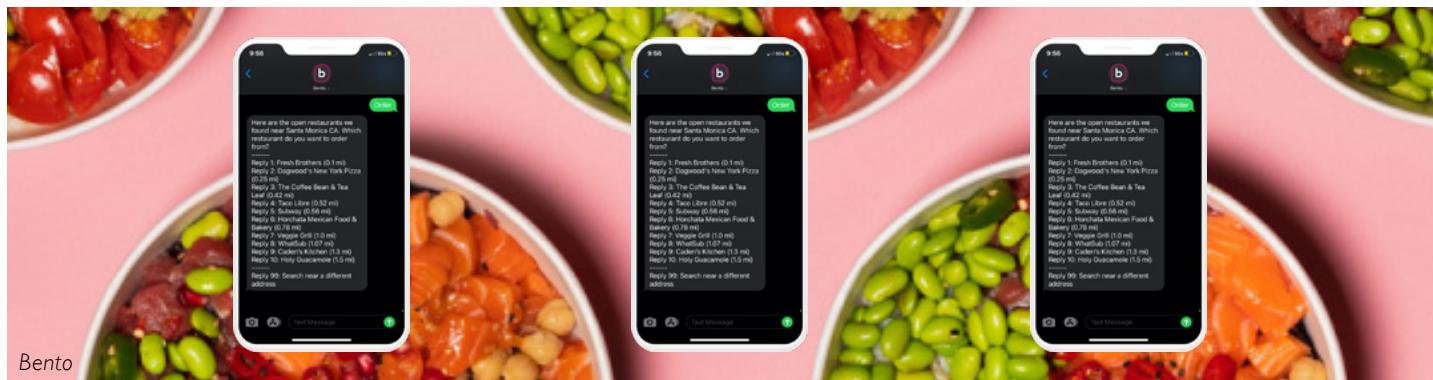


Activist Economy





As we emerge from crisis, the identity of the nation, the brand, and the individual is quickly changing. In a series titled “USA: Can This Brand Be Saved?,” Fast Company recognizes that the challenges that America has faced recently—racism, climate change, income inequality, and political division, among others—have significantly diminished the American brand, and takes an in-depth look at what America’s brand is, how it’s changed over the past several years, and where it should go from here. But, America is not the only brand that’s changing. As consumers re-examine their priorities and shift their shopping habits to reflect their values, brands are being forced to adapt. According to a [McKinsey survey](#), three quarters of Americans changed their shopping behavior since COVID-19 began. Convenience and value are the main drivers of shopping behavior change; however, quality and seeking brands that match with consumer values inspired change for about 40 percent of younger consumers.

In an ongoing attempt to rebrand, Victoria’s Secret replaced their Angels with the VS Collective in June of this year. Famous for their abilities and achievements, this group of seven female role models—including Megan Rapinoe, Paloma Elsesser,

and Priyanka Chopra Jonas—reflects the company’s new focus on “what women want.” Other brands, not in need of a complete overhaul, are reconnecting with their roots to solidify their positioning in the eyes of consumers. In July, Pyer Moss founder and creative director Kerby Jean-Raymond became the first ever Black American designer to show at Paris Haute Couture Week. “Wat U Iz” celebrated Black American history and referenced everyday objects created by Black inventors.

The impending economic fallout of the pandemic makes brands’ responses to the changing consumer landscape that much more important. From the start of the COVID-19 crisis, it was apparent that marginalized and lower income communities would be affected the most, but an array of new initiatives are striving to lessen the blow. LaToria Pierce is one of four entrepreneurs in the process of launching their own tech product to help cut down on excess costs of poverty for low-income individuals as part of the “Shared Prosperity Catalyst,” an 18-month venture initiative backed by Wells Fargo and ideas42. Pierce is developing a “shared job model,” in which two people, such as single mothers, would be able to share a single job role at a

company, splitting the work for a more flexible schedule and a steady income. [Bento](#), a platform that uses SMS text messaging to connect people with convenient, healthy, pre-paid meals from nearby restaurants, is looking to help the 50 million+ people in the United States currently experiencing food insecurity, while [Hippy Feet](#), a sock and apparel brand, has introduced a Pop-Up Employment program that provides transitional jobs for over 120 homeless youth ages 16-24, with particular attention for people of color.

