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## Corporate Social Advocacy: Addressing Social Justice in the Age of Black Lives Matter

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CORPORATE SOCIAL ADVOCACY: ADDRESSING SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE AGE OF  
BLACK LIVES MATTER

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2016

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
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## ABSTRACT

This research explores corporate advocacy and support for the Black Lives Matter movement. Using organizational legitimacy theory as a theoretical framework, this research employed thematic analyses in order to study statements issued by *Fortune's* 50 most admired companies in response to the re-energized Black Lives Matter movement. These statements were studied using thematic content analysis in order to gauge corporate engagement with the movement, as well as indicate themes of authenticity or hypocrisy apparent in the statements. The study revealed major themes of support and authentic engagement, as well as highlighted the missing components that may indicate hypocritical stances to stakeholders. This research contributes to public relations scholarship through its examination of how practitioners strategically communicate around racial or social justice issues in the context of corporate social advocacy. Stakeholders grant legitimacy to companies and cyclically, that legitimacy is earned and reinforced by ongoing corporate actions, to include perceptions of authentic corporate engagement with controversial social-political issues. This study expands on public relations research about communicating corporate commitment to social advocacy, specifically as it pertains to contentious social justice issues. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

This paper is broken into five chapters. The first chapter includes an introduction to the study, a mention of the theoretical frameworks employed in the study, and a description of the study's relevance. Chapter Two includes an in-depth literature review of the theoretical frameworks relevant to the research, as well as background on the Black Lives Matter movement and its recent resurgence. The second chapter also highlights how organizations have responded to the BLM movement. Next, Chapter Three describes the study's methodology, a qualitative

content analysis of official corporate statements about the BLM civil rights movement. Chapter Four then outlines results in the form of common themes identified across corporate statements. Last, Chapter Five provides the discussion, future research suggestions, and practical implications of the research conducted.

*Keywords:* activism, authenticity, black lives matter, corporate social advocacy, corporate social responsibility, issues management, organizational legitimacy, organizational hypocrisy, public relations

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

On May 25, 2020, Minneapolis police officers arrested George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, after a convenience store clerk called 911 and told the police that Floyd had used a counterfeit \$20 bill to make a purchase. Seventeen minutes after the first police squad car arrived, Floyd was unconscious, pinned beneath three white police officers. Floyd died in police custody after officer Derek Chauvin knelt on his neck for 9 minutes and 29 seconds – a length of time that became a rallying cry for protestors – as Floyd pleaded: “I can’t breathe.” The online, viral spread of the video of George Floyd’s murder powerfully re-ignited the Black Lives Matter (BLM) civil rights movement and made policing and racial injustice a focal point of modern discourse. By 2020, two-thirds of Americans indicated support for the BLM movement (Pew Research Center, 2020).

As public support for the BLM movement grew, so too did public expectations for corporate engagement in the movement. Through corporate social responsibility (CSR) companies look beyond their bottom lines and focus on the communities they operate in. Companies create CSR initiatives to address ethical and philanthropic responsibilities, but as society progresses the expected responsibilities of corporate organizations continue to shift (Carroll, 1999), and stakeholders expect more than CSR initiatives; they expect companies to be advocates and partners in addressing some of the greatest issues facing society today.

During the tumultuous times of the BLM protests and riots, organizations have issued statements of support, pledged donations to the BLM movement, reviewed internal policies and structures, and some companies have even advised consumers not to use their services if they do not agree with the major tenets of the movement. Often hyperpolarized and controversial,



corporate social advocacy (CSA) addresses a shifting business-society-government dynamic characteristic of modern corporate social responsibility (Dodd, 2018); that is, the responsibilities of business to society and expectations of organizational impacts on society (Capizzo, 2020; Coombs & Holladay, 2018; Gaither et al., 2018; Park & Jiang, 2020).

Corporate involvement in the BLM civil rights movement was not the first time that stakeholders have expected companies to engage with contentious issues of public concern. According to the Pew Research Center (2019, Sept.), 60% of Americans have called for stricter gun laws, up 8% from a March 2017 poll (Pew Research Center, 2019). American public opinion of gun control laws can be attributed to the nation's continuous witnessing of mass shootings. At Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, 49 people were killed by a gunman in June 2016. Fifty-eight people were murdered by gun violence at a Las Vegas, Nevada concert in October of 2017, and on Valentine's Day of 2018, 17 students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida were shot to death. In the wake of these massacres, corporations have stepped up and taken a stance. Large gun sellers such as Kroger, Walmart, L.L Bean and Dick's Sporting Goods self-regulated by no longer selling guns to anyone over the age of 21 (Everytown Support Fund, n.d.). Businesses from the financial sector decided to update their lending policies and stated that they will no longer be lending to gun manufacturers (Everytown Support Fund, n.d.). The shoe-seller TOMS pledged a \$5 million donation to end gun violence (Fortune, 2018). This demonstrates that corporations have the capacity to take a stance on controversial social-political issues, even if that issue does not directly involve their business operations and how companies engaging with these issues may operate with greater legitimacy.

Through the lens of organizational legitimacy theory, organizations exist by way of public permission and should function within society's expectations (Suchman, 1995). When

corporate organizations do not adhere to societal norms they create “legitimacy gaps” (Heath, 2001), which then leads stakeholders to withhold stakes, such as consumer boycotts or government pressure to intervene (as opposed to self-regulating). Legitimacy is what ultimately defines corporate relationships with their publics. Organizations cannot exist without legitimacy; they need the social capital granted to them from legitimacy in order to survive (Dodd, 2016).

A company’s legitimacy is in jeopardy if it is viewed by the public as behaving hypocritically or lacking in authenticity for issues engagement. Corporate hypocrisy and authenticity are often called into question when companies are engaging with controversial social-political issues. As previously noted, the strong resurgence of the BLM movement has led to an outpouring of corporate support; however, the authenticity of corporate stances has been widely challenged. Publics are specifically looking at the track records of the companies that have made a supportive stance for BLM and paying close attention to the diversity, or lack thereof, in executive ranks (Jan, McGregor, Merle, & Tiku, 2020). In *The Washington Post*, Brickson Diamond, the chief executive of a diversity consulting firm called Big Answers and former chief operating officer of the Executive Leadership Council, a nonprofit that focuses on increasing the number of black people in executive positions, stated, “I appreciate your Black Lives Matter post. Now follow that up with a picture of your senior management team and your board” (Jan et al.,2020).

For companies that make a publicly supportive stance toward BLM, but do not exhibit diversity in leadership and/or do not take action toward greater racial equality, are viewed as hypocritical by stakeholders, and, thus, through the lens of organizational legitimacy theory, their efforts toward the issue may be deemed illegitimate as CSA. Using organizational legitimacy, as

the theoretical framework, this research argues that in the context of CSA, derived from CSR, authenticity or hypocrisy either enhances or detracts from a company's legitimacy, which defines their relationships with publics. This study also employs hypocrisy theory (Cho, et al., 2015) to identify and examine potential gaps in CSA statements and actions surrounding the BLM movement.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

Social issues such as same-sex marriage equality, and movements for racial equality, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, have recently landed on the agendas of many corporations. Through the use of social media and other social platforms, publics have continued to unveil the impact of unfair social systems on individuals and their environments, and stakeholders are turning to corporations to address the issues with direct action. Stakeholders are recognized as individuals, communities, groups, publics, organizations, institutions, and environments that have a stake in an organization (Mitchell et al., 1997). As corporations gain sociopolitical influence, stakeholders stress the responsibility they have to forward agendas benefitting underrepresented publics and environments. Approximately 71% of Americans surveyed said that companies should be addressing social justice issues, and 64% believe that companies should not ignore these issues through silence (Porter Novelli, 2020). Many multinational and well-known corporations have embraced increased public expectations of CSR and CSA.

The killings of unarmed black citizens by state authorities energized the Black Lives Matter movement and the publicized murders led to an outpouring of support from corporations. Corporations such as Starbucks (2020), Walt Disney (2020), Microsoft (2020), Salesforce (2020) and many other organizations have advocated for black lives and communities. They have advocated by releasing statements with corporate initiatives to fund well-known organizations that serve black individuals and communities, they have politicized their support by vocalizing disdain for systematic racism and police brutality, and they have also recognized their contribution to racism and vowed to reflect upon their internal racial discrimination and/or lack

of diversity. However, today 74% of Americans have expressed concern that corporations will not make the promised changes needed to acknowledge racial inequalities and will move on to the next popular issue (Porter Novelli, 2020). Increased public expectations of corporate social responsibility and social justice issues engagement rightly raises questions of authenticity and evaluations of hypocrisy that threaten organizational legitimacy.

