

# The Alt-Right and the Mobilization of Brand Affect: New Balance and Neo-Nazis' Athleisure Affiliations

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Published: July 21, 2021

## Abstract

This article probes American sportswear manufacturer New Balance's reputational and public relations crisis, which resulted from an executive's statement of support for Donald Trump's US-focused trade policies in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election. Reported consumer backlash to New Balance's apparent alliance with Trump was exacerbated when neo-Nazi publication *The Daily Stormer* penned an editorial appropriating New Balance as "the official shoes of White people." Using theories of affect in social media and consumer culture as a framework, I situate the New Balance case within the current culture wars as enacted in politicized social media threads, as well as prior instances in which alt-right groups have attempted to co-opt sportswear brands' cultural associations in the service of extremist politics. Performing manual inductive content analysis on a sample of tweets from before the publication of the editorial (n=100) and after (n=77), I illuminate a polarized political division between users in terms of their backlash or endorsement of New Balance's stance, which correlates with stated anti-Trump or pro-Trump positions, and articulate how users position themselves in terms of a consumer/customer relation to New Balance as brand, while sneakers become a material outlet for consumers to enact their discontent in a mediatized forum.

**Keywords:** New Balance; Social Media; Callout; Affect; Alt-right.

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## Introduction

On November 8, 2016, Donald Trump was declared the winner of the United States presidential election. Less than 24 hours later, in the middle of a resultant political shockwave, Sara Germano, a *Wall Street Journal* reporter, tweeted a comment from Matt Lebreton, vice president of public affairs of the sportswear brand New Balance, in which Lebreton stated that Trump's US-prioritized economic policies would benefit the company. Lebreton had criticized Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade talks under the previous administration of Barack Obama and felt that Trump would promote New Balance's interests in domestic production.<sup>1</sup> Lebreton — as cited in Germano's tweet (since deleted), and in a subsequent article — stated: "The Obama admin turned a deaf ear to us and frankly, with President-elect Trump, we feel things are going to move in the right direction."<sup>2</sup> Social media users were swift to respond to this statement, with videos and photographs posted in the immediate aftermath in which users tossed New Balance sneakers in the trash or lit pairs on fire. New Balance subsequently clarified that it had advocated for local manufacture in order to provide fairly-compensated positions in the United States, and its opposition to the TPP stemmed from not wanting competitors such as Nike, a confirmed TPP supporter, to increase profits based on outsourcing of cheap labour. In a statement to *Business Insider* on November 11, New Balance confirmed its position:

As the only major company that still makes athletic shoes in the United States, New Balance has a unique perspective on trade in that we want to make more shoes in the United States, not less. ... New Balance publicly supported the trade positions of Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump prior to election day that focused on American manufacturing job creation and we continue to support them today.<sup>3</sup>

Lebreton further asserted that his statement had been taken out of context and attempted to distance himself and the company from political intent or implication:

The statement ... is correct in the context of trade, not talking about large geo-political anything, but in the context of the Trans-Pacific Partnership agreement. ... It's inaccurate. Everything I've said is in the context of trade. ... [New Balance has no intention of] getting involved in the politics of presidential elections. ... My statements aren't political, this is policy related solely to TPP.<sup>4</sup>

New Balance's public relations crisis exemplifies a condition, instantiated through a culture of mediation, in which it is impossible for companies to sidestep political conversations or render statements divorced from the policies of administrations — indeed it is contentious and wishful to surmise that statements on trade and international labour were ever apolitical. In this case, New Balance's affirmed commitment to its domestic workforce, uttered within hours after the presidential election, became imbricated in the insidious "America First" discourses on which Trump's trade (and immigration) policies were predicated.<sup>5</sup> On November 12, Andrew Anglin, founder of the neo-Nazi online publication *The Daily Stormer*, added fuel to cultural and actual fires when he wrote an editorial calling for a mass soli-

1. This research was presented at the symposium "The American Everyday: Resistance, Revolution & Transformation" at the Columbia College Chicago on February 15, 2020. Thanks to the conference attendees, as well as to the two anonymous reviewers of this article, for their feedback.
2. Sara Germano, "New Balance Faces Social Media Backlash After Welcoming Trump," *Wall Street Journal*, November 10, 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/new-balance-faces-social-media-backlash-after-welcoming-trump-1478823102>.
3. Dennis Green, "Consumers Set New Balance Shoes on Fire After CEO Praises Trump Victory," *Inc.*, November 11, 2016, <https://www.inc.com/business-insider/new-balance-anger.html>.
4. Brad Esposito and Caroline Donovan, "People Are Pissed Because They Think New Balance Supports Donald Trump," *BuzzFeed News*, November 9, 2016, [https://www.buzzfeed.com/bradesposito/people-are-pissed-because-they-think-new-balance-supports-do?utm\\_term=.wgqBrrxpr#.dJONYIVY](https://www.buzzfeed.com/bradesposito/people-are-pissed-because-they-think-new-balance-supports-do?utm_term=.wgqBrrxpr#.dJONYIVY).
5. Not reported at the time was the fact that New Balance Owner and Chairman Jim Davis had donated \$396,500 USD to the Trump Victory Committee. While he has donated to both Republican and Democratic candidates, this is complicated by its tacit endorsement of Trump's social policies, at least insofar as these benefit his business interests. Jim O'Sullivan, "New Balance founder gave nearly \$400,000 to Trump," *Boston Globe*, January 13, 2017, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2017/01/13/new-balance-founder-gave-nearly-trump/HEoVw5ig6OHhLKOc3dDorO/story.html>.

