Are they leading with purpose? Revisiting Tech Companies' 2020 Promises to Communities of Color.

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Introduction

The year 2020 saw unprecedented protests across the United States (U.S.) in response to the police killing of Mr. George Floyd, a Black man, in the city of Minneapolis. These protests primarily drew attention to the racial inequities in all facets of American society, including the corporate world. Consequently, public expectations prompted a renewal of corporate commitment to diversity in the areas of employment and support for communities of color. Large companies such as Amazon, Apple, and Facebook, among others, pledged financial support totaling $50 billion toward these communities in June 2020 (Koshy et al., 2021).

One year later, however, little headway had been made toward fulfilling these promises. For instance, Propel Center, a learning hub for Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and one of the targeted Black organizations of the promised funds, received only $250 million (Quiroz-Gutierrez, 2021). Also, a research report on the pledges by Blendoor (2021), a corporate diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) rating company, revealed that despite companies' public displays of commitment to DEI, less has been achieved in terms of bridging the gap in employment disparities and the fulfillment of the pledges in general (Somers, 2021).

While these pledges potentially raked in short-term financial and reputational benefits for these companies, how the target recipients' reliance on these pledges impacted their operations needs exploring. This study, unlike previous works that delved into the extent of the fulfillment of these pledges focused on answering the question, *how did actual vs. pledged corporate responses to events in the summer of 2020 affect trust among the targeted publics three years later?*

Because organizational relationships with key publics are based on trust, which is crucial to the success of the organization (Edelman, n.d.), what organizations say to their publics and the actions that follow can help or hurt these relationships (Hon & Grunig, 1999). Most importantly, actions bordering on trust can negatively impact the image of organizations (Rawlins, 2007), which the public relations function seeks to guard against.

Given that the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, civil rights groups, and Black entrepreneurial businesseshave a huge following in the United States, the perceptions of the pledges, especially among the leadership of these groups, has the potential to influence perceptions of sympathizers of these moments about the companies that made these pledges. While positive perceptions of companies may be attributed to quality products and services,

friendly internal and external stakeholder policies, and at present, sustainable environmental policies in the case of companies' whose operations impact the environment, negative perceptions could be the consequence of poor outcomes on any of the above.

This study focused on the tech industry because it made the majority of promises toward ending systemic racism and removing inequities in employment opportunities during the racial reckoning in 2020 (Somers, 2021; Blendoor, 2021). The tech sector in the United States is also growing ten times faster and has wages twice as high as the rest of the nation's economy (Tomaskovic-Devey & Han, 2022). Since no company or industry is immune to crises (Zakiri, 2020), the vulnerabilities of tech companies are connected to customers, of which communities of color are a constituent part. Customers' public expression of dissatisfaction with corporate behavior can be a threat to companies' existence as sales and profit margins could plummet due to boycotts. Accordingly, the following section presents a review of related literature on the communities of color in the United States, tech companies' employment of Black professionals, and the role of trust in reputation building.

Background and Literature

Communities of color in the United States

People of color (POC) make up 24.2 percent of the approximately 333 million citizens in the United States as of July 2022. In specific terms, 13.6 percent are Black/African American, followed by Asian (6.1%), Multiracial American (2.9%), and Native Hawaiian (0.3%).

Despite representing a quarter of the population, however, communities of color (CoC) generally continue to lag in terms of socio-economic equity and political agency, even though the United States holds itself as a nation that recognizes diversity as its bedrock and strength (Executive Order: 13985). Generally, CoC lack improved living conditions with "blacks significantly most likely than other Americans to live in high-poverty neighborhoods"(Firebaugh & Acciai, 2016, p.1).

While CoC, comprising varied racial ethnicities (i.e. Latinx, Blacks, etc.), have a common experience of being underprivileged and underserved, some particularities define their individual realities. For example, the African-American population has suffered subjugation through enslavement spanning close to 400 years (Lovejoy, 1989). Other groups have no such history in the U.S., although discrimination, which affects all, continued and continues today after enslavement ended in 1865.