### **Organizational Legitimacy Theory**

Without legitimacy, organizations are unsustainable and cannot thrive. Legitimacy is recognized as the “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman, 1995, p. 574). If organizations do not adhere to the pre-constructed norms of the societies in which they operate, there is the potential for legitimacy gaps (Heath, 2001) between the company and its stakeholders. Legitimacy gaps threaten the organization’s right to exist by the withholding of stakes or external intervention by government or nonprofit activism groups, for example. Therefore, companies cannot successfully exist without the legitimacy afforded to them by publics (Zimmerman & Zeitz, 2002).

As corporate organizations begin to identify the social-political issues that stakeholders deem important, they will need to identify general stances that society has taken in order to engage with those issues accordingly. Stakeholders support companies because they believe that they were acting within the best interest of the public (Wood, 1991).

Once organizations identify the generally accepted norms then they will not only need to act in accordance with those, but also must do so authentically. Authenticity is described as being honest or natural (Boyle, 2003). Companies must exhibit authentic behaviors to maintain

and earn legitimacy (Sellnow & Seger, 2013). In regard to social justice issues, companies that are transparent with publics are engaging authentically and positively contributing to their organizational legitimacy. A majority of Americans (83%) agreed that companies do not have to have perfect responses to issues surrounding social justice, but they should be open and honest (Porter Novelli, 2020). Thus, organizations with increased transparency contribute to their legitimacy positively (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). Stakeholders need to believe that corporate organizations are being transparent with them (Grower, 2006). For corporations that made statements in response to the Black Lives Matter movement and the social justice issues consuming American media after the murder of George Floyd, the public expected companies to be transparent about their own internal actions to promote social justice. According to a report by Porter Novelli (2020), 76% of Americans want companies to announce how they will change their own internal policies to acknowledge racial inequalities.

For organizations that engaged in advocacy surrounding the recent resurgence of the BLM civil rights movement, a legitimacy gap may be created if their external and internal communicative support for the movement do not align with internal leadership, policies, and practices. For instance, a lack of diverse leadership paired with supportive communication for the BLM movement (and no transparency to this extent) are likely to be publicly indicted, and the company's actions are perceived as inauthentic or hypocritical.

### **Organizational Hypocrisy**

Organizational hypocrisy theory was originally developed to understand how leadership can develop multiple strategies to satisfy a variety of competing stakeholder expectations (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997). For instance, Cho, et al. (2015) argue that threats to legitimacy

or reputation are the primary drivers of voluntary corporate sustainability reporting to the public and notes that there is an argument that organizations “do not walk the sustainability talk” (p. 79). For organizations that vocalize support for the black community, but do not act in ways that are consistent with the messages they communicate to stakeholders - both internal and external - will be deemed hypocritical (Cho, et al., 2015).

As companies have taken a stance in support of the movement, stakeholders have been calling them out as hypocrites. “Brands that profess to support racial justice on social media without a single black board member aren’t helping the cause, they’re just being hypocrites” (Ritson, 2020). For example, Adidas, a shoe retail giant, has been recognized as a company that profits from black culture but suffers from internal racial discrimination and lack of diversity within the company. In response to the public killing of George Floyd and the reignition of the BLM movement around the world, Adidas employees decided to expose the company for its hypocritical stance for equality and demanded acknowledgement. In a social media post the company stated, ““We’ve celebrated athletes and artists in the Black community and used their image to define ourselves culturally as a brand, but missed the message in reflecting such little representation within our walls””(Creswell & Draper, 2020). It also has been noted that only 1% of the company’s worldwide vice presidents are black (Creswell and Draper, 2019). Adidas is not the only company that has had their hypocritical actions exposed. Other giants such as Starbucks, Nike and Twitter (Hsu, 2020) have come out in support for BLM but have also had their own issues with racial discrimination or a lack of representation of diversified executive leadership. In 2017, Nike noted that of their 373 vice presidents, only 8% of them were black (Creswell & Draper, 2019).

## **CSR as a Function of Organizational Legitimacy and Hypocrisy**

CSR is defined as “incurring responsibilities to society beyond profit maximization” (Pava & Krausz, 1995, p. 1). CSR is more recently defined as “the voluntary actions that a corporation implements as it pursues its mission and fulfills its perceived obligations to stakeholders, including employees, communities, the environment, and society as a whole” (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p. 8). During the past 60 years, CSR research has continued to evolve, despite a lack of agreement on a single definition for the concept. Eells and Walton (1961) state that “when people talk about social responsibilities they are thinking in terms of the problems that arise when corporate enterprise casts its shadow on the social scene, and the more ethical principles that ought to govern the relationship between the corporation and society” (pp. 457-458). In a pyramid of corporate social responsibility, Carroll (1991) highlights four responsibilities to be held by corporations, each required hierarchically to reach the next level of CSR: economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities. Carroll argues that corporations have not yet emphasized the importance of their ethical and philanthropic responsibilities and states, “the total corporate social responsibility of business entails the simultaneous fulfillment of the firm's economic, legal, ethical, and philanthropic responsibilities” (1991, p. 43).

Carroll’s conceptualization has advanced ethical and philanthropic importance despite early claims highlighting solely economic objectives of corporations (Carroll, 2016). Levitt (1958) claimed that “the long-run profit maximization is the one dominant objective of business, in practice as well as theory” (1958, p. 49). Famously, economist Milton Friedman (1962) has also discredited corporate social responsibilities, claiming that the sole responsibility of business to society is profit maximization. Thus, studies have focused on the financial gains of CSR



(Brower & Mahajan, 2012). In a widely cited study, Margolis, et. al (2009) found that CSR had a positive, but modest effect on companies' profits.

Beyond profit maximization, CSR research focuses on actual organizational contributions to society (e.g., environmental protections, community involvement, etc.). Through the implementation of CSR initiatives targeting positive societal contributions, companies seek to address issues relevant to society. For example, Starbucks has continued to be recognized as an exemplar for implementing and executing CSR initiatives which include community engagement, ethical sourcing, and investing in career development for its employees (Hung-Baesecke, et al., 2019) and this level of social involvement further legitimizes it as an admired company recognized by *Fortune* in 2020. CSR practices strongly impact corporate legitimacy (Abitbol, et al., 2018). As organizations establish initiatives that are compliant with stakeholder social norms and values (Burlea & Popa, 2013) they are adhering to the implicit social contract between the company and its stakeholders. Public relations practitioners have long recognized the impact of CSR initiatives, particularly those that are intrinsic, that is, those that demonstrate genuine concern for issues important to stakeholders (Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen, 2010).

Today, public expectations of corporate responsibility have evolved to include corporate stances on controversial social-political issues, termed corporate social advocacy (Dodd & Supa, 2014; 2015). For instance, the Global Strategy Group (2018) found that 70% of Americans believe that organizations should stand up for what they believe in politically. Publics are increasingly holding corporations more responsible for their contributions to society. As corporations become more powerful within the socio-political landscape, stakeholders want these organizations to be held more accountable. Corporations often claim to operate with the public interest in mind (Heath and Palenchar, 2009), and today, in order to maintain and earn

legitimacy, companies are increasingly expected to prove this with authentic advocacy surrounding some of the most important issues facing society today (Dodd, 2018). Inauthenticity or hypocrisy identified by the public for controversial issues engagement by companies threatens organizational legitimacy.

### **CSA as an Extension of CSR and Legitimacy**

Corporate social advocacy (CSA) “refers to an organization making a public statement or taking a public stance on social-political issues” (Dodd & Supa. 2014). Corporations have become highly involved in the social, political, and environmental issues prevalent in modern society. In 2020, society witnessed numerous organizations come out in support of racial equality (Sternlicht, 2020), given highly publicized events demonstrating the state-sanctioned killings of black individuals. In light of widespread government inaction on a variety of issues (e.g., gun violence prevention legislation), traditional expectations of responsibility have shifted from the role of governments to the role of corporations. In other words, public pressure applied to corporate issues engagement has realized greater tangible impacts on important issues where the government has failed (Dodd, 2018).

Likewise, as firms are increasingly globalized, operating as multinational corporations (MNCs), they have more of an effect on the environmental, social, political, and economic aspects on the global societies in which they operate. Dodd (2018) argues that globalization, pluralization, and the erosion of trust in traditional institutions has contributed to a shift in public expectations of business in society. According to Scherer and Palazzo (2011), globalization is “a process of intensification of cross-border social interactions due to declining costs of connecting distant locations through communication and the transfer of capital, goods, and people” (p. 901).

As governments, economies, and societies have become interconnected, multinational corporate actors have seized the opportunity to expand their operations beyond the borders of their home countries. Operating on a global scale, MNCs have access to global financial markets and capital that are generally inaccessible to single nation-states. Nation-states are also losing command over their economies and the ability to manage their public welfare systems (Breen & O'Neill, 2010) and as MNCs absorb some of their capital, NGOs are pressuring these corporations to take on the responsibility of providing resources for the communities in which they engage and operate. For instance, MNC Starbucks has over 30,000 retail stores in 80 markets (Starbucks, n.d) and has recognized its responsibility to those markets by creating initiatives targeting global sustainability and strengthening its surrounding communities (Starbucks, n.d).