parity purchase of New Balance-branded products. Anglin's take-up of New Balance's position more explicitly co-opted the brand within an extremist, white supremacist politics that targeted not just persons of colour but members of homosexual and trans communities. In a discussion of the editorial's ramifications, Alex Esculapio further notes, "An image of actor and director Mel Gibson wearing New Balance trainers accompanied Anglin's article, thus implicitly linking anti-Semitism — Gibson's 2006 rant has made him somehow popular among American nationalists — to the footwear brand and conflating economic localism with economic nationalism."<sup>6</sup>

This article contributes to explorations into cases in which alt-right groups have attempted to use online and social media to co-opt brands' 'mainstream' cultural associations in the service of extremist politics. Specifically, it examines the cultural and digital implications of New Balance's statements after the election of Donald Trump and the loaded social media responses that resulted. Through qualitative content analysis of tweets produced in the wake of Lebreton's ill-conceived comments, and later the *Daily Stormer* editorial, I find that consumer sentiment towards New Balance as a brand is enmeshed with a polarized pro-Trump or anti-Trump politics that is then connected to alt-right, neo-Nazi and/or white supremacist movements, albeit still at national (and nationalist) levels.<sup>7</sup> This article explores, via the New Balance case, how politicized discourses have implicated fashion companies and brand identities and how social media platforms function as battle or activist sites. To date, most examinations of fashion's intersection with international politics have trod the terrain, nonetheless fruitful, of embodied, contextual dress practice.<sup>8</sup> The mediatization of the field of fashion necessitates a reframing of fashion and/as the political towards a mediatized fashion politics.<sup>9</sup> This article advances recent studies of the culture wars — as manifested in fashion — in its focus towards consumer response or brand perception, accounted for in social media content, and its use of affect as a theoretical framework to assess the maintenance of online communities.

## From Materialities to Digital Affect Cultures

Studies of affect in consumer and media cultures locate its movement across material and mediatized phenomena. Consumer culture scholars reference Brian Massumi's concept of affect as *intensities*, shown as outward emotion, to explain our attachments to and our embodied interactions with certain brands. Celia Lury identifies the logo as, pace media theorist Lev Manovich, the *interface* with the brand, that opens up a sense of transformative potentialities.<sup>10</sup> Consumers' affiliation to the New Balance brand assumes the dual forms of online interaction and the wear of products emblazoned with the N logo. As performance scholar Maurya Wickstrom observes at the Niketown store, such tactile engagement with branded sportswear can produce a sense of transcended capabilities.<sup>11</sup> Tae-Im Han and Dooyoung Choi examine the affective dimension inherent in the concept of brand love and find that emotional attachments to certain brands increase "consumer loyalty," and this allegiance is tied to self-congruity — in other words, "consumers are more emotionally attached to fashion brands that express their identity" in facets that include but are not limited to social/political values.<sup>12</sup>

6. Alex Esculapio, "Operation New Balance: How Neo-Nazis Hacked the Mall," *Vestoj*, October–November 2017, <http://vestoj.com/operation-new-balance/>.

7. In a related case, in Fall 2020, British sportswear brand Fred Perry pulled its black and yellow polo shirt with its laurel wreath logo from the US market after it was appropriated as part of a uniform for the neo-fascist group the Proud Boys (which also operates in Canada).

8. For example, Andreas Behnke, ed. *The International Politics of Fashion: Being Fab in a Dangerous World* (London: Routledge, 2016).

9. On the mediatization of the field of fashion, see Agnès Rocamora, "Mediatization and Digital Media in the Field of Fashion," *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture*, Vol. 21 (September 2017): 505–22.

10. Celia Lury, *Brands: The Logos of the Global Economy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).

11. Maurya Wickstrom, *Performing Consumers: Global Capital and its Theatrical Seductions* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 13–42.

12. Tae-Im Han and Dooyoung Choi, "Fashion Brand Love: Application of a Cognition–Affect–Conation Model," *Social Sciences*, Vol. 8 (September 2019): 264–65.

Sara Ahmed's concept of *affective economies* locates affect, as emotion, as laden in textual discourses, as well as in material engagements. For Ahmed, *relational* identities and structures are defined in the *circulation* of emotion. Ahmed writes: "it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the 'I' and 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others" — in discursive realms.<sup>13</sup> Ahmed's attention to the *economic* relations of hate speech is further relevant to brand discourses within a politicized climate, as it addresses how hate "circulates between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement," in textual and visual systems of meaning-making both worn on bodies and produced, located, and felt across bodies in networked environs.<sup>14</sup> Ahmed's concepts are referenced in numerous characterizations of affect and its operation within digital and mediatized cultures and the formation of relational communities or discursive events.<sup>15</sup>