In addition, it is important to note that while Black men represent about 13 percent of the American male population, they constitute 35 percent of those incarcerated in the nation (Hinton, et al., 2018). Moreover, they are also incarcerated at a rate of roughly five times the rate of white Americans (Nellis, 2021). The effects of incarceration include high unemployment among offenders (Freeman, 1992), as stained records significantly cut these Black ex-convicts from the labor market due to negative employer attitudes toward them in the US (Atkin & Armstrong, 2013).

Families of convicted African Americans are not spared the brunt of imprisonment and financial shackles that subject them to abject poverty. Children of incarcerated African-Americans are found to be at a greater risk of ending up homeless (Princeton University, 2013), perpetuating the hurdles Black citizens face in modern America.

Prominent among factors responsible for the high rate of incarceration of African-Americans is anti-Black policing practices (Eisenberg et al., 2022), such as racial profiling, which is fueled by negative stereotypes (Vera Institute of Justice, n.d.). The killing of Breonna Taylor in Louisville, Kentucky, and George Floyd in Minneapolis marked the height of racial injustice in recent times. These deaths stirred a wave of public demand for all organizations, including tech companies, to address hiring practices that perpetuate systemic inequities against the Black population, among other things.

Tech companies and Black employment

Tech companies' commitment to hiring Black professionals continues to face public scrutiny. Some of these companies have not been honoring their DEI policies (Tomaskovic-Devey & Han, 2022), raising questions as to whether tech companies are truly committed to having a diverse workforce or if their DEI policies are simply for reputational enhancement. Statistics on tech employment of Blacks underpin the latter. For example, between 2014-2020, Black professionals made up only five percent of the tech workforce (Kapor Center, 2020). This low statistic seems to mirror the general picture in the United States private sector, where Blacks are underrepresented, especially in the highest-paying industries (Hancock et al., 2021), but often overrepresented in the front-line, low-paying jobs (Tripp & Fadlon, 2019).

Pay disparities also persist, as "Black tech workers' salaries are, on average, $10,000 less annually than their colleagues in the same positions," in the tech industry (Kapor Center, 2020, p.1). These facts lay bare the underrepresentation of Blacks in tech companies, the reason for public demand for reforms in this category of companies during the racial protests in 2020.

Role of Trust in organizational success

The events of 2020, coupled with the longer-term legacy of inequality and inequity faced by CoC, bring into focus questions of trust in all types of U.S. institutions, including trust in corporations. Trust is critical to the success of companies. This is because it is essentially tied to the reputation of companies (da Silva & Goncalves, 2013) and constitutes a basic consideration of stakeholders and potential publics to want to engage in what they expect to be a meaningful, mutual relationship with companies. Simply put, trust plays a *crucial role in the development and maintenance of organizational relationship*s (da Silva & Goncalves, 2013, p.2; Ganesan, 1994; Garbarino & Johnson, 1999; Kim, 2016).

The concept of trust, in the corporate context, has everything to do with stakeholders and what they perceive a company to be. Stakeholders' confidence in a company is, in part, dependent on the company's ability to act ethically and responsibly and live their promised values. Lundgren and McMakin (2018) identified eight factors that influence trust in organizations. These factors include empathy and caring; competence and expertise; honesty and openness; and dedication and commitment. Demonstrating honesty and commitment, for example, engenders the belief that a company is trustworthy (Lundgren & McMakin, 2018).

The increasing public demand for accountability is fast extending to all facets of society, including businesses. Apart from expecting quality products and services, which is a guarantee of a good return on investment, publics (especially customers) also want to take companies for their word without necessarily risking their emotions or *social investment* (an act of supporting or taking pride in something through association) in companies. This emerging variant of accountability requires companies to adjust by focusing more on the publics' expectations, a necessary condition for sustaining relationships with these publics.