Pluralized societies are composed of diverse social communities, which has complicated how companies are addressing the needs of stakeholders. As societies become more pluralized, scholars have queried how companies will address competing priorities and manage friction between different stakeholder groups (Cho, et al., 2015; Scherer, et al., 2013). Newly pluralistic societies have also called for the re-evaluation of business priorities, especially with growing responsibilities to address the sociopolitical needs of the public. Once operating exclusively for financial gain and profit maximization, companies are now called to focus their attention on committing to the happiness of stakeholders (Jones & Felps, 2013).

Public relations scholarship has identified a decline in trust of traditional institutions (Brunner, 2017; Dodd, 2018). The Edelman Trust Barometer has also confirmed that institutional trust has been on the decline internationally (Edelman, 2020). The most notable of these institutions include governments. An erosion of trust in governments, actors once expected to operate in the interest of the public good, has contributed to the publics' shifting expectations

from these institutions to corporations (Dodd, 2018). As companies adopt this often controversial role as an extension of more traditional corporate social responsibility initiatives expected by the public (e.g., environmental sustainability), the legitimacy of companies is impacted.

In defining CSA, Dodd & Supa (2014) highlight, “the social-political issues addressed by organizations are divorced from issues of particular relevance to the organization” (p. 5).

Corporations are expected to advocate for controversial social-political issues, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, even if it isn’t specific to their business operations. For instance, in 2020, the insurance company Berkshire Hathaway, came out in support of the Black Lives Matter movement (Berkshire Hathaway, 2020), even though doing so is not core to its enterprise operations. By engaging in controversial social-political issues, the company is responding with a values-based approach that addresses increased stakeholder expectations for corporate issues engagement and thus, they seek legitimacy.

**Brand activism.** A variety of terms across multiple disciplines are used to describe the theoretically supported umbrella concept of CSA as related to specific disciplinary contexts. For instance, see political CSR as related to lobbying practices, CEO activism as related to business leadership’s personal stances, and brand activism as related to financial outcomes for marketing purposes. The marketing scholarship includes relevant literature related to perceptions of authenticity surrounding controversial corporate issues engagement, termed brand activism, so it is included here to add additional context to the study (Moorman 2020; Sarkar and Kotler 2018).

While corporations today are more readily prepared to take stances on contested sociopolitical issues and the public expects them to do so (Dodd & Supa 2014; Korschun et al. 2019; Moorman 2020), the motives for issues engagement are frequently questioned by the

public (Holt 2002). In order to effectively engage, it has become imperative for companies to understand how to engage with issues authentically (Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry and Kemper, 2020). Corporate engagement in issues that is perceived as inauthentic are labeled as “woke-washing” (Sobande 2019; Vredenburg, Spry, Lemper and Kapitan, 2018).

Authentic brand activism is defined and examined as “a purpose- and values-driven strategy in which a brand adopts a non-neutral stance on institutionally contested sociopolitical issues, to create social change and marketing success” (Vredenburg, et al., 2020, p. 446). The authors argue that brand activism is comprised of four key characteristics: (1) a brand must be driven by purpose and values, (2) it must acknowledge controversial social-political issues, (3) the issues can be seen as progressive or conservative, and (4) the organization must engage with the issue with messaging and brand practices.

Society has perceived authentic engagement with controversial issues from brands that are identified as both progressive and conservative. Starbucks (2015) stands out as a prime example of a company that has valued the rights of individuals in the LGBTQ+ community and has authentically advocated for same-sex marriage on behalf of them. On the other side of the issue, Chick-fil-A, a faith-based organization with Christian values, has also authentically advocated for the denouncement of same-sex marriage by not only vocalizing opposition, but also through practice. Chick-fil-A has provided financial support to other faith-based organizations that are recognized for anti-LGBTQ+ efforts (Vredenburg, et al., 2020).

Today’s public asks that corporations respond to issues of social justice, discrimination, and racial inequality in the same manner; that is through brand messaging and practice. The BLM movement gives corporations the opportunity to acknowledge and take action on the ongoing social justice issues that society currently faces.

## **The Black Lives Matter Movement**

The BLM movement was created in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's murderer in 2013 (Black Lives Matter, n.d.). Since its inception, BLM has expanded beyond the workings of a black civil rights movement and has manifested itself into an international organization. The "Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, Inc. is a global organization in the US, UK, and Canada, whose mission is "to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes." (Black Lives Matter, n.d.).

The BLM movement began with the death of Trayvon Martin but went on to fight for the lives of many others who were murdered at the hands of state law enforcement and civilian vigilantes. The movement advanced even further after white police officers in Ferguson, Missouri shot and killed unarmed black teen Michael (Mike) Brown on August 9, 2014 (The Guardian, 2017). The untimely murder of Mike Brown infuriated black communities and activists and was truly the catalyst of the civil rights protests that the BLM movement is so commonly known for today. Thousands of people fled the Ferguson streets in anguish over the state sanctioned shooting. This event would set the tone for future protests against murders of black citizens in the United States.

Civil rights organizations and movements are not new to the United States. In truth, black citizens have continuously fought for their rights to be recognized as equal human beings since the beginnings of slavery in the early 1600's. In a letter, the BLM Global Network Co-Founder, Executive Director, and Board President Patrisse Cullors states:

For more than 500 years Black people have been fighting for our freedom. We have fought back against slavery, Black codes, Jim Crow laws, policing, incarceration, some

of the highest unemployment rates, consistent homelessness, dying while giving birth, being murdered for being trans or non-binary. We have been the consistent moral compass in a country that has thrived on harming the most vulnerable of its population. The BLM movement presents itself as another opportunity to lift the veil of systemic racism in America. According to Merriam Webster, systemic racism is “the systemic oppression of a racial group to the social, economic, and political advantage of another” (n.d.). The presence of systemic racism and white supremacy, that is, “an internalized belief that white people are superior to all other races” (Allen, 2011, p. 72) has relegated black citizens to unequal conditions of life. Black Americans have been denied equal employment opportunities, housing loans, forced to send their children to inadequate schools with lack of access to better educations and has been pushed into segregation (Mills, 2004). Systemic racism and white supremacy are also the source of the racial discrimination that leads people of color to be more likely be arrested by law enforcement, convicted, and imprisoned for longer sentences than other groups (Alexander, 2012; Nesbit, 2015). The BLM movement fights for more than just the lives of the lost, it fights to dismantle the inherent systematic oppression and white supremacy that has created institutions and vigilantes that do not value black lives.

The BLM civil rights movement picks up where other movements have left off and continues to fight for the rights of black lives. The BLM movement is more than the BLM Global Network, it encompasses many organizations that seek to fight for black justice. The movement for black lives (M4BL) has been recognized in tangent with the BLM movement, receiving widespread media attention. The M4BL is a coalition of many social justice organizations such as the BLM Global Network Foundation that have come together with a mission to:

Debate and discuss the current political conditions, develop shared assessments of what political interventions were necessary in order to achieve key policy, cultural and political wins, convene organizational leadership in order to debate and co-create a shared movement wide strategy. Under the fundamental idea that we can achieve more together than we can separately. (M4BL, n.d.)

As a coalition of social justice, M4BL asks for radical systematic change. The alliance is most famously known for its delivery of the BREATHE Act, which is a bill that calls for legislators to defund police departments and re-allocate taxpayer money to other community resources (M4bL, n.d.).

Organizations such as the BLM Global Network and coalitions such as M4BL point out the systematic inequalities that have led to the unjust treatment and state sanctioned murders of black people in America, and society has called for the recognition of these racial injustices. The movement has garnered support since its inception and that support has increased in light of highly publicized incidents of police brutality and murders of black civilians in early 2020. In 2016, 4 in 10 Americans were in support of the Black Lives Matter movement (Pew Research Center, 2016). However, in 2020, following the murder of George Floyd, two-thirds of American adults were in support of the movement (Pew Research Center, 2020). Floyd's brutal murder led to global infuriation and mass protests (Cave et. al, 2020), despite the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic (Powell, 2020). The global community was outraged and continues to call for the denouncement of systematic racism and changes in government policies such as defunding the police (Taub, 2020).



**Corporate response to BLM.** BLM has been an active movement prior to the murder of George Floyd and the protests that erupted shortly thereafter in 2020. There have also been corporations that supported the movement prior to Floyd's murder. Four years before the recent explosion of the movement in 2020, ice-cream maker Ben & Jerry's stated that "Black lives matter" and highlighted the importance of acknowledging systemic racism in society today. In 2016, the company stated, "We've come to understand that to be silent about the violence and threats to the lives and well-being of Black people is to be complicit in that violence and those threats."

