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We the Consumers: The Conservative "Parallel Economy" as Reactionary Commodity Activism

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Brands in the United States capitalize on the visibility of marginalized groups and progressive social movements. Many right-wing groups consider this a threat to their lifestyles, values, and power. In response, they promote a "parallel economy" where conservative businesses and consumers can transact amongst themselves within a promotional milieu that rejects "woke" corporate branding and reasserts the hegemony of "traditional" values. Through a critical analysis of PublicSquare, an online marketplace that brands itself as "pro-life, pro-family, pro-freedom," we illustrate how this "parallel economy" provides a platform for reactionary commodity activism. PublicSquare's branding casts consumerism as both a strategic political activity and an exercise of normative American values by ordinary consumer-citizens, not activists. PublicSquare positions its platform as a weapon for restoring normalcy and defending against woke capitalism's politicization of markets and consumer culture.

Keywords: commodity activism, branding, brand culture, consumerism, conservative politics

In 2023, the Dove beauty brand joined "the movement to end body size discrimination," working with leading body image advocacy groups to develop advertisements that featured models of all sizes ("Supporting the Movement," n.d.). Dove amplified this #SizeFreedom campaign on social media by partnering with issue-aligned influencers, including Zyahna Bryant, an activist well-known for spurring racial-justice discussions that led to the removal of Confederate monuments in Charlottesville, Virginia. Bryant's involvement in the campaign drew heavy criticism and calls for boycotts from conservative pundits (Koenig, 2023). One comedy segment on Fox News joked about Bryant's weight and urged its audience to shun Dove, dismissing the brand, in morally charged terms, as "a huge corporation groveling and virtue-signaling to liberal activists who hate you" ("Gutfeld," 2023, 00:07:03).

These attacks were echoed by the social media accounts for PublicSquare, an online marketplace company that has built its brand identity around an uncompromising commitment to conservative values.

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PublicSquare positions itself as part of a conservative "parallel economy," operating a platform where like-minded businesses and consumers can find each other and harness their market activity toward the advancement of conservative causes and ways of life. PublicSquare leveraged this controversy to promote alternative products from businesses that share "pro-life, pro-family, pro-freedom" values, while simultaneously deriding Dove for its social activism. In an Instagram caption, PublicSquare writes, "We have to stop spending our hard-earned dollars on companies that reject what a woman is, support the murder of our unborn children, promote gender confusion, and push a body size that is extremely unhealthy" (PublicSquare, 2023a). Countering this alleged corruption of the commercial sphere, PublicSquare promises a safe haven where consumers can trust that their shopping supports righteousness. "Switch to PublicSq.," the post says, to buy from brands that "will never use your money to help fund radical ideologies you wholeheartedly stand against" (PublicSquare, 2023a).

PublicSquare is a missionary for the right-wing movement to build a "parallel economy," which seeks to assemble market institutions under the exclusive control of conservative businesses and consumers. The movement justifies itself through a reactionary narrative. It claims that conservatives are forced to compromise their values by participating in a liberal consumer culture wherein brands pander for visibility by performing "wokeness" as an idiom of corporate social responsibility (CSR). To stay authentic to their identities and ideologies, conservatives need a separate space for "shopping [their] values" (PublicSquare, n.d.)—a marketplace where these consumers and companies can materialize their shared worldview through products, practices, and the technologies that mediate commercial and cultural exchange.

PublicSquare contributes to this project by operating an e-commerce platform that hosts vetted conservative merchants and, perhaps more crucially, by serving as a vehicle for "discourses through and about goods" (Leiss, Kline, Jhally, Botterill, & Asquith, 2018, p. 3). The parallel economy acquires meaning within "brand culture," a term coined by Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) to describe how brands create powerful contexts for people to develop identities and affective ties. Conservative brand culture animates the parallel economy by mobilizing a potent repertoire of values and beliefs, with particular emphasis on Christianity, heteronormative patriarchy, gender essentialism, militancy against reproductive rights, zealous faith in "free markets" and privatization, and a nativist and bellicose patriotism (Brouillette & Lorange, 2024; Tripodi, 2022). PublicSquare articulates these values to distinctions of lifestyle and taste, casting strategic consumerism as a means for conservatives to reassert the primacy of their worldview. The company tells consumers that they can use the products available on PublicSquare—and their participation within politically coded brand communities—to reclaim the status they have lost as multiculturalism seems to challenge the normative whiteness of the general mass market (Burton, 2009; Rosa-Salas, 2019) and as social activism has profaned their nostalgic imaginary of U.S. capitalism as a wholesome institution binding "real" Americans in national prosperity. As both a networked marketplace and a multilayered promotional organ, PublicSquare provides an array of settings for telling stories about conservative lifestyles and for imbuing consumer choices with moral and political force.

We argue that PublicSquare presents itself as a medium for a reactionary form of "commodity activism" (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012) that channels and markets conservative political identity toward a revanchist social project. PublicSquare founder and CEO Michael Seifert recruits the platform's

users into a battle for control of the nation—a battle being fought in the marketplace. In a video clip from a speech posted on Instagram, Seifert preaches the gospel of conservative consumerism:

> In less than 18 months, this platform already hit a million members faster than Twitter, Airbnb, Spotify. The movement of the parallel economy is growing. Power structures of society are being shifted back toward We the People and all it takes is starting with a shift of your spending for one item. Pick an item. I bought this watch from PublicSquare, bought my socks from PublicSquare. I got a coffee from a PublicSquare business. Start somewhere and you will find, over time, that more and more of your purchases are weapons in this economic war that will shift the power structures of our country back to the values of We the People. You get to be on the forefront. You get to make change. You have a wallet. It's time to wield it. (PublicSquare, 2024d)

PublicSquare promotes itself and the whole parallel economy as a means to consolidate economic and cultural power for the conservative movement and to reproduce the hegemony of conservative values within U.S. capitalism.