Given that trust is a result of concrete, ethical actions based on truth and demonstrated commitment to the shared values of the parties in a relationship, the nature of companies' public actions has implications on corporate reputation. Even companies' decisions that are regarded as private are inherently risky when their basis is questionable. Lessons from incidents of major leaks of classified information on carbon emissions of German auto company Volkswagen (Zhou, 2016) and ExxonMobil (Supran & Oreskes, 2017; Farrell et al., 2019) have shown that covert actions can slide into the public sphere with lasting reputational repercussions for companies, thus affirming the centrality of ethical behavior and transparency in trust building between companies and their publics.

Trust in companies is premised on their past actions and inactions. They serve as a point of reference for publics' determination of the trustworthiness of companies. Existing literature on the waning levels of trust in programs, including government-initiated programs in CoC in the U.S. points to several factors among which the experience of deception in the past is found to be a major cause of distrust among this population. A manifestation of this distrust was seen in the resistance of COVID-19 vaccines among a section of this population (Jackson, 2021).

Based on the literature, the effects of past actions on trust are quite evident in the U.S., calling for a change on the part of U.S.-based companies to help improve the trust levels of various publics of CoC. A significant step is for companies to pay attention to their corporate social responsibility through effective community relations engagement programs, including following through on promises made to members of these communities.

Galford and Drapeau (2003) identified three different kinds of meanings people associate with the word *trust* when it comes to organizations. These include strategic trust (described as the trust employees have in top management to make the right strategic decisions); personal trust (employees' trust in their managers to treat employees fairly), and organizational trust, which relates to the trust people have in the organization itself. The third, organizational trust, is anchored on organizations' commitment to executing what they promise in a given situation.

Tech companies' promises to communities of color

In May 2020, tech companies found themselves in a quagmire caused by a barrage of calls for them to spearhead social change in the U.S. Among the demands made was that tech companies should publicly condemn racial violence and injustice. They were also to initiate and implement concrete policy actions to ensure diversity and equity in their work environment to help bridge racial disparities in employment opportunities in the nation.

Stuck in this web of societal expectations, more than 200 tech companies made unprecedented promises (Flake, 2022). These promises ranged from DEI commitments to improving the general

well-being of the underprivileged in society. These promises, arguably, resulted from companies' implicit social contract with the population, which required that they give back to society by acknowledging and tackling pressing social issues.

Companies' neglect of many of these promises, however, has since raised the question of whether these companies underestimated the agency of the targeted publics, in which case a disservice was done to these publics. In turn, the longer-term failure to follow through mandates that we evaluate the extent to which this failure has affected the publics' perceptions about these companies.

Given the initial doubts of the promises by some influential members of the Black population who described tech firms' promises as "performative allyship" (Jan et al., 2020), the turn of events seem to give credence to this, which gives reason to probe whether this feeling cuts across the CoC, activist groups, and sympathizers.

Theoretical Lens

Based on Grunig's (1997) situational theory of publics, it can be said that the sections of the American population that mounted pressure or demanded a corporate response to the 2020 racial crisis fall under the active/activist public. These publics have a high level of involvement (i.e., keen interest) in issues, as was demonstrated during the 2020 protests. By pushing for equity in society, they recognize racial injustice as a problem that they were well-placed, perhaps as backbones (by being customers) of these companies, to insist that something momentous be done to create racial parity in employment.

As an activist public, they have the power to influence like-minded individuals with their opinions on an issue of common interest. Therefore, any signal of contrary outcomes to their calls, which occasioned tech companies' promises, would be picked up and interpreted to inform their perceptions of these companies going forward. Essentially, these perceptions will likely influence their purchasing decisions.

Again, because some of these publics already evolved into members of activist groups, such as Black Lives Matter, etc., their concerted voice can threaten the autonomy of the concerned companies (Grunig, 2005). For example, sentiments about tech companies can spread through the ranks of BLM's members, as well as their sympathizers, with negative effects on these companies' reputation and bottom line.

