins are thin. Regardless of size, many marketers are ill equipped to join in on existing social justice discourses.

Historically, marketing measured race for market segmentation purposes (Sexton 1972). However, in the last decade, experts have encouraged scholars to study the more complicated process of "racial dynamics in the marketplace, especially contributions that foreground the perspectives of those affected by racism" (Wooten and Rank-Christman 2022, 19). Marketing can "either further exacerbate multicultural tensions or support successful multicultural engagement," which "should be deliberate, common, and convivial" and not "incidental, sporadic, and guarded" (Demangeot et al. 2019, 340–41). Companies that engage in "sporadic diversity" may pay a price whereas companies that create "deliberate" diversity initiatives may be rewarded by consumers for their endeavors.

Branding research evolved from early conceptualizations focusing mainly on product differentiation, to brands as cultural icons (Holt 2004), to more modern views of brands as engaging in a performance to grab attention. Bode and Kjeldgaard (2017) discussed consumer-brand interactions in terms of "performativity" and concluded that consumers and brands both create performative discourses to strengthen or solidify this bond. Radke et al. (2020) extended this performativity discourse by positing that some advantaged individuals or firms may co-opt social unrest narratives in a self-serving way. The 2017 Pepsi ad starring Kylie Jenner illustrated this response perfectly: "It is not difficult to imagine that Pepsi was seeking to improve their brand's reputation, popularity, and make money by attempting to show solidarity with those participating in political movements" (Radke et al. 2020, 301). Yet their attempts may have backfired because of their unintended use of identity threat cues

rather than identity safe cues (Rank-Christman and Wooten 2023).

Performative versus True Allyship

Allyship is a practice performed by people in positions of power with the express goal of removing barriers to those people with less power to enable them to advance to similar levels of success (Erskine and Bilimoria 2019). Phillips (2020, 2) describes "real allies" as those from nonmarginalized groups who leverage their status and privilege to support marginalized groups. Frey (2020) refers to "true allies" who affect positive social change through (1) critical self-reflexivity, (2) prosocial behaviors, and (3) tempered radicalism to ensure that marginalized groups gain power. True allyship is when people in power create, champion, implement, and follow through with strategies and tactics designed to improve the experience and opportunities of less fortunate or unempowered groups.

Performative allyship is when people in power publicly profess support for a cause but do not follow through with the strategies and tactics necessary to effect positive change. Performative allyship does not directly address the problem at hand but instead allows the ally to create and maintain a message while precluding the ally from doing the very complex and difficult work of being a true ally. A one-off social media post and other perfunctory gestures without proactive involvement to effect change suggest that the performative ally is more motivated by the response from their social circle (Frey 2020). As Kalina (2020, 478) states, "We [advantaged groups] cannot simply care about racism or anti-Semitism when it is convenient. . . . We cannot . . . just forget about the issue and carry on with business as usual." Appendix A, available online provides a more in-depth discussion and examples of true and performative allyship.

In summary, the key difference between performative and true allyship pertains to actions, and not (necessarily) motivations (see Yoon, Gürhan-Canli, and Schwarz 2006). Although true allies back up their words with deeds intended to instigate change that provides long-term benefits to the oppressed group, whereas performative allies at best do the bare minimum, their motives may be equally sincere (see app. A). To the extent that consumers value brands that not only talk the talk but walk the walk, we predict that true allyship brands will perform better than performative ally brands on typical brand evaluation measures.

> **H1:** True ally brands will be evaluated more positively than performative ally brands.

Underlying Processes

Self-Brand Connection. Consumers often use brands to construct and signal their self-identity, both to themselves and to others (Belk 1988; Reed et al. 2012). Brands are "more than just logos and taglines" (Reed and Forehand 2019, 2), they are meaning systems that provide symbolic value (Levy 1959). Thus, consumers are drawn to brands they perceive as having qualities that are consistent with their ideal selves and construct and signal their identity based on the congruence between brand-user associations and their desired self-image (self-brand connections; Escalas 2004). Stronger self-brand connections lead to more positive brand evaluations (Escalas 2004; Swaminathan, Page, and Gürhan-Canli 2007), greater purchase intentions (Escalas 2004; Spielmann, Dobscha, and Lowrey 2021), and greater willingness to pay a premium price (Thomson, MacInnis, and Park 2005). Self-brand connections can also be reinforcing. Stronger self-brand connections are associated with stronger attitudes that are more resistant to change (Escalas, Gallo, and Gaustad 2019). In terms of social causes in particular, self-brand connections are strengthened when brands publicly support social causes that align with consumers' values (Newman and Brooks 2018).

