**Personal Identity Economics: Facebook and the Distortion of Identity Politics**

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**Abstract**

This article examines Facebook’s role in the treatment of marginalized identity as currency. Recent examples of solidarity statements and corporate social responsibility rhetoric treat disenfranchised racial and gender identities as value-added competitive market quantities to boost brands. This trend also incentivizes marginalized actors to capitalize on their own disenfranchisement in pursuit of visibility and career advancement. The resulting identity politicking replaces communal care, grassroots social ties, solidarity, and interdependence with isolating market competition. This article diverges from scholars who trouble the differential value of identity—by troubling the valuation of identity itself. Facebook normalizes identity as private property in what I call a transition from identity politics to “personal identity economics.” I coin this concept and break it down into the following four factors: (1) The optimization of difference beginning in the 1970s, (2) Facebook’s algorithmic invasion of market logic into intimate aspects of life starting in the mid 2000s, (3) Ads Manager’s economization of identity into legible economic units, and (4) neoliberal corporate social responsibility rhetoric of “social good” as a profitable asset.

**Keywords**

Facebook, marginalized identity, critical race theory, corporate social responsibility

**Introduction: It Pays to be Good**

On 3 August 2020, *The Washington Post* exposed the truth about the Instagram account “Queer Appalachia” (Eisenberg, 2020). Over the years, this highly influential account had fundraised hundreds of thousands of dollars to support social justice efforts and combat White supremacy and transphobia in the region, often on behalf of queer and trans people of color. But queer and trans people of color did not see any of the money. It was mostly kept by Mamone, the account’s White owner, who capitalized on marginalized identities to earn attention and money. “Every time [Mamone was] trying to get money,” an informant told the *Post*, they would claim they were fundraising for “a trans person of color” (Eisenberg, 2020).

Mamone’s story is not isolated. The next day, on 4 August 2020, *The New York Times* exposed neuroscientist BethAnn McLaughlin for inventing an Indigenous Twitter user. The fictional account @Sciencing_Bi had allegedly belonged to a queer scientist of the Hopi Nation—who avidly supported McLaughlin’s divisive public statements about gender and sexism, and came to her aid in high-profile disputes, even petitioning for her tenure bid at Vanderbilt University. Then this past April, after the account had gained significant attention on Science Twitter, McLaughlin killed it off. Its owner allegedly contracted COVID-19 and died (Bromwich & Marcus, 2020).

Just 1 month later in a *Medium* blog postdated 3 September 2020, Professor Jessica Krug publicly confessed to having pretended to be Black (Krug, 2020). Krug works as an associate professor at George Washington University. According to her faculty bio, she teaches “politics, ideas, and cultural practices in Africa and the African Diaspora, with a particular interest in West Central Africa and maroon societies in the early modern period and Black transnational cultural studies.” Until her confession, Krug was a high-profile Black studies academic, supported by acclaimed writers like Kiese Laymon and Hari Ziyad. Krug could have led a successful career as a White scholar of the African diaspora. She did not need to pretend to be Black. Why did she do it? She may have believed it gave her position more legitimacy. Hari

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Ziyad tweeted that she was “always needing to prove her authenticity at the expense of everything else” (@HariZiyad, 2020). Her fellow academic Yarimar Bonilla observed how “she consistently trashed WOC [women of colour] and questioned their scholarship” (@yarimarbonilla, 2020).

Krug, McLaughlin, and Mamone are three extreme cases of a shifting norm. At first glance, these stories represent online identity fraud, but I argue that they also signal something more pernicious: the growing cultural treatment of social identity as currency. Each of these three public figures treated disenfranchised racial and gender identities as value-added competitive market quantities to boost their personal brands. This article explores the economization of social identity by consulting two different disciplines: critical social media, and critical race and gender. I apply this combination in an analysis of Facebook’s business advice and Ads Manager interface to argue that Facebook’s business and software ideologies enshrine the asset value of social identity, with debilitating results.

