



“We Need to be Better”: Race, Outdoor Recreation, and Corporate Social Advocacy

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The summer 2020 protests following the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and other African-Americans sparked important conversations about race, police brutality, and institutionalized racism in the United States. In response to widespread civil unrest, organizations across the country issued statements condemning anti-Black violence and supporting the Black Lives Matter movement. This essay analyzes public statements released by 50 outdoor sport and recreation organizations. Extending scholarly literature on race and corporate social advocacy, our analysis develops the concept of conciliatory discourse, which functions by rhetorically constructing 1) a non-specification of grievance, 2) an obfuscation of commitments to action, and 3) a reinforcement of previous actions or processes. We argue that while many outdoor recreation organizations took action in support of racial justice, their public statements complicate long-term commitments for inclusivity and diversity.

Keywords: outdoor recreation, organizational communication, racism and antiracism, black lives matter protests, image repair strategies, environmental racism, corporate social advocacy

INTRODUCTION

The summer 2020 protests following the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and other African-Americans sparked important conversations about race, police brutality, and institutionalized racism in the United States. In March 2020, a Black woman named Breonna Taylor was fatally shot by Louisville police officers in the middle of the night as she lay sleeping in her apartment. The shooting was the result of a botched drug raid, for which the police used the wrong address, and no charges were made in connection to Taylor's death. In May 2020, a convenience store employee called the Minneapolis police on a Black man named George Floyd, alleging that he used a counterfeit \$20 bill. When police arrived on the scene, white police officer Derek Chauvin pinned George Floyd to the ground, kneeling on his neck for 9 min and 29 seconds, continuing long after Floyd lost consciousness. Floyd ultimately died from the injuries he sustained, and in April 2021 Chauvin was convicted of second-degree murder. Although the Black Lives Matter movement has drawn attention to these issues for years, the protests signaled an important turning point that forced white Americans to confront “the social power afforded by hegemonic White supremacy” (Williams, 2020, p. 1). For weeks, tens of thousands of Americans “swarmed the streets to express their outrage and sorrow” (Taylor, 2021, para. 2) in what became the largest sustained protest movement since the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s.

Additionally, several high-profile events involving outdoor recreation and anti-Blackness preceded the nationwide protests, further reinforcing the importance of exploring this intersection. In February 2020, Ahmaud Arbery was murdered while jogging in his

neighborhood after being pursued by two white men (Fausett, 2021). In May 2020, Christian Cooper, a Black man and self-described avid bird watcher, had the police called on him by a white woman following a confrontation in Central Park over an unleashed dog (Vera and Ly, 2020). These highly publicized events are noteworthy in themselves, but also evince a broader historical trend of anti-Blackness in outdoor spaces.

Not surprisingly, as protestors continued to call for reforms, corporations and organizations across the country began issuing statements of solidarity and support. Although corporate efforts in support of social justice are not unprecedented (Jones, 2019), the scope and urgency of corporate appeals in support of racial justice and Black Lives Matter certainly are.

In this essay, we take these organizational statements as our focal point, focusing specifically on 50 statements from outdoor recreation companies and non-profit organizations that responded to the racial justice protests of 2020. The outdoors and outdoor recreation are important sites of inquiry for exploring the dynamics of contemporary race relations in the United States given the frequent policing of Black and brown bodies in public spaces (Finney, 2014).

Our analysis addresses these organizational statements as examples of image repair and maintenance that were intended to speak directly to the exigencies of race relations in the United States. Our work responds to recent calls by scholars to more critically examine race and difference in communication scholarship (Chakravartty et al., 2018; Rodriguez et al., 2019; Wanzer-Serrano, 2019; ToneUpOrgComm Collective, 2020). Moreover, we build on previous outdoor recreation scholarship (Sasidharan, 2002; Madsen et al., 2014; Schmalz and Mowatt, 2014), which has called for a more robust interrogation of the intersection between race and the outdoors. Powell (2021) explains that because “outdoor recreation is coded as white” (p. 172), researchers must “take on the responsibility of asking questions that not only describe the recreation behaviors of African Americans but examines white toxicity in outdoor spaces” (p. 173). Thus, this essay is aimed at interrogating the racialized discursive practices employed by outdoor sporting and recreation organizations -- which have traditionally avoided engaging with “contentious” issues like racism and white supremacy -- to better understand how capitalist practices can shape the lived experiences of people of color in outdoor spaces.