One way in which consumers bolster their self-identity is through perceived agency, which is associated with greater autonomy and self-determination (Ryan and Deci 2000; Thomson 2006). True allyship demonstrates more enhanced agency than performative allyship and is associated with greater attitude-behavior consistency, which is central to the self-concept (Festinger 1957). Thus, we predict that true allyship brands will create stronger self-brand connections than performative allyship brands, which in turn will positively influence brand evaluations.

> **H2:** The positive effect of true (vs. performative) brand allyship on brand evaluation is mediated by self-brand connection.

Self-Esteem. Consumers often choose brands for their symbolic meaning and brands serve a social signaling function that can be used to consolidate a consumer's self-perception. Self-esteem is positively linked to approach goals (those that augment positive self-perceptions) and negatively linked to avoidance goals (those that reduce self-perceptions; Heimpel, Elliot, and Wood 2006). True allyship brands are more agentic and proactive in addressing social injustices. Consequently, consumers should feel greater self-empowerment

from true allyship brands than from performative allyship brands, which should make them feel better about themselves (boost their self-esteem), which in turn should lead to stronger self-brand connection and more favorable brand evaluations.

H3: Self-esteem and self-brand connection will serially mediate the effect of allyship on brand evaluations.

Moderation by Race

Thus far we have argued that true (vs. performative) brand allyship positively affects brand evaluations via enhanced self-esteem and self-brand connection. However, we also expect that these effects depend on the attachment the consumer has to the social issue at hand. Broadly, we argue that the effects of allyship on self-esteem and self-brand connection should be stronger for those for whom the empowerment and social justice change benefit the most. When focusing on racial injustice, compared to White consumers, Black consumers should be more attached to the social justice issue being advocated by the brands, and thus more likely to see themselves in the brand and feel a personal connection to it because the brand's positioning is consistent with core aspects of their self-identity. In addition, the outcomes that are sought (e.g., representation through diversity) directly increase their personal power and that of their in-group, which should be self-esteem-enhancing. Finally, social identity cues (e.g., minority representation) can increase confidence (Purdie-Vaughns et al. 2008). Thus, we expect that the effects of true (vs. performative) allyship by brands on self-esteem, self-brand connection, and brand evaluations will be greater for Black consumers than for White consumers.

H4: The mediated effect of allyship on self-esteem, self-brand connection, and brand evaluations will be moderated by race of the consumer.

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDIES

In study 1, as a proxy for brand evaluations, we use stock prices of the top 100 brands to determine whether true allyship leads to better market performance compared to performative allyship (hypothesis 1). In study 2, we manipulate true versus performative allyship and measure the effect on brand evaluations (hypothesis 1), test whether self-brand connection mediates the effect (hypothesis 2), and

whether race moderates the effect (hypothesis 4). Study 3 replicates study 2 and adds the additional mediator of self-esteem (hypothesis 3). Full details of the studies (measures, manipulations, exclusion criteria, etc.) are provided in appendix C, and the data underlying the studies and supplementary materials are available at https://osf.io/wkmsh.

STUDY 1: MARKET STUDY

The objective of study 1 was to test whether true allyship actions led to better market performance than performative allyship actions (hypothesis 1). The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement of 2020 provided a powerful context to measure the differences between brands that took or did not take action. Blackout Tuesday (a day of collective action that occurred on June 2, 2020) was used as a temporal demarcation. We assessed market performance (brand value change) as a function of allyship in three successive periods after June 2, 2020 (fig. 1) and for the 6 months prior to June 2, 2020, to control for historic changes.

Method

Companies were chosen from Kantar's list of the 100 most valuable US brands. Stock prices at market close for these companies were compiled from Yahoo! Finance (app. B). Data were coded at three moments in time: July 2, 2020, September 2, 2020, and December 2, 2020 (6 months after Blackout Tuesday) to measure effects over time. Historical brand performance was included as a control variable and coded using closing prices from December 2, 2019, to June 2,
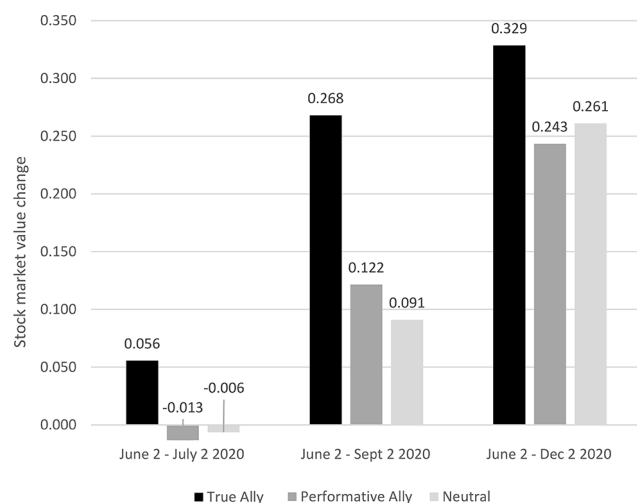

Figure 1. Market stock close change for true ally, performative ally, and neutral brands. At 1 month and 3 months after Blackout Tuesday, true ally brands outperformed performative ally and neutral brands.