Nike most famously supported the movement through its endorsement of controversial BLM supporter, Colin Kaepernick, as part of the company's advertising campaign. Kaepernick, a former National Football League (NFL) player, was blacklisted from the industry after he began kneeling during the national anthem at NFL games (Streeter, 2020). Kaepernick's kneeling represented the protest of police brutality and racial inequality in America. Black citizens are continuously targeted by law enforcement, and Kaepernick's kneeling deeply resonated with the BLM movement as a form of peaceful protest (Streeter, 2020). In 2018, Nike launched its "Dream Crazy" advertisement starring Kaepernick saying "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything." and received immediate public backlash that called for Nike boycotts. However, Nike continued to support Kaepernick both "on and off the field" (Draper & Creswell, 2019). Even though their partnership with Kaepernick was seen as controversial, Nike benefited greatly from the partnership. The "Dream Crazy" advertisement won "Outstanding Commercial" at the Creative Arts Emmys, and Nike's stock skyrocketed, increasing the company's value by more than \$6 billion just a couple of weeks after the advertisement launched (Draper & Creswell, 2019). The company's association with

Kaepernick and what he stood for as an activist resonated with stakeholders and marked the company as an ally for the BLM movement.

In 2020, many corporate organizations have claimed their support for black communities and/or the BLM movement (Jan, et. al., 2020). Chairman and CEO of *The Coca Cola Company* stated, “I, like you, am outraged, sad, frustrated, angry. Companies like ours must speak up as allies to the Black Lives Matter movement. We stand with those seeking justice and equality (2020). Home Depot also made a stance for the movement and stated that it will be donating \$1 million to the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law to help support the organization’s civil rights work (2020).

These commitments and public declarations of support have not gone unnoticed, as stakeholders point out consistent statements made on corporate social media accounts following George Floyd’s murder and the outbreak of protests (Hsu, 2020). Publics recognize the importance of corporate support for the civil rights movement. Approximately 73% of Americans have claimed that a company must take a risk and address social justice issues in order to truly be “purpose-driven” (Porter Novelli, 2020). For organizations that have been moved to value more than their bottom lines, it is key that they address the racial inequalities and discrimination in America that has led to the re-invigorated BLM civil rights movement, as it has become an expectation of stakeholders. Violating agreed upon social norms, such as advocacy for social justice, calls into question company legitimacy as well as hypocrisy for organizations that have claimed to be values and purpose driven, but have produced inadequate statements and actions in support of the movement.

## **Corporate Social Advocacy: Authenticity and Hypocrisy for BLM**

For corporate organizations that have responded to the movement through public statements, stakeholders now expect that they follow their statements up with actions. Approximately 82% of Americans have stated that they are fine with companies making statements of support to communities of color, but they need to follow those statements up with action (Porter Novelli, 2020). Public relations practitioners have argued that corporate messaging without practice is deemed inauthentic activism (Vrendenburg, et al., 2020). In the context of organizational legitimacy, taking a stance on a controversial issue without taking action may not fully address the expectations of stakeholders and may detract from the company's legitimacy. Messaging, that is corporate statements, should be mirrored by practice through actions. These actions can include providing financial support (Crimmins and Horn, 1996), nurturing partnerships (Duane and Domegan 2019), and making changes to company practices and policies that support the employees and stakeholders affected by them (Kapitan, Kennedy, and Berth 2019).

In order to contribute to tangible change, companies should acknowledge the internal practices (Kapitan, et al., 2019) that have perpetuated discrimination and inequalities. This starts with them questioning the diversity of their workforce and executives. If organizations want to support their stakeholders by contributing to the fight for equality in society, they'll want to consider what that fight looks like internally as publics expect organizations to address diversity (Porter Novelli, 2020) and the BLM movement has allowed for publics to, more than ever, involve themselves with the matter of corporate diversity. As social media posts for the BLM movement and George Floyd continue to circulate, stakeholders are shining a light on the internal diversity of organizations. "Pushed by employees in some cases, and in others by a fear

of losing customers, corporations are being forced to examine their roles in perpetuating inequalities in hiring, pay and promotion, fostering toxic workplace cultures and consumer discrimination” (Jan, et al., 2020). Social media and political episodes have blurred the lines of life within and outside of organizations and this has made managing diversity within the organization more difficult (Nkomo et. al, 2019). With corporate diversity, or the lack thereof, uncovered by stakeholders following company responses to BLM, the public has made it a point to highlight any past or current hypocritical actions taken by these companies (Jan, et al., 2020), thus challenging their legitimacy.

Through the lens of organizational legitimacy, companies are expected to act within the expectations of stakeholders (Suchman, 1995). As corporations communicate corporate stances on controversial sociopolitical issues, they will need to do so authentically and prove it with action. More specifically, corporate leadership must evaluate their own company values and genuinely question their commitment to diversity within the organization (Porter Novelli, 2020). Otherwise, corporate issues engagement may be deemed inauthentic and hypocritical, which leaves them at risk for creating a legitimacy gap (Heath, 2001). Thus, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1a: How, if at all, are organizations demonstrating support for the BLM movement through their official initial public statements?

RQ1b: How, if at all, are organizations communicating authentic engagement through action in the BLM movement?

RQ2a: How, if at all, will companies address a lack of diversity in leadership?

RQ2b: How, if at all, will companies provide a plan to address internal shortcomings for diversity (e.g., changes to corporate leadership)?

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This research employed a thematic content analysis to study the corporate statements made by corporations in response to the recent Black Lives Matter civil rights movement uprising, following the murder of George Floyd in 2020. The research examines the initial and official public statements made by Fortune's "50 Most Admired Companies" list (2020) in search of emerging latent themes as potential indicators of the authenticity of the organizations' stance and actions in support of the BLM movement.

### Data Collection

In order to create the 2020 "50 Most Admired Companies" list, *Fortune* partnered with Korn Ferry, a global marketing consulting firm that has been composing the World's Most Admired Companies list since 1997 (Fortune, 2020). In order to take surveys of corporate reputations, they considered 1,500 companies, both from the U.S. and of global recognition. 1,000 of the companies were the largest U.S. companies ranked by their revenue and the 500 global companies were recognized by *Fortune* as having revenues of at least \$10 billion. From those 1,500 companies, the companies with the highest revenue in each of the 52 industries were examined, narrowing the company pool to a total of 680 companies within 30 countries. The executives who work at these companies then voted for the top-rated companies within the 680. Executives, directors, and analysts that worked for the qualifying companies were then asked by Korn Ferry to rate corporations within their own industries on nine criteria: Innovation, People Management, Use of Corporate Assets, Social Responsibility, Quality of Management, Financial Soundness, Long-Term Investment Value, Quality of Products/Services, and Global

Competitiveness. In order to be considered for survey, the company must have ranked within the top half of its industry (Fortune, 2020).

In order to select the final 50 companies, Korn Ferry referred to the executives, directors, and analysts who completed the previous industry surveys to select the 10 companies they admired the most. The survey participants chose from enterprises that were ranked in the top 25% of the previous year's surveys, as well as those companies that ranked in the top 20% of their industry. The participants were allowed to vote for any company in any industry (Fortune, 2020). These companies have been selected for the focus of this researcher because of their recognition as "Most Admired" companies.

### **Data Sample**

In order to compile the corporate statements, the researcher searched for official company statements posted on the websites of the identified Fortune list that communicated the companies' stances and/or actions towards the highly publicized events of racial injustice occurring in reaction to the murder of George Floyd and the enlivened BLM movement. The researcher analyzed the initial and official statements made by the companies in May and June of 2020. Using the 50 identified companies, 41 statements were identified for analysis.

Excluded data included a recorded video interview. Two corporate statements were unable to be found, two companies made statements about support for black communities or diversity, but did not explicitly mention the BLM movement, and four companies did not post official statements on company websites but did engage on social media. The exclusion of these companies from analyses does perhaps, serve as an indicator of a lack of authenticity, in and of itself.

## **Data Analysis**

Corporate statements were used for a thematic analysis involving both open coding and axial coding in order to identify repeating ideas that form latent themes. Open coding was used as the initial coding process (Charmaz 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Open coding is a systematic process utilized in grounded theory to discover what currently exists in the data, instead of utilizing already existing theories and concepts (Tracy, 2019). The corporate statements were coded line-by-line and the constant comparative method was used during the coding process. The constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2014) is used to make code definitions fit new data by modifying the original code. Axial coding (Charmaz, 2014), the second phase of coding, was used to search for commonalities between the codes so that they can be assembled to form themes. According to Owen (1984), themes are created by the use of three criteria: repetition, recurrence and forcefulness, but for the purpose of this research, two criteria were emphasized: repetition and recurrence. Focusing on these two criteria allowed themes to naturally emerge.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This research examined the extent to which companies are supporting and in/authentically engaging with the Black Lives Matter movement and the public outcry for social justice after the highly publicized murder of George Floyd. Through the analysis of statements made by companies from *Fortune's* “50 Most Admired Companies” list, this research evaluates support in the form of action and authenticity (Molleda, 2010; Vrendenburg, et al., 2020) through the presence of diversity within these most admired companies or corporate acknowledgement of gaps in internal diversity with plans to improve, especially within the executive ranks. The list of corporate statements analyzed are outlined in Appendix B.

