
What does salad have to do with racial justice?
Promoting solidarity in the time of COVID-19
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Abstract

In the late spring and summer of 2020, a local build-your-own salad restaurant chain, along with many mid-size corporations and local non-profit organizations, sent an e-mail statement in response to the death of George Floyd by the police. Different from corporations and large institutions, these businesses and organizations — what we collectively term the “salad group” within our sample — associated their product or service (ranging from salads to yoga mats to chocolate) with the project of creating a more local, socially just, and inclusive community. A thematic analysis of 81 crowdsourced organization e-mail messages identified the use of both internal and external appeals for action, although organizations chiefly focused on their internal actions. Our analysis revealed that these e-mails primarily offered solutions that invited or highlighted Black participation in their business enterprises. We describe such statements as *salad solidarity*, a genre of promotion that simultaneously appeals to consumers and social change. Indeed, the framing of possible external responses as tied to consumer choice — and internal responses as tied to a company’s growth and reach — do not directly address the structural problems that spurred these e-mail campaigns. Consequently, such corporate and digital messaging of social movements provokes questions about the commercialization of political movements and the value that language and digital tools hold in building solidarity. We conclude with observations on how e-mails, and digital platforms more broadly, can and cannot facilitate political change, from the analytical lens of racial capitalism. These findings have broader implications for the study of corporate-social responsibility, networked social movements, and mediated communication.

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Introduction

In the aftermath of the May 2020 death of George Floyd, businesses, non-profit organizations, and corporations released statements about the racial landscape of the United States. The killing of George Floyd happened within the larger context of Black Lives Matter protests against police violence in response to the multiple deaths of Black Americans including Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and Tony McDade. Sharing a sense of responsibility through their business, SweetVeg [[1](#)], a “fast casual” build-your-own salad

restaurant chain, expressed rage at the “countless Black Lives that have been lost and oppressed due to generations of systemic racism” and promised to take steps towards change. These steps included supporting Black farmers and creating a more diverse management team. While these sentiments were not unique, SweetVeg’s appeals to their broader community to take responsibility and commit to social change relied on issuing a statement that connected their business of making fresh salads to alleviating racial injustice.

SweetVeg’s statement was one of many that flooded in-boxes after a white police officer killed a Black man during an arrest for allegedly attempting to use a fake 20-dollar bill. Public outrage over George Floyd’s murder, and racial injustice more broadly, sent protestors to the street and organizations to their digital content channels. The salad restaurant SweetVeg, a pseudonym, was not the only organization that felt compelled to send e-mail messages in response to events. The vegan magazine *GreenNews* emphasized their commitment to racial justice by uplifting recipes by Black chefs. Meanwhile, a local restaurant owner shared their personal reflections about white privilege in an e-mail to customers and highlighted the role of the dinner table in facilitating important conversations about race in order to promote the restaurant’s weekly specials.

The concept of racial justice that circulated through promotional e-mails tethered notions of racial inclusion to the promotion of an organization’s values — and paraded businesses and organizations as seemingly local, justice-oriented institutions. Throughout these statements, social justice was a conduit for entrepreneurship. Signaling solidarity became the mechanism for selling magazines and meals; for engaging audiences and building credibility (Wellman, 2022). We crowdsourced these e-mail messages for analysis through our social and professional networks on Twitter with a final dataset of 86 e-mails. Our evidence indicates that while many e-mails named police violence against Black people as the impetus for crafting a statement, very few of them actually named systemic change, such as defunding the police, or political action, such as attending protests, within their framing of solutions.

Given that the early stages of the global COVID-19 pandemic limited in-person meetings for at least three months, these e-mails were tied to prior face-to-face interactions or direct “opt-in” relationships as donor, client, customer, participant, or student. Moreover, they were the primary way local organizations and businesses communicated with, and remained connected to, their bases. Amid tightening pandemic restrictions, these e-mails from spring and summer 2020 also captured how corporations, organizations, and institutions attempted to call attention to issues of racial justice more explicitly than moments before, especially as multitudes of these solidarity statements circulated and recirculated within inboxes. As many organizations went remote, these e-mails represent a moment when digital communication became a primary source of social connection and information seeking, although arguably for more elite populations with secure digital access (Nguyen, *et al.*, 2021). Considering this, we disentangle how organizations attempted to discuss and address issues of racism and inequality through primarily digital promotion during an intense moment of racial reckoning.