In what follows, we begin by situating this essay within scholarly conversations pertaining to race and outdoor recreation. Next, we discuss corporate social advocacy (CSA) scholarship, particularly as it pertains to organization image repair strategies in response to accusations of racism. After detailing our methods, we identify the concept of *conciliatory discourse* to make sense of how outdoor sporting and recreation companies responded to the racial justice protests of 2020. Conciliatory discourse is an organizational response to non-specific grievance(s) that recognizes particular exigencies within the social milieu but deflects claims of culpability. We argue that, while many of these corporate statements make promises for direct action and accountability, they do so by creating rhetorical distance between the company and those

exigencies and by using vague statements about commitments to racial justice to supplant commitments to action. Finally, we discuss the implications of this analysis.

Outdoor Recreation and Race

The ways in which outdoor recreation companies use public statements for image repair during moments of heightened racial violence and strife raises important questions about the racialization of place and space, particularly in outdoor recreation spaces and national parks. The episodes mentioned above, and countless others, highlight the dominant forces and ideologies at play that determine which bodies are worthy of inhabiting outdoor spaces. For example, mass media articles that justified 17-year-old Trayvon Martin’s killing in 2012 by a Florida neighborhood “watch captain” signified that he was identified as a threat because he was “out of place” (Anderson, 2013), similar to the ways in which bodies of color are marked as out of place in national parks, white neighborhoods, and recreational spaces, thus heightening racial anxiety and “impurifying” the (read: white) spaces they inhabit (Anderson, 2013; Brahinsky et al., 2014; McDowell and Wonders, 2009). Naturalizing discourses are deployed to construct racial hierarchies through the language of nature and space and to position the proverbial racial Other as a threat (Brahinsky et al., 2014). Moreover, such murders highlight how “racialization works in intersection with discourses about places and environments to lasting and damaging social effect” (Brahinsky et al., 2014, p. 2). The racialization of outdoor spaces has a long history in line with the US’s racial and racist history of segregation, immigration penalization, land theft, conservation practices and policies, and the codification of race and bodies as un/worthy to inhabit certain spaces and places (Brahinsky et al., 2014; Deloria, 1988; Finney, 2014; Taylor, 2016; Rothstein, 2017). As Brahinsky et al. (2014) assert, “When these bodies are seen as “out of place”, the violent and fearful fantasies of a society deeply scarred by the enduring legacies of racial violence are never far away” (p. 2).

This racialized violence and environmental racism has reverberated throughout the history of America’s outdoor spaces and is still glaringly visible today. With respect to outdoor recreation, this is a deliberate move rooted in the history of American national parks, as people of color were rarely key stakeholders in park planning activities in the earliest years of the American park system (DeLuca and Demo, 2001). According to Myron Floyd, dean of the College of Natural Resources at North Carolina State University, “The underlying rationale for creating parks was this idea of U.S. nationalism, to promote the American identity, and the American identity was primarily white, male and young.” “It was really trying to distinguish the American identity from the European identity: being a separate, more mature nation in the mid-19th century” (Gosalvez, 2020). Furthermore, as Gosalvez (2020) and Purdy (2015) describe, Gifford Pinchot, the first head of the US Forest Service, held racist beliefs and asserted that parks were created *only* for white Americans. The reverberations of this environmental racism manifest in various ways in the present day. For example, García et al. (2016) found that Latino immigrant communities in Los Angeles, California faced

limited park availability. In addition to Latino communities not having park access, Latinos face racism when accessing larger public spaces (Clarke et al., 2015). Arredondo and Bustamante (2020) found that Latinos in Northwest Arkansas faced barriers to community spaces such as entrance fees, exclusionary practices, and the overall construction of public spaces as “whitespaces.” More broadly, people of color in the United States are three times more likely than white people to live in places that have no immediate access to nature or outdoor spaces (Borunda, 2020).

The racism prevalent in outdoor spaces also perpetuates systemic violence against people of color. In an important conceptual move, Wright (2021) argued for the expansion of environmental racism to move from land-based toxins and violence to include anti-Black violence and the devaluation of Black bodies. We contend with Wright (2021) that such a shift must be made to more fully acknowledge, understand, and address the violences experienced by bodies of color in the outdoors, as such environmental racism indeed includes a wide spectrum of micro-level and macro-level violences. Such violences are evidence of continuing tensions between individual rights and freedoms promised to American citizens and widespread discrimination against communities of color (Hill Collins, 2001). Taken together, such findings highlight “the importance of recognizing both historical determinants of inequities in the built environment and how social processes tend to reproduce power configurations in the present” (Hoover and Lim, 2021). While outdoor spaces were initially constructed as spaces of recreation and leisure (read: for white communities by white men in power), history and recent events demonstrate how outdoor spaces are also places of oppression, violence, and disparities for communities of color, further illustrating the codification of race and configuration of social power relationships.