### Corporate Philanthropy and Resources

The most common theme that emerged from corporate statements that confirmed how companies are supporting the movement was providing financial support for social justice organizations. Using company specific resources to directly support black communities also sought to establish that companies were supporting the BLM movement, whether the words “Black Lives Matter” were explicitly used or not. These companies have pursued their commitments through actions.

#### *Theme 1: Providing Financial Support for Social Justice Organizations*

When advocating for the BLM civil rights movement, many organizations announced monetary donations to well-known social justice organizations that serve black communities. For instance, *Microsoft* outlined the organizations they will be giving to, as well as the amount of money they would be giving to each organization:



We will deepen our engagement with six organizations that are advancing social justice, helping community organizers address racial inequality, and offering solidarity to the Black community: Black Lives Matter Foundation, Equal Justice Initiative, Innocence Project, The Leadership Conference, Minnesota Freedom Fund, and NAACP Legal Defense & Education Fund. This starts with a company donation of \$250,000 to each of these organizations (\$1.5 million in total), followed by a company match of our employees' contributions to eligible organizations (2020).

*UPS* is another company providing financial support to civil rights organizations and stated that they have created \$3.2 million of new funding through their UPS Foundation to support a number of organizations including the NAACP and the National Center for Civil and Human Rights (2020).

These company statements exhibit initial actions taken by companies to support the overall BLM movement. As “admired companies” they may be more likely to employ CSR and CSA efforts to maintain their legitimacy and action through financial contribution than companies not recognized as “Most Admired.” These corporations were also intentional in listing the organizations that these donations were going to. It may be noteworthy that many of these organizations did not specifically donate to the Black Lives Matter Global Foundation; however, they did choose organizations that have historically served black people. For instance, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People or NAACP was founded with the sole purpose to protect the social, economic and political lives of black individuals.

*The Walt Disney Company* also used their financial resources to fund social justice organizations by pledging an ongoing \$5 million donation to support social justice nonprofits, with an initial \$2 million donation to the NAACP (2020). More specifically the company

highlights how the financial donation to the NAACP will be used to fund advocacy and education programs targeted at abolishing racial disparities and discrimination (2020). Again, corporate statements and financial support demonstrates support for organizations that have a longer history of commitment to fighting for social justice.

The public statement made by *The Coca Cola Company* was also a notable example of financial support, not only for the company's decision to invest in the movement, but because it went beyond traditional donations and decided that it will match all employee donations to the organizations as well. Employee matching was also present in other company statements and speaks to the company's commitment to the cause. "Incorporating employees into a CSR program has become a popular way for a company to demonstrate its commitment to social causes and society" (Abitol, 2018, p.5). By giving opportunities to employees to also donate to social organizations, and then matching their donations, companies are providing more financial support and helping employees support causes that they care about (Houghton, Gable, & Williams, 2008).

Many corporate statements informed the public of not only the specific amount to be given, but also to which specific organizations. Companies were also intentional in choosing social justice organizations, and more than that, matched employee donations, thus, increasing corporate financial support and employee goodwill. Corporate statements sought to assure stakeholders that company money would aid organizations that had a history of supporting black people and communities.

*Theme 2: Using Company Specific Resources to Support Communities of Color*

Another theme that emerged was the communication of direct support for black individuals and communities by utilizing resources specific to the corporate industry or company. As stakeholders know that companies have the capabilities to provide financial support to social justice organizations that aid black communities, providing resources specific to their industry affords opportunities not previously given to individuals of that community. For example, Adidas, an apparel brand that specializes in footwear and that has been recognized for its sports apparel and athletic sponsorships, opted to invest in black communities as a response:

We will increase the funding for our programs that support, empower and elevate the Black community to \$20 million dollars over the next four years in the US. Initiatives we'll invest in include: adidas Legacy, a grassroots basketball platform built for underserved communities; the adidas School for Experiential Education in Design that creates career paths in footwear design; Honoring Black Excellence, an initiative honoring and supporting the Black community through sport. (2020)

As systemic racism has limited the amount of access black people have to opportunities (Mills, 2004), taking a stance to support the BLM movement through active involvement with black communities is the opportune moment to provide black people with educational and economic access to the industries that the “most admired”, arguably the best, companies are involved in. As seen with the Adidas example, the company is creating opportunities for socioeconomically disadvantaged youth in sports, as well as providing educational opportunities in shoe design, thus providing black students with the tools to have a career in their company.

Another corporate example of investing company-specific resources is *Goldman Sachs*. The company issued a statement:

We have leveraged our expertise and deep relationships with Community Development Financial Institutions and other mission-driven lenders to swiftly deploy targeted capital towards communities of color, including an additional \$250 million in emergency relief to fund the Small Business Administration's Paycheck Protection Program (2020).

As a megabank, the company has a lot of influence in the financial industry and, again, black individuals have historically lacked the access to the opportunities (Mills, 2004) needed to elevate themselves. Using their resources, as a large financial institution, to support black communities gives black people the opportunity to thrive. Supporting black businesses beyond the hype of the BLM movement can create tangible lasting change. Helping black business owners during the time of these statements is even more crucial as they have been disproportionately affected by the Coronavirus pandemic. Black businesses are consistently being denied the financial aid needed to survive during a time where business has significantly decreased (Flitter, 2020), and this form of discrimination contributes to the disregard of black lives. *Goldman Sachs* counters this discrimination by targeting financial support to black communities.

*Procter & Gamble* also stated that they would be utilizing their resources to support communities of color through their brands by creating programs that advance people of color in science and technology (2020), thus again granted them access in a field that they may have had limited access to.

Even though *PepsiCo* had been identified as a corporation in the beverage industry, they have been famously recognized for their advertisements, and more specifically the controversy of some of their ads (Bogost, 2017). In their statement the company noted that they would use their, "buying power to create more jobs for Black creators at our marketing agencies" (2020).

This declaration serves the black community because it gives jobs to black people, thus providing them with the opportunity to have a seat at the table where marketing, advertising and public relations decisions are made.

Organizations that provided their financial and company resources to the movement as a form of action are likely to be perceived as more authentic than those companies that issued a statement but did not follow-up with any supportive action.

### **Communicating Authentic Support**

More importantly than how organizations are supporting the BLM movement with their financial and business resources is how they are authentically communicating engagement with the movement through their statements. One theme serving as an indicator of authenticity was the recognition of structural racism and the status quo. Seventy percent of Americans said that they want the companies that they support to actively engage in conversations surrounding social justice (Porter Novelli, 2020) and in order to do that, companies will need to recognize and acknowledge the root causes of social injustice and racial discrimination.

Similarly, authenticity of supportive corporate stances for the movement are indicated by corporations using the names of the victims murdered at the hands of law enforcement and vigilantes, and whether or not they state the phrase “Black Lives Matter”. As a direct response to the BLM movement the slogan “All Lives Matter” was utilized by opposing groups to detract from the movement. Stating that “All Lives Matter” ignores a history of racism and discrimination of black people, and also communicates to black individuals that their lives don’t matter (Capatides, 2020). Saying the names of the victims is important to the movement for black lives because it humanizes the individuals that were killed. Much attention has been

brought to the recognition of the black individuals murdered. “The #SayTheirNames campaign encourages publications and social media users to not just identify victims of police brutality by the incidents that killed them but to focus on their individual humanity and use their names” (O’kane, 2020). Racism has continued to persist in America because of the dehumanization of black people, so advocates ask that the names of black victims be recognized.

### *Theme 3: Recognition of Structural Racism and the Status Quo*

#### *Structural Racism*

The acknowledgement of structural racism in America has emerged as a theme that speaks to the authenticity of how *Fortune’s* “admired companies” are engaging with the movement. Many companies recognized that the racial injustices that repeatedly present themselves in today’s society are a direct result of structural racism. Apple recognizes this in their own initial statement titled “Speaking up on racism”. The company pronounces this when identifying America’s long history with racism that has led to the murder of George Floyd:

That painful past is still present today — not only in the form of violence, but in the everyday experience of deeply rooted discrimination. We see it in our criminal justice system, in the disproportionate toll of disease on Black and Brown communities, in the inequalities in neighborhood services and the educations our children receive. While our laws have changed, the reality is that their protections are still not universally applied (2020).