The phenomena I describe happen across social media platforms including Twitter and TikTok, but I focus on Facebook because, thanks to its subsidiary acquisitions like Instagram and WhatsApp, and the absorption of many third-party apps, its influence amounts to an enormous infrastructure (Yong Jin, 2015) ubiquitously reshaping public and private norms. Social media scholars have highlighted Facebook’s profound impact on social behavior through its algorithms (Bucher, 2018; Gillespie, 2014; Tufekci, 2017; Vaidhyanathan, 2018), technological ideologies (Chun, 2011, 2016; Kitchin, 2014), social capital arrangements (boyd, 2014; Ellison et al., 2010), labor frameworks (Duffy, 2017; Fuchs, 2013; Stark & Crawford, 2015; Terranova, 2000), work culture (Gregg, 2018; Marwick, 2013), and economic governance (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Critical race and feminist scholars add the ways that disenfranchised populations experience these shifts more acutely, as indicators of its greater negative social repercussions, illuminating the ways that social media profits off racialized and gendered labor exploitation (Abidin, 2018; Duffy, 2017), tokenization (Noble, 2014; Fernandes, 2017), performativity (Ahmad, 2015; Bucher, 2018), and discrimination (Ascher & Noble, 2019; Benjamin, 2019; Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018; Sweeney, 2016).

I join the interventions of these racialized media scholars, not by troubling the differential value of identity—but by troubling the valuation of identity itself. This article considers how social media platforms normalize identity as private property, which I refer to as a transition from identity politics to “personal identity economics” (Lim, 2020). My term updates “identity economics,” coined in 2011 by Nobel Prize winning economist George Akerlof and economist Rachel Kranton, who shed insight into how our social identities determine and motivate our financial decisions (Akerlof & Kranton, 2011). My version speaks less to how behavior drives economics, and more to how economics drives behavior: why and how social media entices populations to calculate and speculate on their social identities as capital assets.

This essay is part of my efforts to restore “identity politics” to its definition in the key 1977 civil rights text The Combahee River Collective Statement; as both representation and the redistribution of material resources. Personal identity economics stands in the way of reuniting those two goals. It advances the idea that mere representation, divorced from redistribution, is enough to accomplish social justice goals, and it aligns identity politics with the market logic of scarcity and competition, which exacerbates lateral community violence and erodes the crucial solidarity needed for collective bargaining and redistribution.

This article tackles the following four ingredients of personal identity economics:

1. **The optimization of difference**: critical race and gender theorists argue that favorable endorsements of social difference have sabotaged identity politics since the 1970s.
2. **Invasive market logic**: data capture acclimatizes social media users to market logic of scarcity and competition, into increasingly intimate aspects of life.
3. **The economization of identity**: a walkthrough of Ads Manager’s Detailed Targeting tool explains how it itemizes social identity into algorithmically legible economic units.
4. **Virtue as an asset**: a comparison between Facebook’s 2012 S-1 statements and its 2020 advice website “Social Good for Business” yields the platform’s rhetorical shifts over the past decade: that “social good” can be measured through visibility and profit.

### The Optimization of Difference

Users who publicly adopt marginalized identity as a political act are pathologized on the left and right, as described by left wing critics as “victimhood culture” (Campbell and Manning, 2018), “oppression Olympics” (Hancock, 2011), “overstated harm” (Schulman, 2016), “victimhood chic” (McWhorter, 2019), and the “Vampire Castle” (Fisher, 2013). Right wing media calls it a “victim narrative” summed up by Shelby Steele’s Fox News segment “The goal of protests over George Floyd’s death: It’s about victimhood and power” (Levin, 2020).

Critical race and gender scholarship refutes “victimhood” critiques by demonstrating the ways that social media performativity is not an individual power-hungry bid, but a systematically reinforced neoliberal optimization of social difference. Self-branding on social media is a new iteration of post-financial pop culture that first accelerated in the 1970s. After markets collapsed in 1973, corporate interests turned to cheaper, more lightweight, flexible accumulation and promoted ephemeral glamorous optics, and vivid lifestyle campaigns like “The United Colors of Benetton”...
recognition (Benjamin, 2019; Brock, 2015; Buolamwini & (Noble, 2018, 165)

New, neoliberal conceptions of individual freedoms (especially in the realm of technology use) are over-supported in direct opposition to protections realized through large-scale organizing to ensure collective rights. This is evident in the past thirty years of active antilabor policies put forward by several administrations and in increasing hostility toward unions and twenty-first-century civil rights organizations such as Black Lives Matter. (Noble, 2018, 165)

Ad-driven ranking metrics promote the careers of highly visible minorities and undermine collective empowerment that would aid their communities. Identity economics replace group solidarity with personal brands.