In recent years, as news articles, social media accounts, and academic research have documented instances of environmental racism and its lasting effects, outdoor recreation and outdoor product organizations have touted their diversity, inclusion, and equity (DEI) work. One of the authors of this manuscript, for example, serves on the Board of Directors for a local climbing non-profit organization and has spearheaded its organizational DEI efforts for the past year. It is telling, however, that this is the first time in the organization’s history (in the wake of the murder of George Floyd) that this organization and many others are just *now* realizing they need to include DEI efforts and initiatives in their larger strategic plans. Such efforts are representative of the diversity industrial complex (or the equity-diversity-inclusion industrial complex), a phenomenon wherein organizations are conducting diversity seminars, bringing in diversity specialists, and making public promises about goals to do better, all in the hopes of serving as a solution to inequity in the workplace. According to Springer (2018), the diversity industrial complex is defined as “organizations and individuals invested in framing discrimination as an apolitical tolerance for difference through linguistically downplaying bigotry, social norms, and business practices, while avoiding historical contexts of power and oppression” (para 3). Springer (2018) further elaborates that

the diversity industrial complex is “ultimately not interested in diversity for the sake of ending discrimination or social justice, but merely for the sake of a harmonious workplace free from harassment complaints and discrimination lawsuits (though such lawsuits are notoriously difficult for plaintiffs to win)” (para. 3). Part of the diversity industrial complex, we assert, includes public organizational statements concerning diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice work, especially because research suggests that diversity work serves the organization more than its employees (Chen, 2020). In this vein, we ask: to whom were outdoor recreation companies’ public statements addressed? Whom did they serve? And to what end?

Corporate Social Advocacy and Race

Public statements issued by outdoor recreation companies following the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 disrupt traditional approaches to public corporate communication. Following sustained public pressure, companies across the United States began to issue statements that directly grappled with the problems of white supremacy and police brutality. While the visibility of these statements across the spectrum of outdoor recreation companies is unprecedented, it is not surprising. Organizations are increasingly using their platform and brand to engage the public on issues of concern or controversy, often times on issues that frequently fall outside the operational scope of the organization itself. Citing well known cases such Nike’s support of NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick, Austin et al. (2019) contend that “the question of what corporations’ role in public interest communications should be remains up for debate” (pp. 3–4). As an emergent genre of corporate communication, these statements constitute what Dodd and Supa (2014) term corporate social advocacy (CSA). CSA is a distinct form of public-facing communication that serves to engage the public by taking a stance on social or political issues. Dodd and Supa (2014) differentiate CSA from issue management or corporate social responsibility by highlighting how, in these statements, “the social-political issues addressed by organizations are divorced from issues of particular relevance to the organization [...] engagement in the social-political issues is controversial and serves to potentially isolate organizational stakeholders while simultaneously attracting activist groups; and [...] as a result, there is a particularly necessary emphasis on financial outcomes for the organization” (p. 5).

For larger organizations that may be able to exert a considerable amount of public influence, the boundary between corporate social responsibility and CSA is a blurry one. Underscoring the significance of these statements, Parcha and Kingsley Westerman (2020) contend that the “effects of corporate social advocacy are important to understand because if corporations are able to influence attitudes on controversial social issues, they could be at least partially responsible for shaping the future of democratic society” (p. 351). Thus, while traditional statements concerning social responsibility may have been limited to contexts directly relevant to the purview of the organization and its stakeholders, CSA represents a significant departure that attempts to engage the public writ-large on issues of cultural or political significance.