The statement produced by *Apple* has been recognized as one of the most notable examples of a company acknowledging structural racism present today and as the root cause of the discrimination that killed George Floyd. “Deeply rooted” signifies how ingrained it is in

American institutions, specifically in our criminal justice systems (Alexander, 2012). American stakeholders have asked for the addressment of racial inequality by companies (Porter Novelli, 2020) and naming the institution of racism shows authentic engagement with the movement through corporate messaging. The target of the BLM movement has been addressing police brutality as it proves to be the reoccurring example of structural racism in America today.

Beyond mentioning the racism in criminal justice and law enforcement, the company goes even further to state how it affects other aspects of black lives, such as how its presence in education systems and community services limits access. This level of engagement does more than address the public display of racism we see in episodes of police brutality but further addresses its overall encompassment of black life.

Similar sentiment has also been echoed by many other companies in their initial statements as well. *Salesforce* responds to the events surrounding the BLM movement by stating “Systematic racism and violence have affected the Black community for far too long” (2020). *Nike* makes a similar statement by confirming that “Systemic racism and the events that have unfolded across America over the past few weeks serve as an urgent reminder of the continued change needed in our society” (2020).

The association of the murders of black individuals to racism shines a light on the real issues prevalent in today’s society and does not attribute George Floyd’s murder to the wrongdoing of an individual; because it is the wrongdoing of the system that led to the “events” surrounding his murder and companies are authentically engaging by recognizing a need for change.

*Status Quo*

The acknowledgement for the need to dismantle the status quo had also been identified in a few company statements. Further into their statement *Apple* has stated that adhering to the “status quo” is no longer acceptable:

This is a moment when many people may want nothing more than a return to normalcy, or to a status quo that is only comfortable if we avert our gaze from injustice. As difficult as it may be to admit, that desire is itself a sign of privilege.

This statement, again, highlights a need for change but more importantly addresses that it is a privilege to want to return to what life was before the protests, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Using the phrase “status quo” identifies that there is an existing preference to keep things how they are. Even more emphasis is to be made on *Apple’s* recognition of existing “privilege”. Highlighting “privilege” reflects the openness of the company to use phrases deemed controversial when acknowledging the “status quo” and that sign of openness speaks to the corporation’s authentic engagement (Sellnow & Seger, 2013) with the movement.

Berkshire Hathaway’s (2020) response parallels this by stating that even though society wants to return to normalcy (also considering the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic), we must take the opportunity to dismantle the status quo as it “will only perpetuate the damage being done.”

#### *Theme 4: Saying What Matters*

Theme 4 emerged alongside company acknowledgment of the murder of George Floyd and other black victims that were publicly murdered and whose murders fed the current resurgence of the BLM civil rights movement. This theme also highlights how the analyzed statements included (or did not include) companies explicitly stating that “black lives matter”, as opposed to saying “all lives matter” or not mentioning the value of black lives specifically.



### *Say Their Names*

Of the 41 statements analyzed, 22 statements included the names of those murdered.

*Berkshire Hathaway* (2020) stated:

The murders of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Breonna Taylor in Kentucky, and Ahmaud Arbery in Georgia are the most recent names added to a lengthy list of horrors faced by black people over the past several hundred years.

Companies used their names to humanize the black lives murdered in the name of white supremacy. By using their names, especially pointing out additional names to George Floyd's, the companies are engaging by empathizing with the black community for the lives lost.

*Berkshire Hathaway* goes further by noting that these names are a few of black people murdered throughout history. And, *The Coca Cola Company* (2020) also explicitly included the names of the victims in their statement:

George Floyd. Killed. A senseless tragedy for him and his family. Ahmaud Arbery. Breonna Taylor. Philando Castile. Sandra Bland. Freddie Gray. Michael Brown. Eric Garner. Tamir Rice. Trayvon Martin. All killed. All Black Americans, predominantly male Black Americans. All of whom should be alive today.

The names used by *Coca Cola* go beyond the most highly publicized murders of 2020. Preceding the public death of George Floyd were the murders of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor who murders were also responsible for fueling the 2020 BLM protests, but before that were other murders that received significant media attention. This company's statement mentions the murder of Michael Brown which began the BLM protests we are familiar with today (The Guardian, 2017), and lastly mentions Trayvon Martin whose murder initiated the creation of the

BLM movement. *Coca Cola* is immortalizing the lives of the lost and making a point by saying their names.

### *Black Lives Matter*

Saying “Black Lives Matter” was also a key indication on whether or not organizations may be perceived as authentic in their support for the BLM movement. In modern society, there has been divisiveness and contention surrounding the phrase “Black Lives Matter”. Conservative groups have argued that by saying “Black Lives Matter” society is saying that only black lives matter, when the contrary is meant. The saying “Black Lives Matter” is recognizing that black lives matter, too (Capatides, 2020). Organizations who have proclaimed that “Black Lives Matter” risk isolating their stakeholders that are unsupportive of the movement, but companies have decided to do so anyway, perhaps in the name of inherent corporate values. The CEO of *PepsiCo* says, “We know that the first step toward change is to speak up, so I want to be very clear: Black Lives Matter, to our company and to me” (2020). Leadership at *Nestle* similarly stated: “I want people talking about race, about inequality and about why it should ever be called into question that black lives matter” (2020). Signs of authenticity by way of the use of the phrase were also clear in the statements and sentiments of other companies, including *Visa* and *Johnson & Johnson*.

Within the context of CSA, corporations may risk financial performance (Dodd & Supa, 2014) when using words that directly connect the organizations to the Black Lives Matter movement as opposed to offering support, but never actually “saying what matters.”

Organizations that offer support, but never make explicit mention of the movement or that black lives matter may be perceived as less authentic or hypocritical in attempts to engage, but in a seemingly less controversial way through words and actions. Saying what matters, whether it be

the names of the murder victims or “black lives matter” further connects the companies with the movement, which has been controversial and divisive, and therefore puts companies at greater risk among competing stakeholder groups values.

### **Addressing a Lack of Internal Diversity**

Additional authenticity-relevant themes emerged in relation to internal diversity/ diversity initiatives and reconsiderations of internal diversity. More than recognizing structural or systemic racism in America, companies need to also look within their own organizations to address diversity measures. Research demonstrates that organizations typically have difficulty with addressing “a mega-threat” or other events that receive high levels of mainstream media attention (Leigh & Melwani, 2019). A mega-threat is defined as “a negative, large-scale, diversity-related episode that receives significant media attention” (Leigh & Melwani, 2019, p. 565). Corporate responses to the killings of black people by state institutions and rogue vigilantes has opened the door to criticism from stakeholders creating a mega-threat, that is the questioning of their own internal diversity. However, by acknowledging diversity within their organizations, and more specifically the lack thereof it, corporate organizations are communicating with greater transparency (Grower, 2006) about the work that needs to be done.

#### *Theme 5: Internal Diversity & Diversity Initiatives*

A common theme emerged among corporate statements that outlined internal diversity and diversity initiatives or policies, as well as external recognition for corporate diversity. In order for company engagement with the BLM movement to be considered authentic, they need to acknowledge the value of diversity and their company’s practice of it (Vrendenburg, et al.,

2020). *Fortune's* “most admired” list included companies who have published statements that feature those prerequisites to be considered an authentic brand activist. For instance, *Marriott International* highlighted its diversity within executive leadership, saying “We’re proud of the fact that fifty percent of the company’s board of directors and senior management are either diverse or women” (2020). The company also recognized its commitment to diversity by also stating, “We are grateful for the acknowledgment by DiversityInc., which placed us number one on the list of the Top 50 Companies for Diversity and Inclusion for 2020” (2020). The company goes even further by identifying their “TakeCare” program which has been responsible for their current diversity achievements.

The statement made by *Marriott* shows that the company recognizes the importance of diversity and believes that communicating it to stakeholders will show they’ve excelled in an area valued by the public (Porter Novelli, 2020). By mentioning previous achievements in diversity and highlighting a continuation of its diversity program, the company shows a consistent practice in valuing diversity internally. Being values driven and practicing those values are both key indicators of authentic brand activism (Vrendenburg et al., 2020).

Other corporations have also acknowledged the value of diversity within their organizations. *FedEx* highlights its value of diversity by justifying how valuing diversity has benefited the company by making them more competitive on the marketplace but also pointing out how it leads to a more inclusive society:

“Embracing diversity is not just the right thing to do; we also have proven that it fosters innovation and makes us a more competitive company. It’s also about fostering acceptance, promoting anti-biases, and encouraging a more inclusive society. These values are core to who we are and how we operate” (2020).

More than “managing diversity”, organizations need to start “valuing diversity”.