2020 (6 months before Blackout Tuesday). Brand rank, brand value (in millions of USD), brand value change from 2019 to 2020 (in percentage), and brand social responsibility rating (Drucker Institute 2020) were also collected as covariates.

Of the 100 brands, 97 were publicly traded and could be coded. Using media articles from reputable and verifiable sources (e.g., *Reuters*, *Washington Post*, etc.), two research assistants coded the brands as either a true ally, performative ally, or neutral (no press article was found, no action was undertaken by the brand; app. B). Examples of brands that were coded as performative are those that posted on social media but did not have a diverse corporate board or those who spoke out despite having discriminatory hiring and/or promotion practices. Examples of true allies were those who pledged financial resources that would directly and explicitly go to support #BLM. The two coders agreed on 97% of the codings and disagreements were resolved through discussion. The final sample size consisted of 32 true allies, 55 performative allies, and 10 neutral allies.

Results and Discussion

To test hypothesis 1, we conducted a MANCOVA using the brand's coded allyship as the independent variable, the stock market changes at 1, 3, and 6 months after Blackout Tuesday as the dependent variables, and brand rank, brand value, brand value change, corporate social responsibility rating, and stock market value change between December 2019 and June 2020 as covariates. The results did not materially change when covariates were included in the analyses (app. B) and thus we report the results without the covariates.

Performance between conditions differed across the periods ($F(6, 184) = 3.584$, $p = .002$, Wilks's $\Lambda = .802$). For the first period (June–July), the effect of the allyship condition was significant ($F(2, 94) = 8.88$, $p < .001$). True allyship brands ($M = .058$, SD = .09) performed better than performative allyship brands ($M = -.013$, SD = .07, $p < .001$), and better than the neutral allyship brands ($M = -.006$, SD = .07, $p = .024$). Performative and neutral brands did not differ ($p = .79$). For the second period (June–September), the effect of allyship was significant ($F(2, 94) = 5.12$, $p = .008$). True allyship brands ($M = .27$, SD = .29) again performed better than performative allyship brands ($M = .12$, SD = .18, $p = .004$), and better than the neutral allyship brands ($M = .09$, SD = .18, $p = .029$). Performative and neutral brands did not differ ($p = .69$). For the third period (June–December), six months after Blackout Tuesday, there were no significant differences between the three conditions ($F(2, 94) = 1.23$, $p = .298$), although the directional pattern was consistent with the previous periods.

The results of study 1 suggest that true allyship brands perform better than performative allyship brands in terms of stock prices, supporting hypothesis 1. True allyship brands also perform better than neutral (no allyship) brands. The results also suggest that the effect can be immediate and last into the short and medium terms. At 6 months, although the effects are no longer significant between true and performative allies, they are directionally as we hypothesized–true ally brands are valued more than performative ally brands.

Stock prices were used as a measure of brand performance. Although stock prices are influenced at some level by consumer demand, they are typically driven in the near term more by institutional investors (vs. individual investors) who base their stock purchases in part on predictions about how external forces (e.g., current events, corporate social responsibility efforts) will affect consumer sentiments toward the brand, which in turn will eventually affect demand. Thus, study 1 cannot directly assess how consumers may react to true versus performative brand allyship. The next two studies address this issue in controlled experiments directly with consumers.

STUDY 2: SNEAKER STUDY

Study 1 provided market-level data that supported hypothesis 1. In study 2, we experimentally manipulate allyship to test hypothesis 1, measure the proposed mediator of self-brand connection to test hypothesis 2, and consider the race of the participant to test hypothesis 4.

Method

Participants and Design. Data from five participants were excluded for not identifying as either White or Black/African American or for failing an attention check. The final sample consisted of 284 members of the Prolific US online panel (145 women; 136 Black or African American, 148 White; $M_{age} = 30.74$, SD = 10.11) who participated in the study in return for a nominal fee and were randomly assigned to conditions in a one-factor (allyship: true, performative) between-subjects design. Participants were prescreened to obtain only White or Black participants in similar numbers.

