CRITICAL RESEARCH ON WOKE CULTURE, ETHICS, AND CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

*Metsiou Anastasia, Patra Anna, Dellas Christos & Kamariadis Dimitris.

University of Western Macedonia, IEES, Koila Kozanis, Greece.

*Corresponding Author: Metsiou Anastasia

University of Western Macedonia, IEES, Koila Kozanis, Greece.

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2. ABSTRACT

This paper examines the emergence of the woke culture from the beginning of the term, as shown in the social justice movements, to its influence on corporate governance and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). Woke culture was originally associated with the awareness of racial and social injustice and the term has expanded to encompass broader concerns such as gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, environmental justice, and ethical labor practices. As these values have become embedded in public discourse, businesses have increasingly been pressured to align their strategies and identities with them. Therefore, drawing on theoretical perspectives from critical theory, ethics, and CSR, the paper analyzes how enterprises respond to this cultural shift and the ethical tensions that arise when social justice ideals intersect with profit-driven objectives. Attention is given to the practices of "woke-washing," where companies seem to adopt progressive actions, but without implementing substantive organizational change in reality. Bibliographical research also aligns with corporate actions in the sense of moral, ethics and polarization of the public debate, amplified by digital media and activist movements. Also, the paper believes that woke culture is reshaping the meaning and expectations of CSR, pushing firms beyond philanthropy and toward deeper accountability for their social and environmental impacts.

3. KEYWORDS: Woke culture, Corporate Social Responsibility, business ethics, corporate governance, diversity and inclusion, sustainability, woke-washing.

4. INTRODUCTION

The social phenomenon known as "woke culture" has emerged from a term that was introduced in social justice movements and has come to be to a mainstream ideology that

now influences the basis of the modern public world, as it originally was associated with a heightened awareness of any racial, gender or social inequalities, and it has gained a new purpose, in order to embody an awareness of broader issues, such as environmental justice, work place ethics and LGBTQ+ rights. Therefore, the spread of the "woke culture" has become a key point that has brought a significant shift in the values of society, as the public now emphasizes more and more in the importance of inclusivity, diversity, and equality (Kanai & Gill, 2020).

The concept of "woke culture" has gained its ground in the business world as well, as enterprises have been trying to evolve, therefore, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) plays an important role, as CSR has been associated with the idea that businesses should not only aim to gain profit but also to contribute to the well-being of society through sustainable practices, ethical actions, and environmental responsibility. As businesses begin to confront the rise of "woke culture", the questions about their CSR efforts have expanded beyond the traditional terms of philanthropy and environmental impact, making it crucial to investigate how businesses can ethically integrate the principles of "woke culture" into their CSR strategies, and also investigate how can "woke culture" coexist with the corporate's profit motives, or if it undermines the very essence of business operations (Farmaki, 2022). Therefore, the article tries to explore the intersection of "woke culture", ethics, and CSR, and examine how businesses have responded to the evolving cultural shift and what it means for both the companies and the society as well.

5. METHODS

Bibliography shows that "Woke culture" is not just a trend but rather an example of social activism and intellectual inquiry, as its ideological roots can be traced to critical theory, feminism, and the civil rights movement, all of which try to expose the systemic injustices, with the term "woke" to have originated within African-American communities in the early 20th century. Initially the term was used as a call to consciousness regarding racial oppression, as the phrase "stay woke" was a reminder to be vigilant against the systemic forces of racism that "hurt" the American society. Also, the civil rights movement of the 1960s was the first widespread institutional methods that formed the ideas that would later fuel the "woke culture" (Aghoian, 2022). For example, civil rights leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X advocated for radical social, political, and economic reforms to address the pervasive inequalities faced by African Americans, and in that theoretical basis, the term of "waking up" to injustice, provided a cry for those who sought to dismantle all the

forms of institutionalized racism and promote the civil rights. However, the legacy of these movements did not end in the 1960s, but it evolved, and expanded to include various groups, that have been left behind and faced prejudice, including the women, the LGBTQ+ community and the indigenous populations (Paché, 2022; Duffy et al., 2023).