Scholarly attention to the commercial sector’s roles in race and social change has largely focused on corporate social responsibility and organizational diversity, equity, and inclusion (Berrey, 2015; Embrick, 2011; Moore and Bell, 2011; Ray, 2019). The common critique about corporate responses is they are merely manipulative exercises in brand building (Martin, 2020). More recent discussions of public statements in the wake of George Floyd’s death have focused on major corporations and institutions, such as large technology companies and universities (Hamilton, 2020; McKenzie, 2020). These analyses have emphasized the limitations of these responses and lack of concrete action; and as Hamilton (2020) points out, corporations pose race itself as the cause of injustice rather than *racism*. Seeing race but not racism ignores the underlying structural system to enact power hierarchies (*e.g.*, Bonilla-Silva, 2021). Our study builds on existing discussions by focusing on smaller companies and local organizations, such as specialty restaurants, niche magazines, fitness studios, and hobby clubs. We describe the genre of companies and organizations connecting their specific product or service to the project of creating a more socially just and inclusive community as *salad solidarity*. Like iceberg lettuce, salad solidarity can be bland and watery, less satisfying but still palatable purporting “good” through its consumption.

Thus, this paper considers online solidarity statements in relation to the construction and reconstruction of the language of social justice within various public relations campaigns. We were particularly interested in the skillful use of promotional language to communicate issues of injustice to audiences and across multiple communities (Joseph, 2002). Corporations have long co-opted the language and keywords of social justice and solidarity into organizational communications (and with the goal of turning a profit) — what Sobande (2019) calls “woke-washing” (see also Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duggan, 2003). Meanwhile, Wellman (2022) calls attention to the credibility maintenance that often motivates performative allyship within various online spaces. The salad solidarity we studied represents a strategy employed by organizations, as they connected broader social issues to specific suggestions tied to their services and/or products, rather than making abstract and ambiguous claims and commitments to action. Additionally, given that promotional e-mails tend to emphasize a positive approach, salad solidarity simultaneously points out racism while maneuvering away from actual social problems of racialized hierarchies.

Our results provoke questions about the commercialization of politics and the value language holds in marketing solidarity and the circulation of social movement campaigns in digital spaces. We then reflect on how our findings have theoretical implications in corporate-social responsibility and mediated communication more broadly (Fiol, 1995; Sillince and Suddaby, 2008; Zelizer, 2017). Ultimately, we argue that the suggested action steps of targeted promotional e-mails — which leverage the language of racial justice, political social change, and connection — actually limit and constrain inclusion and equality within communities. As we discuss later, salad solidarity tethers possible solutions for racial inequality and police violence to the expansion of capitalism by reifying individualistic, consumeristic notions of participation. These approaches foreclose socio-structural analyses and interventions that more substantially engage and critique root causes of the carceral violence and racial capitalism. In short, salad solidarity campaigns can reinforce predatory forms of racial inclusion while expanding racial capitalism (Leong, 2021; McMillan Cottom, 2020).



Background and method

The ubiquity of online solidarity statements in late May and early June 2020 became widespread across the United States amid uprisings against police violence. Such e-mails were so pronounced that it became news when an organization did not release one of these statements. For example, politicians in opposition to the protests praised a brand for not issuing a statement which forced them to go on the record saying they support racial equality (Specia, 2020). Non-profits, local businesses, boutique brands, and corporations flooded individuals’ e-mail inboxes with statements about inequality, race, and outcries against the deaths of the many Black people who lost their lives after interactions with law enforcement. While companies may donate money to candidates, support policies of choice, and publicly respond to different political moments, these organizations crafted digital responses suitable for the cultural moment of heightened tension.

E-mail statements from organizations and businesses do the work of diversity by circulating the “matter of diversity around” (Ahmed, 2012). The ongoing circulation of diversity allows it to accumulate positive affective value, making consumption a simultaneous site for the performance of social relations. In other words, communal formations now exist alongside the expansion of the market. While critical analyses of corporate social responsibility have focused on large multinational corporations and international brands (Boje, 2001; Boyd, *et al.*, 2005; Whiteman and Cooper, 2017), local stores and small enterprises may be sites for critically detangling relationships between community and capital. Our dataset served as a focal point for unearthing how public-facing organizations oriented themselves in relation to solidarity.

