

Brands are fighting to prove they are anti-racist - but is it enough?

Consumers want to make ethical choices, but following the money reveals it is almost impossible to hold companies to account

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A Black Lives Matter banner in Washington DC. Photograph: Andrew Harnik/AP

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n 6 June, the renowned streetwear brand Supreme – beloved by hypebeasts

everywhere – [posted on Instagram](#): “The Black community has inspired and supported Supreme since day one. This week we will donate \$500,000 between Black Lives Matter, Equal Justice Initiative, Campaign Zero and Black Futures Lab. We stand in solidarity with the fight for justice and equality, and will continue to invest in the community.” The statement has been applauded during the weeks of protest sparked by George Floyd’s death, receiving more than 260,000 likes on Instagram.

Elsewhere, brands find themselves engulfed in controversy as consumers call them out for hypocrisy. Take McDonald’s. Its [solidarity statement](#), committing to donate an undisclosed amount to the National Urban League and the NAACP in a stance against systemic oppression, was liked 11,000 times on Twitter. But it wasn’t too long before numerous comments came in, reminding McDonald’s of the [class-action suit being filed against it from black and Latino employees](#) concerned about their safety over Covid-19.

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Glassnote Music was also called out for its statement of solidarity, after ex-employee Lakiesha Herman claimed that she was fired by the company just two months earlier – claiming she was the company’s only black employee. (Herman’s claims said that Glassnote Music initially responded that she had resigned, rather than been terminated. When approached for comment, attorneys for Glassnote Music and Herman advised that the parties had mutually agreed to a resolution of the matter, including an exit package.) Glassnote apologized for the “unnecessary stress caused” and that the company “has always been and will continue to be committed to accountability.”

And this week, activists such as Sharon Chuter have gone even further, [asking companies](#) to publish information related to hiring and pay.

For brands, there’s a lot at stake. Consumers want to spend their money with companies with progressive values: [87% of Americans would purchase](#) a product from a company that advocated for an issue they cared about, while 88% would boycott a company they thought behaved irresponsibly.

Some might think Supreme could teach these brands a thing or two, having gone over and beyond and – as we say on Twitter – “opened their purse”. Alas, if only it were that simple.

Just five days before Supreme’s show of support, a [photo](#) was widely circulated showing a cartridge the LAPD had used to fire rubber bullets at Black Lives Matter protesters. The picture clearly displays the name of the manufacturer – Combined Tactical Systems – a brand name of Pennsylvania company, Combined Systems Inc, which, in addition to supplying US police departments, also supplies teargas to the governments of Israel and Egypt. Evidence suggests such supplies were used on unarmed Palestinian protesters and Egyptian students protesting [against police brutality and government corruption](#) in 2011.

It turns out Supreme and Combined Systems Inc have something in common: their investors, Carlyle Group, a somewhat shadowy multinational private investment firm which bought a 50% stake in Supreme for an eye-watering \$500m in 2017 and previously invested in [Combined Systems Inc](#) through their mezzanine fund ([which they have now sold](#)).

What do these weirdly granular details that sound like they’re from an episode of Billions tell us? It’s that exposing businesses’ hypocrisy and holding them to account through ethical consumerism may not deliver as much as we’d hoped.

Some levels of hypocrisy aren’t clear, or are actively shrouded. Data can’t always give you a full view on workplace culture; supply chains can go dark (a US manufacturer receives tin from a supplier, who gets it from a supplier, that somewhere leads back to Mexico but no one can be sure what the practices are in the tin mine). Then there’s the myriad of business arrangements – from offshore companies to private funds – that make following the money impossible, let alone figuring out how the profits are spent, whether adequate taxes are being paid, and who the money came from in the first place (and whether it was Jeffrey Epstein – joking!).

The truth is market capitalism makes it near impossible to make wholly ethical choices. Wealth exists because of somebody's oppression somewhere, whether it's historic, or out of sight in a sweatshop overseas. Is Supreme hypocritical for taking money from a fund that has been plumped up by the sales of rubber bullets and teargas? Or are they putting bad money to good? Ultimately it's up to the consumer to decide, and figure out how much "bad" they are willing to accept, before they queue up for the next Supreme drop, of course.

This piece was updated on 14 June 2020 to clarify Glassnote Music's position on the matter

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<https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2020/jun/14/brands-anti-racist-money>