In the late 20th and early 21st century these movements found new forms of expression through the digital activism, as the social media, and particularly platforms like Twitter and Facebook, allowed activists to quickly acknowledge to other people events of racial injustice, gender inequality, and LGBTQ+ rights trespassing. For example, hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo exemplified the power of digital platforms and achieved to bring attention to systemic issues, and empower large-scale social movements. By doing that, these movements gained traction, the ideas behind "woke culture" began to infiltrate the public consciousness, particularly within the corporate sector. For example, businesses in America, that have long been the target of critiques for perpetuating inequality and environmental degradation, found themselves increasingly pressured to respond to these movements, as companies could no longer remain neutral to the growing calls for social justice, but instead, they were expected to adopt "woke" principles into their business models, policies, and practices (Kanai & Gill, 2020). These actions marked the beginning of a new era in corporate governance, one in which CSR was no longer optional but an essential component of a company's identity (Foss & Klein, 2023).

According to Foss and Klein (2023), the "woke culture" has been constantly grown and now it presents significant ethical challenges for the businesses, as its core, business ethics has to do with the principles and moral values that guide corporate behavior, in order to ensure that companies operate responsibly and with integrity. It is known that ethical dilemmas often arise in areas such as labor rights, environmental responsibility, consumer protection, and corporate governance, but the integration of "woke culture" into business strategy introduces additional complexities, particularly regarding the alignment of social justice movements with the profit, that is the main motivation for the companies. Businesses, especially multinational corporations, have faced extreme pressures to embrace diversity and inclusion, both within their workforce and in their public-facing campaigns. Yet, as "woke culture" enters the corporate world, companies must cope with a fundamental ethical question, and that is if woke ideals, which prioritize social justice and equality, can be authentically adopted within the capitalist framework, which inherently prioritizes profits and shareholder returns.

The difficulty arises in the tension between profit-driven motives and social responsibility that is highly apparent when companies engage in "woke-washing", which is the practice of

adopting progressive ideals as part of a marketing campaign or public relations strategy, without making real and systemic change. An example of this can be seen in the fashion industry, where brands often advertise their commitment to diversity and inclusivity, yet they fail to address the labor exploitation or the environmental degradation within their supply chains. Critics to these actions argue that this superficial adoption of "woke principles" serves merely as a marketing tool that helps businesses to attract socially conscious consumers while maintaining unsustainable and unethical business practices and not engage in ethical ones (Bahnsen, 2022).

Hashmi et al. (2024), argue that the "ethical dilemma" for the businesses lies in trying to balance the demands of the "woke culture" with the reality of today's corporate governance, because if companies want to engage with "woke culture", they must implement comprehensive and systemic changes that address issues such as racial and gender inequality, environmental sustainability, and fair labor practices, and these changes must be deeply embedded into the company's values, and not just be a superficial marketing tactic, but it must be a basic principle for all aspects of their operations. For example, Nike's 2018 campaign featured Colin Kaepernick, and the campaign was lauded by many people for its support of Kaepernick's stand against racial injustice, but it also generated significant backlash from conservative groups who accused Nike of politicizing sports, as Nike's decision to back Kaepernick was seen by many people as a bold move that aligned the company with a social justice movement, but it also raised ethical questions about the commercialization of protest for human rights, and it arose questions whether it was Nike's commitment to racial justice genuine, or was it merely an attempt to tap into a cultural moment for financial gain (Green, 2023).

Therefore, this case underscores the ethical tension when corporations adopt woke ideals, if it is truly the company's commitment to these values deep-rooted, or is it just another form of brand marketing. On the other side, there are companies like Ben & Jerry's that have consistently integrated social justice causes into their corporate ethos, as the ice cream company has established its commitment to racial equality, environmental sustainability, and LGBTQ+ rights, and unlike some of its competitors, Ben & Jerry's has not simply adopted "woke culture" as a marketing strategy but has incorporated it into its operational framework, influencing everything from the ingredients it sources to its employee policies. Therefore, Ben & Jerry's example demonstrates that it is possible for businesses to authentically align with woke culture, while maintaining a strong commitment to corporate social responsibility (Fan, 2019).