These brands are offering vital solutions to communities in need, and subsequently, catering to a new consumer that puts their money where their values are. In a [research paper](#) published by industry advocacy group Fashion Roundtable in partnership with the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Fashion and Textiles, 91% of submissions stated that inclusivity within a brand would positively influence their purchasing choices. No longer shackled to the status quo, the next generation is leading an inclusivity movement that gives space to long underserved markets.

[The Index Project](#), a non-profit that celebrates people using design to solve the problems that matter, is bringing innovation to the often ignored women's healthcare industry. "I really believe that a product itself can change a system in a way that sometimes policy cannot," says Antya Waegemann, founder of [Margo](#), an Index Award finalist and company that aims to improve the experience of reporting and collecting evidence with a redesigned sexual

assault evidence kit and an integrated digital platform that improves case management and tracking.

As the women's healthcare industry undergoes a much-needed transformation, so too does the men's beauty industry. Rapper Lil Yachty wants to remove the stigma around men wearing nail polish with his new brand [Crete](#). The rapper believes that "there will come a day when people won't gender accessories or clothes or makeup." This statement is reiterated by a new wave of men's beauty brands being introduced to the market. Estée Lauder is funding men's makeup startup [Faculty](#), Shiseido Men relaunched their skincare makeup lines, and Harry Styles recently registered for a new trademark for "wholesale perfume and cosmetics."

These launches are in line with an overall trend toward gender neutrality. According to [Vice](#), 41% of Gen Z identify themselves in the middle of the masculine to feminine scale, and 48% value brands that don't classify by gender. The genderless movement is gaining traction online. Searches for "[gender fluid](#)" are +116% to last year, while searches for "[gender neutral](#)" are +39% to last year. On TikTok, #genderless has 50 million views and counting.

The movement toward inclusivity is a necessary response for brands looking to future-proof their business. By instituting a value-first approach, they are able to disrupt outdated and broken systems while satisfying a new and evolving set of consumer needs and expectations.

Watch List

Influential brands, initiatives, and voices that are leading this conversation.

The Sioux Chef



[The Sioux Chef's](#) Indigenous Kitchen is an educational nonprofit and catering company shining a light on the indigenous cuisine of the Dakota and Minnesota territories. As a member of the Oglala Lakota tribe — a subculture of the Sioux — Sean Sherman pays homage to his Native American heritage by creating experimental dishes using only the indigenous ingredients known to his ancestors. In July 2021, Sherman launched Owamni, his first standalone restaurant.

[Sports Banger](#), the anti-establishment bootlegging clothing brand known for its DIY spirit, embraces rebellious philanthropy. Sports Banger's now-iconic 'NHS Nike' t-shirt was re-released in 2020 amid the Covid-19 lockdown with profits helping feed healthcare workers and low-income families. The brand's latest project, in collaboration with BUILDHOLLYWOOD, takes a generation's political frustrations to billboards across cities in the UK.



Sports Banger

The Index Project



Created in 2002, [The Index Project](#) is a Danish nonprofit that promotes solutions to the critical challenges we face every day—small and large, simple and complex, systemic and emerging. The organization reflects on how design can bring humanity forward, creating a safer and more sustainable world. The Index Award biennale celebrates the use of design to solve real problems, from cybersecurity to circular design.