Procedure, Manipulations, and Measures. In a study ostensibly about advertising by brands, participants were presented a photo of a pair of sneakers along with some information about the brand. Included in this information was

the statement "In light of recent events unfolding in the USA, the brand thought it important to participate and take a stand," and then were shown an Instagram post supposedly by the brand that indicated support for the BLM movement. Next, participants were shown a photo of the 11 members of the Board of Directors (three women). We manipulated true versus performative allyship by varying the racial diversity of the Board (Purdie-Vaughns et al. 2008), with a true ally having a more diverse board than a performative ally (app. C). A pretest manipulation check study indicated that the manipulation was successful ($p < .001$; see app. C).

Participants were then asked to indicate their willingness to purchase the sneakers, how much they would be willing to pay (WTP) for the sneakers, and their attitudes toward the sneakers. Following that, participants completed measures of self-brand connection, shared values, and reactive egoism (app. C). Self-brand connection is the hypothesized mediator,[1] whereas shared values and reactive egoism addressed alternative mediators. Shared values may relate to allyship because consumers may seek brands that have the same values related to social justice as they do (Moss et al. 2020). Reactive egoism may represent an alternative mediator because performative allyship may reduce egocentric focus, which may lead to perceptions of self-serving behavior (Epley, Caruso, and Bazerman 2006), and egotistical motives may motivate firms to engage in social causes (Vlachos et al. 2009). Finally, participants responded to a three-item manipulation check ($\alpha = .91$), provided demographic information, and completed measures of racial preference, symbolic racism, religiosity, and political identity to serve as covariates.

Results and Discussion

Hypothesis Testing. We expected that brand evaluations (purchase intentions, attitudes, WTP) would be more favorable in true compared to performative ally conditions (hypothesis 1). The open-ended WTP measure was skewed, and thus we log-transformed the measure for analyses but report actual dollars in the descriptive statistics. (Nineteen respondents did not provide a dollar amount for the

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1. We note that with only a few exceptions (e.g., Spielmann et al. 2021), self-brand connections are assessed for established rather than novel or fictitious brands, as is the case in our studies. Although our manipulations provided information that would allow participants to assess the extent to which they identified and felt a connection with the brand, we are perhaps more accurately measuring the propensity to develop self-brand connections (similar to the concept of "brand loyalty intentions"; see Pogacar et al. 2021).

WTP measure.) The results did not materially change when covariates were included in the analyses and are not included in the presented analyses. One-way ANOVAs for each of the dependent variables indicated that hypothesis 1 was supported (table 1). Participants in the true allyship condition indicated greater purchase intentions ($M = 4.90$, $SD = 1.76$) than did those in the performative condition ($M = 3.54$, $SD = 1.63$; $F(1, 282) = 44.89$, $p < .001$). The same results were obtained for the effect of allyship on attitudes and WTP (table 1).

We also expected that self-brand connection would mediate the effect of allyship on brand evaluations (hypothesis 2). A one-way ANOVA indicated greater self-brand connections in the true allyship condition ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 1.59$) than in the performative condition ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 1.43$; $F(1, 282) = 48.90$, $p < .001$). To test for mediation, Hayes's (2018) PROCESS model 4 was applied with 5,000 bootstrapped resamples and allyship as the independent variable (X), purchase intentions as the dependent variable (Y), and self-brand connection as the mediator (M). The indirect effect was significant ($B = .31$, $SE = .15$, 95% CI[.0204, .6062]). True (vs. performative) allyship positively predicted self-brand connection ($B = 1.27$, $SE = .18$, $p < .001$), and self-brand connection positively predicted purchase intentions ($B = .82$, $SE = .05$, $p < .001$). To test for alternative mediators, we conducted the same analyses but included shared values and reactive egoism as competing mediators. The indirect effect via self-brand connection remained significant, but the indirect effects via shared values and reactive egoism were not significant (app. C, table W1). The same pattern of results was observed for attitudes and WTP.

