

Brand Activism and Online Advertising

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Brands are becoming increasingly vocal on socio-political issues through the medium of advertising. Be it voicing support for Black Lives Matter (Nike) or hitting out at 'toxic masculinity' (Gillette), brands are willingly *aligning* themselves with significant social and political causes and actively 'taking a stand'.

Whilst such explicit manifestations of brand activism are often applauded, we know a lot less about how brands implicitly manage *misalignment* between their values and socio-political causes. It seems that being placed alongside content, or within a platform that promotes particular socio-political causes, may suggest a relationship to viewers that brands may be distinctly uncomfortable with; a form of brand activism by association.

This tension is manifest in examples including: 1) brands such as L'Oréal, HSBC and Marks and Spencer pulling programmatic advertising spend from YouTube due to branded content running alongside extremist material; 2) news brands struggling to sell advertising space next to articles about coronavirus, #Blacklivesmatter and #Metoo and, 3) brands including Adidas and Coca-Cola boycotting Facebook as part of the #StopHateforProfit movement demanding greater responsibility on misinformation and hate speech.

To actively manage brand activism by association, many brands 'blacklist' key websites, words and causes that they do not wish to align with as part of a commercial focus upon upholding 'brand safety'. The placement – and prevention of placement – of online advertising then assumes a problematic process; one within which brands carefully negotiate the socio-political causes that they are willing or unwilling to be associated with. Brand activism in this sense is invisible, but overtly political.

It is against this backdrop that this project will ask: *how can we better understand brand activism through the negotiation of online advertising placement and its effects?* In order to examine this question, this project has two key research objectives:

1. To investigate the nature of brand safety practices as a form of brand activism,
2. To examine the effects of these practices, e.g. in relation to consumer and other stakeholder responses to advertising mis/placement or to the practices employed by companies to ensure cause alignment and avoid misplacement.

Applicants interested in this project should prepare a research proposal setting out how they would proceed with engaging with this topic, including a brief review of the relevant literature, the research questions they would like to address, the methods they would apply in answering those questions, and the ethical and other challenges they would likely face in completing the research.