Data collection

Rather than analyzing statements from big brands and multinational organizations, we chose e-mail messages from small-to-medium sized non-profit organizations and businesses to examine how they narrated the impact of racial injustice on daily life within more local scales of community. Notably, these groups do not primarily emphasize or specialize in racial equity work as part of their organizational mission. We intentionally designed the study to focus on e-mail recipients so we could assume that the recipients and organizations had a previously established (economic or social) relationship. Thus, these e-mail messages serve as a record of organizational observations and commitments, and they can be viewed as digital invitations for recipients to deconstruct and reconstruct new racially and socially inclusive communities alongside these organizations.

Between June and July 2020, we aggregated our corpus of online solidarity statements by requesting friends and colleagues on Twitter to forward such messages to a project e-mail address. Inclusion in the corpus indicated that the sending organization had some connection to the recipient prior to COVID-19 through purchases, donations, or opting-in to a mailing list. Our contemporaneous crowdsourcing effort yielded over 150 English-language e-mail statements; we saved the text of these e-mails within our cloud-based database alongside other e-mail attributes including: organization name, organization type (*i.e.*, business, educational, professional, nonprofit, other), the recipient's relationship with the organization (*i.e.*, professional or personal), and statement text itself. Recipients could also include optional information regarding the date sent, e-mail subject, and brief comments about the e-mail's main message.

Out of these crowdsourced e-mails, we focus on 86 e-mails from a subsection of organizations that we refer to as the salad group. The salad group included small and medium-sized enterprises that sold a specific product or idea as well as non-profits within a specific geographic area. That is, they were not multinational brands or corporations, although a few of these businesses and organizations had multiple locations. While not explicitly stated, given the types of products and services marketed, these groups mainly targeted middle- to upper-class demographics. For nonprofits, the e-mail statements primarily addressed a volunteer or donor group. Again, racial justice and equity is not part of these groups' scope of work: nonprofit organizations as salad group organizations might include a local sailing club or cycling league. In addition to SweetVeg and GreenNews, the dataset included a local chocolatier, an organic apparel store, a group of sailing enthusiasts, a cycling club, and yoga studio, for example (see [Table 1](#) for summary of organizations by type). *What did the local hairdresser, deli, exercise studio, dry cleaner, sports club, or salad restaurant want to communicate through their statements of solidarity with Black Americans?*

Table 1: Summary Table of Organizations (by Type)

Type of Organization	
Business	55
Nonprofit	26
TOTAL	81

Data analysis

We employed an iterative, inductive process to code and analyze the solidarity e-mail statements' texts,

primarily relying on qualitative content and thematic analysis techniques (Holliday, 2007; Mason, 2002; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). First, we identified the “salad group” subsample as a primary and novel source of interest, rather than large corporations and educational institutions. We then piloted an analytical strategy for examining the introductory and concluding paragraphs of their e-mails, to account for variations in e-mail length. Following this pilot study and discussions between researchers, we tracked the following codes within a master spreadsheet for each e-mail: problem definition, community definition, emotive responses, proposed solutions and appeals (or their suggested next steps), and the orientation of these appeals (*i.e.*, internal vs. external to the organization).

While the first category of codes was used to trace how non-expert organizations narrated the issue of racial inequality and whether they invoked terminology like “Black Lives Matter” within their e-mails, we were also concerned with how their problem definitions pertained to the organizations’ emotive responses and proposed actions, such as specific next steps to foster racial justice. Whereas the coding process focused on introductory and concluding paragraphs, we also regularly revisited and reviewed solidarity statements in their entirety during meetings (six in total for the coding and analysis process), to ensure a flexible, interpretive, and consistent approach to coding (Eisenhardt, *et al.*, 2016; Miles, *et al.*, 2019). As many organizations’ opening lines began with emotions (*e.g.*, “heartbroken,” “grief”), we also coded for emotive responses. The latter parts of the e-mail typically proposed action steps and appeals, which we categorized as internal or external appeals to action. We use an inductive approach to text (Pollach, 2012) to observe a pattern and draw broader conclusions on how organizations promote social justice and solidarity through specific examples and cases.