To test whether race moderates the effect of allyship on brand evaluations (hypothesis 4), we conducted 2 (allyship: true, performative) $\times$ 2 (race: Black, White) ANOVAs for each of the three dependent variables. The results for purchase intentions are reported here and for attitudes and WTP in app. C (table W2). The interaction was significant ($F(1, 261) = 12.07$, $p < .001$). White participants indicated greater purchase intentions in the true allyship condition ($M = 4.63$, $SE = .18$) than in the performative condition ($M = 3.99$, $SE = .20$; $F(1, 261) = 5.61$, $p = .019$). Black participants also indicated greater purchase intentions in the true allyship condition ($M = 5.44$, $SE = .19$) than in the performative condition ($M = 3.44$, $SE = .21$; $F(1, 261) = 49.35$, $p < .001$), but the effect was larger ($M_{diff} = 1.99$) than for White participants ($M_{diff} = .64$). The same pattern of results was observed for attitudes and

Table 1. Mean Comparisons for Studies 2 and 3

| Measure	Condition	Study 2				Study 3			
		Reliability (alpha)	Mean (SD)	F-test	P-value	Reliability (alpha)	Mean (SD)	F-test	P-value
Purchase intentions	True allyship	.95	4.90 (1.76)	44.89	<.001	.94	4.88 (1.57)	29.86	< .001
	Performative allyship		3.54 (1.63)				4.03 (1.69)		
Brand attitudes	True allyship	.96	4.73 (1.82)	20.45	<.001	.96	4.61 (1.65)	3.72	.054
	Performative allyship		3.79 (1.67)				4.30 (1.75)		
Log-transformed WTP [original values in brackets]	True allyship		3.93 (.82) ($82.72 [$252.57])	9.25	.003		3.93 (.74) ($69.29 [$111.35])	9.49	.002
	Performative allyship		3.60 (.90) ($42.86 [$34.97])				3.68 (.95) ($51.22 [$42.74])		
Self-brand connection	True allyship	.95	4.25 (1.59)	48.90	<.001	.94	4.38 (1.48)	43.17	<.001
	Performative allyship		2.98 (1.44)				3.42 (1.54)		
Shared values	True allyship	.90	4.72 (1.74)	42.80	<.001				
	Performative allyship		3.46 (1.47)						
Reactive egoism	True allyship	.90	2.22 (1.39)	38.78	<.001				
	Performative allyship		3.26 (1.42)						

WTP, although the differences between true and performative conditions were not significant for White participants.

To test for moderated mediation, we conducted a 2 (allyship: true, performative) × 2 (race: Black, White) ANOVA with self-brand connection as the dependent variable. The interaction was marginally significant ($F(1, 280) = 2.966$, $p = .086$; see table 1 for means). Next, Hayes's (2018) PROCESS model 7 was applied to specify the moderation at path a, with purchase intentions as the dependent variable. The index of moderated mediation was not significant ($B = .52$, SE = .30, 95% CI [$-.0704, 1.1032$]; see fig. 2). Self-brand connection is a statistically significant mediator for both White participants ($B = .80$, SE = .20, 95% CI [.4071, 1.2139]) and Black participants ($B = 1.32$, SE = .23, 95% CI [.8612, 1.7826]). The same mediation results were obtained for attitudes and WTP (app. C, tables W3 and W4).

Follow-up Studies

Two additional studies were conducted to rule out two potential confounds. Full details are provided in appendix C. The first follow-up study had two objectives: (1) to test whether the allyship manipulation of Board diversity influenced participants' perceptions of true versus performative allyship and (2) to test whether the allyship effects are driven by sincerity/hypocrisy rather than self-brand connection or self-esteem (Yoon et al. 2006). Participants thought the brand was more of a true ally in the true allyship condition than in the performative allyship condition ($p < .001$) and ratings of the sincerity of the brand did not differ between conditions ($p = .132$), and the true ($M = 4.37$) and performative ($M = 4.76$) sincerity ratings were both above the scale mid-point (7-point scale; both $p < .001$). The objective of the second follow-up was to further test sincerity of

White Consumers
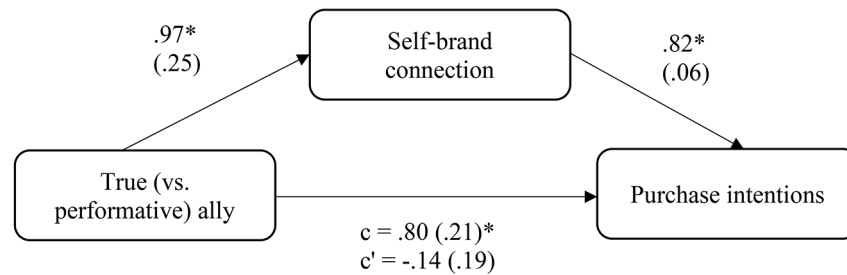
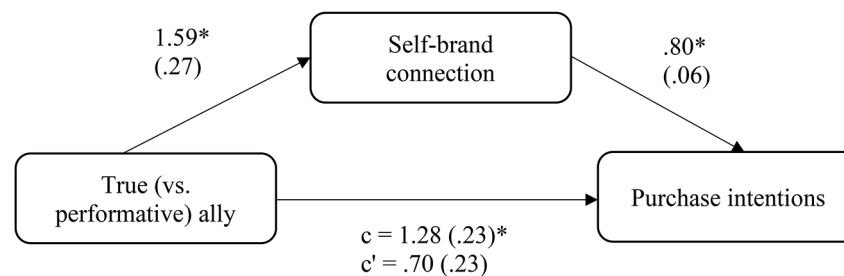