Given that the public relations function hinges on the concept of mutuality as the basis of effective relationship building, promises have a direct impact on organizational relationships. Publics driven by values will expect accountability by expressing unfavorable behaviors that are inimical to corporate interests.

With the rise of *cancel culture* in the United States (as labeled by mainstream media) brands can no longer gamble on serious social matters, particularly those connected to race and intersectionality. In fact, Novelli's (2021) study indicated that more than 70 percent of the American population will be willing to stop using a brand's services or products if it says or does something perceived as offensive that has a connection with racial justice.

Based on the above study, a company's misstep on racial justice can damage its brand perception and loyalty (ANA, 2021), which can push the affected publics to switch to another competitor (Mohsen, 2022). Therefore, honoring pledges to various publics associated with civil rights and activist groups, which possess a quick mobilizing power, can protect companies from public anger and the predictable problem of poor image.

Implications of unfulfilled promises to companies and society in general

Companies' efforts to achieve equity across the board in society fall under the ambit of corporate social responsibility (CSR), a key part of ESG (Environment, Social, and Governance). CSR programs are driven by the belief that businesses have an obligation to society beyond their commitment to stockholders or investors (Library of Congress).

Acting in socially responsible ways has multiple benefits for companies and society as a whole. To companies, sincere corporate social responsibility undertakings present them as good corporate citizens in the eyes of the host communities, which improves their image (Yoon, et al., 2006). This creates a conducive operating environment for companies to thrive. The popular maxim "doing well by doing good" is a reflection of the public relations conviction that companies must be seen as key contributors to community development.

Again, being touted as community-centered is great positioning in the area of best corporate practices. To that end, the positive spotlight enjoyed by companies rated as among the 100 Best Corporate Citizens Ranking by the U.S.-based rating agency 3BL Media makes evident the benefits that organizations receive for seeking public good by being socially responsive.

Promises made under the guise of being socially accountable are façades tantamount to a manipulation of society's view of social responsibility (Woodward et al., 1996). The effects of unfulfilled promises are a further corrosion of public trust in companies, as witnessed in 2021 (Edelman, 2021). Although Eldelman's (2023) report on trust found indications of improvement in public trust in companies, this study focused on DEI as a driver of trust.

The waning public trust in companies is a double-edged sword. To companies, it reduces public empathy for them in difficult times, and at worse, leads to public withdrawal of goodwill for companies. This, in turn, has serious consequences for society in general, as disadvantaged and vulnerable populations that form a relatively significant segment of the markets will likely miss support from these companies in challenging times. This is because companies that are canceled are susceptible to financial losses, which can negatively impact their ability to fulfill even their corporate social responsibility to communities with diverse populations, including vulnerable persons. Given the goal of this study, three research questions guided this research as follows:

Research Questions

1). What role did the American population expect tech companies to play during racial protests in the summer of 2020?

2). What perceptions does the American population hold about corporate response to the summer of 2020 protests?

3). How did actual vs. pledged corporate response to events in the summer of 2020 affect trust levels among targeted publics?

Method

This study employed an IRB-approved Qualtrics survey in gathering responses from respondents using a set of 20 questions. A survey was the most appropriate data collection strategy because of its ability to reach the study's targeted population. The study specifically sought insight from Gen Z individuals based on their keen interest in and knowledge of racial justice conversations in recent times. Gen Z individuals also have a unique perspective given their formative years occurring at the height of the COVID pandemic and 2020 BLM protests. While certainly this generation—compared to older generations—is more in-tune with, and perhaps engaged with, today's key social issues including climate change, LGBTQIA+ protections, and additional DEI-related advocacy, their perspective is crucial. Gen Z voices should be top-of-mind for companies across industries—especially as their purchasing power grows and political voice becomes more central to American discourse(Francis & Hoefel, 2018; Bardastani et al., 2022; Lal & Harbridge-Yong, 2023).