This article frames the social media backlash to New Balance's statement within more recent communication research into *digital affect cultures*, a term coined by Katrin Döveling, Anu A. Harju, and Denise Sommer, based on empirical research into online fandom and into processes of memorialization connected to events such as terrorist attacks or celebrity deaths.<sup>16</sup> The term describes "relational, contextual, globally emergent spaces in the digital environment where affective flows construct atmospheres of emotional and cultural belonging by way of emotional resonance and alignment."<sup>17</sup> The authors deem this framework useful for studies in "politics and populism" as it aids in the evaluation of which types of emotion and sentiment, which identities, and which views are privileged or contested in discursive formations.<sup>18</sup> Their application of this concept to politicized responses or communities is instructive for studies in networked fashion brand affiliations and reactions to actions or statements read as offensive or unproductively performative. The authors draw from Zizi Papacharissi's concept of *affective publics*, which emphasizes the function of affect in the constitution of mediated socialities and locates social media, notably Twitter, as a forum in which connective threads are interwoven or separated.<sup>19</sup> The structuration of online political communities resonates moreover with Angharad Closs Stephens's theorization of *national affective atmospheres*, instilled in patriotic events or moments of crisis, and their attendant discourses, that breed nationalist sentiment.<sup>20</sup> The 2016 Trump campaign and New Balance's support for domestic trade policies appropriated a xenophobic nationalism demonstrated in political rallies but more pervasively in social media threads. While the case of New Balance can be situated within histories of sportswear's co-optation for white supremacist and white nationalist movements, I aim to reframe the discussion in terms of a circulation of discursive and affective content within a late-capitalist and mediatized political climate.

## New Balance as Nationalist Brand

New Balance was founded in Boston in 1906 and maintains its headquarters there: the firm produced arch support products and orthopedic shoes until the 1960s, at which time marathon runners started

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13. Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 11. For an application of Ahmed's affect theories to the sphere of feminist fashion production in a digital context, see Rosa Crepax, "Digital Fashion Engagement Through Affect, Personal Investments and Remix," *Australian Feminist Studies*, Vol. 33 (October 2018): 461–80. On the affective economies of fashion curation as politicized practice, see Delacey Tedesco, "Curating Political Subjects: Fashion Curation as Affective Methodology," *GeoHumanities* (June 2021): 1–17.
  14. Ahmed, 44.
  15. Cf. Athina Karatzogianni and Adi Kuntsman, eds. *Digital Cultures and the Politics of Emotion: Feelings, Affect and Technological Change* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012)
  16. Katrin Döveling, Anu A. Harju and Denise Sommer, "From Mediatized Emotion to Digital Affect Cultures: New Technologies and Global Flows of Emotion," *Social Media + Society* (January–March 2018): 1–11.
  17. Döveling, Harju, and Sommer, 1.
  18. Döveling, Harju, and Sommer, 7.
  19. Zizi Papacharissi, "Affective Publics and Structures of Storytelling: Sentiment, Events and Mediality," *Information, Communication & Society*, Vol. 19 (March 2016): 307–24.
  20. Angharad Closs Stephens, "The affective atmospheres of nationalism," *Cultural Geographies*, Vol. 23 (April 2016): 181–98.

to ask for custom-made shoes.<sup>21</sup> A 1999 brand case overview finds that, “New Balance’s attention to quality through technological innovation, coupled with its fostering of strong positive associations through ... local manufacturing has allowed it to establish a loyal following within its niche segment, and potentially beyond.”<sup>22</sup> The authors observe that “New Balance’s consistent adherence to local manufacturing practices has created significant positive associations when compared to the myriad of social irresponsibility charges facing Nike” which at that time was embroiled in scandal over its use of sweatshop labour.<sup>23</sup> In the more than two decades since, New Balance has expanded into several sectors of sportswear and from the 2017 to 2019 fiscal years saw annual revenues of at least \$4,000,000,000.<sup>24</sup> In November 2016, *GQ*, acknowledged that New Balance’s staunch emphasis on US manufacture had been admired: “Over the past few years, we’ve lauded New Balance’s ability to turn out quality, stylish footwear while maintaining a manufacturing presence in the United States as other brands fled to China, Vietnam, and elsewhere.”<sup>25</sup> The election of Trump following the divisive and racist rhetoric that his campaign deployed could be read as an occurrence that turned New Balance’s nationalism toxic, but as this case study outlines, it informed the political polarization exemplified in social media responses to its statement. Ahmed identifies white nationalists as a cultural “organisation” based on the production of hate speech and the labeling of certain identities as undesirable within discursive spaces both ‘real’ and networked:

Such narratives work by generating a subject that is endangered by imagined others whose proximity threatens not only to take something away from the subject (jobs, security, wealth), but to take the place of the subject. ... This narrative involves a rewriting of history, in which the labour of others (migrants, slaves) is concealed in a fantasy that it is the white subject who ‘built this land.’<sup>26</sup>

The “America First” ethos slides neatly into white supremacist and neo-Nazi beliefs of a threatened displacement; the New Balance statement that endorsed the preservation of domestic positions, however unintentionally so, tripped into these same logics.

