

Oppositional Decoding Influences under Stuart Hall: A Case Study of the Advertisement “The NFL is for everyone”

Daniel Blanchett,¹ Jony Oktavian Haryanto,² Jhanghiz Syahrivar³

¹President University

²President University

³President University

E-mail: danblanchett@president.ac.id

Abstract. Social Justice Content Marketing (SJCM) presents unique challenges to the marketer beyond the traditional marketing tools used to message the consumer effectively. Consumers demand that corporations take action on social issues, yet it is difficult for consumers to define for corporations or marketers what such actions should entail or whether initiatives are effective from the corporate and societal dimensions. Over the last thirty years, changes in media have divided consumer attention across multiple media channels, and message persistence is decreased due to increased message volumes overall. Positioning of SJCM messages is often unintended. Identity via labeling, the backbone of traditional marketing segmentation, targeting, and positioning, is counterproductive in SJCM communications. We used a netnographic approach to capture responses to the National Football League’s SJCM advertisement *Football is for Everyone* to determine why consumers rejected the advertisement. We applied Stuart Hall’s reception theory to categorize consumer responses and used social dominance theory, labeling and identity frameworks, and semiotics under Pierce. In addition, we examined the benefit to corporate revenue and societal improvement. The results found were that advertisement rejection was due to oppositional and denotative decoding resulting from polysemic symbol versus iconic usage and encoding non-socially dominant beliefs as dominant beliefs in the advertisement. Iconographic messaging reduces non-preferred and negotiated decoding. Further, some corporations may benefit from SJCM financially, but others may suffer substantial financial loss. The gains are more tied to the alignment of core customer demographics and existing beliefs with the advertisement and losses with a disconnect with customer beliefs.

Keywords: social dominance, identity, labeling, semiotics, reception theory, positioning

Introduction

Societies often experience episodic outbreaks of civil unrest when heightened awareness of social problems, combined with a lack of tangible actions, reaches a critical mass (Silverstein, 2021). In the summer of 2020, the United States experienced widespread protests and civil disobedience after the arrest and subsequent death of George Floyd while in police custody on May 25, 2020. The death of Floyd, an African American, created the social construct that resulted in protests against police brutality across numerous American cities and other countries (Silverstein, 2021). Many companies responded to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement: for example, Apple (Cook, n.d.), Amazon (Amazon, 2020), and Google (Pichai, 2020), among others.

Corporations that take positions on political and societal issues engage in Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA) (Dodd & Supa, 2014). Some corporations issue statements on an issue, and others communicate their initiatives, messages, and positions to the consumer through social justice content marketing (SJCM) campaigns. Whereas the link between companies and society has always existed, CSA poses unique challenges to the marketer in many aspects of SJCM advertising and messaging.

We took a netnographic approach to collect consumer sentiment through user comments on the advertisement *Football is for everyone*. We investigated why most consumers rejected the advertisement under Stuart Hall’s reception theory. We ask if labeling (segmentation) is effective for anti-prejudicial/social justice marketing. The benefits of SJCM to corporations from the profit dimension were investigated, as were the meeting of consumer expectations for societal change. Lastly, we investigate if the

execution of the advertisement's messaging could be improved for the consumer. The significance of the investigation is the importance of communication theory being advanced in marketing education.

We grouped responses within Stuart Hall's reception theory framework. We applied Pierce's semiotic triad to the advertisement's encoding, Roberts and Rizzo's social dominance theory to explain the existence of pejorative hierarchies, Reed's identity theory to explain rejection within Roberts and Rizzo's arbitrary category, and consumer rejection of a supposedly socially dominant belief and societally beneficial message under Hall's dominant messaging theory.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is a net positive for companies and society. Byus et al. (2010) investigated 120 firms in the Dow Jones Sustainability Index (DJSI) and found a positive financial benefit to the company after adopting DJSI criteria. Harvard Business School reported that over 90% of the Standard and Poor's 500 companies (S&P 500) issued CSR reports in 2019 (Cote, 2021). Corporate Social Responsibility is part of the sustainability component. Mackey et al. state that CSR can maximize corporate market value (Mackey, Mackey, & Barney, 2007). Księżak (2016) writes that unethical practices can lead to reduced sales or boycotts of products. From an altruistic perspective, "doing good" is philosophically moral and a significant underpinning of CSR (Perry & Towers, 2013). Research using multidimensional scaling suggested that CSR was a three-dimensional construct; "utilitarian, justice, and rights" (Boak & Peery, 1985), further underpinning a corporate moral and ethical responsibility. Leaving aside the obligation of the corporate morality question, consumers want corporations to "achieve their business goals while improving society and the environment" and have wanted this for some time (Epstein-Reeves, 2010). Harvard Business Review states that consumers demand "Corporate Social Justice," the focused efforts on measurable programs or initiatives benefitting `societally *disadvantaged groups* (Zheng, 2020). Therefore, CSA is a focused extension of CSR.

CSA is not without critics, however. Stakeholders, such as shareholders, may disagree with corporate initiatives directed at specific demographic groups or may perceive the initiatives taken do not directly enrich shareholder wealth and are outside the management directive as fiduciaries to the principals, viz., the shareholders (Friedman, 1970). Consumers may view corporate actions as opportunistic, i.e., motivated by profit rather than substantially committed to effecting societal change (Alemany, 2020). Nike realized a sales increase of 6 billion dollars (Kim, Overton, Bhalla, & Li, 2020) due to the *Dream Crazy* advertisement featuring Colin Kaepernick. Zamora categorizes some CSR disclosures as "virtue signaling" dependent upon the credibility of the messenger and message as perceived by the consumer (Zamora, 2021). Similar to "greenwashing," the pejorative term used to describe opportunistic corporate environmental efforts, Dowell and Jackson label non-committed social justice as "woke-washing"; "the appropriate[ion]...[of] the language of social activism into marketing materials" (Dowell & Jackson, 2020). The Los Angeles Times criticized The Coca-Cola Company and Delta Airlines, headquartered in Atlanta, Georgia, for lack of immediate social response to the Election Integrity Act of 2021 because the companies voiced objections to it only after the law's passage coincided with public "pressure to take a stand." Over 250 other companies issued a joint statement in response to the law (Civic Alliance, 2021) that was described as "weak-tea statements" by the Los Angeles Times (Hiltzik, 2021).