6. DISCUSSION

The rise of "woke culture" has made controversial thoughts, as some critics view it as a threat to traditional values and a destabilizing force that undermines societal norms, and this backlash is part of a larger moral panic, a term that was introduced by the sociologist Stanley Cohen, in order to describe the disproportionate societal reaction to a perceived threat. Particularly in the case of "woke culture", this threat is often framed as an attack on the free speech, the personal liberties, and the cultural "status quo", but people that agree with "woke culture", on the other hand, argue that it is a necessary response to historical and ongoing forms of discrimination and oppression (Gasparino, 2024).

As businesses try to navigate through this moral panic, they must consider the broader implications of their actions, as the public relations risks associated with engaging in woke culture are significant, especially when companies are accused of "canceling" opposing views or stifling the free expression of speech, and this tension is particularly evident in the digital area, where the social media platforms have become the "battleground" for all kinds of ideological conflicts. Moreover, social media allows for the rapid dissemination of both support and backlash, creating an environment where every corporate action is scrutinized and criticized (Léger, 2022).

For businesses in particular, this polarized environment creates a dilemma, whether they should risk alienating certain segments of their customer base by aligning with woke causes, or should they prioritize neutrality and avoid engaging in contentious issues. With the ethical challenge that lies in navigating this divide and determining whether a company's CSR strategy should reflect the values of social justice movements or whether it should prioritize the avoidance of cultural conflict (Hunt, 1997; Sobande, 2023). According to Curran-Troop, Gill and Littler (2022), the role of CSR in addressing the "woke culture's" influence cannot be understated, as companies that seek to remain relevant in the wake of these shifting cultural norms must recognize that public expectations of corporate behavior are evolving, and companies must understand that CSR strategies that fail to engage with social justice issues are increasingly seen as outdated or out of touch. However, businesses must be careful not to alienate customers who view "woke culture" as overly politicized or divisive, and in order to navigate this delicate balance, companies must engage in honest self-reflection and assess whether their CSR strategies are genuinely aligned with the values of equality, inclusivity, and justice, or whether they are merely driven by the desire to capitalize on the cultural moment.

The influence of "woke culture" on CSR strategies is profound, and as businesses increasingly integrate diversity, inclusion, and social justice into their CSR initiatives, they face the challenge of adapting to an evolving landscape. Therefore, the success of these efforts will depend on how businesses address the intersection of profit and ethics and how they respond to the expectations of socially conscious consumers, activists, and employees, especially in sectors such as technology, fashion, and entertainment, where "woke culture" has sparked a reevaluation of the CSR priorities. So, technology companies like Google and Microsoft have incorporated diversity and inclusion into their recruitment practices and workplace cultures, thus responding to the pressure from employees and consumers who demand more equitable representation in the tech industry, and fashion companies, too, are beginning to recognize the importance of sustainability and ethical labor practices, as consumers increasingly demand transparency in supply chains (Thorslund, 2022; Bodie, 2023).

So, if businesses wish to thrive in this new cultural area, they must integrate "woke culture" into their core CSR strategies, thus ensuring that social justice is not just a marketing tool but a guiding principle that shapes all aspects of their operations, and this includes everything, from employee policies and hiring practices to environmental sustainability and community outreach. If they do so, companies can not only enhance their public image but also contribute to the creation of a more just and equitable society (Warren, 2022).

7. CONCLUSION

"Woke culture" therefore has reshaped the corporate world, by forcing businesses to reconsider their role in promoting social justice and ethical behavior, and as companies increasingly adopt CSR strategies that reflect the values of inclusion, diversity, and sustainability, it is important for them to accept the ethical challenges of integrating woke culture into their operations. While there are significant risks associated with woke-washing and backlash from consumers, businesses that genuinely commit to social responsibility have the potential to drive positive change both within their organizations and in society at large. Moreover, in the future to come, businesses will likely continue to refine their CSR strategies to balance the competing demands of "woke culture" and profit-making, and the key to success will be the authenticity, as companies must demonstrate a genuine commitment to the values they have, that ensue that their CSR efforts are not merely symbolic gestures but integral components of their corporate identity. By embracing this approach, businesses can contribute to a more just and equitable world while remaining competitive in the marketplace.

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