Cynthia Miller-Idriss’s detailed archival work and ethnographic research documents the popularization of extremist fashion brands from the 2000s to the present, particularly among youth in Europe, as a case of “the extreme gone mainstream,” illustrating a “commercialization” of alt-right or neo-Nazi fashion brands or the wearing of their commodities to perpetuate extremist politics on a more insidious and networked scale.<sup>27</sup> Miller-Idriss demonstrates how such products often employ subtle and subversive codes that can slip under the radar of school and workplace dress codes or federal hate speech legislation. Miller-Idriss’s research focuses on companies such as Thor Steinar that have set up brick and mortar stores across Europe, as well as international online distribution, while Elke Gaugele performs a close reading of Thor Steinar’s site content to illustrate a networked confluence of nationalist, often white supremacist, referents in adherence to a semiotics of fashion.<sup>28</sup> Miller-Idriss points also to a historical “appropriation” or “co-optation” of mainstream fashion brands that dates back to the skinhead

21. James M. Gladden and Mark A. McDonald, “The Brand Management Efforts of a Niche Specialist: New Balance in the Athletic Footwear Industry,” *International Journal of Sports Marketing & Sponsorship*, Vol. 1 (June–July 1999): 67.

22. Gladden and McDonald, 71.

23. Gladden and McDonald, 71.

24. “New Balance,” *Business Insights: Global*, December 31, 2019.

25. Jake Woolf, “Our New President Just Got His First Sneaker Endorsement (Update),” *GQ*, November 9, 2016, <https://www.gq.com/story/donald-trump-new-balance-sneakers>. Content strategist Aleks Kang reads *GQ*’s earlier praise for New Balance’s domestic production in terms of its nature as a set of “patriotic manufacturing practices.” Aleks Kang, “New Balance Suffers a Brand Mangling ‘Whitewashing,’” *Entrepreneur*, November 14, 2016, <https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/285346>.

26. Ahmed, 42–43.

27. Cynthia Miller-Idriss, *The Extreme Gone Mainstream: Commercialization and Far Right Youth Culture in Germany* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017)

28. Elke Gaugele, “The New Obscurity in Style. Alt-right Faction, Populist Normalization, and the Cultural War on Fashion from the Far Right,” *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture*, Vol. 23 (November 2019): 717–20.

subculture, after the 1989 German reunion, and still manifests concurrent with the circulation of more extremist clothing: these resituated brands include “Lonsdale, Alpha Industries, Fred Perry, Pitbull, and New Balance for their coincidental symbolic resonance with the far right.”<sup>29</sup> She traces German neo-Nazis’ particular interest in New Balance shoes to a simplistic use of “alphanumeric codes,” as the N logo stitched onto the side of each shoe can stand for “Nazi” or “neo-Nazi,” encoding a doubled referent into the footwear that is not overt to consumers without neo-Nazi affiliations but could signal to those that do, within specific contexts such as rallies.<sup>30</sup> Social media act as a conduit for extremist politics via mainstream, sportswear, or athleisure brands, and also spark the need for executives and PR directors to combat these associations.

In the US, there is little evidence that New Balance has been irrevocably “co-opted” as part of an alt-right uniform — nonetheless, such a call occurred in a mediatized manner. Esculapio uses Andrew Anglin’s editorial — and later offer to become a New Balance ambassador after the firm distanced itself from his extremism — to discuss how neo-Nazi movements incorporate popular culture imagery, fast food icons, and additional sportswear brands such as Adidas.<sup>31</sup> Here the communicative utility of mainstream brands resides in a politics of “invisibility” that “overlaps with attempts by the far-right to look less threatening and appear more palatable to broader audiences” but also reinforces conditions of “whiteness” and heteronormative “masculinity” as dominant based on a *lack* of visual distinction.<sup>32</sup> Anglin’s first post in *The Daily Stormer* makes no specific link to German neo-Nazis’ affiliation for New Balance, though one could presume that, as a prominent identified neo-Nazi, he knows the codes of the international scene. Anglin writes about his ‘newfound’ appreciation for New Balance in terms that indicate subcultural affiliation but also push for the proliferation of codes into a collective utterance:

The fact is, they are publicly supporting Trump, publicly supporting US manufacturing. The fact that they are doing that because they believe it will be profitable is irrelevant. New Balance is making a gesture to support White people and to support US manufacturing. We need to support that.

I see New Balances now becoming the official shoes of White people.

I myself am due a new pair of sneakers. I’m browsing their website now.

This will be fantastic. We will be able to recognize one another by our sportswear.

... New Balance: the shoes of the people.<sup>33</sup>

Esculapio points to a difference in scale between social media users’ reaction to the New Balance statement and the later response to the *Daily Stormer* editorial, which took the form of media amplification but also meme circulation:

The social media outrage caused by Anglin’s endorsement of New Balance ... was an inadequate response inasmuch as it was mostly directed at the company rather than at Anglin and the political views he represents. Boycott may be appropriate in the case of companies who do business with certain political figures ... but it is misguided in the case of brand appropriation, which does not require direct affiliation on the part of the brand. Furthermore, by focusing on the PR scandal not only did most mainstream media outlets give free

29. Miller-Idriss, 77. Miller-Idriss coded 2924 photographs in total of which 234 were coded as representations of co-opted brands (8% of the total archive). While it’s not clear how many individual photos depicted New Balance sneakers, New Balance was mentioned as one of the representative brands from these samples.