A basic and descriptive question about the e-mailed statements guided these analyses: *What did organizations say, and what were their appeals to action?* Indeed, driven by an interest in the persuasive strategies of these solidarity statements (which simultaneously served as promotional content), we were particularly interested in how the problem definitions within e-mail introductions segued into appeals and action within concluding paragraphs; how the beginnings of these e-mails related to their ends, and the broader issues at play; how readers were primed about (and then reminded of) key issues and potential next steps, especially as it related to the specific organization issuing the statement.



Results

Within this section, we discuss some findings, concluding with a brief reflection on how they might affect fields touching on issues of corporate-social responsibility and digital communication more broadly. In general, our analysis of this set of digital messages about racial solidarity identified two primary organizational appeals to action: internal and external. Internal appeals focused on changes that the organization intended to put into effect. External appeals were suggested activities for audiences, in order to facilitate change in the organization’s geographical area or within their customer community.

Deconstructing the salad group

To begin, the organizations within our “salad group” were seemingly connected to their readers and audiences, likely through a previous commercial transaction, donation, or e-mail list registration. These community ties and relationships existed prior to the start of COVID-19 and the rise of 2020 protests against police violence. This group allowed for an examination of the wide array of rhetorical strategies and commentary about the summer’s sociopolitical campaigns and tensions. As Banet-Weiser (2012) highlights, contemporary brand cultures organize cultural and political meanings via economic exchange and consumption. Thus, e-mails sent by the salad group helped us consider how various groups and businesses connected and oriented their products, services, and brands to the persistent problems of police violence and racial inequality, primarily on economic and capitalistic terms.

Indeed, the transformation of the capacious imagination of racial justice and liberation struggles from the 1960s and 1970s into mainstreamed and narrow terms of diversity and inclusion relied upon the increasing expansion of market cultures (Duggan, 2003). For one, SweetVeg begins their e-mail by describing their feelings of rage in the aftermath of “Black lives lost and oppressed due to generations of systemic racism and police violence.” This political landscape moves them to reflect on how to “use our privilege and platform to create sustainable changes ... while furthering our mission of connecting people to real food.” Within two sentences, they deftly shift from racial violence to their corporate mission, invoking brand-building as community-building. In their solutions, they emphasize “alleviating food insecurity in Black communities” by expanding a meal assistance program to those with limited access as well as building “longer term support for the work of BIPOC farmers.” They express commitment towards working to create “a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive team” by updating their recruitment, hiring, and promotion practices. The e-mail sign-off from Team SweetVeg reads, “We’re holding ourselves accountable.”

Capital functions as the medium in which community enacts itself (Joseph, 2002), and organizational value depends upon, and generates ideas of, community. As another example, the e-mail from BoxIt!, a food delivery service, begins with a list of names of Black people who have “suffered from violence and police brutality” and announces their commitment to using their business platform for change. In a list of action steps, they announce their launch of the “Black-owned restaurants collection” (where orders from this collection will be delivered free of charge) and the goal of extending their collection to businesses “unserved by delivery platforms.” Their e-mail sign-off closes with “We stand with the Black Lives Matter movement.” By looking at statements of solidarity within the genre of promotional e-mails sent to a customer and member base, the salad group presents a unique case study of how idealizations of community and capital supplement one another.

Defining the problem(s): From structural racism to organizational goals

The opening lines and introductory paragraphs of these solidarity e-mails identify and define what they perceive as the “problem” (or “problems”) at hand. These problem statements cut across different scales of recognition, from individualized acts of police violence to broader claims of systemic injustice. Many of the opening lines listed the names of individuals slain by police violence in 2020. Additionally, a distinct language marker for the salad group’s non-experts’ familiarity with issues of racial inequality emerged within introductory paragraphs, particularly as various individuals and organizations identified the core problem(s) of racial inequality:

To our Black artists and community, We see you. We hear you. And we pledge to do everything we can to fight against **racism and injustice**. (MadeByYou, online art store)

To everyone in our community: it’s never been more important for each of us to ask ourselves hard questions about the society we’re building and how we treat each other. We stand unequivocally against **racism and racial injustice**. Black lives matter. It’s that simple. (EduNow, educational start-up)

By now, you know the story. **The American police keep killing unarmed Black people**. We know this is just the latest chapter of our American legacy: **the law has been a force of oppression and death for Black people from the start**. (Polintelligence, socially conscious blog)

Organizations demonstrated familiarity with the terminology of structural racism and oppression as they articulated specific details in connection to the current state of police violence and its impact on Black communities. Often, they expressed this familiarity by restating that “Black lives matter.” While naming broader structural issues of racism such as police violence, organizations would pivot to connect racial

oppression to their organization's business, mission, and goals instead.