CSA statements issued by large corporations have addressed a variety of concerns such as gun control (Gaither, et al., 2018) and same-sex marriage (Dodd and Supa, 2014). Given the prevalence of racial conflict over the last several years, companies are increasingly engaging with the public on issues of race, identity, and difference. For instance, in 2015, Starbucks launched the Race Together Initiative, which was meant to foster racial dialogue following protests in Ferguson, Missouri (Logan, 2021). The initiative, which involved encouraging baristas to write #racetogether on coffee cups to encourage customers to engage in a discussion about race relations, was widely regarded as a failure (Peterson, 2015). Other companies, like Nike, have established an extensive record of engaging in race-focused public statements and campaigns. For example, Waymer and Logan (2021) have analyzed the shoe company's support of quarterback Colin Kaepernick following the widespread public backlash to his kneeling protest against racial injustice as a form of corporate advocacy. As they assert, "Nike's stance on social justice issues—backed by its corporate mission, public statements and campaigns—aims to position the company as a legitimate corporate social justice advocate" (Waymer and Logan, 2021, p. 5). These high profile examples highlight the tricky terrain of racial politics in the United States that organizations are now beginning to navigate through corporate social advocacy.

Given the racial tensions that have permeated all facets of U.S. American society and the communicative negotiation engendered by corporate social advocacy efforts, it is vital to interrogate the complex power dynamics at play in these public-facing discourses. In recognizing that corporations have historically "perpetuated and profited from racial oppression, making them contributors to, and beneficiaries of, racial injustice," Logan (2021, p. 6) proposes a novel theoretical framework termed corporate responsibility to race (CRR). Understood as a normative theory, CRR "could, and perhaps should, guide the behavior of corporations and similar organizations on matters of race and social justice" (Logan, 2021, pp. 6–7) and invites researchers to "theorize how human beings and organizations experience the world within the context of powerful corporations advocating for racial justice" (Logan, 2021, p. 7). CRR draws on a wide body of scholarship including critical race theory, corporate social responsibility, and CSA to provide a framework for understanding how corporations might engage with racial (in)justice. According to Logan (2021), CRR communications should be able to draw attention to race, highlight the implications of racism, advocate for racial justice, express a desire to achieve a more just society, and prioritize societal good over economic profit (p. 13). As a vital reimagining of public relations scholarship that foregrounds race, the CRR framework provides a valuable heuristic for exploring organizational statements about racial injustice.

While the existing literature on corporate social advocacy works to contextualize our present study, it does not fully account for the statements about police brutality and racial injustice. We argue it is important to analyze these statements rather than taking them at face value, because, as Holling et al. (2014) remind us, rhetorical criticism "requires questioning

commonsense explanations that produce and reinforce our consent to the current social order and its power structures" (p. 250). To what extent do these public statements disrupt current power relations and demand a change in the material conditions of white supremacy (Gordon and Crenshaw, 2003; Holling et al., 2014)? These organizations issued statements without being directly called upon to do so, and so we echo Gordon and Crenshaw (2003) in asking "What replaces the silence about racism?" (p. 251).

METHODS

To answer this question, we turn to an analysis of 50 statements released by outdoor sporting and recreation companies in the wake of the racial justice protests in the summer of 2020. Public statements provide a salient avenue for exploring organizational values and identity. Previous scholarship has emphasized the importance of public-facing communications like corporate ethics statements (Murphy, 1995), mission statements (Klemm et al., 1991), and environmental statements (Onkila, 2009) for exploring how organizations engage with stakeholders and the general public. Given the centrality of social media, the majority of these statements were issued through platforms such as Instagram and Facebook, but several organizations also issued detailed statements on their web pages. We focused on the 50 public statements compiled by Outside Business Journal (2020), which kept a running list statements "condemning racial injustice and institutional violence against the Black community in the United States" (para. 1).

These statements represent a diverse cross-section of organizations and companies that work in the broad domain of outdoor recreation. The majority of the statements ($n = 41$) were issued by for-profit companies or corporations. These included larger corporations (e.g., REI, Eddie Bauer, Timberland), smaller companies (e.g., Cotopaxi), and outdoor-focused public relations firms (e.g., Press Forward PR, Outside PR). The second group of statements ($n = 6$) was made by industry advocacy groups and professional organizations such as the Outdoor Industry Association and the American Hiking Society. The final group of statements ($n = 3$) is from what we term community-building organizations (Black Girls Climb, Outdoor Afro, and She Explores), which advocate for more inclusivity in outdoor sport and recreation. Given that this final group is composed of organizations whose major strategic goal is inclusive advocacy, we did not include their statements in our analysis. Most of the statements were released on social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook, although several organizations also linked to their website where more detailed statements were available. In cases where social media posts linked to longer statements on organization websites, both texts were used. We copied the text of these statements and any accompanying images into qualitative coding software NVivo 12, which was used to facilitate coding.