30. Miller-Idriss, 53, 65. Miller-Idriss observes a distinct contrast in the level of alt-right organization, content circulation, and complex referentiality between German and US affiliates. Still, I would add here that the level of coverage devoted to the 2017 Charlottesville rallies in the United States does indicate more serious concentrations of these alliances and an emboldened practice of public demonstration.

31. Esculapio, para. 5

32. Esculapio, para. 6–8.

33. Andrew Anglin, “Your Uniform: New Balance Just Became the Official Shoes of White People,” *Daily Stormer*, November 12, 2016, <https://dailystormer.su/your-uniform-new-balance-just-became-the-shoes-of-white-people/>.

PR to Anglin and his site ... but they also failed to address the dynamics of neo-Nazi's [sic] appropriation of a mainstream footwear brand with a global distribution.<sup>34</sup>

The neo-Nazi editorial, however, must be seen as a second occurrence that took up a catalytic statement of support for domestic trade policies that provoked expressions of divided sentiment towards the New Balance brand, embroiled in the political turmoil that arose after the election of Donald Trump as US President. The New Balance case can be further read within recent phenomena of "call-out culture" or "cancel culture," in which, as Vanessa Gerrie outlines in a fashion context, individuals, public personalities, and companies are taken to task in mediatized forums for problematic statements, often accompanied with calls to boycott products in order to inflict financial repercussions, or to deplatform speakers.<sup>35</sup> Citing culture writer Asam Ahmad, Gerrie notes how call-out culture can counter claims to "freedom of speech" across the political spectrum and can both destabilize and reinforce "inherent biases of power dynamics."<sup>36</sup> Social media's tendencies to produce "viral" content facilitate the callout process and amplify its ramifications: "Call-out culture has come to the forefront of the cultural consciousness over the past decade particularly with the democratization of social media platforms making the space for public callouts all the more accessible."<sup>37</sup> In the event of consumer or stakeholder backlash, instantaneous and international content circulation can occur well before public relations teams can strategize an appropriate or effective crisis communications plan.

This article is oriented towards this more immediate social media response terrain and finds that expressions of political sentiment related to the New Balance scandal are concentrated on the company's statement of support for Donald Trump rather than the later media-circulated outrage over Anglin's editorial. User utterances reflect a polarized political climate and, as per Esculapio's observations on responses to the editorial, remain focused around the New Balance brand. At the same time, New Balance sneakers as objects become a material outlet for consumers to enact their discontent with the brand in a mediatized and hypervisible forum.

## Methods

I performed manual inductive content analysis on a nonrandom sample of tweets produced from between November 10 and 13, 2016. I searched for all tweets that used the phrase "New Balance" or tagged the account @newbalance from November 10-11 and then from November 12-13 and included tweets that were responses and tweets with links. I discarded tweets that repeated content, which came in particular from pro-Trump or MAGA (Make America Great Again) accounts (which could also be bots), tweets in languages other than English of which there were just two in the sample, and tweets in which content wasn't decipherable, of which there was one. While lack of access to Twitter's complete historical data at the time of research limited the number of tweets obtained, qualitative coding allowed me to determine not just whether or not users endorsed or criticized New Balance's statement, or rather their positive or negative orientation towards the brand, but how this sentiment was structured around the brand and its products, and how users connected the brand's politics and those of Trump and/or the Republican Party. This method moreover revealed commonalities in how users positioned themselves in terms of not just their consumer perception of but also their sense of material, affective relation to New Balance and its products. Of the tweets from November 10-11, I coded a sample of the first 100 unique tweets (n=100). From November 12-13, there were 77 tweets in total, all of which I coded (n=77). Prior content analysis of tweets in a fashion and consumer culture context has demonstrated

34. Esculapio, para. 4.

35. Vanessa Gerrie, "The Diet Prada Effect: 'Call-out Culture' in the contemporary fashionscape," *Clothing Cultures*, Vol. 6 (December 2019): 100. Gerrie's research profiles the work of the fashion industry watchdog accounts Diet Prada and The Fashion Law.

36. Gerrie, 100.

37. Gerrie, 100.

that tweets offer an encapsulation of “real-time, apparently spontaneous thoughts by the users,” though additional information about individual users can be difficult to track or to correlate.<sup>38</sup>

## Results

Tweets were analyzed with initial dominant thematic codes of Positive (Pro-New Balance), Negative (Anti-New Balance), and Neutral/Unclear to assess users’ orientations towards New Balance. Of the tweets from November 10–11, 40 tweets (n=40) expressed a positive response towards New Balance while 44 (n=44) expressed a negative response, and 16 responses (n=16) expressed more neutral sentiments or political comments or were coded as unclear (Table.01). Of the tweets from November 12–13, there were 39 positive responses to New Balance (n=39), 33 negative responses to New Balance (n=33) and 5 tweets (n=5) coded as neutral or unclear (Table.02). 20 tweets across the total sample set (n=20) contained explicit statements of endorsement for Trump (with his name included in the tweet) and/or statements against Liberal positions: for example, “Buy you & your [heart emoji] ones New Balance products for #Christmas this year. It’ll make a liberal cry #PresidentElectTrump #TrumpWon @newbalance.” 16 tweets across the total sample set (n=16) expressed an explicit anti-Trump position, some accompanied with photographs of Trump, for example, a tweet critical of New Balance’s partisan endorsement, that read, “@NewBalanceUSA @newbalance Is this true? New Balance supports Trump products? No store should endorse any candidates [sic] products.” Another tweet advocated for the destruction of New Balance sneakers as if to purge Trump’s evil influence, accompanied by three photographs of New Balance product overlaid with a photograph of Trump delivering a speech: “burning your NEW BALANCE SHOES is the only way to destroy the hateful, bunyun-causing [sic] spirits that live inside. @newbalance.”