Modern high-tech “diversity” narratives portray equity as a burdensome act of charity that conceals the need for systemic, class-based transformations by designing first-world centric opportunities, products, and technologies that naturalize racism into digital interfaces, algorithms, AI, and face-recognition (Benjamin, 2019; Brock, 2015; Buolamwini & Gebru, 2018; Noble, 2018). High-tech companies debate the digital divide, “optimize” racist interfaces, hire racialized influencers for one-off ad campaigns, or offer band-aid solutions like funding “uplifting” inner-city programming projects (Noble, 2018; Sweeney, 2016). The high-tech enfranchisement of racism reduces “diversity” to a competition over charity opportunities for celebrations of superficial, optic representation.

Today, personal identity economics grow out of a trajectory of evacuated single-issue representational diversity optics, disarticulated from class analysis, deployed to shore up the authority, and social capital of the speaker. In the current economic era of privatization, decimated labor activism, precarious short-term contracts, ballooning personal debt, and diminishing social welfare, users comply with social media directives in the hopes of earning financial stability in the attention economy (Browne, 2015). Users put their personal identity traits to work, optimizing unique value-added propositions in neoliberal entrepreneurial efforts. Identity-as-property undermines the incentives of mutually interdependent community building and collective bargaining for the equitable redistribution of secure jobs, fair wages, rent freezes, lower tuition, universal health care—the resources that marginalized communities truly need.

Competitive marginalized self-branding is not an example of individual failure, or narcissistic self-interested social media users, but represents the historic cultural impetus of neoliberalism in which state, commercial, and cultural institutions profit from exploiting difference, while undermining collective, interdependent social movements (Brown, 2015; Duggan, 2003; Ferguson, 2012). Bringing together social media and critical race and gender scholarship illuminates the dehumanizing infrastructure of colonial population management that Facebook inherits and stimulates with unprecedented intensity, training users to internalize identity as a calculated brand asset. Marginalized actors who depend on these calculations suffer from its alienating impact, as important harbingers for broader social harm of injecting market logic at the interpersonal level. Identity economics are the by-product of an ongoing battle between genuine equity-seeking efforts—and private, pro-business efforts to quell them.

Invasive Market Logic

Critical race and gender scholars identify how neoliberalism reduces identity to a competitive asset, and this section draws on media scholarship to understand how, through Facebook’s algorithms and platform logic.

The advent of the Internet enabled unprecedented access to unite the lonely, connect long-lost friends, support persecuted affinity groups, and introduce like-minded activists on independent message boards, websites, and blogs. Facebook combined its indispensable affordances into one platform where all of these activities became subject to central policies and algorithms (Tufekci, 2017). These social forums foment a panicky threat of obsolescence with constant updates and upheavals that pressure users to accept compromising terms, conditions, and social parameters (Bucher, 2018; Chun, 2016; Tufekci,
These new norms bring users in line with algorithms designed to commodify social connections.

In his seminal 1994 essay “Surveillance and Capture,” computer scientist Philip Agre explains how algorithmic capture personalizes market logic. He presciently forecasts the enormous success of a platform that, like Facebook, primes users to think in terms of “supply and demand in perfect markets” (Agre, 1994). Agre explains how algorithms help organizations transition toward profitable neoliberal capitalism by molding individual behavior toward market-based relationships. Building on economist Ronald Coase’s theory of the firm, Agre explains that factory-style bureaucratic hierarchical top-down management was expensive because of the associated transaction costs (middleman fees like a manager’s salaries or broker’s commissions). Corporations save money by eliminating the middleman and transaction costs, and algorithms make this possible by generating standard templates for every transaction. To attract attention, maintain relationships, and cultivate social capital, advertisers, politicians, users, and third-party apps must all learn and conform to the algorithmic ranking of affinity, weight, and time decay (Vitak et al., 2011). Social media lowers the transaction costs of relational maintenance when algorithms capture and then enforce preformatted webpages, participatory spaces, and affordances in standardized, clearly defined templates. Facebook’s algorithms and large data sets produce the ideal neoliberal organization that eliminates mediators and replaces them with templates in a precarious, competitive free market atmosphere.