Special interest groups may benefit from supporting or not supporting specific social justice goals. The Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, Inc. (BLMGNF) is

accused of undue enrichment. The Associated Press reported that the BLMGFNF engaged companies closely related to co-founder and former board member Patrisse Cullors (Morrison, 2022) (BLMGNF, 2022).

Consumers demand committed, concrete efforts by companies to change societal behaviors of police brutality, racism, and hate crimes. Companies respond to consumer wishes. Individuals demanding corporate intervention often publically self-exclude themselves as members of an offender group and believe external loci are the sources of societal problems (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). Consumers “cost shift” responsibility to corporations and governments to solve problems historically woven *within the existing societal fabric*—the feasibility of consumers’ demands to change what is outside the corporations’ ability to influence substantially.

Responsibility for social change is illuminated in a 2020 survey. Aflac surveyed 1,260 adults and found that 55% of all consumers believed that individuals are responsible for “making the world a better place (AFLAC, 2020). However, the differences among generations are substantial. Individual responsibility noted by Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z was 65%, 56%, 48%, and 46%, respectively, indicating a decreasing belief in the individual’s responsibility to affect social change. As more Millennials and Gen Z occupy a more significant percentage of the consumer population, increased demands on corporations to drive social justice initiatives will increase, assuming that current trends remain.

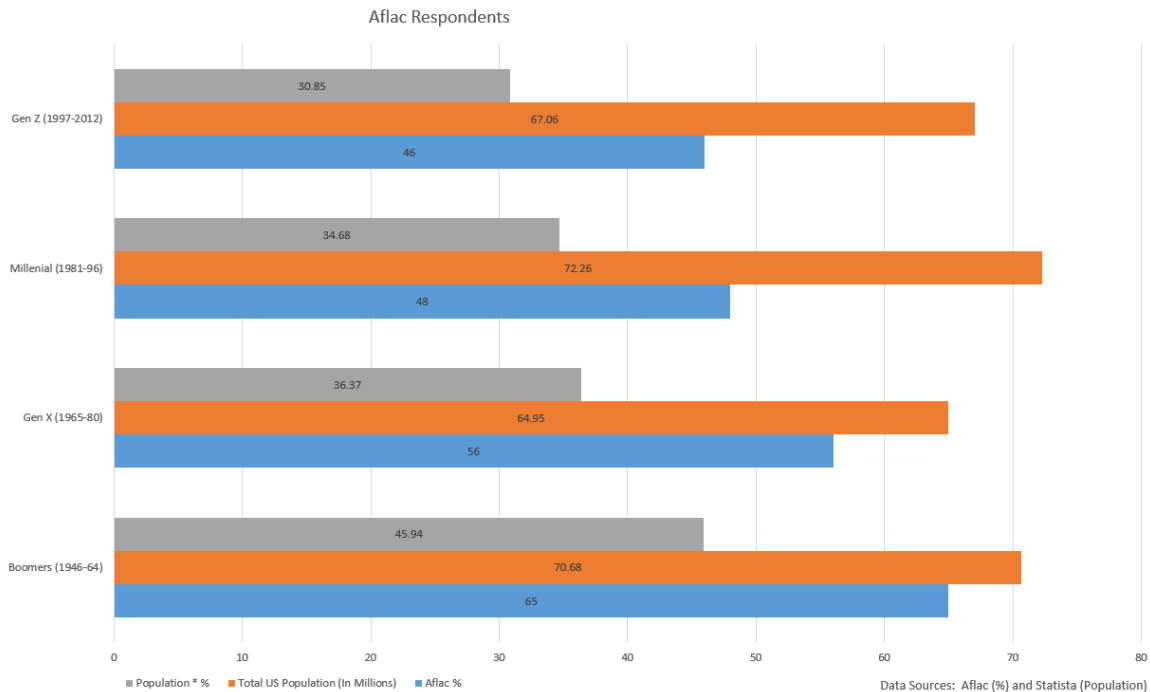


Figure 1-Individual Responsibility by Generation

Managing brand attitude is vital to marketing activities. CSA actions increasingly contribute to brand attitude. Like product/service marketing, SJCM validates, reinforces, entices, and persuades consumers’ beliefs about social issues. Consumers demanding SJCM around issues reinforces and validates existing beliefs. For consumers who are neutral or apathetic to the issue, beliefs must be enticed from neutrality or apathy to importance. Reed and Forehand (2010), in a working paper, investigated the “bases for self-definition” in their theoretical framework on identity stated, “Although a consumer

can potentially self-identify with every possible social category, not all social categories receive significant attention from the consumer” (Kihlstrom, 1992) (Reed II & Forehand, 2010). Consumers may reject the social justice messaging for other reasons; for example, cohort members who have not experienced the deleterious effects experienced among others in the group. The George Floyd protests of 2020 were a moment of solidarity for many of the estimated 46.8 million Americans who identify as black (Tamir, 2021). Kaiser Foundation, Civics Analytics, NORC, and Pew Research estimated that 26, 23, 18, and 15 million Americans, respectively, took part in the protests (Buchanan, Bui, & Patel, 2020). Support was broader among blacks, 71% strongly supported, and 15% somewhat supported the Black Lives Matter movement (n=9,654) (Kim, Horowitz, & Anderson, 2020). Not all blacks support BLM.

Corporate goals are different. Within corporations’ internal policies and practices and with their upstream and downstream suppliers, corporations have a more significant influence on the outcomes of CSR (environmental) and CSA (diversity, gender) initiatives and actions and can better measure progress toward goals. However, societal social justice changes are outside corporations’ locus of control. This conflicts with consumer demands with corporations’ ability to deliver societal changes.

The contrast between consumers and corporations is stark. Although more than 20% of Generation Z Americans have embraced an LGBT identity, overall, only 7.1% of Americans consider themselves LGBT, according to Gallup (Jones, 2022). Fortune Magazine reported that a survey conducted by DISQO quantitatively found that LGBTQ messaging was “oversaturated” (DISQO, 2022) and that over one in five Americans want less LGBTQ+ visibility in advertising. Of those who are part of the LGBTQ+ community, 3.25% wanted less visibility; however, 21.29% of those with “unsure/questioning” sexual identity wanted less. One of the stated reasons was the lack of corporate authenticity and sincerity. The authors opine that SJCM may do more “harm than good” (Wolny, Grabert, Cliszek, & Wolff, 2022).