WinterStage, a music performance venue and ticket seller, opened their e-mail by stating their company goal was, "to bring people together to celebrate music and culture." They then share that there have been "great injustices" that impact their communities, writing, "We need to stop the racists that are literally killing culture." This statement bears closer attention. Here, the problem of racial injustice through the lens of racist police killings is framed as a barrier to the celebration of music and culture (*i.e.*, consumption through tickets and music performances). Racism as a broader societal problem hinders a potential community of music lovers from coming together. Meanwhile, *Herbs and Leaves*, an online information resource for cannabis-related news, topics, and markets, emphasizes the urgency of doing anti-racist work by using their resources to "apply the voices of those fighting for social justice in cannabis." They narrate the criminalization of drugs alongside a legacy of racism against Black communities, while also sharing that they will strive "to improve our company and our industry."

These examples demonstrate different ways that salad group organizations fit the problem of racial injustice into their brand communities. Particularly, the translation of structural racism to organizational mission, goals, and communities happens through the language of appeals for action, which we elaborate on in the next section.

Appeals for action

In addition to problem definitions, due to the fundamental role of words and language in leading to actions, we also focused on how problem definitions within introductory paragraphs segued into different types of appeals within each e-mail and its concluding paragraphs. An appeal was defined as any type of action or next step that was listed within a solidarity statement; organizations often conveyed that these specific actions were urgent and important to move forward. These appeals might range from suggesting a reading about racism to donating to another organization.

Concluding appeals were categorized based on whether they were internal or external in nature. When an appeal was *internal*, it was directed toward addressing issues within management structure or organizational culture. Meanwhile, *external* appeals were suggestions for ways readers could respond. Organizations issued both internal and external appeals, although most solidarity statements focused on internal appeals ([Table 2](#)).

Table 2: Summary of Types of Appeals for Action

Type of Appeal	
Internal	50
External	19
Both	9
None	3
Total	81

“WE Have to Be Better, Do Better”: Internal organizational responses

Internal organizational appeals typically entailed the need for future listening sessions or (virtual) meetings; to identify and address core internal issues; to collaborate or get supplies from marginalized communities; and to allow for marginalized members to share their experiences of exclusion. “We are starting by taking a hard look at who we are today,” writes one specialty food and beverage magazine, “with the goal of making sure that our team culture and our storytelling can become a part of the solution in correcting our country’s systemic injustices and inequalities.” A boutique sauce company shares, “We’re thinking deeply about how to incorporate equitable action into the DNA of our company.” Internal appeals tend to reference assessment and changes to organizational culture through practices of reflection and listening. Other common internal appeals include promises for diverse hiring or industry-wide investments and initiatives that aim to improve diversity and inclusion. These internal appeals focused on promoting companies’ attempts to foster and/or contribute to racial justice by reinvesting and redistributing organizational resources within their organization. For example, Jewel Yoga, an eco-friendly yoga mat company, explained their attempts to foster a more diverse and inclusive space within their company and the yoga industry:

Mental & physical health as well as true diversity & inclusion are **long term initiatives which require continued investment to create lasting change**. We are committed to both of these initiatives for the long term. As such, we will be active in creating change and **we will hold ourselves accountable. We invite you to hold us accountable too.**

We will improve diversity & inclusion across the Yoga Studio by strategically amplifying the voices and increasing the opportunities for yoga teachers and students of color, and by the appointment of a Director of Diversity & Inclusion to help us maintain and innovate.