Our data analysis process unfolded in three phases. First, we began with a close read of the statements to identify broad, emergent themes about the data set. We each developed

individual notes about the statements that sought to describe the strategies these organizations employed. We used these notes to develop theoretical memos that were used to orient the later phases of our analysis. During the second phase, we engaged in descriptive first cycle coding (Tracy, 2020) that sought to capture categorical information about the statements as well as meanings that could be used to develop a codebook with examples and definitions. The categorical information including details such as whether the statement was made by a company or non-profit organization, whether the statement committed to a specific course of action (such as donating money or hiring diversity and inclusivity managers), whether the statement explicitly named white supremacy, police brutality, or white privilege as social problems, and whether the statement provided readers with resources that could be used to support social justice causes. Finally, we engaged in third-level axial coding (Creswell, 2007) that explored how these emergent categories and themes were interconnected. We drew on concepts of CSA and CRR as sensitizing concepts to make sense of these data in light of the theoretic memos developed in our first cycle of coding. Additionally, our analysis was partially informed by our positionalities as researchers who engage with outdoor recreation in a variety of ways. Carlos is a Latino borderlands scholar whose research interests focus on environmental organizations. Sarah is a mixed-race Chicana from the Mexico/U.S. border who enjoys hiking, rock climbing, and spending time outdoors with her family. Leandra is a critical health communication and media studies scholar who utilizes Chicana feminist lenses to explore community activism in reproductive justice contexts. As an avid rock climber, she is also a member of the Board of Directors and EDI committee for her local climbing advocacy organization. In the next section, we explore the major themes that emerged in these public statements and advance the idea of conciliatory discourse as an analytic frame.

Analysis

These statements constitute a unique style of organizational image repair that we term conciliatory discourse. Drawing on and extending Logan's (2021) CRR framework, we argue that these public statements represent an attempt to center race in social advocacy, but ultimately do not fully address the "processes of racism and racialization" (p. 16) that perpetuate racial harm. Conciliatory discourse, then, is a hybrid genre of corporate social advocacy that is defined by organizational responses to exigencies within the social milieu that create rhetorical distance and a denial of culpability. An analysis of the public statements issued by outdoor sporting and recreation organizations reveals that conciliatory discourse functions by rhetorically constructing 1) a non-specification of grievance, 2) an obfuscation of commitments to action, and 3) a reinforcement of previous actions or processes. As our qualitative analysis reveals, this new genre of corporate social advocacy highlights how organizations co-opt specific message frames to engage in face-saving engagement with broad publics. These tactics, we argue, evince a commodification of social justice discourse that allows organizations to tout a commitment to justice while

simultaneously denying culpability or taking material action. The organizational statements included in our analysis represent a wide range of communication strategies and, accordingly, our intent is not to point to specific examples that were more or less successful. On the contrary, our aim is to showcase how the statements encompass myriad responses that complicate how organizations might respond to complex, deeply-entrenched problems like white supremacy and police brutality.

Non-Specification of Grievance

The first characteristic of conciliatory discourse concerns the non-specification of grievances or the ways in which organizations externalize social problems. While some styles of public-facing communication such as corporate apology (Hearit, 1995) respond to specific grievances or actions directly related to organizational wrongdoing, conciliatory discourse addresses external problems that may not be directly connected to the purview of the organization. The statements issued in response to the racial justice protests were markedly different in that the responding organizations were not directly at fault for incidents such as the killing of George Floyd or the police call involving Christian Cooper. As a result, the statements largely externalized racial injustice as a broad social problem that allowed the organizations to create rhetorical distance, enabling them to speak about racial injustice vaguely and deny culpability.

Many of the public statements offered exceptionally vague condemnation of injustice but did not address the specific events that precipitated the protests in the summer of 2020. In these cases, the organizations drew on justice and anti-racist frames, but did so without explicitly engaging with the particularities of the unrest unfolding at the time. For instance, Moosejaw, an outdoor recreation apparel company, offered a statement that simply read, "Moosejaw stands for inclusivity, and we stand with all those affected by bigotry, injustice, and systemic racism. We see you. We hear you. We stand with you. #blacklivesmatter" (Moosejaw, 2020). Hoka One, an athletic shoe company, simply posted, "We fly higher when we fly together. It's time to do better. It's time to be anti-racist. Let's do better together. The time is now" (HOKA ONE ONE, 2020). Similarly, Ibex Wool's statement offers a general solidarity statement: "We cannot stand silent while blatant injustices happen daily to our brothers and sisters. We must do better . . . All of us here at Ibex know that we must build diversity and justice into the foundation of our company and not tolerate hate of any kind" (Ibex Outdoor Clothing, 2020). Statements like these highlight a broad strategy of non-specification that points to general ideas like injustice and bigotry, but does not name issues like police brutality or white supremacy that have enabled the perpetuation of injustice in the first place.