Agre continues, the most lucrative market atmosphere is when every actor sees themselves in competition with the others. Workers on the factory floor tolerated algorithmic workflow because it was rewarded by a lifelong secure job, health benefits, and a pension. Modern social media labor is even more lucrative because it manages itself, thanks to an atmosphere of precarity, fierce competition, entrepreneurial hustle, individual responsibilization, and a neoliberal fetish for fame that media theorist Stuart Hall (2011) calls “a passionate audience [that] plucks us out of an envious audience and raises us to the status of the gods” (p. 723). “Influence” is a market research term for customer conversion (Keller & Berry, 2003) and “centrality measures” (Kiss & Bichler, 2008) used by commercial decision support systems to spread viral marketing campaigns. But from the point of view of users, “influence” is associated with numbers of friends, public sharing, personal appeal, popularity, and likeability (boyd, 2014). If users want to participate and become visible within their network’s conversations, they are incentivized to optimize their statements according to its principles: shaping their reputations, personal story-telling and even identities around platform marketing, and investing in training and tools to conform as much as possible with its “regimes of visibility” (Bucher, 2018).

Users consciously and unconsciously study platform algorithms to gain social attention and approval. Social media scholars refer to this highly crafted behavior as Algorithmic Life (Bucher, 2018), the edited self (Marwick, 2013), the curated self (Hogan, 2010), and microcelebrity norms (Abidin, 2014; Cirucci, 2018; Marwick, 2013; Senft, 2013). The commercial calculations of platform algorithms are integral to self-presentation. This produces a shift in how users view themselves and others (boyd, 2014), to the extent that many ordinary users have come to view themselves as microcelebrities with a fanbase (Abidin, 2014; Cirucci, 2018; Marwick, 2013; Senft, 2013). Activists and scholars add that inflammatory content draws more attention and acerbic callouts gain more self-branding traction (Noble & Ascher, 2017; Tufekci, 2017) that emphasizes publicity and spectacle over nuanced and thoughtful democracy (Dean, 2001; Tufekci, 2017; Vaidhyanathan, 2018). Even blatant hate crimes can provide “notoriety—that demands five-figure speaking fees” (Ascher & Noble, 2019; 177). Social movements compromise their message either in favor of likable feel-good content, or hostile, extreme claims that tend to generate comments (Dean, 2001; Tufekci, 2017).

This is not to say that Facebook algorithms are top-down commands, they are iteratively co-constituted with audience demand. Digital platform scholar Tiziana Terranova (2000) tempers the idea of pure untouched capitalist victims. “The fruit of collective cultural labor has been not simply appropriated, but voluntarily channeled and controversially structured within capitalist business practices” (Terranova, 2000, p. 39). Vulnerable populations are early and expert adopters of new media affordances (Brock, 2015; Cottom, 2018), and to survive the demands of the neoliberal economy, enterprising minority actors adapt to Facebook’s market-ready personalized identity economics.

As reputation maintenance and self-branding become essential norms, social values are molded in favor of market and business interests. In her seminal study of self-branding, Alice Marwick (2013) explains,

[Self-branding] suggests that each person has an intrinsic value based on their possession of a singular, intrinsic, and moreover, marketable skill; it also implies that success is wrapped up in a sense of the “authentic self”—which, as discussed elsewhere, is a social construct. Putting it all together, this suggests that what is truthful or authentic is what is good for business. These are not values that are somehow inherent in internet technologies; rather, they are traditional market values that have been mapped over a new application: social media. (p. 198)

“What is truthful or authentic is what is good for business,” sums up how social media norms merge with market values. While it would be wrong to claim that social algorithms force behavior, they influence norms to the point that self-branding has become a mandatory high school proficiency. In my Canadian province, the Ontario Curriculum Expectations Guide prompts teachers to ask, “How does using media in this way contribute to the development of your sense of self and to the way you present yourself to the world [e.g., building a ‘personal...
brand’)?” (The Ontario Curriculum, 2019). Platform affordances do not command behavior, but algorithm and platform scholars demonstrate that, through calibrated defaults and suggestions, they normalize the intimately personalized market-ready behavior problematized in the first section.

