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Brands Take a Stand for Good: The Effect of Brand Activism on Social Media Engagement

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Abstract

Brands are entering an era where brand activism and corporate social responsibility strategies are holding a large influence on consumer purchase decision making, rather than the traditional brand product marketing. A major distribution outlet for the rising brand activism strategy is through social media, where users can directly interact with brands and other users surrounding major issues. Higher engagement with such activism campaigns suggests more consumer support for the brand, leading to higher sales performance potential. This study examines the influence of brand activism campaign qualities on social media engagement, specifically on the Twitter platform. Tweets for 8 different brands – Nike, Reebok, Under Armour, Puma, Always, Yoplait, Procter & Gamble, and Airbnb – were collected using RStudio and Twitter APIs and dissected based on their association to the brand's activism campaign. A survey was also distributed to gather data on several characteristics for each campaign. A Poisson regression was used to analyze the relationship between social media engagement metrics – favorites and retweets – and the characteristics of tweets and campaigns. Brands that are looking to contribute to the activism space, particularly on Twitter, should produce content that is geared towards individuals, rather than society as a whole. Higher engagement will be generated by campaigns that focus on causes with longer-term impact, in addition to campaigns that target both genders rather than being gender specific.

Keywords: Brand Activism, Twitter Engagement, Campaigns, Consumers, Tweet

Introduction

The topic of this thesis paper revolves around user engagement with brand activism posts on social media and how campaign qualities influence engagement in this context. The paper will use social media engagement metrics and brand activism posts on social media to determine if different campaign types have different effects on how brand activism is portrayed and how users engage with such posts. More and more companies are publicly voicing their opinion pertaining to social and political issues that arise in society, partly due to the enhanced value that consumers are placing on corporate social responsibility. Engagement comes into play because it not only creates a representation of the community's reaction to the activism campaign (pertaining to the brand's stance on the issue), but also allows the company to judge how they are being perceived. With the rise in both brand activism and corporate social responsibility values, being able to understand how social media engagement corresponds to a campaign's qualities will allow the brand to build a specific strategy where their engagement metrics will produce the greatest return on investment.

Review of the Literature

Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything. This was the tagline for Nike's September 2018 activism campaign where Colin Kaepernick encourages the audience to stand up for what they believe in, similar to how he protested for police brutality in the NFL. On a more general note, the tagline could be used to describe the risk many brands take when voicing their opinion about controversial social and political issues. Many brands across numerous industries have also advocated for political and social issues affecting society in that moment. In January 2017, Stella Artois and Water.org launched a campaign advocating for clean water supply for families in developing countries. In February 2017, Airbnb introduced

#weaccept, a movement advocating for acceptance no matter who someone is, where they are from, who they love, worship, etc. following Donald Trump's immigration order. In March 2017, around International Women's Day, Procter & Gamble created the #WeSeeEqual campaign that encouraged a gender-equal world, free from gender bias and unequal representation. In June 2017, Yoplait encourages moms that they are doing awesome despite all the judgement on social media. Those are four large campaigns in the span of 6 months, with many that follow around the Superbowl and throughout 2018. Brand activism through social media is on the rise, but there is little research on what aspects may influence the public's engagement with such campaigns.

Brand Activism

According to the 2018 Edelman Earned Brand Study, 64 percent of international consumers choose to buy from, or boycott, a brand strictly based on the brand's stance on social and political issues (Edelman, 2018). Such 'belief-driven' buyers make up the majority of each geographic market around the world – 59% of the U.S., 60% of Japan, 57% of the U.K., 54% of Germany – thus showcasing that alignment between consumers' beliefs and a brand's outward position on an issue is an important factor in purchase decisions (Edelman, 2018). As the value of brand activism, in the eye of the consumer, has become more important, brands have begun to incorporate additional advertising campaigns that do not necessarily focus on the product being sold; they focus on a societal issue or special cause. In 2010, the Barkley Cause Survey found that 66% of businesses were actively engaged in cause marketing, also referred to as corporate social/political activism or brand activism (Cause Good, 2018). Turn to 2018, where the political and social turmoil in society is extremely controversial and 69% of consumers prefer to be involved in social challenges by interacting with brands (Cause Good, 2018).