Additionally, many of the statements offered general condemnation of racial injustice and police brutality but did not address how racism has permeated outdoor recreation activities. This may not be surprising given that the protests were driven largely in response to the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and others. However, in directing focus to problems external to the organizational domain (i.e., outdoor sport and recreation), many of the

statements failed to account for how racist practices have excluded people of color in outdoor spaces. For example, clothing retailer prAna's (2020) statement explains:

Grief. Frustration. Anger. Confusion.

Fear. Guilt. Exhaustion.

Words fail to capture these feelings.

Action is required.

In trying to understand these feelings, how to express them, and how to respond, we waited. We realize now the waiting in and of itself was a privilege we took for granted, and our silence spoke for us.

We stand with George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and their families.

We stand with those speaking out against racism in Minneapolis and cities around the world.

We stand with anyone impacted by racism and social injustice.

Today, we stand up to listen.

Statements like this demonstrate a process of externalization in which the social ills of police brutality and systemic racism are rendered as problems “out there” that allow the organizations to deny culpability. We do not mean to suggest that these companies are directly responsible for the atrocities committed against Black folks or the centuries of institutionalized racism in the United States. However, the organizational self-reflexivity attempted in these statements does not begin to address how capitalist practice, outdoor recreation culture, and economic privilege have reified the outdoors as space traditionally reserved for white bodies (Finney, 2014). Statements by groups like the American Alpine Club (2020), a non-profit climbing organization, specifically “condemn the systemic racism that jeopardizes life and opportunity for black and brown people,” (para. 3) but only offers vague calls for justice “in everyday life, at protests, in the halls of government, *at the crag*, and in the voting booth” (para. 4, emphasis added). Similarly, the non-profit American Hiking Society emphasizes that its mission “will never be fulfilled until systemic racism is erased and black bodies are safe outside. We resolve to re-commit to doing what we can as American Hiking to root out racism in the outdoors” (American Hiking Society, 2020). Whether by speaking in vague generalities or by externalization, these statements reveal how conciliatory discourse works through non-specification of grievance.

Obfuscation of Commitment to Action

Although nearly all of the public statements offered a condemnation of racism and statements of solidarity with protestors, our analysis revealed a wide range of commitments to tangible action. Thus, a secondary characteristic of conciliatory discourse is a general evasiveness on behalf of the organization. Because organizations create rhetorical

distance through non-specification as outlined above, efforts to create change are also marked by a general tendency to avoid solid commitments for change.

A primary strategy to obfuscate action commitments was to express the need for change without providing any details for action. In these cases, organizations used nebulous language about promoting justice but did not explain what such an approach would encompass. For example, Arc'teryx, an outdoor clothing and climbing gear company, pledged they “will use our voice to seek justice where we live, work, and play We will educate whenever and wherever we can. We commit to ensuring that every single human feels at home in everything we do” (Arc'teryx, 2020). Others, like public relations firm Outside PR, emphasized that “We need to be better. We need to understand better. We need to listen and learn. We need to stand together.” (Outside PR, 2020). Cycling company Rapha similarly expressed the need to “do more in supporting diversity at a grassroots level do more in championing diverse leaders in the sport do more in recruiting and advancing diversity within our organisation [sic]” (Rapha, 2020) but did not specify how such objectives would be accomplished. In these cases, the organizations drew upon vague commitments to the goals of social change but did not provide actionable steps for accomplishing them.

Organizations also employed a strategy of focusing on listening and voice amplification. Rather than committing to concrete action, these organizations emphasized critical self-reflexivity as the best action they could take. Tension Climbing, a climbing gear company, released a statement committing to “listening to and elevating BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, People of Color] voices, and creating short-term and long term goals within our company” (Tension Climbing, 2020) that asked followers to reach out directly with areas for possible improvement. Alpine gear company Mammot took a similar approach with their statement: “Today, we don't have all the answers. Today, we are listening and learning. Talk without action doesn't create change, so please let us know how we can be better and more inclusive” (Mammot North America, 2020). Many of the organizations also utilized the #AmplifyMelanatedVoices hashtag while putting a pause on regularly scheduled content and used the opportunity to “listen and reflect on how we can do better” (Climbing Wall Association, 2020). Conciliatory discourse enables organizations to elide responsibility by using self-reflexive monitoring as a strategy for addressing non-specified grievances.