The Economization of Identity

The previous sections explain why and how platforms promote deeply personal market competition. But how do specific social identities become economized and thus marketable? I explore Ads Manager’s Detailed Targeting tool to study exactly how identities become algorithmically legible and competitive. I adopt the walkthrough method proposed by Ben Light et al. (2018), in particular, the “everyday use” stage: recording Detailed Targeting’s functionality, options, and affordances. As users seek to build a personal brand, they strive to create content that is as recognizable as possible to algorithms. Ads Manager’s Detailed Targeting itemizes identities into a catalog that offers insight into how they become discernible for algorithmic promotion.

Ads Manager is an interface where any user with a Facebook Page can create an ad on Facebook, Instagram, Messenger, or WhatsApp, and I studied Ads Manager in 2018 and 2019 (Lim, 2020) before my formal walkthrough documented on 4 March 2021.

I begin by opening Ads Manager and selecting “Create,” leading to a “New Campaign” page where I am prompted to name my campaign and select an objective. I randomly select “Brand Awareness,” which enables me to click “Next,” for the page “New Ad Set,” where I am cued to select a location. I select “North America” after which I am able to scroll down to the heading “Audience,” and find the subheading “Detailed Targeting.” Under “Detailed Targeting,” I select the “Edit” option to reveal a “Browse” bar that expands into three dropdown menus, respectively titled “Demographics,” “Interests,” and “Behaviors.” Each of these three expands into many subgroups, for example, “Interests” > Hobbies and activities > Politics and social issues > Environmentalism.” Each destination option is explained with a dropdown box, for example, this last option is explained as “Size: 91,841,970. Description: People who have expressed an interest in or like pages related to Environmentalism.”

The three umbrella menus have stayed the same since I began exploring Ads Manager in 2018—“Demographics,” “Interests,” and “Behaviors”—but the dropdown subgroups have changed. When I accessed Ads Manager in 2018, “Demographics” expanded into a subgroup “Ethnic Affinity,” which offered three options, “Asian American (US),” “African American (US),” and “Hispanic (US—Spanish dominant),” as documented by ProPublica (Angwin & Parris, 2016). Starting in 2019, however, “Demographics” no longer offered the “Ethnic Affinity” default. In another example, in 2018, the “Behaviors” dropdown menus offered the option of “Ramadan (month),” yielding subgroups like “friends of people who have engaged with Ramadan.” This subgroup was no longer available as of 2020.

Facebook made these changes due to public and legal pressure to withdraw options seen as discriminatory, in 2016, 2018, 2019, and again in 2020. For example, in 2016, ProPublica journalists revealed racist target demographics in the drop-down menu when they were able to create an ad for housing that excluded certain races: “Narrow Audience> EXCLUDE people who match at least ONE of the following> Demographics> Ethnic Affinity > African American” (Angwin & Parris, 2016). An ensuing civil lawsuit forced Facebook to remove these options, but even after these changes, ProPublica discovered that racist targeting was still available, like “Demographics> Education> Fields of study> History of ‘why jews ruin the world’.” These racist tags have since been removed (Lerman, 2020).

My present focus is not racism, but the endurance of the highly specific identity-based “edge objects”; the declarative information shared through platform interactions (Bucher, 2018; 78). My 2021 walkthrough reveals that although submenus no longer tag highly specific identities, they are still salient market categories that can be accessed through hidden menus.