We present this argument through a critical analysis of PublicSquare's branding, drawing on investor relations documents, marketing materials, and social media posts. These communications tell stories not just about the company but also about the consumers, businesses, and political causes brought together by its platform. Our analysis showcases the ambivalence and contradictions of politics in a brand culture (Banet-Weiser, 2012). PublicSquare brands itself *against* progressive commodity activism and CSR, and it brands conservative consumers and businesses as having been robbed of the privileged standing to which they are entitled within the American marketplace. Thus, while PublicSquare clearly advocates and employs commodity-activist tactics, it also distances itself from that label; it appeals, in particular, to consumers who are unlikely to identify with activism, telling them to view their values as normative, not politicized. Indeed, a central conceit is that individual conservatives can use strategic consumer choices to *eradicate* politics from the marketplace. PublicSquare serves as a medium for both enacting politicized conservative consumerism and branding this social movement as the authentic normalcy of consumer citizenship, rather than activism. Our analysis highlights a tension in this branding between the invitation to carve out a separate conservative sphere and the directive for conservatives to reestablish their place at the center of economic and cultural life.

Literature Review

"Parallel Institutions" and the Conservative Parallel Economy

Conservative business leaders, political elites, and cultural influencers complain that liberal-leaning media and marketplaces, in the United States and elsewhere, are hostile to their values (Zeng & Mahl, 2023). Reacting against their supposed marginalization, these conservatives are promoting a "parallel economy" where like-minded consumers can make purchasing choices that authentically express their identities, affinities, and moral commitments (to Christianity, traditional gender roles, racial hierarchies, gun culture, etc.).

This parallel economy is an active front in the conservative movement's designs for dedicated right-wing social spaces and institutions (Brown, 2021). Right-wing social media platforms, for example, offer a "safe haven" for conservatives, including those who have been demonetized, expelled, and/or ostracized from mainstream social media for violating terms of service or standards of conduct (Zeng & Mahl, 2023). More broadly, a right-wing media network (Benkler, Faris, & Roberts, 2018; Nadler & Bauer, 2019)—which became formidable by leveraging new technologies, neoliberal policies, and long-term investments in institution-building (Amenta, 2022; Hemmer, 2016; Ouellette, 2012)—provides spaces where thought-leaders and tastemakers construct an "oppositional identity," framing conservatives as "outsiders" to a cultural mainstream and its corrupt, liberally biased media (Hemmer, 2016; see also Peck, 2019; Lewis, 2020). As one right-wing influencer said, "We've really created parallel institutions" (Warzel, 2017, para. 7). Overall, the idea is to fashion pillars of society—media, education, law, politics—in a purely conservative mold.

The parallel economy is the aspect of this project that focuses on marketplace institutions and the material culture of branded commodities. Among other things, it convenes a conservative "consumption community," where "people with a feeling of shared well-being, shared risks, common interests, and common concerns" can materialize their loyalties to (and rejection of) certain ideologies, values, and lifestyles (Boorstin, 1973, p. 147). As such, it is a space for promoting political identity and beliefs—one that reinforces ingroup solidarity among conservative consumers. This reinforcement of solidarity is one of the main strategic reasons for creating institutions with ideological and partisan purity. Squires (2002) describes how political groups may seek to "maintain a solid group identity and build independent institutions" in their effort to remain intentionally separate from the wider public (p. 463). She refers to this as a *satellite* public sphere, which can form "from dominant or marginalized groups" (p. 463). Importantly, Jackson and Kreiss (2023) point out that these right-wing institutions are often *defensive*, assembled to fortify rather than counter "established social, racial, and political orders" (p. 107).

Promoters of the parallel economy invoke a flexible but patterned set of values and interests. The values on display in PublicSquare's branding overlap substantially with what Francesca Tripodi (2022) calls the "'five F's' of conservatism": faith, family, firearms, forces, and the free market (p. 26). Our references to conservative consumers index these basic tenets, including their extreme variants, which remain well represented within the Republican Party (Huntington, 2021). Overall, the conservative brand assembled around PublicSquare brings together center- and far-right partisans, with a particular magnetic pull from the currents that Mike Davis (1981) recognized as integral to the rise of the New Right—namely, alignment with a small-business and entrepreneurial fraction of capital, skilled exploitation of direct marketing, and hardline social conservatism, including being anti-abortion, pro-gun, and "devoted to the defense of the sanctity of white suburban family life" (p. 38).

White racial identity is an important element of this conservatism (Jardina, 2019; Johnson, 2022). Whiteness has long been treated as a natural or default category for the average American (Igo, 2007), including in the "general" consumer market (Burton, 2009; Rosa-Salas, 2019). Increasingly, though, more white Americans explicitly identify with whiteness and perceive multiculturalism as a threat to their status and group interests (Jardina, 2019). With the rising visibility of racialized groups in advertising and with brands trying to capture some (but not all) of the energy surrounding social movements like Black Lives Matter and #MeToo (de Oca, Mason, & Ahn, 2022; Sobande, 2019), White conservative consumers see themselves being diminished or

even attacked (Ulver & Laurell, 2020). Notwithstanding that representations of diversity in advertising often neuter radical politics (Banet-Weiser, 2018) and may help reproduce White supremacy (Shankar, 2020), advocates of the parallel economy decry the cultural violence they associate with what Kanai and Gill (2021) call "woke capitalism." Through this lens, conservatives see the mainstream market working against them, and this fuels the creation of parallel—but still capitalist—marketplaces that align with their values.