The emotionality of social justice issues creates a possible “chilling effect” in focus group responses (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). Disagreements with widely held beliefs carry consequences. Cancel culture is real. Brendan Eich, the former Mozilla CEO, resigned after public outcries called for his ouster after he donated \$1,000 to support California Proposition 8 (McBride, 2014), a constitutional amendment that banned gay marriage and *was approved* by the voters. The California Supreme Court later overturned the amendment. Although the confidentiality of respondents to focus group questions is promised, data breaches are common, and there is no reason that focus group participants would not consider possible repercussions before responding to marketers’ questions. Consumers’ demands exist, and corporations perceive the need to respond. Product or service demographic, sociographic, and psychographic segmentation do not easily crossover to SJCM.

Consumer segmentation has been used for many decades. Demographic marketing allowed a relatively straightforward process of identifying consumers within cohort groups. More specific cohorts could be defined as more detailed and voluminous data collected and analyzed. Psychographic and sociographic segmentation are more challenging to distinctly group as there are multiple overlaps among groups, and marketers cannot effectively interview large consumer segments qualitatively. Psychographic segmentation is linked to the consumers’ identity yet has multiple influencers and sources.

Reed et al. (2012) have researched identity in consumer behavior and settled upon the definition, “...we define an identity as any category label to which a consumer self-

associates either by choice or endowment” (Reed, Forehand, Puntoni, & Warlop, 2012). The succinctness of the definition allows for researchers’ inclusive view of the self without the encumbrances of subdivision or referent, as do schemata frameworks in psychology. Within the consumers’ description of self are the self-assigned or endowed labels, be they “stable” or “fluid,” that become identity after “...the consumer has begun to incorporate it [the label] into his or her sense of whom he or she is *and* has initiated the process to become that kind of person” (Reed, Forehand, Puntoni, & Warlop, 2012). Reed's definition argues that a label must be internalized and acted upon to be considered an identity.

Identity is but one mediating variable. Both semiotics and linguistics address the conventions of identification. The triad advanced by Pierce categorically classified semiotic vehicles into symbols, indexes, and icons (Symbol, Index, Icon, n.d.). Symbols are most subject to distortion and are the focus of this paper.

Languages are symbolic systems; a word symbolizes and represents something yet is not the thing itself. The symbol “dog” is not the mammal, the symbol “hate” is not the feeling, and the symbol “pretty” is not the poorly defined adjective. All symbols represent a *generally* agreed-upon meaning. One of the many ways linguistics categorizes these symbols is by grouping similarly functioning symbols into parts of speech. Nouns are labels that symbolize persons, places, or things, whether concrete or abstract. Adjectives impart qualities to nouns. Regardless of linguistic categorization, each label identifies and describes obvious (bus/train) or subtle and distinct (polite/courteous) differences between words of disparate or similar meanings. In colloquial usage, labels exist to define distinctions between and among the generally agreed-upon meaning of the symbols.

Finally, identity using symbolic linguistic labels is used to create, construct, organize, and perpetrate hierarchical structures used in social dominance, as discussed by Roberts & Rizzo. Roberts & Rizzo (2021) identified seven factors contributing to racism: categories, factions, segregation, hierarchy, power, media, and passivism. Categories share attributes (“essence”) that create (“grant”) identity to them. Categories are distinguished and facilitated through the assignment of labels (symbols) and the particular properties of the label; for example, chickens (label) lay eggs (property). The property is attached to the label in a general sense.

Properties (characteristics) may be intrinsic or assigned. Inherent properties (chickens/eggs) are immutable; yet may lack accuracy. Chickens, as a species, lay eggs; however, only sexually mature hens lay eggs. Roosters and juveniles do not. Agreement upon the “accepted meaning” is provided through contextual clues.

Assigned attributes are generalizations; for example, Americans like hot dogs. Generalizations are applied to an entire population based on inference from limited observations. Generalizations are malleable. The transformation of generalizations into stereotypes occurs when the generalizations are judgmental, lack exceptions, dominate other individual features, remain static, and are not data-driven (Generalizations v. Stereotypes, 2013). Stereotyping moves assigned attributes into permanent, essential, and inherent qualities no longer divisible from the property/label.

In product and service marketing, researchers determine what characteristics are included within a segmented label group, target their messaging to reach the correct audience and position the messages to trigger the specific identity desired. Positioning labels occupy a place in the consumer’s mind regardless of their validity. Louis Vuitton positions its purses to communicate beauty, class, elegance, financial wherewithal, and quality, among other attributes but in the mind of some consumers, it essentially communicates, “*I am better than you* (Main, 2017).” Positioning communicates differences between competitors’ products and services, but more importantly, it communicates

differences *between consumers*. Noteworthy is that the assumptive characteristics of racism are the same assumptions used to assign label attributes in the marketing segmentation, targeting, and positioning model.

Faction formation under Roberts and Rizzo (2021) extends Minimal Groups Phenomena, which is considered fundamental in Social Identity Theory (SIT). The idea that individuals endow positive attributes to others similar to themselves is not surprising (Crest et al. v Padilla, 2022). The roots of the like-individual association have been investigated in marketing. Taute and Sierra researched anthropological origins and segmentary lineage to explain Brand Tribalism (BT) (Taute & Sierra, 2014); however, the majority of research has focused on how BT influences consumer attitude toward brand, defense of brand, and repurchase intention, and other downstream relationships rather than its formation. Notwithstanding, without the individuals' "choice or endowment" of identity and the subsequent "internalization and action" taken to incorporate the identity (Reed et al., 2012), tribes cannot form. Goulding et al. state, "...they need a story, myth or narrative around which they can unite, and it is the marketer's challenge to enable them to connect easily with each other" (Goulding, Shankar, & Canniford, 2013). Bender (1978) defined "community" as "a network of social relations marked by mutuality and emotional bonds." The shared properties, attributes, and labels create and bind a tribe or any societal faction while simultaneously distinguishing the tribe or faction from others.

Segregation is the grouping of factions. Segregation leads to narrower perceptions due to less interracial contact, influences individuals' preferences within a race (Roberts and Rizzo 2021), and lessens understanding between groups while reinforcing existing beliefs. Segregation is not limited to race but may apply to any arbitrary category marker. Marketers do not create segregation in society. Instead, marketers target and position to the existing demographic, psychographic, and sociographic dimensions. Notwithstanding, behavioral responses to SJCM efforts vary due to the perceptions created and reinforced *by* segregation.