Jewel Yoga begins by identifying diversity and inclusion as well as mental and physical health (which is broadly what yoga mats support as a product and what yoga studios provide as a service) as long-term initiatives and investments for change. As they make a commitment to both, they invoke the promise to “hold themselves accountable” while inviting customers to do the same. Both metrics — first, for measuring “true diversity” and, second, for ensuring accountability — remain unclear. Jewel Yoga also highlights that they will improve diversity by amplifying voices and opportunities for people of color (both staff and customers), as well as creating a new hire for someone to help them be innovative in the areas of diversity and inclusion. This sequence echoes a commonly observable pattern where a racial crisis catalyzes a flurry of hiring across companies looking to hire more people of color who will also then contribute to their diversity and inclusion initiatives (and inevitably, often be individually held responsible without organizational support). Additionally, Jewel Yoga commits to supporting yoga teachers and leaders in communities of color, beginning by amplifying two social media accounts of Black yoga instructors. Here, internal commitments to diversity become externally visible through visual representation. However, by presenting itself as “good at” diversity, organizations can actually conceal ongoing inequalities while simultaneously building and maintaining their credibility (Ahmed, 2012; Wellman, 2022).

Similarly, RightHire, a freelancing platform that connects individuals and businesses, also committed to taking action and holding themselves accountable for a more inclusive workplace:

We have committed to take action toward **building a more diverse and inclusive workplace**. Our commitments include setting and holding ourselves accountable to measurable goals around hiring Black leaders and promoting Black team members, quarterly data deep-dives to unpack how we are doing against these goals, and fostering **honest and intimate conversations about race at work**.

On [our] platform, we continue to work to build a space where people of all races, backgrounds, and nationalities can tap into unparalleled work opportunities ... We are channeling our outrage into work, to **actively build a company and a society that Black people deserve**.

They emphasize that the measurement of internal diversity will improve through hiring and promotion as well as creating spaces for conversations about race at work. They anchor this commitment to their service of providing both contingent work opportunities to freelance workers, and cost-effective professional workers to external companies. In these ways, RightHire articulates their efforts to build a more racially inclusive company as part of the larger project of racial justice. Here, the language of racial justice becomes appropriated as a mechanism for promoting RightHire’s good intentions.

These common internal appeals reflect the need, first, for individuals within each organization to consider their complicity or inaction in relation to racial inequality; and second, for organizations to open the door for changes, mainly by diversifying representation or contributing organizational resources to amplify change. Rarely did these internal appeals signal a more structural approach toward addressing larger issues outside the company.

“YOU Need to Do Something”: External appeals to action

External appeals address the e-mail recipient and urge them to take action. They often do so by cultivating a united front against racism. For example, a local CrossFit gym emphasizes that strength through community is based on their values of “inclusion, togetherness, safety, and fun,” and that the “kindness of our members” is what makes them a “family” focused on bettering people’s health and wellbeing. By creating a sense of community that links e-mail recipients to the company and organization, solidarity statements from the salad group create a shared sense of responsibility.

When external responses were the focus for an organization, they often entailed requesting donations or asking audiences to become informed by reading various resources. For instance, an external appeal by the vegan magazine *GreenNews* invited its audience to buy from (and thus support) the Black vegan chefs they featured within their e-mail. Other companies invite recipients into their internal community projects by appealing to them to stay connected and “join them” in the process. Spicy Sauce, the boutique sauce company mentioned above, closes their e-mail with the sign-off: “We have a lot of conversation, relationship building, and thoughtful investment ahead of us. We hope you will join us.”

Some organizations encourage recipients to take civic action. For example, a local cycling union, Cycle Together!, encouraged members to contact the local city council and aid in specific policy actions tied to their community interests. As cycling is a mode of transportation, Cycle Together! appealed for removing law enforcement and banning facial recognition in traffic and transportation infrastructures. They write, “[We] have always believed in equity in our transportation system, but in the past we have not acted enough on that conviction. We’re committed to changing that, and ask that you continue showing up with us.”

However, most companies encouraged apolitical external responses, often oriented around commercial consumption. Mattress company Cloud Foam emphasizes that “we” (including customers) still have work to do and the “real work starts by looking inward.” To encourage others to also reflect, they offer suggested readings about race and “allyship”. They then conclude their e-mail by inviting customers to consider entering a staycation sweepstake, as a form of respite:

We also know it’s been an emotional few weeks, and, well, who couldn’t use a break? That’s why we’ve worked with like-minded partners to offer the staycation bedroom suite of your dreams. Enter to win below. Thanks for reading.

Similarly, a local restaurant owner also connects consuming their product to customers’ potential next steps toward change:

It sure feels weird to be waxing on poetically about spring produce, the blossoming farmer’s markets and the fact that it’s soft shell crab season with all the ugliness going on in our world right now ... In my family, many of our most serious conversations happen at the dinner table. So in order to facilitate the important discussions you will surely have in the coming days, we have some specials this weekend.