Politics, Brand Culture, and Commodity Activism

Branding and Political Identity in Conservative Consumerism

Brand choices are linked to identity and politics (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Kreiss, Lawrence, & McGregor, 2020). U.S. political culture has absorbed a marketing logic whereby "differences steeped in class, region, race, gender, and generation, as well as party membership, are mapped onto taste cultures and consumer markets" (Ouellette, 2012, p. 188). Branding involves the co-creation of meanings between organizations marketing products (including political parties and personae) and the people who encounter these products in marketplaces, media, or other social spaces (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Through the forms of participation and self-presentation afforded by networked media, branding and consumption have become increasingly vital sites for political organizing and action (Billard & Moran, 2020).

Many corporations court strategic consumption under the rubric of "commodity activism," wherein the motivation behind an issue or cause is commodified and represented by brands or products (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012). Buying from companies with a social mission becomes both a political act and a recognizable signal—to oneself and others—of the kind of person one is. This cultural context attaches a moral weight to consumer choices, tastes, and lifestyles, accessing and enlivening reservoirs of politicized symbolic meanings. Invocations of "small businesses" and "main streets," for example, leverage nostalgia for an idealized past. As we will see, *reactionary* commodity activism promises a restoration of simpler times, tapping into feelings of longing, loss, and grievance. This draws on well-established tactics. As Banet-Weiser (2012) explains, "Conservative political groups in the US have for at least the last four decades brilliantly, and strategically, used nostalgia for a more harmonious and prosperous society to mobilize their political base" (pp. 128–129). From the Tea Party to MAGA, right-wing branding has tied lifestyles and class-based taste cultures to a nostalgic sense of entitlement and righteous anger (Peck, 2019; White, 2018). We use the term conservative consumerism to refer to consumerism's dual meanings as a way of life rooted in consumption and as political advocacy by consumer constituencies (Jubas, 2007).

Commodity activism links consumption with the desire for social change, helping individuals feel as though they can finesse the contradictions raised by using markets to solve problems created or exacerbated by capitalism (Kanai & Gill, 2021). This work often assumes a liberal stance toward political progress (Ulver, 2022). Many case studies illustrate commodity activism seeking to empower women, raise money and awareness for global health crises, and make food systems more environmentally friendly (Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012). Our study contributes to nascent work on right-wing consumer politics (Cambefort & Pecot, 2020; Ulver, 2022). Although far-right subcultures commodify their identities in various ways (Miller-Idriss, 2020), there are relatively fewer examples of *commodity activism* on the right beyond

fleeting cases of boycotting and buycotting (e.g., Liaukonytė, Tuchman, & Zhu, 2023).[2] Christian bookstores provide one example of sustained commodity activism; they are heavily aligned with conservatism (Hendershot, 2010), and pressure campaigns have targeted these media-distribution bottlenecks to limit the reach of dissenting voices (Laughlin, 2021). Commodity activism represents a struggle for power, one that accounts for social groups' status in the marketplace and the linking of consumption to political impact.

Commodity activism is related to CSR, a versatile set of self-regulatory practices that fasten a company's behavior to social goals. Businesses invest in CSR to promote their public image and associate their products with "doing good" (Banet-Weiser, 2012; de Oca et al., 2022). Some companies extend this by engaging in direct political advocacy, such as endorsing politicians or paying for employees' birth control, thereby aligning their brands with certain ethics or causes (Weber, Joireman, Sprott, & Hydock, 2023).

Like commodity activism, CSR is ambivalent. It emerged from efforts to protect the centrality of private corporate power within capitalist democracy against public governance and radical social welfare (Ewen, 1996; Kaplan, 2015). Yet its scope has been checked from the right by adherents to the neoliberal doctrine—famously espoused by Milton Friedman—that a corporation's only social responsibility is to grow profits (see Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 144). Contemporary CSR tends to promote liberal causes through the logic of branding, working largely to reproduce, or even extend, capitalist social relations (Kanai & Gill, 2021). Interestingly, PublicSquare's branding at once denounces the politicized activism of liberal CSR, while still pressuring businesses to put certain values ahead of profit-seeking.

"Consumer Citizens" and Consumer Choice as Political Power

Commodity activism links consumption to a broader political brand culture "in which individual identities, citizenship, and social action are crafted, experienced, and made normative" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 130). Conservative consumerism is not just about purchasing particular brands but also weaving partisan politics into ways of being in the world. This draws on the intimate entanglement of citizenship and consumption in the United States (Cohen, 2003; Porter, 2020). Throughout American history, social groups—and oppressed groups in particular—have expressed political claims via consumption. For example, in the 20th century, women and African Americans leveraged their purchasing power into democratic participation. These dynamics occupied the foreground of national policy after World War II; the United States became "a consumers' republic" (Cohen, 2003), where cultural, political, and economic incentives elevated mass consumption to a keystone of national wellbeing. Consumption became integral to how political parties courted constituencies, and political affinities became useful indices of identity for marketers trying to target consumer subgroups (Cohen, 2003; Davis, 1981; Mattson, 2008).

The common-sense "ideology of consumerism" puts consumer-citizenship at the heart of capitalist democracy (Jubas, 2007, p. 248). It reinforces hierarchical distinctions of class, race, and gender, and affixes them to normative ideas about national identity and (the boundaries of) political participation. Within

[2] *Boycotting* (avoiding products) and *buycotting* (intentionally buying them) are elements of a broader commodity activism, but are typically discrete, short-lived responses to specific politicized events (Micheletti, 2010).

this framework, market institutions serve as a central venue for consumer-citizens to maneuver for recognition and political standing. As Banet-Weiser (2012) puts it, "the consumer citizen *is* the central category of analysis for today's advanced capitalist culture" (p. 44). Political identity factors into consumer choices and responses to corporate activism (Jung & Mittal, 2020; Weber et al., 2023), and political identity is interpreted, in part, through the logics of markets and branding in consumer capitalism (Billard & Moran, 2020; Porter, 2020). Turning now to a close examination of an online marketplace that urges its consumers to exercise political power by "shopping their values," we will see how this conservative brand culture offers "security to consumer citizens in terms of their political convictions" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 148).