Through social media, consumers are able to quickly spread their satisfactions and dissatisfactions with a brand by a simple hashtag, keyword, image or mention. Considering that two thirds of millennial consumers leverage social media to engage with or address corporate social responsibility actions of a company (Cone Communications, 2015) – the overarching tactic which brand activism falls under – brands have an increased opportunity to cater towards consumer values by contributing to the societal dialogue. The controversy of societal issues generates a polarization of responses no matter what view a brand has on an issue, which guarantees a significant engagement level since 70% of consumers are willing to voice their opinions directly to the company regarding its social responsibility actions (Cone Communications, 2015). As social media posts gain traction from other users, engagement metrics increase, the brand's awareness increases through post visibility, content regarding the advocated issue will begin to resonate with users, purchase decision-making will be influenced, sales revenue will be generated, and the list goes on. Engagement is a major key performance indicator that allows a brand to assess their current strategy in the eyes of consumers.

More and more companies are publicly voicing their opinion pertaining to social and political issues that arise in society, partly due to the enhanced value that consumers are placing on corporate social responsibility. Engagement not only creates a representation of the community's reaction to the activism campaign (pertaining to the brand's stance on the issue), but also allows the company to judge how they are being perceived. Do the company's values align with that of their customers, or is it deterring them from interacting with the company? With the rise in both brand activism and corporate social responsibility values, being able to understand how social media engagement with brand activism posts is affected by specific

qualities of a campaign will allow the company to build a specific strategy where their engagement metrics will produce the greatest return on investment.

Brand activism is defined as a values-driven strategy that companies implement to showcase their thoughtfulness of current and future societal attributes (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017). Kotler and Sarkar (2017) make the argument that brand activism naturally stems from the larger idea of corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs that many companies are spending a lot of money on. Like brand activism, corporate social responsibility does not have a definitive definition, rather it has a working definition that solidifies as more companies pursue the strategy. McKinsey&Company describes CSR as a strategy that seeks business and societal benefits simultaneously (Keys, Malnight & van der Graaf, 2009). Cause promotions, corporate philanthropy, and brand activism stem from this overarching objective (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017). Brand activism can be further divided into social activism, legal activism, business activism, economic activism, political activism and environmental activism – all areas in which companies actively express their views of certain issues (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017).

In comparison to standard marketing campaigns that promote a product, brand activism campaigns focus on the social or political issue. With that being said, there are some campaigns that serve a mixed purpose – both advocacy and product marketing – and in fact most are categorized as mixed (Drumwright, 1996, p. 76).

Clemensen's research discovered that companies have the ability to encourage social change by distributing their marketplace power accordingly. "The more business power a corporation has, the more responsibility it has to society" (Clemensen, 2017, p. 11). Edelman's study further emphasizes this idea, reporting that consumers believe brands drive social change better than governments can and that it is easier for brands to have an impact (Edelman, 2018).

There is a lot of pressure for companies to not only advocate for certain issues, but to do it well. With the level of controversy on many issues, advocating for certain positions brings about many consumer reactions that could have a very positive or very negative effect on the company. The uncertainty in ROI and consumer reactions hinders many companies from participating in the strategy. As the expectations continue to rise for brands to participate, many will need to walk the line of offending some or losing support when they participate in or refrain from joining the dialogue.

Social Media and Engagement

An easy way for brands to communicate their activism efforts is through social media – Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, etc. These platforms are easily accessible and allow users to create, share, and interact with content and other users. Social media has also played a large role in transforming online consumer behavior by providing engagement opportunities between consumers and brands, thus influencing external brand strategies (Muntinga et al., 2011, p. 13). Brands must be able to interpret consumer engagement responses, in addition to the motivations behind consumers' online-brand related activities (COBRAS), in order to measure the success and impact of their activism efforts.