I select North America as my location. The “Demographics” drop-down menu no longer offers a default “Ethnic Affinity” subgroup; however, a search bar permits greater choice. After a distinct delay of several seconds, the search term “Chinese” offers a variety of suggestions. “Chinese culture” is the third suggestion, with the callout box explaining, “Size: 91,235,720. Interests> Additional Interests> Chinese culture” (Figure 3). Description: People who have expressed an interest in or like pages related to Chinese culture.” Not only Chinese people express an interest in Chinese culture, but this identifier easily incorporates a Chinese user’s posts, like mine about my new-born niece’s name in han’nu pinyin. Likewise, when I search the term “Transgender,” a variety of suggestions include “Transgenderism” (a term used by anti-transgender activists) and “Passing (gender).” The latter callout box explains. “Size: 3,050. Interests> Additional Interests> Passing (gender)” (Figure 1). Description: People who have expressed an interest in or like pages related to Passing (gender).”

Both ethnic affinity and gender or sexuality are target options that Facebook has claimed to remove. LGBT target options were removed in March 2018 “based on feedback from our community and outside experts” (Kantrowitz, 2018) according to Facebook’s product management director. But thanks to the category of “Additional interests,” these identities remain discernible to target advertising and algorithmic promotion on Instagram and Facebook. Moreover, “Additional interests” is not a default subgroup and evades attention, signaling Facebook’s protection of its commercial assets.

Although users may not know which specific tags harness these algorithms, trial and error guides them to perform these tags as closely as possible. The result appears
two-dimensional, as social media scholar Angela Cirucci (2018) explains,

The Facebook self, as the definitive example, is boiled down for mass consumption. Thus, just as branding a product means extracting and simplifying its core qualities, I argue that instead of supporting socialization, Facebook provides identification guides that support celebration—templates that work to extract core, foundational selves that can collect the most attention. (p. 65)

Ads Manager spells out the “templates” that incentivize two-dimensional Facebook performativity. If a user wants to be visible, Ads Manager’s taxonomy determines the marketable tokens of identity they must perform. In effect, Ads Manager’s market-ready taxonomies economize identity as commercial property.

Virtuous Profit

This article has described “identity economics” emerging through the following three factors: the invasion of market logic into intimate behavior, the neoliberal incentive to optimize social difference, and the classification of identity into marketable units. Combined, these factors frame identity as a profitable asset, which enables the rhetoric on Facebook’s new website “Social Good for Business.” This advice site crystallizes the ways that Facebook is designed to champion social causes for profit and brand visibility. I conduct a content audit of “Social Good for Business,” and conduct a comparative rhetorical analysis between Facebook’s public statements in 2012 (Dror, 2015; Hoffmann et al., 2018), 2019, and 2020.

Facebook’s revenue comes entirely from advertising, and “Social Good for Business” is dedicated to fostering cause-driven advertising on Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and Messenger, according to a Facebook blog post. The site was unveiled in December 2020, concluding a year of deep social introspection between civil uprisings after the murder of George Floyd, social inequities exposed by the global pandemic, and a rise in online conversation as people sheltered in place. The site encourages “purpose driven brands,” “social impact tools,” and “economic productivity,” featuring case studies of successful socially motivated ad campaigns (Figure 2).

![Figure 1. Facebook Ads Manager: Additional Interests > Passing (gender).](image1)

![Figure 2. Social Good for Business keyword audit.](image2)
Social Good For Business is not in fact a unique website, but a single page unifying 764 links under an emergent theme of commodifying social awareness. It is a subdirectory, featuring 586 internal links back to “Facebook for Business” and 178 external links to secondary sources and press. Interestingly, the press is not actually press coverage, for example, the site subheading “News” links to *Fortune* Magazine, but specifically to an ad in *Fortune* paid for by Facebook, with the title “How Facebook accelerates progress toward the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals” written by Facebook’s Head of Global Business Strategy and Engagement, Arielle Gross Samuels (2020).