Method

We approach PublicSquare as a case study for analyzing ongoing efforts to promote a "parallel economy," advance political causes and identities through commodity activism, and brand the conservative movement. A case study aims to "generate in-depth, multi-faceted understandings of a complex phenomenon in its real-life context" (Crowe et al., 2011, p. 1). Following the descriptive and interpretive aims of this approach (Odell, 2001), our case study advances our understanding of conservative branding and reactionary commodity activism by using insights from existing literature on communication, marketing, and political culture to make sense of PublicSquare's promotional strategies. Specifically, we consider how the company's branding labels businesses, products, and consumers as authentically conservative and as contributors to a political and cultural project. PublicSquare thus provides a grounded example for exploring strategic communication and network building by right-wing elites. The study is guided by a "logic of discovery" (Luker, 2010, p. 125), endeavoring to establish foundations for further theoretical and empirical work.

The evidentiary basis of our analysis comes from public-facing messages PublicSquare produced or circulated between September 2023 and August 2024. We reviewed and captured dozens of screenshots of orienting information from the PublicSquare website, including its homepage, blog posts, and a page articulating the company's values ("Our Values," n.d.). We also closely monitored PublicSquare's social media accounts during this time, focusing on Twitter and Instagram (though the company posted much of the same content on both platforms). We created a corpus of social media data that includes scores of posts on their feeds and screenshots of "stories." We limited our social media analysis to messages hosted on official PublicSquare accounts. Many of these messages are directly attributed to the company or its CEO, but PublicSquare also posts content promoting its brand that is created by other conservative influencers. This suggests that PublicSquare's promotional spaces serve as a clearinghouse for conservative brand culture.

We also analyzed available financial documents, including Securities and Exchange Commission filings and reports to shareholders. We collected investor relations information from PublicSquare's website, downloading several hundred pages of documents uploaded between July 2023, when the company went public on the New York Stock Exchange, and August 2024 ("PublicSquare Investor Relations," n.d.). The financial documents and press releases comprising this part of the corpus are tools for branding a corporate image. Our method here is akin to "listening in" (Corrigan, 2018) on a company from multiple angles to see how it portrays itself to potential customers and investors. Finally, we made exploratory, but not systematic,

observations of some merchants' sites on PublicSquare. Future research should examine how merchants position their products and brands.

With a corpus representing how PublicSquare talks about itself, its opponents, and the merchants and consumers using the platform, our analytical work focused on recognizing the modalities and contradictions foregrounded in critical theories of commodity activism and brand culture (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012). This approach offers new dimensions of understanding to studies of political consumerism, which typically focus on boycotting and buycotting. By contrast, we show how PublicSquare brands itself and, in the process, tries to enlist businesses and their customers into the co-production of brand culture for a broader conservative movement. This helps to understand the tight marriage between conservative politics and consumer culture, where identity and branding shape particular pathways for citizenship and political expression (Porter, 2020).

Our choice of PublicSquare as a case study is deliberate. PublicSquare is not the only conservative e-commerce platform appealing to right-wing ideology and political mobilization. It stands out for scrutiny because of its scale (described below), its relationships with conservative celebrities (including Donald Trump, Jr., Tucker Carlson, and some elected officials), and, perhaps above all, its normalcy.[3] PublicSquare looks different from many conservative marketplaces: The site's aesthetics are professional and on-trend, and, unlike the in-your-face kitsch of other partisan merchandise, many of the products on PublicSquare do not project their politics—they are simply everyday products for everyday life (see Figure 1). PublicSquare espouses aggressive right-wing politics, and yet it glosses its brand in a veneer of ordinary, apolitical consumerism.

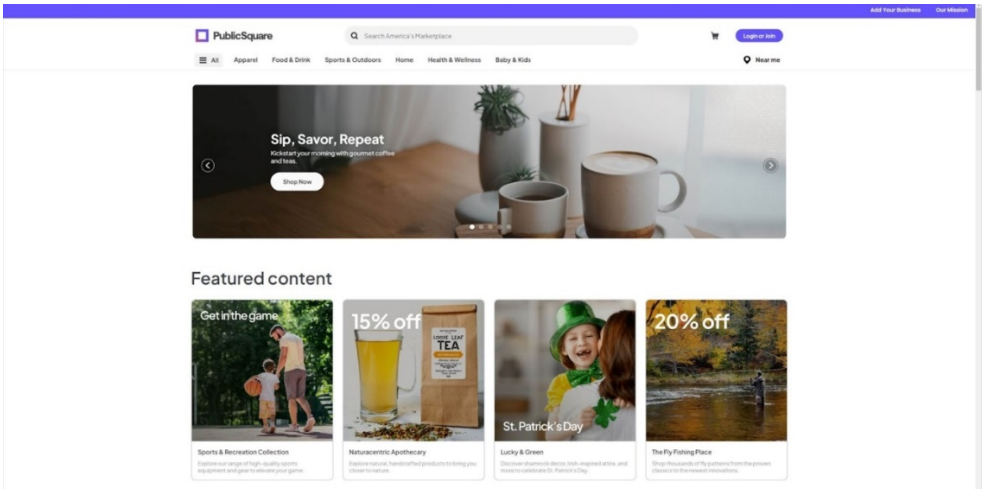

Figure 1. PublicSquare homepage, March 8, 2024 (PublicSquare, n.d.).

[3] Trump Jr. is part of PublicSquare's "outreach program" of "ambassadors and influencers" who profit from recruiting new consumers and businesses to the platform (PublicSquare, 2024b, p. 11). PublicSquare was the first advertising deal for Carlson's media company (Schwartz, 2023), and some former elected officials serve on the PublicSquare board.