Hierarchies delineate and rank individuals and groups by "relative status" or authority. Social Dominance Theory posits three hierarchies defined by the sets of age (older adults vs. adults vs. juveniles vs. children), gender (men vs. women), and arbitrary, "defined by social distinctions meaningfully *related to power*, such as...nationality, 'race,' ethnicity, class, estate, descent, religion, or clan," and that these systems exist in all societies (Pratto, Sidanius, & Levin, 2006). Organization is the manifestation of power dynamics imbued through assignment into hierarchies. Lastly, they found that the trimorphic set distinctions exist in all human societies; however, not to the same degree of severity across the three dimensions.

Power is the ability to perpetuate existing social structures and beliefs in society. In other words, those who possess power define societal norms and control and manipulate the societal environment (Roberts & Rizzo, 2021). Further, Pratto et al. (2006) state that dominant social groups benefit more than subordinate groups viz wealth, roles, and the allocation and distribution of resources.

Media is the distribution, amplification, and mechanism for the beliefs of dominant social groups to be communicated (Roberts & Rizzo, 2021) (Hall, 1973). Sixty years ago, there were three primary media channels, print, radio, and television. Newspapers and radio were primarily local or regional, whereas television was a mixture of local/regional and national. Message transmission was limited by how many times a paper could be printed, who could produce and transmit a message, and the limited number of frequencies available for radio and television (Innis, 1951). Therefore, newspapers were more time-based media relative to the more space-based media of radio and television;

the finite transmission channels limited the number of producers and the total amount of messages that could be transmitted.

Cable television, the internet, and social media platforms changed everything. No longer were producers able to as easily control, to the degree that they were ever able to control, the channels of communication and the denotative and connotative meanings of the messages. Nonetheless, these communication modes generally reflected the “dominant or preferred meanings” (Hall, 1973). Innis would argue that newspapers, television, and the internet are space-based media easily transmissible (light media) and shorter-lived (Innis, 1951). The focus should be, however, on the centralization of power and “control over power, wealth, and force” (Comer, 2001). As technology increased, avenues of access increased, and producers were not limited to those reinforcing the socially dominant messages of the past. All Facebook or Twitter users can transmit messages. Despite the space-based classification of the internet, decentralization has occurred, and information volume has dramatically increased but with a corresponding decrease in control of knowledge. Technology blurs the line between time-based and space-based media, control of knowledge, and control of power. It is this dynamic that the social justice marketer must be cognizant.

The final category noted by Roberts and Rizzo (2021) is passivism, the inherited racist system that denies or overlooks racism. It is passivism that allows racist and other attitudes and beliefs to persist. If corporate SJCM efforts are to effect change, consumer passivism is a failure. Financial consequences may occur if the efforts are opportunistic, that is, to sell more products or services. Passivism is not the worst possible outcome; however, consumer retaliation is.

June is celebrated as LGBT Pride Month. Three presidents have made official declarations, Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, and Joe Biden. Many corporations acknowledge this month through displays, advertisements, and other efforts. The NFL is no different.

On June 28, 2021, the National Football League posted the video on its official YouTube Channel entitled, *Football is for everyone* to coincide with the celebration of LGBT Pride Month and to support The Trevor Project, an organization focused on suicide prevention in the LBGTQ+ community (The National Football League, 2021). The NFL YouTube Channel has 9.45 million subscribers.

Outsports quoted Sam Rapoport, Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for the NFL, “I am proud of the clear message this spot sends to the NFL’s LBGTQ+ fans: This game is unquestionably for you” (Bumbaca, 2021). Samantha Ross, a league spokesperson, said that the video directly responded to Carl Nassib’s announcement that he was gay (Zeigler, 2021). Nassib played professionally for the Las Vegas Raiders. His release from the team was reported on March 17, 2022 (Bellamy-Walker, 2022) Nassib donated \$100,000 to The Trevor Project, and the NFL matched the donation (CBS News Pittsburg, 2021). The video has generated approximately 2,400 “thumbs up” or likes and 12,000 “thumbs down” or dislikes.

Methodology

The source of the advertisement was the NFL’s YouTube channel. A netnographic approach was applied to the user comments available online and publicly accessible (Kozinets, 2002) through August of 2021. We used a YouTube Data API (Application Program Interface) running a script in Google Sheets (LearningOrbis, 2020) to scrape the comments from the NFL YouTube video. The data were exported into MS Excel, containing 2,905 total comments and replies. All comments and replies were captured as of the date

of capture. The ratio of comments to replies was 2,220 to 789. Comments were categorized within Stuart Hall's reception theory framework.

Using Hall's decoding framework, we classified comments as follows: Preferred reading (Hegemonic or Dominant) - understands the producer's encoding of the message, reproduces the producer's preferred (intended) meaning, and accepts the message's preferred meaning. We illuminate that when we refer to hegemonic or dominant, we refer to the producers' encoding of the message within the *dominant ideology of the media elite* (Hall, 1973). Decoders both agree upon and accept the encoder's meaning. This meaning, however, may not be congruent with the dominant ideology in society.

Negotiated reading - understands the producer's encoding of the message but reproduces it in such a manner as to agree with their existing belief systems, experiences, or interests. Negotiated reading allows for "understand and agree, except." It is rationalized decoding of the message.

Oppositional reading - understands the producer's encoding of the message but rejects the preferred reading and substitutes an alternative code. That is, the decoder is "determined to decode [the message] in a globally contrary way" (Hall, 1973).

Some comments are not explicit or interpretable to be categorized. These include any language other than English, comments containing emoticons only, hyperlinks to different web pages, and incomplete thoughts. These comments are coded as "undetermined."

YouTube stopped displaying the dislike count because of concerns about targeted harassment and to reduce dislike attacks (The YouTube Team, 2021). Google Chrome, however, offers a Return YouTube Dislikes extension for its browser that was used to capture the dislike number (Return YouTube Dislike, n.d.). Comments were downloaded from newest to oldest. Next, the first and last download comments were verified against the YouTube comment section. Then, they were manually evaluated into Hall's preferred, negotiated, and oppositional framework. Some comments clearly expressed the reason for the oppositional decoding are included herein and discussed.