Managing diversity has been recognized as the “business case” for diversity because businesses have identified it as being better for the bottom lines or to remain competitive (Mundy, 2016). However, “valuing diversity speaks to an organization’s social justice and advocacy mandate” (Mundy, 2016, p. 13). Scholars have argued for the need to value diversity on the basis of integrating and learning (Ely and Thomas, 2001). Diversity then can be considered as a resource for organizations to learn and change (Ely & Thomas, 2001) for the progress of racial equality in society. In their statement the company 3M is in agreement that diversity, and inclusion, should be valued because it is “right” for society. They said, “Diversity and inclusion are core values for 3M and, aside from being a competitive advantage, they are simply the right values to live by and promote” (2020).

The statement made by *3M* and *FedEx* point out a significant indication of legitimacy earned through values. As organizations are expected to value diversity by stakeholders, companies are adhering to those agreed upon values (Burlea & Popa, 2013) and are acting in the interest of the public good by valuing what’s “right”.

#### *Theme 6: Reconsideration of Internal Diversity*

A most notable theme was the companies’ reconsideration of their own internal diversity, particularly in leadership, with special attention to the initiatives they are committed to in order to increase diversity within leadership. According to Mundy, “Success with diversity efforts begins with leadership itself; leadership must reflect and be directly involved with diversity initiatives.” (2016, p.2). Companies that claim to value diversity need to look within themselves to take stock of their own diversity and consider what diversity looks like for their company. If

corporate organizations recognize that they are lacking diversity, that transparency (Grower, 2006) and openness communicates authenticity and, thus, strengthens their legitimacy (Sellnow & Seger, 2013). 63% of American employees wish their companies would be more transparent about their diversity, equity & inclusion (DEI) journeys and admit where they still need to improve (Porter Novelli, 2020).

*Adidas* brought attention to their lack of internal diversity by stating, “We will increase the number of Black employees. A minimum of 30% of all new positions in the US at adidas and Reebok will be filled with Black and Latinx people” (2020). *BlackRock* also recognized the need to increase diversity within its organization and said, “By 2024, our goal is to double representation of our Black senior leaders and increase overall representation by 30%. Today, only 3% of our senior leaders (directors and above) and 5% of our workforce in the US are black” (2020).

The above examples inform stakeholders that companies are willing to make the necessary changes in order to increase internal diversity. As *BlackRock* gave a goal timeframe in which they hope to increase diversity in its ranks, and mentions their current diversity levels it, brings light to the work that needs to be done and the work they are committing to do.

A prominent example of a company that outlines their improved diversity initiatives is *Salesforce* that stated:

We take a multi-faceted approach to advancing Equality including building community through our 12 Equality Groups, or Employee Resource Groups, and growing diverse future leaders through initiatives like our Equality Mentorship program and a partnership with the Executive Leadership Council on an in-house development program focused on underrepresented minorities (2020).

The previous example shows a further commitment to increasing internal diversity by naming the specific programs and groups designed to monitor the development and growth of diverse leaders.

BlackRock (2020) also outlines each of the 5 actions that will specifically employ to increase internal diversity. These actions include the development and guidance of careers for of black professionals, as well as focusing on manager development and rewarding “proactive inclusion” and “improved diversity outcomes”. Other actions include increasing their commitment to recruit and onboard black professionals, to raise awareness surrounding racial equity and ingraining accountability and improving the measurement and tracking of their diversity measurements.

In their statement, *PepsiCo* notes that one of their initiatives includes increasing representation as it relates to one of their three business pillars: “People”. The company stated:

Expanding our Black managerial population by 30% by 2025 through internal development and recruitment—we will add more than 250 Black associates to managerial roles by 2025, including adding a minimum of 100 Black associates to our executive ranks. Whilst 14% of our U.S. workforce is Black, we know we need to increase representation in leadership (2020).

Similar to the statements made by *Adidas* and *BlackRock*, the above example by *PepsiCo* gives specific goals and timeframes. Informing stakeholders of a goal and date holds companies accountable for reaching those goals. If they hope to increase diversity by 2025, stakeholders can approach companies in 2025 to confirm whether or not they have reached their targeted goals.

*Visa* also mentioned the importance of diversity within its team and has implemented company goals to increase it by saying that they are going to, “Increase the number of under-

represented VP+ by 50% in 3 years”, as well as, “Increase the number of under-represented colleagues within Visa overall by 50% in 5 years” (2020).

Companies with diversity initiatives have intentionally focused on the diversity needed in their leadership. Past studies have highlighted the fact that stakeholders are paying attention to the makeup of company boards (Bear, Rahman, & Post, 2010) and corporate organizations have been openly criticized by stakeholders because of the lack of diversity or representation on their boards (Ritson, 2020). If companies want to be perceived as authentic advocates for the BLM movement, they need to do more than claim they value diversity and care for black lives.

Corporate organizations need to look inward and take internal action by diversifying executive boards. Stakeholders expect to see more than public statements of support; they want to see internal change in the form of diverse representation in leadership. Outlining their plans to increase diversity in leadership communicates authenticity to stakeholders through their intention to take action (Molleda, 2010).



## CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Based on the analysis of 41 public statements made by Fortune's (2020) Most Admired Companies, this discussion seeks to tie in findings with existing literature surrounding organizational legitimacy (Heath, 2009) and hypocrisy (Cho, et al., 2015) in the context of corporate social advocacy (Dodd & Supa, 2014). Scholars have highlighted the importance of corporate social responsibility as well as the emergence of corporate social advocacy (Dodd & Supa, 2014). Diversity in leadership has been recognized for its value to organizations as publics declare diversity, equity, and inclusion a necessity for organizations to successfully advocate for social justice (Porter Novelli, 2020). The legitimacy of these companies is, thus, dependent on their responsibility to advocate for social justice, as well as how they authentically value diversity within their own companies.

For the purpose of this research, the actions or inactions of companies in response to the black lives matter movement was questioned. How did these companies support the movement? When analyzing these statements, two themes emerged: *providing financial support for social justice organizations* and *using company specific resources to support communities of color*. These themes indicate that the companies are supporting the movement through money and resources. Action is imperative to authentic engagement because it highlights that companies are practicing what they claim (Vrendenburg et al., 2020).

In their statements, when they indicate that they are providing financial support to identified organizations, the companies use phrases such as "deepen our engagement" or "new funding" to imply that the monetary donation is meant to do more than provide cash flow but to contribute to a long-term partnership with organizations that have been continually fighting for

social justice. The theme *using company specific resources to support communities of color* indicates that companies are using more than their money to take action through the phrases “harnessing our expertise” and “using our position”. The statements are meant to express that the utilization of corporate expertise and position to contribute to communities of color can lead to lasting change. Investing in communities of color by using resources that are specific to the company also demonstrates support through action. Adhering to the tenets of CSR and CSA, companies are recognizing their responsibility to take action and making public statements, but they are doing more than that by committing to long-term action and change.

RQ1b asks how organizations are authentically communicating engagement with the BLM movement and there were two themes that were most notably recognized: *recognition of structural racism and the status quo* and *saying what matters*. Organizations who were authentically engaging with BLM mentioned the presence of structural racism in America and its long-lasting presence has led to the murders of George Floyd and countless others. In order to acknowledge the BLM movement, they must recognize what has created the need for social justice movements such as BLM, which is the ongoing existence of structural/systemic racism. As with acknowledging structural racism, companies also note the presence of the “status quo” that prevents black individuals from fully realizing their humanization in America. The next theme reveals authentic engagement through the names of the murdered and firmly stating that “Black Lives Matter”. Saying the names of the murdered victims humanizes them after they’ve been marked as another slain black body by state institutions. Stating “Black Lives Matter” represents commitment to the movement. Counter-movements to BLM have emerged to undermine their progress and have coined the “All Lives Matter” and phrases to draw attention away from the fact that black lives do matter (Capatides, 2020). For organizations who truly

believe that black lives matter and have highlighted the importance of diversity and inclusiveness in their values, they need to acknowledge that in their messaging to be considered authentically advocating.

RQ2 asks whether organizations will acknowledge the lack of diversity within their leadership and if those who lack diversity will provide a plan to increase it. This questioning has led to the emergence of two themes: *existent diversity & diversity initiatives* and *reconsideration for internal diversity*. The company that stood out the most in regard to their internal diversity was sure to inform stakeholders how they were diverse in their leadership as well as reinforced stakeholders of their continuous diversity work. This is comparable to other “admired” companies that were also already committed to long-term diversity work. The theme *reconsideration for internal diversity* more importantly revealed that companies who acknowledged the lack of internal diversity, outlined a plan to achieve greater diversity within its leadership. They enforced their pledge by using phrases such as by highlighting their commitment to increase diversity within their organization. This commitment reinforces their legitimacies as companies because of their admissions of imperfection and also contributes to their authenticity because of their willingness to be transparent (Sellnow & Seger, 2013). 63% of current employees want their employers to be open about their DE&I status and to acknowledge that they need to make progress (Porter Novelli, 2020) and through their statements they are solidifying their legitimacy by adhering to the expectations.