PublicSquare as Reactionary Commodity Activism

PublicSquare calls itself "America's marketplace in the parallel economy" ("PublicSquare Investor Relations," n.d., para. 1). It is an online search tool and mobile application for finding companies with "traditional" conservative values, which are summarized as "pro-life, pro-family, pro-freedom" ("Our Values," n.d.). PublicSquare claims to be "the largest, traditional-values-driven marketplace in the country" ("PublicSquare Investor Relations," n.d., para. 1). Its platform hosts more than 75,000 businesses and more than 1.6 million active consumer members (PublicSquare, 2024a). PublicSquare reported earning net revenues of $5.7 million for 2023 and holding $16.4 million in cash (PublicSquare, 2024c), though it admits it has "not generated significant revenues or achieved profitability" (PublicSquare, 2024a, p. 16). It owns two subsidiary companies: a pro-life diaper company and a private financial payment company. The former is symbolically loaded, while the latter extends the PublicSquare's influence within the "Infrastructure of the Parallel Economy" (PublicSquare, 2024c).

PublicSquare was founded in 2021 by Michael Seifert, an alumnus of the Evangelical Liberty University. His biography describes him as "a thought leader in the areas of business development, politics, and culture" ("Executive Management," n.d., para. 1). Seifert frequently appears in PublicSquare marketing materials on social media. Because the company's stock structure gives him voting control in shareholder decisions, he "has significant influence over how we apply our five core values" (PublicSquare, 2024a, p. 24). These values, foregrounded in PublicSquare's branding (see Figure 2), state:

> We are united in our commitment to freedom and truth—that's what makes us Americans.
>
> We will always protect the family unit and celebrate the sanctity of every life.
>
> We believe small businesses and the communities who support them are the backbone of our economy.
>
> We believe in the greatness of this Nation and will always fight to defend it.
>
> Our Constitution is non-negotiable—government isn't the source of our rights, so it can't take them away. ("Our Values," n.d.)

PublicSquare's devotion to these values is so strong that it has reportedly "forgone, and may in the future forgo, certain expansion or revenue opportunities that we do not believe are aligned with our five core values, even if our decision may negatively impact our operating results" (PublicSquare, 2024a, pp. 23–24). This suggests that PublicSquare is a political project as much as a money-making enterprise.

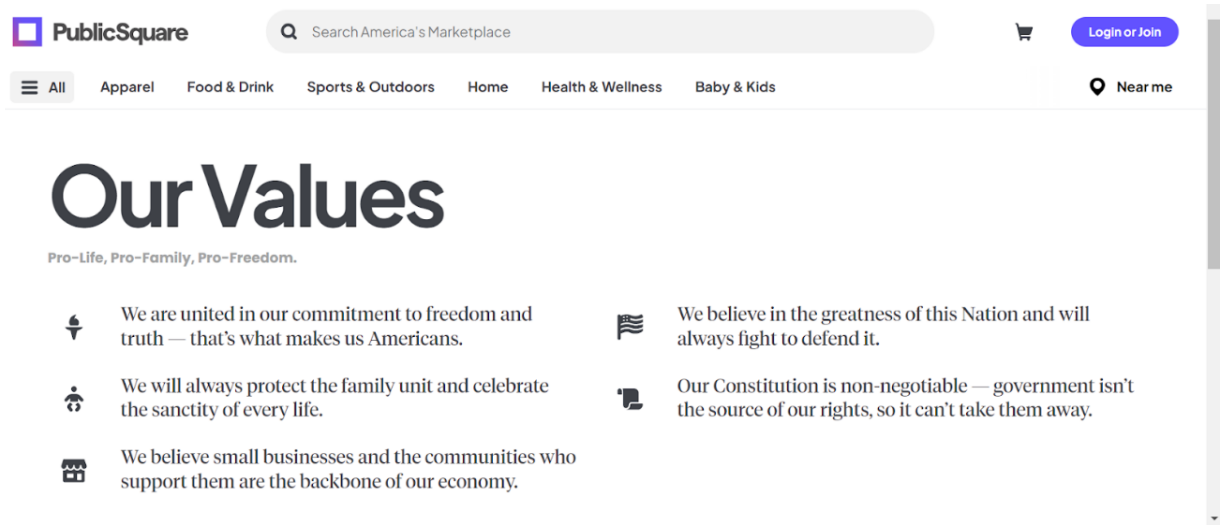

Figure 2. The PublicSquare values ("Our Values," n.d.).

PublicSquare's marketplace hosts pages for "small businesses" to promote themselves. The companies that sign up to be on PublicSquare "agree that they will not support causes that are in direct conflict with our core values" (PublicSquare, 2024c), and PublicSquare employees "routinely review business member profiles and other advertising materials and content" to ensure that the sellers on the platform honor this commitment (PublicSquare, 2024a, p. 2). It is free for a business to join PublicSquare, but many companies pay advertising fees to improve their visibility on the platform (PublicSquare, 2024a). The companies on PublicSquare range across product categories, including Apparel, Food & Drink, Sports & Outdoors, Home, Health & Wellness, and Baby & Kids. PublicSquare also offers a "Near Me" feature that refers users to values-vetted local businesses. A search in the authors' location returned construction companies, IT services, personal trainers, musicians, furniture resale stores, gun and ammo stores, real estate, auto shops, and a dentist.[4]

The following sections show some of the tactics by which PublicSquare brands itself—and the parallel economy—as a vehicle for reactionary commodity activism. PublicSquare channels commercial activity toward political causes (and vice versa), creating and exploiting cultural ties between partisan identities, lifestyles, and brands. It also reacts against progressive-coded activism, branding its project as normative consumer citizenship, simply restoring business-as-usual. In each case, the company tells moral stories about the marketplace and power in America.

[4] A cursory review of some merchants' pages shows that not all companies market themselves according to PublicSquare's "core values." Lots of the pages and products exhibit no obvious political valence and would look at home on mainstream e-commerce sites. Many businesses, though, foreground conservative values, even in selling mundane products like soaps and candles. Others put innocuous branding around goods that index right-wing politics (e.g., gold bars).