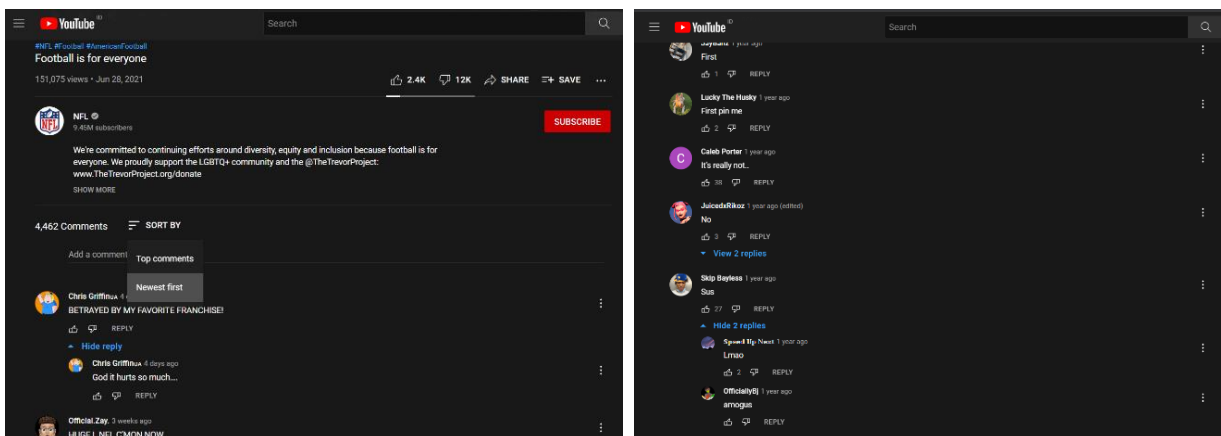


Figure 2-Comment Capture Validation First & Last- Source: YouTube by author

We screened for duplicate posters who repeated the same or similar opinions. Those who replied to comments were not considered. Replies to a comment classified within Hall's framework would represent a new producer/receiver loop because the reply is outside the video producer and consumer receiver framework. Data were analyzed and grouped into the preferred, negotiated, oppositional, or undetermined related to the encoded message intention of the producer.

Results and Discussion

The video received 2.4k likes and 12k dislikes (see figure 2). The rate of disapproval was 83.3%. Data were analyzed to determine preferred, negotiated, or opposition decoding. Of the 2,220 comments reviewed, 71 (3.20%) were coded as preferred readings, 296 (13.33%) as negotiated, 1,641 (73.92%) as oppositional, and 212 (9.55%) as undetermined. The volume of preferred decoding was small relative to the total comments, as was the like-to-dislike ratio.

Advertisement Structure

The video opens with bold white lettering revealed from left to right over a black background with a drum roll and cymbal audio track and verbal “hoots” at various times throughout the ad. The all-caps text used in the advertisement was as follows:

FOOTBALL IS GAY
FOOTBALL IS LESBIAN
FOOTBALL IS BEAUTIFUL
FOOTBALL IS QUEER
FOOTBALL IS LIFE
FOOTBALL IS EXCITING



Figure3-Advertisement Opening Source: YouTube by author

FOOTBALL IS CULTURE
FOOTBALL IS TRANSGENDER
FOOTBALL IS HEART
FOOTBALL IS POWER
FOOTBALL IS TOUGH
FOOTBALL IS BISEXUAL
FOOTBALL IS STRONG
FOOTBALL IS FREEDOM
FOOTBALL IS AMERICAN
FOOTBALL IS ACCEPTING
FOOTBALL IS EVERYTHING
FOOTBALL IS FOR EVERYONE

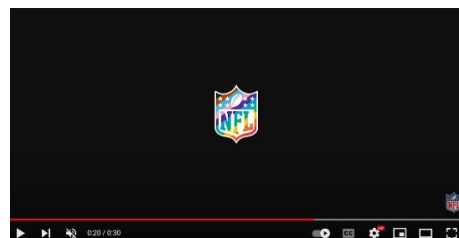


Figure 4-NFL Logo Source: YouTube by author

NFL logo in LGBTQ+ colors appears, followed by:
NFL PROUDLY SUPPORTS THE TREVOR PROJECT
LGBTQ+ YOUTH WITH AT LEAST ONE ACCEPTING ADULT
HAVE 40% LOWER RISK OF ATTEMPTING SUICIDE

Except for the NFL logo, the advertisement uses symbols in creating its sign vehicles; no icons or indexes are used.

Semiotically, signified and signifier should agree, at least in the most widely accepted sense. The verb “is” in the advertisement was often taken denotatively to mean “exist” or “equals” rather than connotatively and metaphorically to mean “for.” Samuel Durey stated, “I learned in math class that “is” means “equals”... so that would mean that gay is football...” (forming a subject compliment). Another commenter wrote, “Football is gay” (Jim Frost). “‘Football is gay.’ Hey, the NFL said it, not me” (Holy Family Crusader). Trevor Phillips stated, “Everyone outside of North America could have told you that way before. American football was always gay. 😊” A sampling of 1,000 opposition comments yielded 106 commenters who decode the message denotatively. In this case, the NFL

decided to employ symbols rather than icons and indices and failed to "frame the construct."

The NFL website states, "We're committed to continuing efforts around diversity, equity, and inclusion because football is for everyone. We proudly support the LGBTQ+ community and The Trevor Project: [TheTrevorProject.org/donate](https://www.thetrevorproject.org/donate)" (NFL, n.d.). The issue is authenticity. Gay Pride month is celebrated in the United States from June 1 until June 30 each year, yet the NFL failed to communicate its commitment until June 28 and only in response to the announcement of Carl Nassib. Consumers commented on the lack of authenticity of the video.

Some referenced the lack of support for Colin Kaepernick, the NFL quarterback who knelt to protest police violence against Black Americans during the national anthem. Christopher Crowder stated, *"Everyone except Collin Kaepernick."* *"Obviously not for Kaepernick, smh...and all he did was kneel,"* said Blong Vang.