Black/African American Consumers

Figure 2. True (vs. performative) allyship leads to stronger self-brand connections and greater purchase intentions for both Black and White consumers, but the effect is larger for Black consumers. The numbers represent the regression weights and standard errors (in parentheses). The c path coefficients represent the total effect of allyship on purchase intentions through self-brand connection. The c' path coefficient represents the direct effect of allyship on purchase intentions.

motives as an alternative explanation by measuring sincerity of motives using the same dependent measures as Yoon et al. (2006). Again, the true ($M = 5.31$) and performative ($M = 4.89$) ally conditions did not significantly differ ($p = .105$).

The results of study 2 are generally supportive of hypotheses 2 and 4, showing greater purchase intentions under true compared to performative allyship, consistent with the market performance data in study 1. This effect is mediated by greater self-brand connection, but more so for Black participants than for White participants, although the interaction between allyship and self-brand connection was only marginally significant (and thus the moderated mediation was not significant). The same mediation pattern was noted for attitudes and WTP. The results of our follow-up studies also show that sincerity of motives is an unlikely alternative explanation for the effects.

STUDY 3: REPLICATION AND EXTENSION

The purpose of study 3 was to replicate study 2 and test an additional mediator (self-esteem), to explain the effect of

allyship on self-brand connection. We expected that true allyship would boost self-esteem, which in turn would increase self-brand connection and brand evaluations (hypothesis 3), and that this effect would be stronger for Black participants than for White participants (hypothesis 4).

Method

Participants and Design. No data were excluded from the analysis using the same criteria as in study 2. 435 members of the Prolific US online panel (202 women; 210 Black or African American, 225 White; $M_{age} = 32.80$, SD = 10.67) who participated in the study in return for a nominal fee were randomly assigned to conditions in a one-factor (allyship: true, performative) between-subjects design. Participants were prescreened to obtain only White or Black participants in similar numbers and to ensure that participants in study 2 were not able to participate.

Procedure, Manipulations, and Measures. The procedure, manipulations, and measures were identical to study 2 plus a 14-item measure of self-esteem ($\alpha = .95$; see app. D).

Results

Manipulation Check. Participants in the true ally condition rated the board as more diverse in the true ally condition ($M = 6.05$, SD = 1.03) than in the performative ally condition ($M = 2.97$, SD = 1.44; $F(1, 433) = 669.17$, $p < .001$), indicating that the manipulation was successful.

Hypothesis Testing. To test hypothesis 1, we conducted one-way ANOVAs for each of the dependent variables. We again log-transformed the WTP measure for analyses because of skewness. (Ten participants did not provide a price for the WTP measure.) Participants in the true allyship condition indicated greater purchase intentions ($M = 4.88$, SD = 1.57) than did those in the performative condition ($M = 4.03$, SD = 1.69; $F(1, 433) = 29.86$, $p < .001$). The same results were obtained for the effect of allyship on attitudes and WTP (table 1).

We also expected that self-esteem and self-brand connection would serially mediate the effect of allyship on purchase intentions (hypothesis 3). One-way ANOVAs indicated higher self-esteem in the true condition ($M = 8.28$, SD = 1.89) than in the performative condition ($M = 7.86$, SD = 1.91; $F(1, 433) = 5.35$, $p = .02$), and greater self-brand connection in the true condition ($M = 4.38$, SD = 1.48) than in the performative condition ($M = 3.42$, SD = 1.54; $F(1, 433) = 43.17$, $p < .001$). We tested serial mediation using Hayes's (2018) PROCESS model 6 with 5,000 bootstrapped samples, with allyship as the independent variable (X), purchase intentions as the dependent variable (Y), and self-esteem (M1) and self-brand connection (M2) as the mediators. The indirect effect was significant ($B = .07$, SE = .03, 95% CI [.0114, .1464]). True (vs. performative) allyship positively predicted self-esteem ($B = .42$ SE = .18, $p < .021$), self-esteem positively predicted self-brand connection ($B = .28$ SE = .04, $p < .001$), and self-brand connection positively predicted purchase intentions ($B = .63$, SE = .04, $p < .001$). These results support hypotheses 2 and 3. The same mediation was noted for WTP and brand attitudes.