"We the People": A Branded Consumption Community Reclaiming Their Power

PublicSquare promises consumers the ability to shop their values, letting them procure the things they need and desire from companies that share their worldview. These consumers can feel secure about living their politics and beliefs authentically and without compromise. PublicSquare describes its business as "ready to help find your new favorites from people just like you" ("Shop America's Marketplace," n.d., para. 1). Catering to conservative values and group interests, the company helps organize a *political* consumption community (Boorstin, 1973).

PublicSquare brands itself as responding to the injuries inflicted by an elitist and woke commodity activism. In a report to shareholders, the company explained:

> We have observed that many consumers are increasingly disenchanted with large corporations that have embraced non-traditional, progressive ideas and policies and would prefer to re-allocate more of their dollars to business members who do not stand in opposition to their views and values. (PublicSquare, 2024a, p. 7)

Against this disenchantment, PublicSquare provides a marketplace that "empowers like-minded, [*sic*] patriots" to support companies that "share their values" ("PublicSquare Investor Relations," n.d., para. 1). The Corporate Overview from PublicSquare's Investor Relations page underscores the company's emphasis on reclaiming power for unjustly marginalized consumers:

> Americans are hungering for a future where power is back in the hands of the people and a patriotic economy is created; an economy where small business owners prosper and where those, [*sic*] businesses and consumers who love their country and respect personal liberties can thrive, without having to self-censor and sacrifice their values due to the fear of cancellation. ("PublicSquare Investor Relations," n.d., para. 1)

PublicSquare characterizes its reactionary commodity activism in grand and urgent terms. It declares itself "on a mission to restore the culture through the power of commerce" ("Shop America's Marketplace," n.d.). PublicSquare vows that it will "fight to defend" the nation and the sanctity of "what makes us Americans" ("Our Values," n.d.), thereby labeling progressive commodity activism as anti-American and turning its traditional values into a rallying cry for a conservative consumption community. "Your purchases are weapons in this economic war that will shift the power structures of our country back to the values of we the people," PublicSquare tells its followers. "You have a wallet. It's time to wield it" (PublicSquare, 2024d, 00:00:28).

PublicSquare offers these patriots a platform to wage their revanchist war to take back the market, the consumer culture, and the spirit of American capitalism as they imagine it. In a blog post, Seifert (2024) says that, with PublicSquare,

> We're not powerless anymore—it means we can shift financial power structures back towards "We the People," it means we have the chance to revitalize "Main Street" and the small business community of America more broadly, it means we get to be "proactive" instead of "reactive," and it means we can resurrect the meritocracy and excellence that once drove our economy and our nation to greatness. (para. 5)

Thus, PublicSquare hails its target audience as the true and rightful protagonists of American markets and politics—"we-the-consumers" is the call of the people who should not have to "self-censor and sacrifice" when using the expressive power of the almighty dollar to exercise their patriotic duties ("PublicSquare Investor Relations," n.d., para. 1).

PublicSquare repeatedly draws stark distinctions between the progressive commodity activism of brands like Dove and the company's own market-based countermovement. And, yet, both appeal to individual consumers by offering a sense of personal empowerment and salvation from the contradictions and complexities of consumer capitalism. PublicSquare's reactionary commodity activism invites conservative consumers to realize "a politically virtuous self" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 146)—both civically active and ideologically pure—by shopping within the values-policed confines of PublicSquare. Conservative consumers (and businesses) can use the PublicSquare platform to participate in a brand culture and consumption community dedicated to maintaining their authentic identities and moral commitments, thus translating their participation into political empowerment.

"Buy vs. Ditch": Branding Alternative Products as Political Resistance

PublicSquare's marketplace provides "alternatives" to the products of "woke" corporations. Seifert says that the latter "resemble political progressive organizations more than they do actually functioning companies" (PublicSquare, 2023c, 00:01:03). Seifert brands these corporations as political activists because of their CSR policies and the identity politics represented in their marketing. In contrast, he promotes his company as an unadulterated—seemingly apolitical—marketplace, drawing a line between wholesome and perverse business.

PublicSquare exploits the narrative that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) efforts alienate traditional values and identities. To fight back, PublicSquare tells customers to "buy" from its merchants and "ditch" woke brands. This trope comes up in blogs on several parts of the PublicSquare website and in patterned social media posts that typically picture the offending product/brand next to a nearly identical substitute from a partnering merchant. In one such blog, Seifert (2024) writes, "For many years, when these demonstrations of ESG-driven corporate activism would take place, our only option was to boycott" (para. 3). With the PublicSquare marketplace, "we are providing a proactive solution that helps consumers not only avoid businesses that antagonize and demean their value systems, but also move their money toward businesses that share their love for life, family, and freedom" (Seifert, 2024, para. 4). "This isn't about boycotts," the company website explains, "it's about helping you switch to something better" ("Shop America's Marketplace," n.d., para. 2). Clearly, PublicSquare *is* advocating for boycotts and buycotts, but as pieces of a broader movement to mobilize branding and commodity activism toward the advancement of a conservative consumer culture that can "ensure America

remains a great place for our families to thrive for generations to come" ("Shop America's Marketplace," n.d., para. 2).