### **What’s Not There**

Even though companies demonstrated authenticity through their statements supporting the BLM movement, it has been recognized that there are missing acknowledgements in these

statements, and these missing pieces will leave stakeholders to believe that the companies are being hypocritical.

The acknowledgement of historic events of racism would have served as a great supporting theme that authenticates company engagement, but only one company recalled their own past discriminatory occurrences. According to Porter Novelli, 80% of Americans have confirmed that they are more willing to listen to companies that have acknowledged that they've been biased in their past than companies that communicate generic messages of support without acknowledging their own past racial mistakes or transgressions (2020). Out of the 41 statements analyzed only one company, the *Coca Cola Company*, acknowledged their past issues of discrimination. *Coca Cola* mentions all of the great work they've done to fight for racial equality by highlighting work they've done to help desegregate South Africa and being the first company to have African American advertisers but then they go on to say,

And it's made mistakes, including the grave one with the largest discrimination lawsuit in U.S. history in 1999/2000. As the judge said, our biggest issue was not that we made mistakes and that there were individual cases, but that when we knew, we didn't act to remedy and improve (2020).

The company's statement embodies authenticity because of its willingness to be open and acknowledge its past mistakes, which most companies have been receiving backlash for (Jan, et al., 2020).

Other companies in *Fortune's* "most admired" list did not take the chance to even briefly mention their past transgressions. The PepsiCo company has been most famously recognized for advertisements and has decided that it is imperative to include more black individuals on their marketing team, as previously mentioned. However, the company did not acknowledge why it

was necessary for them to include black content creators or mention the terribly misjudged advertisement that made headlines as being insensitive and has been accused of undermining the BLM movement (Victor, 2017). In 2017, the company broadcasted its “Jump In” ad with celebrity Kylie Jenner (Bogost, 2017). The ad showed people protesting on the streets, while fashion model Jenner is doing a photoshoot. Once she realizes the protest that’s going around her, she decides to stop the photoshoot to “jump in” to the protest. The model then walks up to a law enforcement officer and hands them a Pepsi soft drink as a sign of peace (Victor, 2017). During this time BLM protests, as well as protests by other groups were prevalent in the country so publics felt that the advertisement was trivializing the issues that those protests stood for (Smith, 2017). The Kylie Jenner ad has been described as “An absurdist parody of the long, unfinished project of civil-rights activism in America” (Bogost, 2017). Bernice King, the daughter of civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr., addressed the ad on Twitter by saying “If only daddy would have known of the power of #Pepsi” (Victor, 2017). The company acknowledged the backlash by issuing an apology that stated “Pepsi was trying to project a global message of unity, peace and understanding. Clearly, we missed the mark and apologize” (Victor, 2017). Even though the company previously issued a statement apologizing for the “Jump In” advertisement they did not acknowledge this or any of their discriminatory shortcomings in their BLM statement.

Companies are issuing these statements during a time that they are being openly criticized for being hypocritical (Jan et al., 2020) or accused of “woke washing” because they are only supporting the movement as a marketing tactic to increase financial performance and not as a values-driven practice (Vrendenburg, et. al, 2020), but they should have revealed more of their own discriminatory wrongdoings and admitted to their complicities to structural racism. Many of

*Fortune's* “most admired” exclaimed “We need to do more” but did not highlight how they’ve done less in the past or even benefitted from the existence of structural/systemic racism.

Systemic racism reveals the oppression of the Black race in favor of the dominant White race in America, of which many of the founders and current C-suite executives belong to. Not mentioning their past transgressions and own complicity to racism may undermine any established legitimacy they have as a company.

The statements made by *Fortune's* “most admired” revealed important themes that spoke to their authentic engagement but a lot of them were missing crucial indications of authentic engagement as well. One of the noted missing pieces from most of these statements were timeframes they would provide updates on their progress, as well as a mention of the tools they would use to communicate those, whether it be via company reports or other channels. This missing information is imperative to the progress of tangible social change because it shows that companies are committed to the cause. A majority of Americans believe that companies will proclaim their support for the fight for social justice but then will move onto the next issue (Porter Novelli, 2020).

Few companies provided timelines that would be used to reach their internal goals of diversity and only a couple of the companies stated how they would track or review the progress of their company goals. The most notable was Visa who stated how they were going to track their improvements:

“We will be instituting a Quarterly Business Review (QBR) specifically for Inclusion & Diversity to track and review progress and will use new data reporting at these sessions” (2020).

## **Practical Implications**

A company's legitimacy is what allows it to successfully operate. Metzler (2001) states that legitimacy is "at the core of most, if not all public relations activities." CSR and CSA are continuously becoming prerequisites for organizational legitimacy. Companies are expected to make statements and take action. More importantly, they are expected to make long-term commitments to change. The BLM movement has led to an outpouring of statements from companies, but stakeholders' question whether or not these companies are committed to the fight for social justice. "74% of citizens today are concerned companies will move on to the next issue without making the changes they promised to address racial inequalities" (Porter Novelli, 2020).

Besides long-term commitment, companies should value diversity, especially within its leadership. "Americans expect companies to engage in the social justice conversations of today, but in order to do so in an authentic and credible way, companies must live and breathe those values internally" (Porter Novelli, 2020). It is evident in statements made by "admired" companies that diversity needs to become a priority within their organizations, especially within leadership. Leadership should be more diverse but more than that it needs to be valued by leadership since leaders set the tone of diversity for their organization (Martins, 2020). Valuing diversity allows companies to authentically advocate for social justice, but those values must start at the top.

## **Future Research**

Further research must be conducted on companies that have publicly pledged to take action for social justice in light of the energized BLM movement, and increase diversity. For companies that have stated plans to donate, researchers must question whether or not these

companies have continued to donate or if their donation was a one-time occurrence. Since most of these statements were made in May and June of 2020, we need to question if these companies are still committed to the fight for social justice, especially if it is no longer a hot topic issue in the media. For the few companies that have provided timelines to become more diverse and increase diversity in leadership, we need to question whether these companies have achieved their goals or are committed to providing status updates on achieving these goals. As most of these companies have settled in their statements, there is still more work to be done in regard to social justice and diversity.

Future research should also be done to expand on current literature of strategic diversity leadership (SDL), which is defined “as the shaping of the meaning of diversity within an organization by the organization’s senior leaders” Martins, 2020, p. 4). According to Martins, “senior leaders can articulate for employees and stakeholders the meaning of diversity and inclusion within the organization” (2020, p. 8), and this is done through diversity communication. Diversity communication, as well as the diversity-related actions of organizations and leaders will define the value of diversity for an organization. Strategic diversity leadership explores the diversity dividend that organizations create to increase organizational performance (Martins, 2020). According to Martins, “ a diversity dividend refers to the enhancement in an organization’s performance that is attributable to its diversity” ( p. 2), and organizational performance not only includes financial results, but the sociological and psychological outcomes that an organization benefits from creating and fostering an inclusive and diverse workforce (2020). Highlighting the sociological and psychological benefits argues the importance of “valuing diversity” and not “managing it” as a commodity (Mundy, 2016).



## **APPENDIX A: IRB NOT HUMAN RESEARCH DETERMINATION**



UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL FLORIDA

**Institutional Review Board**

FWA00000351  
IRB00001138, IRB00012110  
Office of Research  
12201 Research Parkway  
Orlando, FL 32826-3246

**NOT HUMAN RESEARCH DETERMINATION**

March 25, 2021

Dear [Asianna Elston](#):

On 3/25/2021, the IRB reviewed the following protocol:

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Title of Study:	Corporate Social Advocacy: Addressing Social Justice in the Age of Black Lives Matter
Investigator:	<a href="#">Asianna Elston</a>
IRB ID:	STUDY00002661
Funding:	None
Grant ID:	None
Documents Reviewed:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• CHECKLIST_ HIPAA Waiver of Authorization.pdf, Category: Faculty Research Approval;</li><li>• Corporate Statement Analysis, Category: Other;</li><li>• HRP-250-FORM- BLM.docx, Category: IRB Protocol</li></ul>

The IRB determined that the proposed activity is not research involving human subjects as defined by DHHS and FDA regulations.

IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities are research involving human in which the organization is engaged, please submit a new request to the IRB for a determination. You can create a modification by clicking **Create Modification / CR** within the study.

If you have any questions, please contact the UCF IRB at 407-823-2901 or [irb@ucf.edu](mailto:irb@ucf.edu). Please include your project title and IRB number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

Katie Kilgore  
Designated Reviewer

## **APPENDIX B: CORPORATE STATEMENTS ANALYZED**

3M. (2020, Jun 12). *Listening, understanding, acting*. <https://news.3m.com/English/3m-stories/3m-details/2020/Listening-understanding-acting/default.aspx>

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