We expected that race would moderate the effect of allyship on brand evaluations (hypothesis 4). We conducted 2 (allyship: true, performative) × 2 (race: Black, White) ANOVAs for each of the three dependent variables. We report the Results for purchase intentions here and the other two in appendix D (table W5). The interaction was significant ($F(1, 421) = 5.88$, $p = .016$). White participants indicated greater purchase intentions in the true allyship condition ($M = 4.47$, SE = .15) than in the performative

condition ($M = 4.03$, SE = .15; $F(1, 421) = 4.33$, $p = .038$). Black participants also indicated greater purchase intentions in the true allyship condition ($M = 5.35$, SE = .15) than in the performative condition ($M = 4.18$, SE = .17; $F(1, 421) = 28.66$, $p < .001$), but the effect was larger ($M_{diff} = 1.18$) than for White participants ($M_{diff} = .44$). The same pattern of results was observed for attitudes and WTP, although the differences between true and performative conditions were not significant for White participants.

To test for moderated mediation, we first conducted separate 2 (allyship: true, performative) × 2 (race: Black, White) ANOVAs with self-brand connection and self-esteem as the dependent variables. The interaction for self-brand connection was significant ($F(1, 431) = 6.32$, $p = .01$; see app. D, table W5), replicating study 2. The interaction for self-esteem was also significant ($F(1, 431) = 5.45$, $p = .02$). Next, we used PROCESS model 83, which specifies moderation at path a. The interaction between the condition and race leading to self-esteem was significant ($B = .83$, SE = .35; $p = .02$). Decomposing the interaction, the conditional indirect effect of race on purchase intentions, through self-esteem threat and self-brand connection, was not significant for White consumers ($B = -.01$, SE = .04; 95% CI [−.0997, .0757]), but was positive and significant for Black consumers ($B = .14$, SE = .05; 95% CI [.0462, .2373]. The index of moderated mediation was significant ($B = .15$, SE = .07; 95% CI [.0200, .2895]). The full table of moderated mediation results is presented in appendix D (table W6).

The results of study 3 supported all hypothesized relationships and replicated the findings in study 2. True allyship brands were evaluated more favorably than performative ally brands, and the effect was serially mediated by self-esteem and self-brand connection. These results add an additional process explanation for why true allyship increases self-brand connection. These effects were moderated by race, with the effects stronger for Black than White consumers, with no significant mediation for White consumers. These findings differ slightly from study 2, which found significant mediation for both Black and White consumers. However, the results support the primary assertion that true allyship creates a stronger bond with those most affected by the advocated social justice cause.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

The year 2020 provided a unique moment in time to measure how brands react to social justice inflection points in

real time. The murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery sparked global protests, and communities, families, friends, and coworkers were forced to confront the racism that inhabits every corner of the globe and our lives. Our goal was to understand how brands reacted to this cultural inflection point. Some brands responded swiftly and decisively to enact changes in their organizations and begin the process of discovering and challenging racism at every level within the firm. Other brands provided swift but toothless responses, usually through a vague social media post or overly dramatic email stating that George Floyd's murder was unacceptable. These varied responses provided a backdrop for the research question: do consumers notice the difference between true and performative allyship and does this difference influence consumers' perceptions and evaluations of the brand? Previous scholarship implied that allyship based on race would have a positive effect on consumers' brand evaluations.

These expectations were confirmed. Through secondary data (stock prices) and primary data (lab experiments), results consistently showed that consumers (and investors) do make assessments about allyship behavior by brands and are discerning enough to notice the difference between true and performative tactics. In each of the studies, true allyship brands were more positively evaluated than performative allyship brands, and this effect was driven by self-esteem and self-brand connection. True allyship was more self-affirming (resulting in higher self-esteem) compared to performative allyship, which led to stronger self-brand connections for true allyship brands, which positively influenced brand evaluations. The results also show that the consumers' race moderated the effects. Black consumers evaluated the true ally brands more positively than the performative ally brands because true allyship was more self-affirming and produced stronger self-brand connections for Black consumers than for White consumers.