Consumer engagement can refer to “interactive brand-related dynamics [cognitive, emotional and behavioral] ... which reflects a consumer's level of interest in, and personal relevance of a brand” (Hollebeek et al., 2014, p. 2). Mollen and Wilson (2010, p. 9) briefly identify three online engagement dimensions: active, sustained, cognitive processing, the attainment of relevance and utility, and emotional bonding. On the other hand, Calder, Malthouse, and Schaedel (2009) describe website engagement as a series of experiences: stimulation and inspiration, social facilitation, temporal, self-esteem and civic mindedness,

intrinsic enjoyment, utilitarian, participation and socializing and community. These researchers placed each experience into two categories, personal engagement and social-interactive engagement. Findings concluded that personal engagement represents individual experiences, such as reading a newspaper. Social-interactive engagement is manifested in website experiences where individuals interact with others. In reference to their original experiences, Calder et al. (2009) found that many experiences overlapped between personal and social-interactive engagement.

Muntinga et al. divide social media related COBRAs into three categories: consuming, contributing and creating. Consuming refers to passive engagement – viewing, listening, reading, playing, downloading, etc. Contributing is the next level of interaction, consisting of ‘user-to-user and user-to-content’ activity. The highest level of engagement, according to Muntinga et al. is creating; an individual actively “produce[s] and publish[es] the brand-related content that others consume and contribute to” (2011, p. 16). Muntinga et al.’s study further identifies motivations that drive each COBRA. They found that consuming brand-related content is driven by motivation for information, entertainment and remuneration. Consumers are motivated to contribute to brand-related content by 1) personal identity, further motivated by the satisfaction of self-presentation and self-assurance, 2) integration and social interaction, also referred to as social identity and collective helping, and 3) entertainment. The act of creating brand-related content is driven by similar motivators found in the contributing COBRA, however, there are some sub-motivator differences. For the creating COBRA, sub-motivations for integration and social interaction consist of social pressure/a sense of belonging, instead of collective help. In addition to personal identity, integration and social interaction, and entertainment, consumers

who create content are also motivated by a feeling of empowerment over individuals and brands who consume and are influenced by their published pieces. (Muntinga et al., 2011, p. 26-37)

Because consumers are shifting from passive to active participants and influencers in a brand's strategy, consumer brand engagement (CBE) is becoming a key performance indicator for brand performance. Hollebeek and colleagues (2014, p. 3) specifically claim that high engagement levels are typically associated with sales increases, cost decreases, brand referrals, profitability, etc. It is important for brands to sustain high levels of positive engagement in order to maintain and/or improve their performance, which could be in terms of numerous metrics and indicators.

Campaign Qualities

All brand activism campaigns are different in style, message, audience, platform location, etc., but there are a few general qualities that can be used to compare them. This research study will specifically focus on media inclusion, society vs. individual orientation, gender specificity, and projected impact.

Media Inclusion

Social media allows for many different types of content – text, video, photo – to be shared with a large audience. Specifically on Twitter, using videos and pictures to express something takes up a lot more space on someone's feed than a tweet that contains only text. In addition to having more timeline real estate, a picture or video will stand out amongst the text tweets, causing users to slow their scroll and pay attention to the tweet.

Once a user stops to look, it does not take long before they completely understand what is being shared. Users are able to process visual information faster, in comparison to a line of text (Manic, 2015, p.91). In addition, emotions are conveyed more easily through visual content,

which allows the viewer to relate with the user; in this context, a brand becomes more humanized. Manic (2015) further claims that visual ads are 43% more effective in persuading consumers to make certain purchasing decisions. Typically, when users are pleased with something they come across, or when they easily relate to it, they share it so that their followers can be exposed to it too. These arguments bring us to our first hypothesis:

H₁: Campaign tweets that incorporate media in their tweets draw more engagement than campaigns that do not.

Society vs. Individual Orientation

There is a rise in social challenges that the collective society is being forced to handle. Brands are advocating for certain perspectives, new organizations are forming to tackle issues, and people are becoming more civic-minded. There is an increasing recognition that something must be done in order to preserve human kind in various ways: political rights, environmental wellbeing, social rights, etc.

As the bystander effect suggests, whose responsibility is it to take charge, when there are millions of other people experiencing the same issues? This brings us to a current debate regarding whether or not we live in a ‘generation me’ or ‘generation we’ society. By the way older generations talk about Millennials, it seems like we live in a ‘generation me’ society. A study conducted by the Association for Psychological Science (2017) suggests that individualism and narcissism is an increasing global phenomenon throughout the world. People are more concerned about their accomplishments, particularly those that have to do with status – jobs, education levels, income, etc. – rather than what is going on in the world around them. Such hedonistic values drive motives behind consumer behavior, engagement with brands, and support

for specific causes. We expect that the above trends spill over to how users engage with brand activism campaigns.