Of these dominant codes, I created several sub-codes that often overlapped across tweets in the total sample. In the first sample of tweets from November 10–11 (n=100), of the subset of 40 Pro-New Balance tweets, 29 tweets (n=29) praised or endorsed New Balance’s political stance, while 23 tweets (n=23) described a relation to New Balance as a consumer or endorsed consumption of its products; five of these tweets expressed intention to purchase products for family members or encouraged consumers to do so. A further eight tweets (n=8) referred to New Balance’s creation and/or preservation of American jobs. 10 tweets (n=10) made explicit pro-Trump references, expressed an overall anti-Liberal position, or made right-wing-oriented statements such as “all lives matter” or statements in support of free speech. Of the subset of 44 Anti-New Balance tweets, 26 tweets (n=26) expressed displeasure with New Balance in terms of a severing of an existing customer relationship with the brand — for example: “Dammit @newbalance! My New Balance shoes were my favorite, now I gotta throw these away [angry emoji]!” These tweets were coded as “done with New Balance” and were often accompanied with aforementioned photographs of sneakers thrown in the trash or lit on fire. 21 additional tweets (n=21) advocated for a consumer boycott of New Balance products in some form, with seven tweets coded as “Call for boycott of New Balance,” six tweets coded as “Get rid of/return/donate New Balance shoes” telling consumers what to do with existing product; four tweets coded as “Burn shoes” making explicit calls to light shoes on fire; three tweets coded as “Endorsement of another sportswear brand”; and one tweet coded as “Will never purchase New Balance” indicating a refusal to assume a customer role. 10 tweets were identified as critical of the brand’s political position (n=10) while nine tweets made anti-Trump statements (n=9).

While the total volume of tweets decreases in the time period from November 12–13, the proportional number of Pro-New Balance tweets increases slightly to 50.6% of this second sample. Within the subset of Pro-New Balance tweets, 29 tweets (n=29) refer to recent or future New Balance purchases, including a statement that a user “will only purchase New Balance” and a further five tweets supporting purchases of New Balance for family members. 12 tweets (n=12) endorse New Balance as a brand itself and correlate with expressions of customer affiliation. 10 tweets (n=10) express similar praise for New Balance’s

38. Cf. Joan. C. Chrisler, et al. “Suffering by comparison: Twitter users’ reactions to the *Victoria’s Secret Fashion Show*,” *Body Image*, Vol. 10 (September 2013): 651.



political stance as those tweeted between November 10–11. 13 tweets take an anti-Liberal position, making reference to the MAGA slogan used in Trump’s election — and circulated on fashion items such as the prominent, visible red ballcaps — or to specific alt-right movements, or praise Trump himself; as in the previous sample, an additional six tweets support the creation of US jobs. Of the tweets coded as Anti-New Balance (n=33), 20 tweets (n=20) refer to a customer stake or relation, with 18 tweets coded as “Done with New Balance” and two tweets coded as “Will never purchase New Balance.” 12 tweets (n=12) are critical of New Balance’s political stance with one tweet comparing New Balance as a brand to Nazis. Only five tweets reference a boycott of the brand or the return or destruction of its products, and seven express a specific anti-Trump sentiment.

Table 01. Sample of tweets analyzed from the date range November 10–11, 2016.

November 10–11 (n=100)	Number of tweets	% of sample	% of subset
<b>Positive (Pro-New Balance)</b>	<b>n=40</b>	<b>40.0%</b>	—
Praise/endorsement for NB political stance	n=29	29.0%	72.5%
Consumer relation or product endorsement	n=23	23.0%	57.5%
Refers to creation/preservation of US jobs	n=8	8.0%	20.0%
<i>Pro-Trump/Anti-Liberal statements</i>	<i>n=10</i>	<i>10.0%</i>	<i>25.0%</i>
<b>Negative (Anti-New Balance)</b>	<b>n=44</b>	<b>42.9%</b>	—
‘Done with’ NB/breakup of customer relation	n=20	26.0%	60.6%
Call for consumer boycott/return/trash products	n=21	21.0%	47.7%
Critical of NB political stance	n=10	10.0%	22.7%
<i>Anti-Trump statements</i>	<i>n=9</i>	<i>9.0%</i>	<i>20.5%</i>
<b>Neutral/Unclear</b>	<b>n=16</b>	<b>16.0%</b>	—

Table 02. Sample of tweets analyzed from the date range November 12–13, 2016.