In all, 81 participants responded to the survey in Qualtrics over a two-week period. The data were collected and analyzed for base descriptive statistics. Questions gauged the levels of trust developed for tech companies in response to their DEI-related promises. The survey also asked whether tech companies' public declarations on racial inequities were linked to current perceptions of these companies, and whether current perceptions had negatively impacted respondents' trust in the companies.

While many of the key findings could have been predicted based on generational assumptions, they provide an important framework for understanding the challenges facing companies and the role of accountability in long-term communication strategies. As such, the findings inform public relations theory and ask us to enter a new chapter of theoretical growth.

FINDINGS

The survey revealed five main takeaways regarding the role of tech companies in social advocacy specific to the Black Lives Matter Movement in 2020. First, respondents expressed a strong view that tech companies should publicly declare their stance on racial issues. Respondents also emphasized that these companies must live up to their word by fulfilling their DEI promises to the targeted publics. To that end, the third key takeaway is that respondents indicated they would not trust a tech company if they knew it failed to honor its promises made during racial protests in 2020. Tied to that finding, data indicated that respondents will likely not buy a company's products due to unfulfilled promises. Finally, respondents suggested that the current level of attention companies are paying to DEI in their environments needs to improve through more investment in DEI programs. The following sections will walk through those individual themes, including charts which display respondent breakdowns.

Companies should publicly declare their stance on racial issues

Data showed that companies need to publicly declare their stance on social issues related to DEI. That is, for corporations to be seen to be showing solidarity with POC and genuine concern for their calls for DEI in the United States beyond internal programs, a majority (49.23%) of respondents expected corporations to publicly make statements on such issues, while only 3.17% of respondents disagreed. This suggests that the majority of the respondents (who are mainly American) expects tech companies to make their voices audible on racial injustice. Thus, being socially responsive is a new standard consumers expect companies live up to.

To what extent do you agree/disagree that corporations should publicly respond to social issues related to DEI, such as the Black Lives Matter protests in summer 2020?
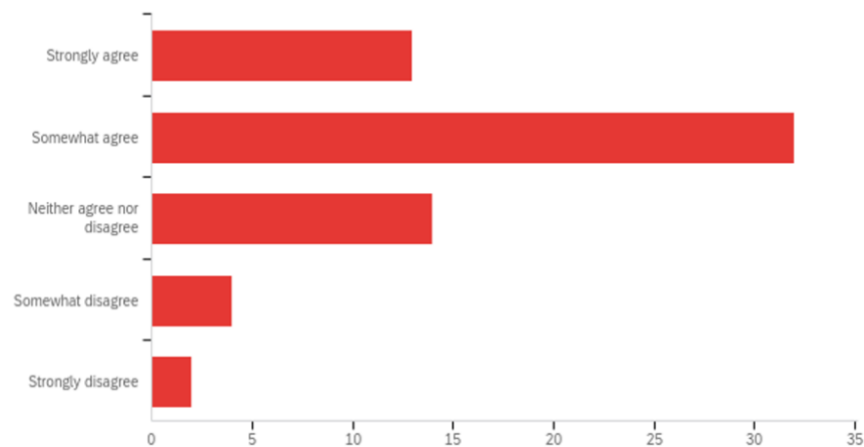

Figure 1

Companies' need to fulfill their DEI promises or risk losing respondents' trust and loyalty

Apart from making public statements, the data indicate that a majority of respondents (69.84%) expect companies to fulfill their pledges in response to social justice issues. Although 6.35% of respondents did not seem to attach importance to the fulfillment of promises, 36.51% of the respondents said their trust levels would fall drastically in companies they knew failed to fulfill the pledges made in the summer of 2020. This finding generally reflects respondents' regard for trust as a basis for continued engagement with companies.