It is worth noting that several of the organizations in our analysis did commit to tangible actions in support of racial justice. In fact, some of the organizations (n = 13) pledged donations or matching funds to organizations like the NAACP and ACLU. While important, fewer organizations made commitments to engage in long-term efforts in support of diversity and inclusivity initiatives. We argue this distinction is important in the larger context of DEI efforts because it represents a compartmentalization of racial justice. That is, by donating money, the organizations are able to present clear, tangible evidence of their support for racial justice -- but do not necessarily need to commit to longer-term efforts to combat

racialized exclusions within the organization or the broader realm of outdoor recreation. As a discursive strategy, this move is consequential because it uses discrete image repair strategies (i.e., monetary donations) in response to non-specified grievances (i.e., systemic racism), thereby enabling the organization to assert publicly that it is doing the labor of equity and inclusivity.

Reinforcement of Previous Action

Organizational issue management is typically timebound. When a crisis occurs that may undermine the legitimacy of the organization, statements are issued to placate investors or stakeholders so that confidence in the organization is not undermined. Conciliatory discourse, by contrast, is not bound by considerations for expedience in the same ways because the grievances are abstract and, by consequence, solutions do not need to be directly responsive. Although all of the statements in our analysis were released as protests around the country were growing in size (roughly a 1-week timeframe in early June 2020), the strategies outlined in response to grievances about racial injustice were not temporally bound to the present moment. Instead, many of the organizations relied on appeals to previous efforts focused on diversity and inclusivity as another way of avoiding direct culpability. This strategy, a reinforcement of previous action or process, is the third defining characteristic of conciliatory discourse.

Many organizations in our analysis touted longstanding commitments to diversity and anti-racism to underscore commitment to the protests that were occurring at the time. In the clearest example, Timberland, an outdoor clothing wear company known for its distinctive style of boots, posted an advertisement from 1992. The image features the iconic Timberland boot with the text “Give racism the boot.” On the Instagram post featuring the advertisement, the caption explains:

In 1992 we shared a message. Sadly, we bring it back today. We don't want to. We shouldn't have to. As humans, we have the responsibility to care for our planet, ourselves, and each other—all of us, no matter who you are. Let's work together now for a better future. Caring is no longer enough. Use your voice. (Timberland, 2020).

The message concludes by encouraging followers to take action by supporting Color of Change, a non-profit civil rights advocacy organization. This statement is noteworthy because it exemplifies conciliatory discourse in several ways. The company does not directly address the specific exigencies that prompted the statement (i.e., racism, police brutality, social unrest), nor does it outline specific actions that it is taking to combat those problems. Instead, the company alludes to its previous anti-racism efforts by way of an advertisement and attempts to bridge the temporal gap between past and present. This maneuvering allows the organization to avoid direct culpability because the image is meant to serve as evidence of longstanding commitments for social justice.

Other organizations relied on similar strategies to showcase previous efforts in support of diversity and inclusivity. Mountain Equipment Co-Op emphasized that they were signatories to the “Outdoor Industry CEO Diversity Pledge,” an industry-wide set of principles intended to increase representation for people of color in outdoor recreation. Their statement explains:

MEC signed the Outdoor Industry CEO Diversity Pledge in 2018. It specifies the work we need to undertake—and continue—and it holds us accountable.

We are aligned with the guiding principles of the pledge, which include:

1. Hiring and supporting a diverse workforce and executive leadership.
2. Presenting representative marketing and advertising in the media.
3. Engaging and supporting broadly representative ambassador athletes.
4. Sharing our experiences with other leading brands (MEC, 2020).

Despite stating that “Anti-Black racism is an injustice that must be named specifically and resisted actively” (MEC, 2020), the company does not highlight any actions it is taking, nor does it highlight specific changes that have occurred in the 2 years since signing the pledge. Other organizations linked their organizational identity to commitments for inclusivity. Cotopaxi, for instance, claimed that “Creating a more equal and just world has been at the heart and soul of our brand” (Cotopaxi, 2020) and the protests have simply catalyzed a stronger commitment to social and racial justice. In these instances, organizations are reinforcing previous actions and value alignments in response to external pressures for public advocacy displays.