November 12–13 (n=77)	Number of tweets	% of sample	% of subset
<b>Positive (Pro-New Balance)</b>	<b>n=39</b>	<b>50.6%</b>	—
Customer relation — recent or future NB purchases	n=29	37.7%	74.4%
Customer relation — endorsement of NB brand	n=12	15.6%	30.7%
Praise/endorsement for NB political stance	n=10	13.0%	25.6%
Refers to creation/preservation of US jobs	n=6	7.8%	15.4%
<i>Pro-Trump/Anti-Liberal statements</i>	<i>n=13</i>	<i>16.9%</i>	<i>33.3%</i>
<b>Negative (Anti-New Balance)</b>	<b>n=33</b>	<b>42.9%</b>	—
‘Done with’ NB/customer breakup/never purchase	n=26	26.0%	59.1%
Critical of NB political stance	n=12	15.6%	36.3%
Call for consumer boycott/return/trash products	n=5	5.2%	12.1%
<i>Anti-Trump statements</i>	<i>n=7</i>	<i>9.1%</i>	<i>21.2%</i>
<b>Neutral/Unclear</b>	<b>n=5</b>	<b>6.5%</b>	—

## Discussion

Results indicate a political polarization reflective of the climate that produced the election results of November 2016, in which Donald Trump won the electoral college with 304 votes to Hillary Clinton’s 227 but lost the popular vote by approximately 2,900,000 votes.<sup>39</sup> Tweets that expressed positive or negative sentiment towards New Balance correlated with users’ approval or disapproval of LeBretton’s comments and with users’ pro-Trump (or pro-Republican/anti-Democrat/anti-Liberal) or anti-Trump (or

39. Gregory Krieg, “It’s official: Clinton swamps Trump in popular vote,” *CNN*, December 22, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/12/21/politics/donald-trump-hillary-clinton-popular-vote-final-count/index.html>.

anti-Republican/pro-Democrat/pro-Liberal) positions, the latter positions evidenced in the use of hashtags such as #notmypresident or #theresistance. Pro-New Balance posts were more likely to use hashtags overall: these utterances included examples such as #MAGA #MakeAmericaGreatAgain, #Americafirst, #TrumpWon or #snowflakes (a common insult directed at Liberal users), as well as a proliferation of US flag emojis. In both the Pro-New Balance and Anti-New Balance subsets of tweets, users defined their stake in the brand as that of a (past, present, or future) consumer/customer or called for users to respond to the brand via material performances of consumption, waste, or purchase of competitors' products. In several photographs and video clips, sneakers become an effigy on which users' discontent with the New Balance brand is enacted via disposal or destruction, but through which the 'N' logo becomes even more prominent via its social media circulation than it had been prior to the public relations crisis — an ironic turn given the crisis's (and the editorial's) illumination of the neo-Nazi referents encoded into this icon. Some pro-New Balance (and therefore pro-Trump) users pick up on this doubled referent and post photographs of their "well-worn" New Balance sneakers and/or make statements of "love" for their New Balance sneakers. While it remains unknown how many users had purchased New Balance sportswear or felt an affiliation with the brand prior to Lebreton's statement, a significant proportion of tweet content expresses a discontinuance, continuance, or adoption of such a relation based on whether users feel that New Balance's values mirror their own.

While there is a slight proportional increase in the number of Pro-New Balance tweets after the publication of the *Daily Stormer* editorial, the total numbers of tweets decreases, and there is no indication of a new or renewed social media backlash sparked by the editorial itself. Tweets in the second sample, posted after (though not necessarily because of) the publication of and resultant media furor over the *Daily Stormer* editorial, tend to endorse the New Balance brand overall rather than praise its political position (though the timing of these tweets could still suggest a tacit political endorsement), and there are fewer articulations of 'breakups' with the brand. More specific references to recent or future purchases of New Balance products could however be prompted by the editorial's call for visible brand wear. There are few if any direct references to the editorial other than people retweeting mainstream media news stories *about* it, often with a neutral tone to the actual tweet content, in concordance with Esculapio's observation that the mainstream media amplified this second wave of the public relations crisis.<sup>40</sup> Only 16 tweets from the sample used the editorial's oft-circulated pull quote, "the official shoes of White people," and most of these either linked to mainstream news stories or remarked that this fact was old news, rather, that New Balance had already been a brand associated more widely with White consumers. The miniscule number of tweets that called for a boycott of New Balance or destruction of products indicates that the initial movement had lost momentum or perhaps, like a pair of sneakers, flamed out. The social media backlash that New Balance did face stemmed rather from its initial statement of support for Trump's domestic-focused trade policies, perceived in the election aftermath as an alliance with a broader, right-wing Trumpian politics, while the explicit textual co-optation of New Balance as a White (and white supremacist) uniform and media outlets' resultant attention to neo-Nazis' interest in the brand can be seen as an incidence of framing that furthered the brand's public relations quagmire.