Regardless on your stance regarding corporate involvement in DEI, do you feel these companies should fulfill public pledges in response to social justice issues?
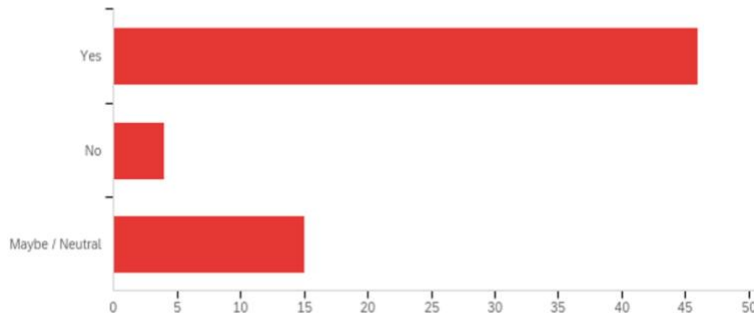

Figure 2

Respondents are unaware of promises, unsure whether promises are fulfilled

The statistic of respondents indicating that their trust levels in companies will drop if they knew specific companies failed to fulfill promises leads to a new finding. About 63.49% of respondents said they did not know tech companies made promises in the wake of the racial protests. Given that the respondents (i.e. Gen Z) are tech and social media savvy with a high consumption of news (Auxier & Arbanas, 2022), the above statistic suggests that these important corporate promises were probably not well communicated across the nation, revealing a potential reflex on the part of tech companies in that they may not have consciously made much efforts to communicate this message to public. Also, given the level of unawareness among the respondents, the reverse would have probably introduced a new dynamic regarding the respondent-company relationship with potential implications for these companies' fortunes.

Q12 - Are you aware that U.S.-based tech companies made pledges to support communities of color and to address diversity, equity problems in the summer of 2020?
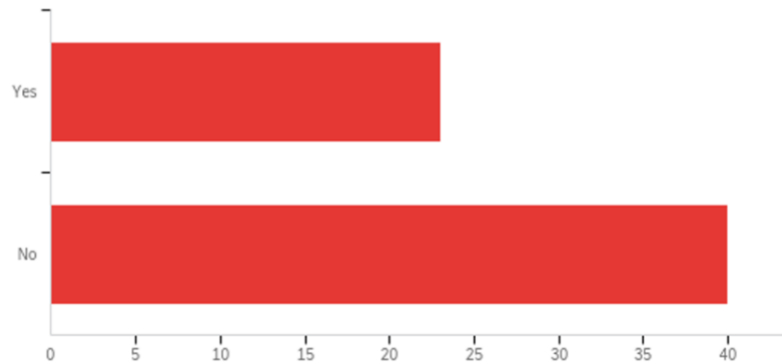

Figure 3

Companies with unfulfilled promises cannot be trusted

As a direct consequence of low trust, 49.23% of the respondents stated that they would likely boycott a company's products if they knew it failed to honor its 2020 DEI promises. This brings the importance publics attach to companies' public statements to the forefront, such as promises

made on issues like racial injustice and inequities in employment opportunities. About 3.17%, however, said they would continue to maintain their trust for companies regardless of the neglect of the promises made.

Would you still buy the products or patronize the services of companies neglect their public pledges in response to social justice issues?
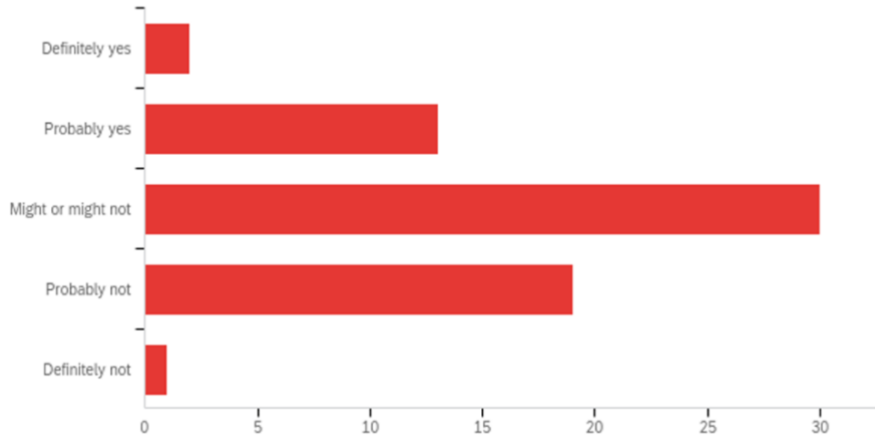