The NFL has a history of a lack of authenticity by ignoring player behavior. Accused by at least two dozen women of sexual assault and misconduct, Deshaun Watson began serving an *eleven-week* suspension and was fined \$5 million. The government did not bring criminal charges; still, his behavior was described as "egregious" and "predatory" by Sue L. Robinson, NFL disciplinary officer (Trotter, 2022). Violence against women is often inconsistently disciplined by the NFL, and individuals with violence against women are drafted into the league (Walker, 2019). Chris Detrin commented, *"Is the NFL still okay with players beating women?"* and Bcam 291 wrote, *"Football is... accepting of Deshaun Watson's treatment of women."* Finally, Dean Walker opined, *"Pop Warner just left the building. Gay? Of course, welcome....absolutely...I shoulda walked at women beaters...but walking now on your ridiculous, all of a sudden, we care policy. Best of luck."* Ignoring other critical social issues, police brutality, spousal abuse, and sexual harassment, undermines support of the social justice content marketing issue in the advertisement and allows consumers oppositional decoding opportunities.

A history of advocacy adds credibility to the message, and increases preferred decoding. Corporations must "be ahead of the issue" instead of reacting to events (Coca-Cola, Delta). Many commenters believed the NFL was engaging in "woke washing" and opportunistic marketing. *"Your organization is an absolute joke! I truly hope you lose millions of dollars over this pathetic attempt at virtue signaling,"* wrote Zach Parsley. Christian Hundley stated, *"Virtue Signaling at its absolute finest,"* and Kayden Bronzynski opined, *"July 1. The day every company immediately stops virtue signaling for pride and goes back to normal. Companies don't care; they just care about making money from exploiting people and looking like they care."* Finally, T. Blaze stated, *"Fire your entire marketing team."*

Symbolic labeling in the ad is divisive. The advertisement used lists and concluded, "Football is for everyone.". The NFL's core demographic, Gerardo Dueñas, noted, *"Why wasn't heterosexual there?? I thought it's for everyone."* Joe Young stated, *"NFL is apparently not for everyone; it just left me out!"* Paulymer observed, *"Just more proof that 'pride' is, in fact, anti-straight when in a video that says 'football is for everyone' they list every other sexuality EXCEPT straight. It's not for everyone then, is it?"*

We need to illuminate the general distinctions between SJCM and traditional product and service marketing before we apply the existing linguistic, semiotic, and communication frameworks to the NFL advertisement. According to Cravens and Percy, *"...[an] organization must monitor...customer needs and wants..."* (Cravens & Percy, 2009). *Tout court*, a consumer must have a want or need to monitor; at any given moment, the want or need must, at minimum, latently exist to be activated or be created through

an activated or newly formed awareness. Further, the want or need must benefit the consumer in some way. Herein is the first divergence: consumers not in the marginalized social group may not see societal changes as a personal benefit, although they may want societal changes to occur; any benefit to them is more indirect than direct.

Traditional segmentation and targeting identify a want or need for a given consumer population. Within the universe of consumers in a society, how do marketers psychographically and sociotographically identify the populations of racists, sexists, and tribalists? They cannot. Therefore, SJCM messages are broadcast to everyone, regardless of individual beliefs. Segmentation is *implied* to groups that in the past have been perpetrators of pejorative behaviors; however, individuals within a group may not engage in such behaviors. For example, segmentation of LGBTQ+ SMJ advertisements is implied to non-LGBTQ+ individuals. Generalized segmentation assumes that all members of the targeted group believe the same.

Conversely, marginalized groups may hold stereotypical beliefs about socially dominant groups. In other words, all individuals and groups have implicit biases (Steinhauser, 2020). The Kirwan Institute at The Ohio State University defines implicit bias as "the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, decisions, and actions in an unconscious manner." These implicit biases we *all* hold do not necessarily *align with our own declared beliefs*" (Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, 2012) (Levy, 2017). Implicit biases result in the denial of unconscious biases in the individual when confronted. Implicit bias is the problem key for the marketer: the misalignment of declared beliefs with actual beliefs. Rejection of socially beneficial messages can be unconscious.

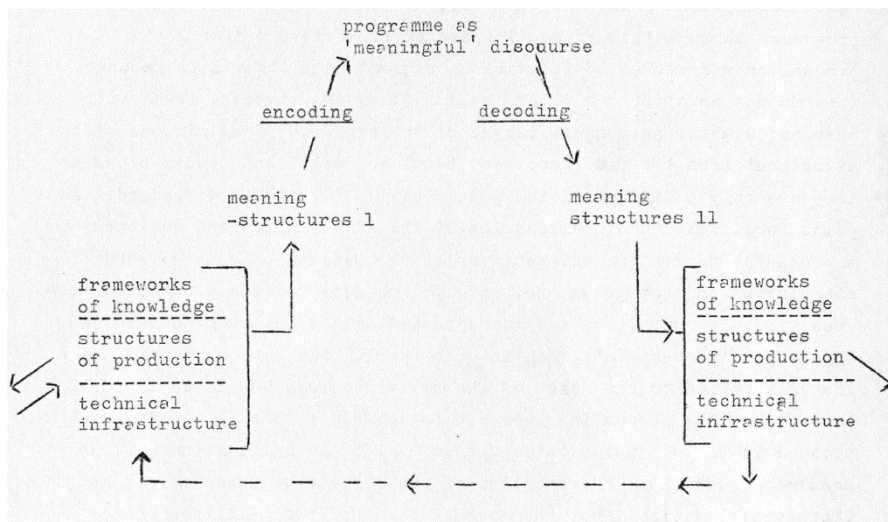


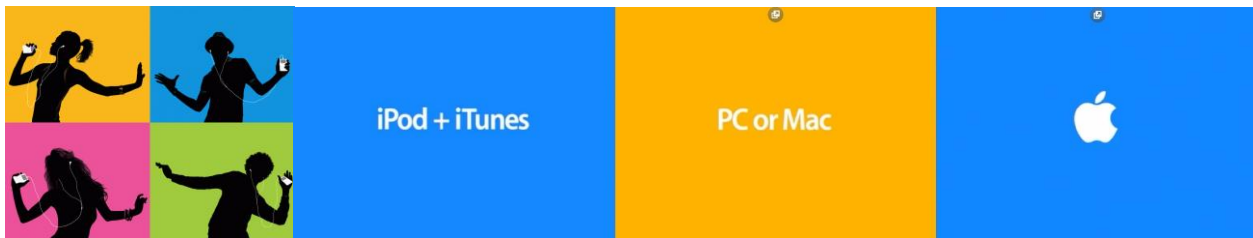
Figure 5-Stuart Hall's Framework Source: Stuart Hall 1973

Hall was concerned with the political implications of encoding and decoding, and, as such, Hall's framework is essential for marketers to understand and consider when designing social justice campaigns as they are political. Marketers must remain cognizant of the decoding of messages and that decoding occurs within a "specific social and cultural context" (Xie, Yasin, Alsagoff, & Ang, 2022). Implicit bias resides within the social and cultural context, the frameworks of knowledge Hall described.