PublicSquare's "Buy"/"Ditch" framing stages opportunities to castigate progressive branding and to define conservative brands in opposition (see Figure 3). An Instagram post about ditching Dove features a lengthy caption criticizing the "well-known beauty brand" for validating social activists, "pushing progressive alphabet propaganda and catering to nearly every virtue-signaling requirement of the DEI & ESG overlords" (PublicSquare, 2023a, para. 3). In another example from Instagram, PublicSquare attacks Kay Jewelers for celebrating same-sex marriage: "The diamond chain has been recognized by the virtue-signaling mafia for their commitment to affirming gender confusion and progressive DEI policies. Their most recent ad campaign was a disappointing attempt to redefine the traditional family unit" (PublicSquare, 2023b). The first image of that post puts the Kay logo on a black background labeled "Ditch," distinguishing it from a white section that says "Buy" and features the PublicSquare logo. In the posts' remaining slides, PublicSquare promotes nine alternative jewelry companies from its marketplace, including one that sells "The Marksman," a men's wedding band made with an elk antler, which marries the platform's brand to outdoor lifestyles (PublicSquare, 2023b). In an example from Twitter, PublicSquare endorses Old Glory Bank as a savior for Christians at risk of "de-banking" (PublicSquare, 2024h) by the likes of Bank of America, saying, "It's time we stop banking with people who hate us" (PublicSquare, 2024g) and adding a "Ditch" overlay on top of an out-of-focus Bank of America sign. Finally, casting children's books as a battleground in a "war for our children's hearts and minds," a PublicSquare tweet recommends publishers that forgo open discourse on gender and sexuality as "the antidote to the woke culture's attack on children," again highlighting the PublicSquare brands with a white background and the "Ditch" book on a black one (PublicSquare, 2024e).

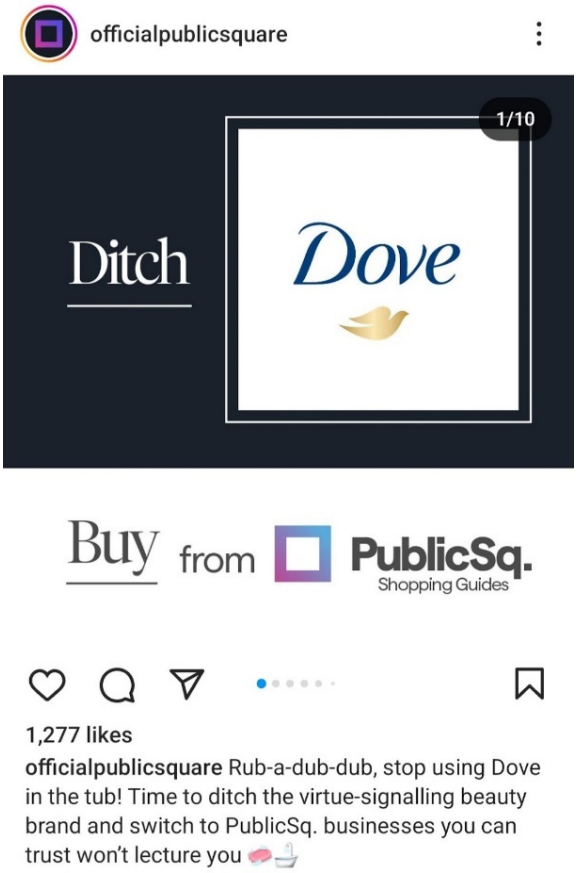

Figure 3. The Buy/Ditch campaign against Dove on Instagram (PublicSquare, 2023a).

PublicSquare's "Buy" vs. "Ditch" scenarios explicate the political stakes of these brand choices. They offer conservatives a tangible means to not only identify with opposition to DEI, but to also use their wallets as a "weapon" in the fight to reclaim economic and cultural power from people who "hate" them and what they stand for (e.g., PublicSquare, 2024g; PublicSquare, 2024i). Presenting its affiliates as "owned and operated by patriots who love America and the traditional values that made our nation great" (PublicSquare, 2023b), PublicSquare enlists consumers to exercise their sovereign consumer choices as a defense against the anti-American threat of progressive commodity activism. PublicSquare's vetting makes this easy for consumers who lack the time or wherewithal to research companies' values and supply chains. In a video posted on PublicSquare's Instagram account, right-wing personality Chanel Rion describes the platform as a "very simple solution to woke mania," even for busy shoppers (PublicSquare, 2024i). "You're going to spend your money on the essentials. Why not spend it with companies that support our basic all-American values?" (PublicSquare, 2024i). Here, strategic brand switching is just one more low-involvement purchasing choice, a habitual part of routine shopping.

Discussion

Our case study shows how PublicSquare presents itself as a multifaceted medium for reactionary commodity activism and politics in a brand culture. The platform links politicized ways of life to individual consumer choices, channeling both toward the assembly of a "parallel economy" and a conservative consumption community. Our discussion reflects on the contradictions in these efforts, starting with the ambivalence of commodity activism. We suggest that PublicSquare tries to rally consumer-citizens around a right-wing ideological project, while also trying to naturalize that ideology and understate the project's imperious ambitions.

PublicSquare positions itself against progressive commodity activism in a double sense: On one hand, it claims to be avenging the perversions of the marketplace perpetrated by liberal activists and woke brands; on the other hand, it implies that what it is doing is not really activism at all, since it is mobilizing "ordinary" people to restore the "traditional" values that are supposed to orient consumer capitalism and American culture writ large. The conceit of PublicSquare is, in part, that the general marketplace and mainstream brand cultures have been corrupted by ideologues; by shopping in a marketplace that is seemingly *free from politics* (but, really, promoting preferred political values), consumer-citizens can "restore the culture" to normalcy. Despite its pointedly political rhetoric, PublicSquare addresses itself to consumers who are not "activists" but are just authentic Americans trying to enact their values. It brands the conservative consumer-citizen as the default subjectivity of the American marketplace (Burton, 2009).

PublicSquare's branding taps into and projects onto conservative lifestyles, tastes, and values. The company's self-promotion tells stories about the consumers and merchants who participate in its marketplace and interpellates them within a branded consumption community. Crucially, this involves appealing to conservatives as a subculture with partisan interests in politicized issues, highlighting distinctions of ideology and taste to provoke them into action, while also insisting that their stake in those issues is actually the natural order of things—the normative values and politics of "We the People." Indeed, PublicSquare seems to brand the natural order of the market itself. When it ridicules "woke" corporations for operating more like political organizations than businesses, it implies that capitalism is politically neutral. This softens the contradictions that arise as PublicSquare courts conflicting capitalist blocs (see Cooper, 2022)—promoting family-owned, private businesses (against publicly traded corporations) while spinning its own public status as a populist form of accountability ("PublicSquare Investor Relations," n.d.).