## Conclusion

In the case of New Balance's 2016 public relations crisis, support for or criticism of the firm correlated with users' articulated political position, while users characterized their relation to the brand in terms of consumer positionalities, as current, former, or future adherents. Expressions of political sentiment related to the scandal fell within a polarized and extreme political spectrum — and indeed contained several pro-Trump statements — but were focused around the New Balance brand rather than on its footwear or other products per se, though select tweets did mention the level of quality in the shoes, for example, as a further reason to sever a customer relationship. At the same time, as outlined above, the shoes become a material outlet for consumers to enact and mediatize discontent. Ahmed's affective economies illustrates how objects can become "sticky" with affect, and function as beacons around

40. Esculapio, para. 4.

which affective utterances are concentrated.<sup>41</sup> In this instance, consumer affect was oriented towards New Balance but also the actual products, whose commodity form, referencing the Marxist foundation for Ahmed's theorization, occludes the labour within it.<sup>42</sup> Ironically, the shoes' actual production was effaced in resultant textual and visual discourses even as the issue of domestic production had underpinned Lebreton's remarks at the outset.

Tweets were oriented towards a particular statement from one New Balance executive that became a metonymic referent for the brand as a whole, illuminating concerns for companies in making sure that 'brand' values align with their executives'. Media outlets reported on American clothier L.L.Bean's support for Trump's election at the same time as New Balance Chairman Jim Davis's contributions were disclosed.<sup>43</sup> In August 2019, fitness empires Equinox and SoulCycle faced consumer backlash after owner Stephen Ross hosted an expensive, exclusive fundraiser for Donald Trump at Ross's home in upstate New York, imposing a set of associations that undermined SoulCycle's expressed brand values of diversity and inclusion.<sup>44</sup> In 2020, media outlets published entire lists of corporations whose CEOs had made donations to support Trump's reelection, with the consumer site *DoneGood* itemizing corporations (including New Balance) across a host of sectors including fashion and cosmetics, with several corporations functioning as parent companies to additional brands.<sup>45</sup> For its part, New Balance was forced to issue two statements, one after the initial comments to the press and another after the *Daily Stormer* editorial, disavowing white supremacist and/or neo-Nazi politics. Its November 14, 2016 statement read:

New Balance does not tolerate bigotry or hate in any form. One of our officials was recently asked to comment on a trade policy that was taken out of context. As a 110-year old company with five factories in the US and thousands of employees worldwide from all races, genders, cultures and sexual orientations, New Balance is a values-driven organization and culture that believes in humanity, integrity, community and mutual respect for people around the world. We have been and always will be committed to manufacturing in the United States.<sup>46</sup>

While the company reasserts progressive values, it reinforces its mandate to domestic manufacture, and attempts to tie this principle to its sense of inclusiveness, even as an association with the "America First" ethos remains implied in the text. New Balance is considered by content strategists to be one of the first cautionary tales in public statements of political partisanship and, of note, in making statements of alliance with a Trumpian politics, even at the purportedly isolated level of trade policies, as well as of "whitewashing" as a process of white supremacist co-optation in the public, consumer consciousness.<sup>47</sup> *GQ* reported that company representatives asked individual stockists not to take comments from one executive as part and parcel of the ethos of an entire brand.<sup>48</sup> This case points to nebulous distinctions between the brand as interface and executives' political positions as representative of the brand — territories that are still muddled and should be probed with attention to consumer response and brand perception, notably in a context of affective social media networks.

41. Ahmed, 11.

42. Ahmed, 11.

43. O'Sullivan, "New Balance founder gave nearly \$400,000 to Trump".

44. Alex Abad-Santos, "SoulCycle's instructors are as mad about its investor's Trump fundraiser as its riders are," *Vox*, August 9, 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2019/8/9/20791646/soulcycle-trump-fundraiser-backlash>.

45. Todd Lido, "Boycott Trump: Companies to Avoid Updated for 2020," *DoneGood*, June 4, 2020, <https://donegood.co/blogs/news/boycott-trump-companies-to-avoid>.

46. New Balance (@newbalance), "New Balance does not tolerate bigotry or hate in any form. One of our officials was recently asked to comment on a trade policy that was taken out of context. As a 110-year old company with five..." Twitter, November 14, 2016, <https://twitter.com/newbalance/status/798322478389035009>.

47. Cf. Aleks Kang, "New Balance Suffers a Brand Mangling 'Whitewashing'".

48. Cam Wolf, "New Balance, Under Armour, and the Year that Sneakers Got Political," *GQ*, December 22, 2017, <https://www.gq.com/story/new-balance-sneakers-politics-2017>.

This article presents one case study towards research that uses affect theories to examine how fashion brands have become imbricated via social media into the culture wars and into forms of populist, extremist, and activist persuasion. Limitations of the present methods include a lack of access to the entire archive of tweets related to the New Balance public relations crisis, or posted in response to related news media articles or to New Balance's official statement, to validate the findings from a more data-driven, quantitative standpoint. Nonetheless, qualitative coding reveals a clear polarization of political positions and consumer/customer identifications in the tweets posted after Lebreton's statement, as well as the bases on which these positions are expressed. Results point to the affective dimension within politicized social media discourses and consumer-brand affiliations and support the pursuit of further research in the role of affect in the mediatized discursive formations in which fashion and fashion companies are implicated. Miller-Idriss points to simultaneous tendencies in subcultural formations both to maintain membership and affiliation but also to resist the dominant culture. While her work is more continental in its scope, American cases — especially those from the Trump and post-Trump administrations — are fertile ground for the application of social theories of fashion and consumption, as well as an examination of how the culture wars are enacted in the circulation and production of affect, in and of users and their affiliations.

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