H₂: Society-oriented campaigns draw less engagement than individual-oriented campaigns.

Gender specificity

Based on the idea that society is more individualistic, one would think consumers would prefer to see a representation of themselves on advertisements and campaigns. Those who are of minority, whether that be ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, etc., often seek companies where they know they will be represented in some supportive way. Specifically for brand activism campaigns, seeing a representation of yourself being afflicted by an issue or benefiting from a certain action stimulates internal emotion. Our societal circles are becoming more diverse and inclusive though, to the point where brands are representing multiple variations of people, rather than one specific gender, ethnicity and religion. Research by Gunkel, Lusk, Wolff, and Li (2007) suggests that traditional masculine and feminine qualities are not necessarily important to men and women when making decisions. Instead, genders attach importance to goals and values expressed in advertising messages. For those who are set in being a ‘stereotypical stereotype,’ gendered campaigns and gender symbols from brands are appealing; for those who have matured with society and have come to accept the increase in diversity and acceptance, gendered marketing is relatively ineffective and can be dangerous to a consumer’s perception of the brand (Alreck, Settle & Belch, 1982). These observations and findings bring us to our next hypothesis:

H₃: Gender-specific campaigns draw less engagement than non-gender-specific campaigns.

Projected Impact

The duration of impact for campaigns varies based on the overall message, expected outcome, and the number of supporters who continuously spread the message through social media engagement. According to Woolley and Fishbach (2016), activity persistence, in this case the amount of engagement, is determined by the perceived value of the activity – engaging with the particular campaign. The greater the persistence (engagement), the more valuable a campaign is assumed to be, thus the effects of the campaign can be expected to last longer.

Consumption philanthropy, which encompasses marketing campaigns that encourage production consumption to support causes, is considered incapable of creating social change because it primarily focuses on increasing profits through short term support of a cause (Eikenberry, 2009). Companies that deeply route social change into their marketing efforts, via brand activism, are considered better suited for instilling long term change. They directly focus on the cause, while indirectly gaining support for their brand. Such support can be measured through engagement.

Since most brand activism campaigns focus on improving the current state of an issue – inequality, environmental pollution, stereotypes, etc. – one can assume that those who positively engage with the campaign place value on improving the issue. The long-term value thesis suggests that the best way to help people in general is to make decisions that benefit the future (Todd, 2017), thus supporting campaigns that focus on generating a long-term impact, rather than a short-lived one. Furthermore, a belief-driven buyer who makes purchasing decisions based on the company's activism mindset does not choose to support a company with a short-lived vision of fixing a *problem*; they support a company with a long-term vision of fixing the *process*.

H4: Campaigns with possible short-term impact draw less engagement than campaigns with longer-term impact potential.

In this study, the above hypotheses will be tested to improve our understanding of how these factors may influence users' engagement with online brand activism campaigns.

Data and Methodology

Brand activism campaigns from Nike, Reebok, Under Armour, Puma, Always, Yoplait, Procter & Gamble, and Airbnb were analyzed to understand the relationship between certain campaign qualities and campaign engagement metrics. Tweets pertaining to each brand's campaign, along with social media engagement data and tweet characteristics, were collected in R (R Core Team, 2018), using Twitter's APIs and the R package rtweet (Kearney, 2018). Engagement data consists of the number of retweets and favorites for each tweet. Several tweet characteristics are included as covariates in our model. These covariates consist of tweet length, whether the tweet is a reply, retweet, or an original tweet, if the tweet contains a quote, if the tweet contains media, number of users the brand follows and the number of users who follow the brand.

Tweets posted by the above-mentioned brands on their twitter account were collected for the period July 2017 to March 2019. Tweets that did not contain the campaign hashtag or did not have text pertaining to the campaign were removed from the data collection. 2,513 tweets were collected.