Generally, these external appeals emphasize an individualistic approach to action and next steps, appealing to readers to share information on social media, donate to specific causes, and read and learn about racial justice. Moreover, external appeals often reinforced the need to participate in activities of consumption, in which capital would supposedly foster social change. That is, buying specific products or services would help “unity” and “progress” to prosper, particularly when they served as a sign of support for protesters and Black Lives Matter. An exception to these trends for individualistic and consumerist appeals was Cycle Together!’s appeal for policy advocacy and action. Suggesting participation in protests or policy advocacy — individual activities not tied to purchasing power and consumption — was generally not prevalent within the salad group’s messages of solidarity.

Discussion: On community and capital

In sum, *salad solidarity* demonstrates the divergent and convergent ways that many organizations attempted

to define and respond to systemic issues of racism and police violence. Namely, in response to the deaths of Black people by police, local organizations and businesses turned to their e-mail lists to issue statements of solidarity and articulate the necessity of social change while also connecting with their communities and audiences for promotional purposes. These appeals were largely outside of political calls to action such as direct organizing and policy advocacy. Below we identify several of the mechanisms of this dynamic: problem definition, appeals to action, individual action, and the role of consumer activism.

First, the proliferation of online solidarity statements and the wide array of problem definitions allude to the general sentiment that racial injustice was a problem, but the specific terms, core issues, and proposed solutions for this problem focused on consumption and enhancing the perceived value of organizations within a given community. Moreover, while external appeals often reinforced individual consumption (and “prosumption”) through calling for social media sharing, donations, and buying products, internal appeals for action called for individual and collective moments of introspection (*i.e.*, listening, reflecting, and sharing) — all in the name of “next steps” for progress and (company) growth (see Ritzer and Jurgenson [2010] for more about prosumption). These next steps were often suggested as urgent and necessary for social change. However, unsurprisingly, these appeals for progress and growth were often expressed with a positive tenor and brand (or product) promotion, acting as public campaigns to build and maintain credibility (Wellman, 2022).

The internal and external appeals also implicitly demonstrated that there was often similarity in what these solidarity e-mails collectively did *not* discuss: that is, addressing police violence, policy action against racialized social hierarchies, and taking part in political action were often markedly absent from these e-mails. Indeed, while “the problem” within e-mail statements was often defined and introduced in relation to racism and police violence, there were very few instances where the solutions and appeals to action actually involved explicitly calling attention to or contesting police violence. This neglect disregards and conflates diverging views on the role of police reform versus police abolition. Thus, the framing of external actions as primarily tied to consumer choice, and internal actions as tied to a company’s growth and reach, both reproduce neoliberal modes of participation, rather than address the structural problems that spurred these actions in the first place (Joseph, 2002; Banet-Weiser, 2012). In other words, market cultures of privatization, personal responsibility, and “woke-washing” (Sobande, 2019) collapse politics and business interests (see also Duggan, 2003).

To be clear, social transformation requires individual levels of action to foment collective change. Individuals can contribute at different scales of civic participation: from making donations; attending a rally; calling political representatives; posting on social media to raise awareness; building coalitions; and learning from community experts about becoming more involved in a local grassroots campaign. However, what is important to note here is how the salad solidarity promotions emphasized an individualistic *and capitalistic* approach to change. They entirely ignored the structural and systemic aspects of the social hierarchy that animated these protests against Black death at the hands of police. Diverse hiring practices and increased donations to advocacy groups might help usher in changes, but they do little to tackle the legal, governmental, and carceral systems that were the core issues of the protests in June 2020. Additionally, the statements reveal a broader landscape in which companies, not civic institutions, serve as the purveyors of social change.

Racial capitalism offers a lens and underlying condition for understanding how disparities are exacerbated when change becomes predicated on buying and selling products or services, especially considering the extractive and exploitative nature of capitalism in relation to Black communities. McMillan Cottom (2020) connects racial capitalism and platform capitalism to argue that the study of race and racism within a digital society is increasingly important because digital tools enable the logic of predatory inclusion. Predatory inclusion is a process where civic and financial institutions provide a needed service, such as education loans, to Black households on exploitative financial terms that limit the long-term financial gains of the service. McMillan Cottom addresses predatory inclusion through examples of including marginalized consumer-citizens within extractive mobility schemes such as student loan debt and housing (Taylor, 2019). Our examples of solidarity statements offer insight into the profit-turning aspects of inclusion as well as

how companies organize and conceptualize social relations through the interlinking of community and capital. Similarly, Leong (2021) coins the term “identity capitalism” to discuss the promotion of self-interest and power through the language of diversity, wherein individuals and organizations can accumulate social status associated with diversity without necessarily doing the difficult work required (see also Wellman, 2022).