Figure 4

America needs racial systemic change

Data also showed that the majority of the respondents view racial systemic change as necessary in American society. About 74% of respondents said the United States needs racial systemic change to become a more equitable society, while 1.59% disregarded the need for it.

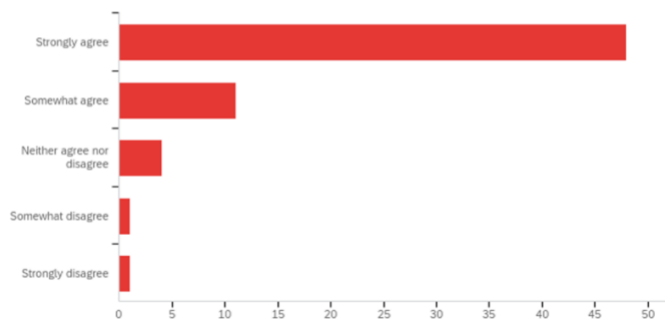**To what extent do you agree/disagree with the need for racial systemic change for a more-equitable society?**

Figure 5

U.S.-based tech companies need to invest more in diversifying their workforce.

To achieve systemic change, 60% of the respondents stated that corporations should invest more in diversity programs to help build internal, organizational DEI in the workforce while 4.7% did not feel the need for such investments. Respondents who argue for investments believe this will contribute to bridging racial gaps in the workforce. Currently, Black employees are the least

represented group in tech companies in the United States, making this sentiment even more important.

To what extent do you agree/disagree that corporations should invest in programs <u>that</u> help build internal, organizational diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)?
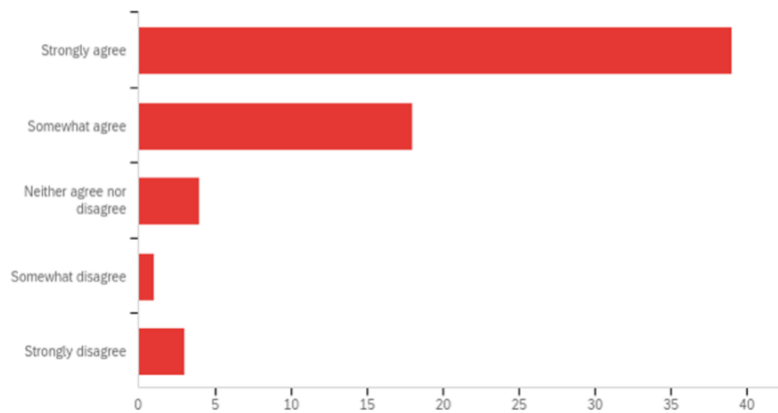
Figure 6

Discussion & Conclusion

This study set out to investigate publics' trust levels in tech companies that made bold promises during racial protests in the summer of 2020. The findings provide key insights for the guiding research questions. First, the findings indicate that the majority of respondents expect tech companies to not only publicly declare their stance on racial issues, but to also invest more in DEI programs to make their workforce diverse internally. A high number (49.23%) of respondents expressed their intentions to cut ties with companies that fail to honor their public promises on racial issues in the United States by boycotting their products and services.