Hall and The NFL is for everyone advertisement

The focus of Hall in his seminal 1973 paper was encoding and decoding in television programming. Notwithstanding its scope, one may consider any television commercial a condensed program. Hall (1973) stated that for a meaningful discourse to occur, it must tell a "story"; however, the story is not a fixed moment only to be received but is created by the recipient in the decoding moment. We use the phrase "frame the construct" to mean that marketers should encode messages in such a way as to restrict alternative interpretations of the message. Additionally, a story must be told (Hall, 1973). From least specific to most specific sign vehicles, symbols (words) are most subject to polysemic decoding, icons (photos, drawings) best represent the signified object, and indices are in the middle. Hall (1973) argues that polysemy is but one explanation for message decoding distortion.

The iPod was introduced in 2001 and sold one million units between its introduction and 2003. Apple began its iPod "Silhouette" campaign in the fourth quarter of 2003. The icon-heavy advertisements used black silhouettes of people dancing against electric green, blue, fuchsia, and yellow backgrounds.



Figures 6 and 7-Apple-TBWA\CHIAT\DAY\ Silhouette Source: MBA Knowledge Base and YouTube by Author

TBWA\CHIAT\DAY advertising used only five symbols and two indices. The agency framed the construct to focus on the user experience. Iconography restricted decoding to focus on what the product does *for* the consumer, not what the product *does*. It is an invitation to have fun; as Sarah Giannantonio, SVP, Team NBC Universal, Streaming Marketing + Media, stated, "...the universally appealing nature of music and how it quite literally moves us," and "...these dancers could be any one of us" (The Drum Team, 2016). The following year, Apple sold 4.4 million iPods (Dilger, 2013) for a 92% market share (MBA Knowledge Base, n.d.).

Linguistically, the verb "to be" forms a subject complement. Subject complements are referent to the subject and function to equate the subject and its complement and easily allow the consumer to default to the literal decoding of the message. Linking verbs rarely enable meaning to be parsed.

Authenticity

Preferred decoding also requires consistency of messaging over long periods. Apple has been an advocate of personal privacy. In 2010, Steve Jobs said, "I believe people are smart, and some people want to share more data than other people do. Ask them. Ask them every time. Make them tell you to stop asking them if they get tired of your asking them. Let them know precisely what you're going to do with their data" (Yurieff, 2018). Apple announced that it would scan for "child abuse imagery" on iPhones and photos uploaded to iCloud (Peters, 2021). The backlash was widespread against the initiative. The Center for Democracy & Technology (CDT) objected to the initiatives and wrote in a

letter to Tim Cook, CEO of Apple, that governments will take advantage of the surveillance capability Apple is building into iPhones, iPads, and computers and "Once the CSAM hash scanning for photos is built into Apple products, the company will face enormous pressure, and possibly legal requirements, from governments around the world to scan for all sorts of images that the governments find objectionable" (Franklin & Nojeim, 2021). This was a marked departure from Apple's commitment to privacy and forced the company to publicly postpone the implementation of the software features stating, "Based on feedback from customers...we have decided to take additional time...before releasing these critically important child safety features" (Barrett & Newman, 2021). With a history of privacy advocacy, one decision by a company can undermine years of social content marketing. The NFL has no such history.

Labeling, Identity, and Targeting

We argue that labeling contrasts the signified with another signified rather than compares them. When SJCM encodes messages using group labels, linguistically and semiotically, it distinguishes and defines differences between groups, not the commonalities among them. The differences usually delineate mutual exclusivity. Labeling is the product of identity, not the cause; however, within a segmented population, consumers may own many labels from various sources (Reed, 2010). Specifically, "gay" and "lesbian" are exclusive to each other, as are other labels such as "black" and "white" when describing race.

The effects of the NFL advertisement are challenging to measure. With one exception, the Green Bay Packers, all thirty-two NFL franchises are privately held entities that do not report financial data (Eckstein, 2022). Large media corporations pay for broadcast rights to NFL games, so a direct product-to-customer link does not exist except for the NFL+ streaming service. Therefore, consumer backlash to labeling in SJCM cannot be accurately measured for the NFL.

Public companies, however, do disclose financial data. Proctor and Gamble company posted an \$8 billion write-down for its subsidiary, Gillette, after its "Toxic Masculinity" advertising campaign. Mark Borkowski, an expert in Public Relations, said the advertisements were a "fantastically well-thought-through campaign." Consumers thought otherwise. Andrew P Street, Speechwriter, SA Department of Premier and Cabinet, observed, "The comments under the @Gillette toxic masculinity ad is a living document of how desperately society needs things like the Gillette toxic masculinity ad" (Topping, Lyone, & Weaver, 2019) (Rashid, 2022). Gillette said it would be "shifting the spotlight from social issues to local heroes" (Chung, 2019).

Hall (1973) argues that elites dominate the production of programs (messages) and encode them to reflect cultural policies and programs. These reflect the dominant societal belief systems. We argue that the oppositional decoding and rejection of the Nike *Dream Crazy*, Gillette *Toxic Masculinity*, and the *NFL is for everyone* messages were a function of identity, semiotics, and implicit bias. More importantly, it was the encoding of a minority cultural belief as a dominant belief.

Marketing Implications, General

Rarely is Hall's reception theory touched upon in marketing education nor given much thought in ad agencies. Although positioning, brand identity, and brand image are discussed in-depth, a structured analysis of knowledge frameworks in consumer decoding is not proactively evaluated. Focus groups are often used, but researchers and producers cannot identify the disconnect between stated beliefs and implicit biases that

manifest after the ad campaign has been released to the public. Remembering that there are cultures within cultures means that labeling allows for ad rejection based upon identity, excessive use of symbols leads to oppositional decoding, and dominant social beliefs resist change. The question of socially dominant messaging versus politically correct messaging or if media elites are encoding through a "tyranny of the majority" (Reynolds, 2009) is to message acceptance through preferred decoding. A misalignment between dominant and politically correct messaging can be financially detrimental. Nike got it right, but Gillette did not.