This equation between social and commercial agendas is relatively new. In previous years, Facebook emphasized its moral social role by downplaying its commercial agenda. In 2013, digital media scholar Yuval Dror conducted a rhetorical analysis of one of Facebook’s first statements as a public company, its S-1 Registration Statement with the Securities and Exchange Commission. Dror compares CEO Mark Zuckerberg’s words to those of three other big tech public statements by the CEOs of Google, Zynga, and Groupon, and also analyzes their media reception. He concludes that Zuckerberg’s S-1 statement, like those of its Silicon Valley peers, lean on ideology, belief, culture, and emotional pleas, making the following three rhetorical moves: (1) we are different, (2) we are not here for the money, and (3) we are here to bring value to the world and to make it a better place (Dror, 2015, emphasis mine). Zuckerberg writes, “we have an opportunity to have an important impact on the world and build a lasting company in the process” (Dror, 2015). These sentiments were met with skepticism by financial journalists and interpreted as dishonest. This idealistic language would probably cease in the long run, Dror (2015) predicts, “in the business realm, structural and ideological barriers still matter, and soft power rhetoric alone is not sufficient, but rather must be reinforced by financial success.”

Hoffmann et al. agreed with Dror’s conclusions the following year, when they conducted a vast discourse analysis of Zuckerberg’s every public utterance from 2004 to 2014. The authors explain how Facebook grapples with the contradiction of profit versus social betterment:

As politicians, businesses, and celebrities are brought into the fold of Facebook users, users’ lives are increasingly described in commercial terms. Along the way, Zuckerberg’s language subtly shifts back and forth from describing users as empowered social and political actors to positioning them as little more than consumptive audiences. These shifts betray the tension between the site’s social utility and its commercial commitments, a tension that (as suggested earlier) is often rendered invisible through appeals to a broader social mission. (Hoffmann et al., 2018, p. 210)

That tension is dissipating. Facebook neither abandoned its soft power ideologies nor hid its commercial commitments, instead it merged those together. This rhetorical shift is evident when attempting to apply Dror’s analytic categories to “Social Good for Business.” In contrast, the message of this site is that (1) we are here for the money and so, (2) we are here to bring value to the world and to make it a better place. The site offers four case studies. One is Bombas, a
retailer who donates a pair of socks for every pair sold. The case study highlights Bombas’ support for LGBTQ homeless youth, but it is not clear how. Bombas directed 40% of its sock donations to The Ally Coalition, an organization who books A-list musicians to raise awareness for LGBTQ issues. Also, Bombas released a line of rainbow colored socks.

However, the purpose of this case study is not the campaign’s impact on LGBTQ homeless youth. Even though their goal is described as “driving awareness, impact and sales,” there is no emphasis on awareness or impact. Instead, the subheading “Their Success” describes,

33% lift in conversions over business-as-usual campaigns
27-point lift in unaided ad recall over business-as-usual campaigns
7.7-point lift in purchase intent over business-as-usual campaigns
1.2X return on ad spend
65% higher return on ad spend than business-as-usual campaigns (Facebook for Business, n.d.)

Facebook uses this case study, not to demonstrate social impact, but to demonstrate how its platform is well-suited to use cause-driven advertising for a profit, through specific products:

The company ran a Pride campaign in select cities, targeted to a combination of lookalike audiences based on Custom Audiences of existing customers, with interest targeting layered on . . . The team made the most of its budget by opting into automatic placements, which allowed Facebook to deliver the video ads to the best possible placement. The team also used a simplified account setup to target a broad audience via automatic placements, which further improved efficiency. (Facebook for Business, n.d.)

Facebook’s Ads Manager’s “interest targeting” option enabled Bombas to target users who have expressed an interest in or like pages related to LGBT issues. The profit aspect of a social cause is not buried or downplayed, but is according to Facebook, the central reason for cause-driven advertising.

In 2019, the parent site “Facebook for Business” posted similar articles, but with moderate emphasis on profits and more emphasis on the social cause. For example, in the article “Why Community Should Be Your Next Creative Muse” (Facebook for Business, 2019), the subheading “celebrate” praises Pantene Shampoo in Thailand for adopting transgender women to represent their campaign:

knowing that hard-to-reach Millennials care about cause-driven brands, Pantene identified a fringe community for whom hair is more than just hair. For transgender women, hair is often the first and most visible expression of their femininity. Rather than trying to appropriate the trans experience, Pantene gave the trans community a powerful platform to express themselves, delivering a campaign directed by and featuring transgender influencers, activists and actors. (Peck, 2019)