The above findings also signal that tech companies can no longer stay on the fringes when it comes to issues of equity and social justice in the United States. In fact, the above finding suggests that it will be costly for tech companies to ignore their public pronouncements or promises related to racial issues in the future. With this expectation, tech companies in the United States are confronted with a new reality of *social surveillance* where public sentiments which impact trust will hugely impact companies' survival and allow consumers to easily refuse to buy from companies for not acting or behaving in a way that aligns with consumers' values.

What is more striking about this survey is its level of credence. More than 77% of the survey respondents identified as white. Thus, indicating that not only POC (who are mostly affected by inequities) feel strongly about the need for DEI in companies but white respondents as well. In terms of gender representation in the survey, 71% identified as female while the remainder of 29% identified as male.

The study also provides insight for its guiding theory, the situational theory of publics (Grunig, 1997). At its base, the theory tests how to understand and identify those groups who qualify as non, latent, aware, and active publics. Before social media, and the corresponding ability to quickly plug into events across the globe, companies arguably did not have a mandate to stay

abreast of events that did not directly affect their business. Today, as evidenced by the findings, companies no longer have that luxury.

Accordingly, the findings suggest that social activists and individuals plugged into social issues generally can no longer be considered a non-public for any type of corporation. Instead, those individuals should be considered aware and moved to action when needed. In many ways, the conversation has been flipped. Companies must listen to the public's discourse across a number of issues. As the findings indicated, publics could stop using a company's products or services because of perceived inaction, or willful wrong action, when it comes to a variety of social issues.

These findings, therefore, support prior studies that have found consumers are more engaged today in determining whose products and services to use based on what they know about a company's values. In short, "purpose" has become front and center in consumers' minds.

Several recent studies support this trend. For example, Aziz's (2020) survey of 8,000 global consumers showed that 94% of consumers identified purpose as central to their decision to engage with a company and were four to six times more likely to buy from, trust, or defend a company with a strong purpose. Accenture's (2018) study highlighted this as well, as 63% of the respondents indicated they would boycott a company that does not have a shared purpose that reflects their values and beliefs. Purpose, according to Aziz, is reflected, among other things, through companies' commitment to fair treatment of all employees, ethical and sustainable business practices, support for important social causes, fostering a diverse and inclusive culture, and meeting corporate social responsibility expectations, which about 68% of respondents in Cox's (2019) study identified as "crucial" in their purchasing decisions.

The key aspect of this current research that differs from prior studies is how to ensure long-term accountability. Yes, research has shown that consumers increasingly seek companies that share their social values. In the case of this study which focused on tech companies, however, consumers had little knowledge that these companies did *not* fulfill their promises. It seems that now consumers care about what a company *has* said and done in the past, and what they promise and do in the present. In fact, consumers can also make judgments based on what companies have *not* said. How to make companies accountable for what they have *not* done remains unanswered.

Better journalistic reporting may be instrumental in holding companies like these accountable going forward. However, if public relations practitioners are to serve as an organization's ethical conscience, the onus falls on them. When making promises on actions for social causes, the public relations function must also tell the public when and how they will follow through. Moreover, practitioners must also provide mechanisms for their publics to track progress or the lack thereof. In terms of crisis response best practices, practitioners are taught that in order to remain in control of a story, they must respond quickly, tell all affected stakeholders the next steps, and then follow through on those steps. The same practice must apply here.

Finally, this research reinforces the importance of the public relations function in an organization. If consumers are looking for organizations with purpose, then the public relations function must reside at the center of that purpose, driving the conversation on how to respond to

social issues, and then ultimately holding their organizations accountable in the long term. Consumers are watching and deciding with their dollars.

Limitations & Future Research

One key limitation of this study was the small sample size, although the study's findings provided important insights that are useful to PR professionals, particularly those in the tech industry. Due to the relatively limited survey sample, the findings are not generalizable. Future studies should investigate the role of the public relations function in driving purpose, and study how organizations remain ethically accountable for promises on social issues. In doing so, different industries and different populations should also be researched. Companies should be prepared to act and make public statements as needed, as expected by their key stakeholders.

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