A survey was distributed to gather societal opinions on several characteristics for each campaign: societal benefit, short term impact, self-actualization, gender-specificity, individual benefit and long-term impact. A total of 41 respondents were presented with the official description of several activism campaigns. They were then asked to rate on a 5-point Likert scale

how each campaign benefits society, focuses on a short-term impact, is gender specific, focuses on self-actualization, benefits individuals, and focuses on a long-term impact. Scores for each question pair that addressed opposing concepts were subtracted from one another to create a single score. The society-oriented score was calculated by subtracting ratings for a campaign being individual-oriented from the ratings of the same campaign being society-oriented. A similar process was used to create the short-term score for each campaign. These computed scores and direct Likert scores for the rest of the characteristics were aggregated over respondents to create a single average score for each campaign and characteristic. As a result, the scores of four campaign characteristic variables, titled gender specificity, self-actualization, society orientation and short-term, were added to the tweet dataset and matched with the corresponding campaign tweets.

Two Poisson regressions were used to analyze the relationship between social media (Twitter) engagement metrics and tweet/campaign characteristics for brand activism campaigns. Numerical variables were standardized to allow for simpler comparisons of each variable's effect.

Number of Favorites

$$= \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Length} + \beta_2 \text{Reply} + \beta_3 \text{Media} + \beta_4 \text{Quote} + \beta_5 \text{Retweet} + \beta_6 \text{Followers} \\ + \beta_7 \text{Friends} + \beta_8 \text{Gender} + \beta_9 \text{Self} + \beta_{10} \text{Society} + \beta_{11} \text{Short}$$

Number of Retweets

$$= \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Length} + \beta_2 \text{Reply} + \beta_3 \text{Media} + \beta_4 \text{Quote} + \beta_5 \text{Retweet} + \beta_6 \text{Followers} \\ + \beta_7 \text{Friends} + \beta_8 \text{Gender} + \beta_9 \text{Self} + \beta_{10} \text{Society} + \beta_{11} \text{Short}$$

Table 1: Variable Descriptions	
<u>Variable</u>	<u>Description</u>
Length	The number of characters a tweet has.
Reply	The tweet is a reply to another user.
Media	The tweet contains a picture or a video.
Quote	The tweet contains a quote.
Retweet	The tweet is a retweet of another user's tweet.
Followers	The number of users who follow the brand.
Friends	The number of users the brand follows.
Gender	The campaign's gender specificity score.
Self	The campaign's self-actualization score.
Society	The campaign's society-orientation score.
Short	The campaign's short-term impact score.

Discussion of Results

The results of the analysis have been presented in Table 2. Two dependent variables were used, namely the number of retweets and the number of favorites each campaign tweet received, to evaluate the effect of the focal campaign characteristics on Twitter engagement metrics. As expected, most of the variables have similar effects on both engagement metrics, which strengthens our findings.

Tweets that contain media, whether a photo or a video, attract more favorites and retweets than those that do not contain media. Twitter users are more likely to engage with the

tweet by favoriting it instead of retweeting it. A campaign tweet that is centered around societal benefits will receive fewer favorites and retweets than a tweet that is more geared towards individuals. This relationship suggests that campaigns geared towards individuals generate more engagement than campaigns that focus on larger scale societal issues. This relationship is further supported by the positive relationship between self-actualization campaign tweets and the engagement metrics. There is a negative association between tweets that focus on a specific gender and both retweets and favorites, which suggests that the more gender specific a campaign tweet is, the lower the chances that the general population will engage with it on Twitter. We do not rule out the possibility that engagement within the focal gender might be higher. The magnitude of the effects for gender specificity is similar to the effect of a tweet being society oriented. Campaign tweets that vouch for short-term outcomes receive fewer favorites and retweets than those that focus on everlasting outcomes.

When a brand replies to another tweet, in association with their campaign, the tweet is likely to receive fewer retweets and favorites than tweets that are not replies. This variable had a larger effect on retweets than favorites. Tweets that contain quotes receive less engagement – retweets and favorites – than tweets that do not contain quotes; the effect was larger for retweet engagement. When a brand retweets someone else's tweet that is related to their campaign, the tweet receives more retweets than an original tweet created by the brand. The retweet receives fewer favorites than an original tweet, however, the relationship was found to be insignificant. As the number of followers a brand has increases, the number of retweets and favorites a campaign tweet receives will slightly increase. An increase in the number of users the brand is following will likely generate more favorites for the tweet and less retweets for the tweet. As the

number of characters in a tweet increases, it is expected that engagement with the tweet will slightly decrease.