We suggest that these sleights of hand set the stage for a larger political project. PublicSquare's reactionary commodity activism is emblematic of a right-wing parallel movement (Brown, 2021). This parallelism extends beyond the traditional economic marketplace to the realm of political consumption and engagement with other areas of political choice, including social media (Zeng & Mahl, 2023), conservative news cultures (Lewis, 2020; Nadler & Bauer, 2019), and the growing emphasis on homeschooling among conservatives (Brown, 2021). Each of these institutions provides space for the authentic representation and enactment of conservative culture, free from perceived liberal influence. PublicSquare encourages its social media followers to use consumption as an onramp for an expansive social movement: "The Parallel Economy

must bleed into every aspect of society: athletics, entertainment, culture, education, agriculture, and politics. The current system isn't working. Build a new one" (PublicSquare, 2024f).

Here, we see another hallmark tension in PublicSquare's branding of the parallel economy. The promise of occupying a separate conservative realm is packaged in rhetoric that also expresses a clear revanchist ambition to reclaim power and restore the central status of "traditional" American values. PublicSquare positions the parallel economy as a symbolic and practical space for the strategic networking of conservative brand cultures and consumption communities. That space is celebrated for its purity, but also for channeling individual actions into forms of collective energy that have a purchase beyond partisan cloisters. PublicSquare promotes right-wing ideologies and identities through a marketplace that replicates the trendy aesthetics of social media influencers and popular e-commerce portals, dressing the movement in visual cues that read as mainstream, not fringe. Furthermore, the affordances of these digital media environments enable consumer-citizens to participate easily in economic, cultural, and political activism (Billard & Moran, 2020). The implied possibilities for organizing and activating individuals into a social movement are key. Although more research is needed on this, the discourse surrounding PublicSquare seems to suggest that the "parallel economy" is not just an end in itself but also a means for parts of the conservative movement to assemble power that can be applied on or inside central institutions. For example, "Project 2025," the much-publicized playbook for a Republican presidency, includes plans to execute a dramatic right-wing restaffing of the U.S. government by hiring from the parallel professional networks cultivated around conservative organizations (Blitzer, 2024). Much like how the disavowal of commodity activism gives an apolitical pretense to what is an obvious form of commodity activism, the emphasis on parallel institutions disguises a desire to be the norm, not the exception. It is significant that these right-wing spaces take their names from potent abstractions like truth and the public square. They are branding and laying claim to nothing less than bedrock cultural and political values (albeit in contradictory ways).

Conclusion

PublicSquare and the proponents of the "parallel economy" see themselves as the rightful "We the People" of American society and seek to construct a market of like-minded consumers. They propose to consolidate power through conservative consumerism and reactionary commodity activism. The parallel economy articulates consumer sovereignty to a set of moral claims and cultural repertoires, and its technology platforms and networks of commercial and social relationships enact partisan consumerism as politics in a brand culture. This political brand culture fastens conservative identities, values, and tastes to a self-conscious consumption community and channels its purchasing power toward right-wing causes. Perhaps above all, PublicSquare contributes to the branding of the conservative movement and the consumer-citizens and businesses who see themselves as belonging to it. This branding construes conservative consumerism as authentic and empowered political participation, rooted in the moral force of a natural order. Through an ambivalent but aggressive commodity activism, "We the People" becomes "We the Consumers."

Our case study of PublicSquare shows how the fields of political communication and critical cultural studies can work together to enhance our understanding of conservative social movements and their branding and marketing of identities, lifestyles, ideologies, and values. Conservative consumerism offers a

rich area for further research, drawing on existing studies of the cultural tastes and brand loyalties that help orient conservative politics (Kreiss et al, 2020; Ouellette, 2012; Peck, 2019; Tripodi, 2022). Our analysis of reactionary commodity activism highlights how right-wing influencers continually capitalize on "culture war" publicity and repurpose progressive tactics to drive attention, outrage, and engagement. Future work could develop more insights into the specific importance of platform and network affordances to reactionary commodity activism, perhaps emphasizing participatory culture (Billard & Moran, 2020) and detailing aspects of technology design and use (Brock, 2018). Studies of conservative marketplaces could further examine merchants and their products. The many texts comprising the promotion and packaging of these products, the commercial relations among these companies, and the business models of the various platforms all deserve sustained study. The success of any of these companies is hardly assured; even with famous backers, PublicSquare may not survive to see profitability (though it appears willing to tolerate losses in the service of politics). Whatever their fate, these ventures provide an important arena for seeing how political beliefs and identities are branded and sold.

Finally, our analysis raises important questions about the purposes and implications of the "parallel" economy. It may be that the point is not so much to provide a separate sanctuary for people who want to exist *outside* the mainstream, but rather to engage a participatory network of conservative consumers and business owners whose money and activism can be mobilized to reclaim control *within* dominant institutions—to "shift the power structures of our country back" toward an imagined natural order (PublicSquare, 2024d). This conjecture goes beyond what we can infer from our findings, but existing work on the conservative movement suggests that it is plausible (e.g., Hemmer, 2016; Tripodi, 2022), and the material stakes of such a power grab strengthen the warrant for ongoing research. In other words, a democratic polity needs to be vigilant. The militant hostility in PublicSquare's messaging, combined with the unassuming blandness of its own products and aesthetics, underscores how the parallel economy angles to defend partisan interests and naturalize far-right ideologies. The goal may not be parallelism, but revanchism.

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