Here, “Facebook for Business” is still focused on business returns, the article goes on to discuss Pantene’s brand lift. But the wording is more modest, prioritizing the importance of “celebrating” trans women and explaining how; with “a powerful platform to express themselves.” This message slightly downplays the focus on profits and customer conversions. However, “Social Good for Business” does not explain social impact and focuses on profit returns. Facebook’s 1 December 2020 blog post about the site declares,

social good is good for everyone. It’s good for the economy, relationships with customers, the community and for your business. 28% of shoppers surveyed across 12 key markets encouraged others to buy a product after learning about a business’ values, causes or practices, on average. (Facebook News, 2020)

These claims are not substantiated by tangible social good, but by consumption statistics that emphasize that social good is economic good. In this sense, “Social Good for Business” is bolder than its predecessors. This shift normalizes disenfranchised identities—like Bombas’ target group of LGBTQ homeless youth—as a mere asset for boosting a brand, without a focus on improving their living conditions.

“Social Good for Business” sheds light into how the platform’s design influences personal identity economics on an individual basis, since, as social media scholar Jose Van Dijck (2013a) reminds us, “The similarities between the online presentation of people and products, individuals and brands, are striking: the same interfaces and tactics apply to both, making them even more exchangeable than before” (p. 207). The interfaces and tactics taught on “Social Good for Business” are the same incentives that reward marginalized individuals who optimize their own social differences into assets to attract investors in a virtue-based economy. Marginalized actors who might initially seek to promote social relationships are rewarded with celebrification and career advancement according to the optimized, marketable taxonomies advertised on this site. In fact, although the term “influencer” refers to social media nodes tracked by commercial decision support systems (Kiss & Bichler, 2008), they have become socially synonymous with the positive “role models,” in a cycle of virtue economics that treats representation as justice in itself, while preserving the upward distribution of profit.

Facebook exploits the rift between representation and redistribution by boosting cosmetic social impact without any real downward profit distribution. “Social Good for Business” may be read as a kind of manual for personal identity economics, which thrive in the neoliberal era that “Social Good for Business” broadcasts more audaciously than possible 9 years ago.
Conclusion: Bankrupt Virtue

This article uses the term “personal identity economics” to describe the systemic cultivation of identity as property, and more perniciously, of marginalized identity as an asset. This concept emerges from the combination of media and intersectional scholarship into historic techniques of ranking difference, intensely personalized market logic, Ads Manager’s rigid taxonomies of identity and the bold assertion of profit alone as a social good. The results raise the visibility of social causes but without equitable results, and worse, replace social ties with competitive, anxious, and laterally violent group dynamics. The paradox of this ethic is clearest in cases of fraud, like in the cases of McLaughlin, Mamone, Krug, or Smollett. However, stories like theirs fit with Facebook’s commonsensical market logic that cause-driven self-branding—even with no basis or impact on material reality—are a competitive asset and a net social good. Gradual shifts in platform rhetoric belie the creep of the ideology that endorses identity as a business asset, making marginalized identity into justifiable corporate brand leverage—for companies and individuals alike. Critical race and gender scholarship offers essential insight to platform tactics. Before the rise of Facebook, Feminist and critical race theorists insisted on bridging the chasm between representative politics and redistributive politics:

The Achilles’ heel in progressive-left politics since the 1980s, especially, has been a general blindness to the connections and interrelations of the economic, political, and cultural, and a failure to grasp the shifting dimensions of the alliance politics underlying neoliberal success. (Duggan, 2003, p. xvi)

Ongoing grassroots organizing battles against Facebook’s norms. Social difference took on a contested set of values in the 1960s when civil rights movements successfully mobilized difference as a bedrock of solidarity and empowerment. Facebook is a new iteration of ongoing capitalist and state efforts to re-absorb this empowerment back into commodity and merchandise. Feminist and critical race scholarship are essential for tracing a long battle between the colonial capitalist idea of social difference as property, and the activist idea of social difference as relational. The crucial overlap between this intersectional analysis, and social media scholarship, exposes Facebook’s role in the neoliberal project to persistently wrench identity politics from its redistributive agenda.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Dr Limor Shifman, Dr T.L. Cowan, Dr David Nieborg, Reece Steinberg, and Thea Lim for reading and commenting on earlier drafts of this text.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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