The regression results support all four hypotheses, while providing additional evidence for the impact of tweet characteristics on social media engagement.

Table 2: Regression Results						
<i>Model 1 (DV: Favorites)</i>				<i>Model 2 (DV: Retweets)</i>		
Variables	Coefficient	Std. Error	Z Value	Coefficient	Std. Error	Z Value
Length	-0.006	0.00005	-145.64	-0.007	0.00004	-230.27
Reply	-0.64	0.019	-33.45	-0.21	0.01	-17.19
Media	0.65	0.006	100.97	1.14	0.008	145.74
Quote	-2.21	0.01	-203.31	-1.71	0.006	-264.46
Retweet	2.41	0.03	903.03	-17.06	9.73	-1.75
Followers	0.22	0.003	71.98	0.03	0.002	14.44
Friends	-0.15	0.004	-31.08	0.06	0.002	24.54
Gender	-6.57	0.05	-138.33	-9.12	0.04	-230.71
Self	1.38	0.01	124.86	1.70	0.009	187.26
Society	-6.52	0.05	-123.38	-9.22	0.04	-210.32
Short	-2.26	0.02	-95.88	-3.48	0.02	-208.90

Conclusion

Brand activism efforts are rising in the marketing and advertising space, with greater emphasis coming from both consumers and the brands themselves. Most brands are taking to social media to place their campaign in front of as many people as possible. One way to assess the success

and support for the campaign and the brand behind it is by measuring engagement with the campaign. This study uses Twitter as the social media platform and analyzes tweet engagement metrics to understand the influence of campaign and tweet characteristics. Brands that are looking to contribute to the activism space, particularly on Twitter, might get more people engaged with their tweets if they produce content that is geared towards individuals, rather than society as a whole. Higher engagement will also be generated by campaigns that focus on causes with longer-term impact, in addition to campaigns that target both genders rather than being gender specific. Furthermore, tweets should incorporate media, whether it be a picture or a video, that captures the campaign's message. With the lack of literature covering this new marketing strategy, this study suggests ways to increase Twitter engagement with brand activism campaigns.

Limitations

Our analysis is focused on Twitter and is hence limited to available user engagement metrics on this platform. One way to improve these findings is to test our hypotheses on other major platforms. In addition, our analysis did not entail data from all current social activism campaigns and focused on a number of larger campaigns by a limited number of brands for the studied period. A more comprehensive analysis can cover a longer period of time and may include a more comprehensive list of brands and campaigns.

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Appendix

Brand Campaign Descriptions

Airbnb #weaccept:

We believe in the simple idea that no matter who you are, where you are from, who you love, or who you worship, you deserve to belong. We really do believe the world is a better, more beautiful place the more we accept each other.

Under Armour #UnlikeAny:

Honoring under-recognized achievements of female athletes, elevating them above gender roles, labels and conventions. The campaign looks to break down perceptions of female athletes as lesser to male counterparts.

Procter & Gamble #WeSeeEqual:

Aspiring to build a better world that is free of gender bias and with equal representation and an equal voice for all women and men.

Reebok #BeMoreHuman:

Encourages people to live up to their full potential, cater towards their own humanity, and be the best version of oneself mentally, physically and socially. The campaign celebrates strong women who have overcome obstacles to reach that potential. In addition, the campaign advocates for being human, participating in physical activity and transforming as an individual through rigorous circumstances.

Yoplait #MomOn:

Encourages moms to ignore judgment from others while embracing their own parenting strategies. The campaign also focuses on breaking down mom-shaming acts.

Puma #Reform:

A platform for activists from sports, music, and entertainment who support conversations around universal equality and criminal justice reform. The goal is to turn intentions into actions and achieve progress faster through team Reform.

Always #LikeAGirl:

Encourages girls to embrace failure as a fuel to build confidence and keep going like a girl. The campaign seeks to reverse the negative connotation of the phrase 'like a girl' and reframe it as being strong, confident, and downright amazing.

Nike #justdoit Equality:

Using the power of sport to encourage people to take fairness and respect they see in a sport and translate it off the field. Everyone should be "defined by their actions, not their looks or beliefs. Equality should have no boundaries."