CONCLUSION

Conciliatory discourse constitutes a genre of corporate social advocacy responsive to social exigencies that allows organizations to deny culpability and, by consequence, create rhetorical distance between the identified problem and actionable solutions. Our analysis highlights how corporate social advocacy might be employed when dealing with broad, complex problems circulating in the public consciousness. This genre is likely to become more common as organizations and corporations extend their influence into public life (Deetz, 1994; Parcha and Kingsley Westerman, 2020) and are called upon to speak out on issues like climate change, LGBTQIA + rights, immigration, and other complex issues.

Our analysis highlights how organizations navigate the tricky dynamics of racial politics in the United States. To be certain, many of the organizations included in our analysis *did* commit to tangible action that we believe has the potential to create more inclusivity in outdoor sport and recreation. However, these statements also demonstrate how conventional methods of message dissemination (e.g., press releases, social media posts,

etc.) may be insufficient when dealing with issues such as systemic racism and white supremacy. The prevalence of social media in the contemporary information ecosystem means that serious engagement with complex problems may not be entirely possible. For example, Mitchell S. Jackson's (2020) Pulitzer prize-winning essay about Ahmaud Arbery in *Runner's World* serves as a powerful counter-narrative that engages with the dynamics of white supremacy in outdoor recreation in ways that were not evident in any of the public statements included in our analysis. He explains, "It's also clear to me that the same forces that transformed running from a fledgling pastime in my white-ass home state into a billion-dollar global industry also circumscribed a culture that was at best, unwelcoming, and at worse, restrictive to him" (Jackson, 2020, para. 38). Here, style and form enable a greater degree of complexity that would not be possible in a Tweet or Instagram post, especially when dealing with non-specific grievances.

One limitation of our analysis is that it focused exclusively on the public statements of these organizations and may not encompass larger efforts to support diversity and inclusivity. As we explained above, many of the statements expressed a clear commitment to social change, but it was not abundantly clear *how* such changes would be accomplished (within the organization or otherwise). While our analysis aimed to be comprehensive in examining how these organizations responded to the racial justice protests through public communication, we do not account for any long-term initiatives or internal organizational reforms in our analysis. Still, we maintain that public statements provide an important vantage point for exploring image repair or maintenance strategies. Future research should explore whether approaches like conciliatory discourse can manage to engender long-term change in organizations.

Although many of the organizations made commitments in support of social justice such as donations to civil rights advocacy, our analysis calls into question the motivations behind such decisions. Jones (2019) explains that many companies are now engaging in "wokewashing," or marketing that appeals to social-justice-oriented causes to maximize profits. Previous environmental communication scholarship (Pezzullo, 2003) has shown how organizations can draw on eco-friendly discourses while supporting actions that are environmentally destructive (greenwashing). As concerns about racial justice

become more mainstream, it is critical to interrogate whether public commitments for change are more than just optics campaigns drawing on the latest cause célèbre. To be clear, we believe that organizations making firm commitments for anti-racism and inclusivity have the potential for positively impacting the racial politics of outdoor spaces. However, given the ambiguous statements issued by many of the organizations in our analysis, we question whether these efforts are genuine or just a face-saving technique so as not to appear out of touch.

The public statements issued following the racial justice protests in 2020 evince the changing dynamics between organizations and the broader public, particularly around contentious issues like race. In our analysis, we found that organizations like Tension Climbing and Mammut centered dialogue in their statements, and other organizations made monetary donations. This is a start, but true reconciliation would mean that an organization confronts the role *they* have played in maintaining white supremacy in outdoor spaces, engages in dialogue with those who have been most impacted, and collaborates with them to determine the necessary reparative actions. If donations are made, which organizations are doing the best antiracist work? What else is needed to undo the white supremacy inherent to organizational practices and outdoor spaces? Following Logan (2021), we should not "naïvely assume corporate communication can unilaterally undo enduring systemic and structural racism," (p. 12) but these efforts present the possibility of progressive change. These organizations cannot and should not assume they have the answers, and dialogue with the communities most impacted is a necessary step forward towards reconciling historic (and present-day) injustices.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

CT, SU, and LH equally contributed to the development, analysis, writing, and editing in this essay.

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