In the wake of violence, companies selling salads, yoga mats, and mattresses neatly articulate social change as part of their mission and vision through a short promotional e-mail. As the language of racial justice and solidarity becomes repurposed as mechanisms for selling goods and services, it is important to question such messages tied to consumption; and to question if communities centered through solidarity statements are being included or excluded — and commodified — by predatory inclusion. Through looking at promotional e-mail messages by small-to-medium-sized organizations, this paper conceptualizes language work within these online solidarity statements — salad solidarity — as constrained and enabled by capitalism and furthering for-profit goals. While the pursuit of racial justice should be the end of extractive systems of racial capitalism, the inclusion of racial justice messaging within these e-mails monetize this vision to promote fast and easy solutions to racism. As Ahmed (2012), Leong (2021), and McMillan Cottom (2020) all point out, the work of contemporary capitalism, particularly in the digital era, makes exploitation “feel good” — and that we can supposedly solve complex social issues such as racism by building more equitable yoga companies and salad chains through shared participation.

Conclusion

Straddling both public and private forms of communication, e-mails can be used for crisis communication to send messages rapidly and widely. While businesses are traditionally cautious about politics because they wish to appeal to the broadest clientele possible, the spring and summer of 2020 illustrated a deviation from this trend. Organizations articulated their support to the Black Lives Matter movement and protesters through different formats, including e-mail statements of solidarity. Through our inboxes, the same company that sends us promotional updates on sneaker sales can also serve as an anti-racist reading resource. However, these e-mails became so ubiquitous that we noticed friends, colleagues, and organizers on our social media feeds express a collective disdain for them and their platitudes. Some publicly reflected on Twitter this disconnect between the subject lines and appeals to action within various e-mails: for example, decrying Democrats’ “Donate Now” campaigns in response to George Floyd protests. In tweets, people both expressed desires for organizations to take action and told organizations to “save their statements” — that they did not need any more e-mails from places they bought shoes or coffee from years ago.

Put simply, local organizations and businesses promote racial solidarity as a strategy to expand and grow their consumer and donor bases. While the salad group often provides other services or goods, a “racially just” organization becomes the product they are selling within these solidarity statements, whether or not organizations are versed in the language, analytical tools, and actual demands of social justice organizing and activism. These statements use the language of social change and concerns emerging from social movements to address and motivate a community of current and potential consumers, donors, and/or organizational stakeholders. These statements attempt to forge connections between organizations and communities through promoting the values of racial justice. However, their capitalist paradigms and end goals often limit solutions towards a more liberating future apart from extractive forms of racial, platform, and identity capitalism.

From a broader view, these results have implications for the studies of race, capitalism, and social movements, especially as they dovetail with a critical analysis of business and management culture. For one, smaller organizations, storefronts, and businesses have been sites where incidents of deadly violence have happened because proprietors call the police to protect private property, recover assets, or merely to

report the presence of Black people. The connection between activism and local sites of commerce has been long-standing, with histories of sit-ins, occupations, and boycotts. The entangled relationships between community-size capital could extend previous work on business boycotts and political protests (Boje, 2001; Whiteman and Cooper, 2017). In a different vein, this study presents novel case studies for revisiting communication theory about social relations, organizations, and communication (Carey, 1989). In the case of e-mails promoting solidarity, perhaps the medium is the message (McLuhan, 1994). Such e-mails, and their various frames, allude to this vision for an inclusive community, particularly in a moment where digital platforms became increasingly vital for physical well-being and social connection. Finally, considering growing amounts of research examining digital strategies of social movements and networked communication, attention to the role of digital (racial) capitalism may be of interest to these studies, particularly given how much of online activism takes place on commercial platforms and adjacent to digital storefronts. 

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Note

1 Organization names have been changed throughout this paper.

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