If the marketer's goal is to affect social change, SJCM, in its current form, failed to result in any measurable change in the targeted society. If the goal is to gain more customers, the risk of alienation and inadvertent cannibalization of core customers and the financial impact on the company due to SJCM must be weighed against profits.

The Invitation to Change and the Common Denominator

Consumers are aware of society's problems, and changes to reduce prejudice benefit society; however, they may be incapable of seeing a direct benefit to themselves. Nor do many consider themselves to be, at the very least, the passive perpetrators of the ills they wish remedied. Alexander Hamilton noted that persecution and demonization rarely result in converts to new beliefs when he said, "*For in politics, as in religion, it is equally absurd to aim at making proselytes by fire and sword. Heresies in either can rarely be cured by persecution.*" (Hamilton, 1787).

Bill Backer of McCann Erickson Advertising Agency and creative director for the Coca-Cola account answered the question of how to get consumers to engage in an issue that may not resonate with their identity and beliefs. In 1971 Backer co-created the "I'd Like to Buy the World a Coke" campaign. The "Hilltop" ad was not intended to be an SJCM advertisement, yet, it became one. Backer observed, "...Coke not as it was originally designed to be -- a liquid refresher -- *but as a tiny bit of commonality between all peoples*" (The Coca-Cola Company, n.d.). Backer added that Coca-Cola "...could be a little *social catalyst* that can bring people together." The ad "became a rallying message of tolerance and hope," and "the lyrics, although not overtly anti-war, delivered a message of peace and camaraderie (Cause Marketing, n.d.)."

SJCM must invite the consumer to change their beliefs. Semiotically, the ad used two symbolic vehicles, the lyrics, and the melody, with icons that "framed the construct" of consumer decoding: inclusivity and equality. The idea of inclusivity and equality were never explicitly stated nor forced upon the consumer; they were *inferred*. The consumer will know the genesis of the belief or message as either a product of their creation or a dogma being forced upon them. Allowing the consumer to infer meaning creates an affinity with the message. Hall would call this the determinant moment when the decoder becomes the message producer. Consumers must be allowed to create socially acceptable beliefs. Iconography *showed* togetherness and allowed the consumer to imagine an inclusive, diverse, and beneficial world for those living there.

No symbols used labeled any of the individuals or groups of people portrayed. Labeling marginalized groups would have distinguished one group from another, placing them into distinct, non-overlapping factions and organized into relative status hierarchies.



Lyrics:

I'd like to buy the world a home
And furnish it with love
Grow apple trees and honey bees
And snow white turtle doves

Chorus:

I'd like to teach the world to sing
In perfect harmony
I'd like to buy the world a Coke
And keep it company
That's the real thing

Figure 8-Coca-Cola "Hilltop" Advertisement-Source: YouTube by Author

Linguistically, the lyrics used one broad, all-inclusive symbol, "world." Connotative and metaphorical meanings supplanted the denotative meaning. Congruency between linguistic and music sign vehicles and icons led the consumer to decode the message in the preferred manner. Most importantly, the producer's encoded socially dominant beliefs were congruent with the recipients existing frameworks of knowledge.

Further Study

The cross-pollination and framework overlap between marketing, psychology, sociology, and communication theories is open to further study. We propose further studies to validate if non-dominant social encoding is causative in rejecting politically correct messaging. Similar instances of rejection of SJCM warrant investigation through Stuart Hall's decoding model. Studies examining the negotiated and oppositional decoding of advertisements using Pierce's sign vehicles of symbol, index, and icon

Conclusion

Racism, sexual identity, and ageism are all within the arbitrary social dominance category, and all members equal standing among other members. To create equality between the arbitrary category members and the dominant social class, producers attempt to encode minority belief systems as majority ones. We conclude that oppositional decoding under Hall is determined by consumers' cognizance of dominant belief systems and rejecting others. The internet has conflated the differences between the time-based or spaced-based framework offered by Innis. The limits and control of knowledge and the restrictions over the ability of consumers to retransmit messages no longer remain within the producers' ability to control, and oppositional consumers may reframe and retransmit individual determinate decoding moments as the marketers'

intended positioning of the advertisement. Because determinate moments of decoding are dominated by recipients' frameworks of knowledge that include implicit bias that is unknown and *unavailable to be known* to the marketer, predicting advertisement positioning is difficult.

Further, consumers are aware that the respective reference groups they are engaged with may hinder intended positioning further. Expression of beliefs and behaviors while engaged with a group do not necessarily reflect personal beliefs; stated beliefs may be truthful and accurate or acquiesce to known group beliefs in defense of self or other unstated, personal motivations. Regardless, the marketer cannot accurately research unexpressed beliefs.

Marketing has been extensively researched. Generally, segmentation, targeting, and positioning identify the most likely consumers effectively, choose the most effective vehicle for messaging, and attempt to communicate the position well. Where positioning fails in marketing rests within the determinate moment of decoding; that is, positioning is rarely explicit but rather implicit. Understanding this vital moment in the communication process requires that marketing students have a working understanding of Hall and others. Knowledge of semiotics will help marketers choose more effective symbols, indices, and icons to reduce polysemy. In a broader context, marketers must evaluate if the SJCM message accurately reflects congruency with the existing dominant accepted belief(s) in a given society or the future ideal. We conclude that symbols allow for greater negotiated and oppositional decoding due to increased polysemy, and icon usage increases preferred decoding of messages due to reduced polysemy under Hall's framework.

The corporate dimension of increased brand affinity and profits through SJCM is possible (Nike) while carrying grave financial consequences (Gillette) when executed poorly. Knowing how the consumer will potentially decode the SJCM beforehand is essential. Corporations must have a consistent, public stance on issues, not reactive ones.

The social change dimension is different. SJCM is not offering a product or service or even an idea about a product or service: it is selling a belief. Endowed beliefs and endowed identities are more static, rigid, and resistant to change. Encoding SJCM messages that activate unwanted consumer identities and broadcast non-dominant ideas as dominant will also be rejected. Finally, the genesis of any social change within a given societal structure does not rest with the corporation; changes rest within the political, legislative, educational, and individual members of society.

Political, societal, and cultural ramifications are beyond the scope of this study. Without question, however, there are effects. Marketing and communication theories are at a tenuous intersection with technology. Increased accessibility to "publish" without "peer review" allows for alternative "truths" to propagate through social media channels as well as traditional channels. The vocal minority has increased power the amplification power of the internet. We are in a new age of communications.

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