Theoretical Contributions

This research contributes to the literature on consumer-brand relationships by demonstrating differential effects of allyship. Research demonstrates that diversity cues are experienced differently depending on the social identity contingencies of targeted individuals (Purdie-Vaughns et al. 2008). Likewise, previous research on brand relationships focused primarily on product differentiation, brand loyalty, cultural iconography, and brand performance. Previous conceptualizations of performativity (Bode and Kjeldgaard

2017) did not include a measure of valence. This research extends the current thinking on brand performativity by adding this valence vector and accounting for the social space that consumers occupy (targeted minority or not) when faced with social injustice initiatives by brands. In other words, brands may perform in an "incidental, sporadic, and guarded way" (Demangeot et al. 2019, 340–41), which will have deleterious consequences for both advantaged and disadvantaged groups. This type of criticism of brands differs from Holt's (2002) research on brands that sometimes willingly "cause trouble" to drum up promotional attention. In this study, all the brands' intentions seemed genuine; it was the poor planning, lack of connection to real change, and misuse of cultural symbols that put them in the category of performative.

This research also contributes to the understanding of the underlying mechanisms that strengthen the brand evaluations by Black and White consumers. Brand messaging toward social justice issues and disadvantaged groups can be self-affirming, which strengthens the connection between the brand and the consumer's self-identity. However, the extent to which it is self-affirming and strengthens self-brand connections depends on the extent to which the supportive messaging is seen as true.

Insights for Practice and Limitations

True (vs. performative) allyship relates to actions by a firm that have implications for marketing (e.g., brand actions), investments (e.g., stock market value), and management (e.g., retention and recruitment). This research provides insights for marketing practice. It gives practitioners a clearer picture of how to successfully create a true allyship relationship with their consumers. The important consideration in this study is that both consumers and nonconsumers of a brand may be impacted by the brand's desire to align itself with a social justice initiative. For example, Black consumers are 20% less likely than White consumers to have a Visa credit card but may still respond favorably to the creation of Visa's Black Scholars and Jobs Program.

One important limitation of this research is how race was measured. Although we measured race as two discrete categories, we are not implying that people who identify as Black or White are monolithic. Marketing has historically used race as a segmentation variable in mundane product categories, but recent studies have found that these consumer groups have more similarities than differences when it comes to buying everyday items (Schor 2010), and thus Black consumers should be viewed as just as heterogeneous

as White consumers (McKinley, Smith, and . Marshall 2015). Our use of two categories in this study was deliberate because history has shown that when traumatic national events around race happen in the United States, the responses typically break along the Black/White line. However, disciplines such as African American studies, anthropology, and biology are turning away from this man-made differentiation based on skin color, which has roots in the slave trade, in favor of ethnicity, which better captures the complexities of society than skin color (Bryce 2022).

One reasonable criticism of this research is that the predictions and observed effects are intuitive. Although we acknowledge that the finding that the results are stronger for Black consumers than for White consumers is highly intuitive, we argue that the other findings are not. First, it is not intuitively obvious that consumers will immediately distinguish between true and performative allyship, particularly for those who are not actively participating in the cause already. Yet we observed that participants reacted differently to the true and performative allyship conditions, even though the manipulations were relatively subtle. Moreover, even though the effects were perhaps unsurprisingly stronger for Black consumers than White consumers, allyship still influenced White consumers. Finally, the underlying processes are also not immediately intuitive. There were numerous candidates for plausible mediators (which we empirically addressed), but self-brand connection and self-esteem emerged as the primary ones.

Future research should test the generalizability of our findings across different social justice contexts (e.g., #MeToo) and also test how the effects of self-brand connections vary between novel versus existing brands. Although the main effects may generalize, the different contexts may impact different mediating processes. A related question is whether members of other stigmatized groups (e.g., women, LGBTQ, etc.) might show solidarity and thus respond similarly to brands that are true (vs. performative) allies regardless of the issue (Nardini et al. 2021; Wooten and Rank-Christman 2019), in effect responding positively to diversity in general? Likewise, an in-depth examination of perceived motivations of firms and sincerity versus allyship intentions could also add a more fine-grained understanding of how social justice initiatives by firms influence consumers. Finally, future research should consider the acts of allyship on traditionally "White" brands. Does the attempt at true allyship by traditionally "White" brands end up being as negatively evaluated as performative brands? Future research would benefit from a more granular analysis of the positive and negative im-

pact of allyship stance on both advocates and adversaries of social causes.

Importantly, the results from study 1 suggest that the true allyship advantage may wear off over time. Thus, brands need to be continuous and consistent in their true allyship efforts rather than temporary or uneven. Future research could explain how different brands perform over time, ideally in longitudinal studies, and examine their constant or shifting levels of allyship over longer periods and the resulting impact on consumer perceptions.

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