— 01

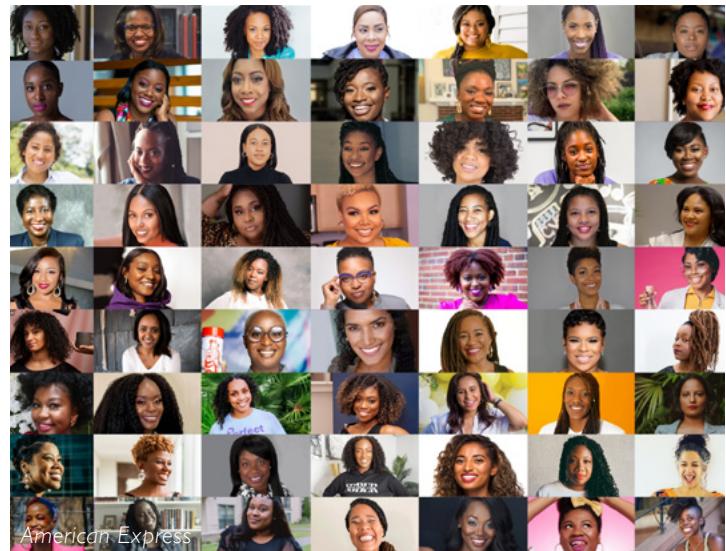
Rebranding Renaissance



VS Collective via Shape Magazine

— 02

Equality Agenda



American Express

— 03

Rebellious Inclusivity



Crete

Rebranding Renaissance 01

“USA: Can This Brand Be Saved?” asks Fast Company in a series that takes an in-depth look at what America’s brand is, how it’s changed over the past several years, and where it should go from here. To examine the framework of America as a brand and explore possible solutions to the nation’s most complex problems—ones that are becoming increasingly apparent—Fast Company hired ad agency Wieden+Kennedy to pitch a rebrand. In a [67 slide deck](#) titled “The Great American Rebrand,” Wieden+Kennedy offers ideas for events, branded content, community outreach, and packaging to improve the nation’s branding, like introducing The Equality Olympics—a competition that pits the countries of the world against one another in events that measure equity, success, and opportunity—or rebranding “Medicare For All” as “The War On Sickness.” While this tongue in cheek pitch deck may not offer viable solutions, it does present an alternative approach to solving our nation’s problems, reframing complex issues as marketing challenges, and

recognizes a glaring truth—who we are, as a nation, is changing.

As we grapple with America’s changing identity, we must also rediscover who we are as individuals. Only heightened by COVID-19, issues like racism, climate change, income inequality, and political division have come to a head over the last several years. As we emerge from crisis, we are re-examining our priorities and redirecting our energy towards what matters most. “I think we’re going through a collective identity crisis. If this year hasn’t driven you to question who you are, what you stand for, what you give importance to—what will?” Neada Deters, founder and CEO of [Lesse](#), told *Coveteur* in a recent [interview](#). This shift in values is reflected in our shopping habits. According to a [McKinsey survey](#), three quarters of Americans changed their shopping behavior since COVID-19 began. Convenience and value are the main drivers of shopping behavior change; however, quality and seeking brands that match with

“I think we’re going through a collective identity crisis. If this year hasn’t driven you to question who you are, what you stand for, what you give importance to—what will?”

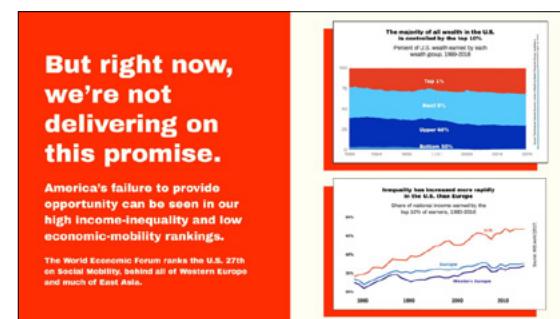
Neada Deters, Founder and CEO of Lesse

consumer values inspired change for about 40 percent of younger consumers.

Research shows that this behavioral change extends to employment preferences, making it increasingly important for brands to adapt. A new [study](#) from Atlassian shows that a growing cohort of workers believe their employers' values should match their own. 80% of U.S. workers say companies should be taking action to address society's problems, up 6% from the same survey last year. 38% said they would quit a job "if an employer acted in a way that didn't align with their values," also up 6% from last year. Employees are changing their preferences for work conditions as well. 45% of U.S. respondents "would consider changing jobs to get more access to remote work." For millennials, that number jumps to 56%.

Brands are responding to this pre- to post-COVID shift in varying ways. In an ongoing attempt to rebrand, Victoria's Secret replaced their Angels with the VS Collective in June of this year. Famous for their abilities and achievements, this group of seven female role models—including Megan Rapinoe, Paloma Elsesser, and Priyanka Chopra Jonas—reflects the company's new focus on "what women want." Other brands, like the meditation app Calm, are making their stance on issues like mental health clear. In June, Calm pledged support for Naomi Osaka after the athlete refused to participate in press conferences for the French Open for mental health reasons.

Still other brands are using this period of discovery to solidify their identity and reconnect with their roots. In July, Pyer Moss founder and creative director Kerby Jean-Raymond became the first ever Black American designer to show at Paris Haute Couture Week. "I wanted to use the stage to share with other Black Americans who inspire me -- and Black people who



Wieden+Kennedy



VS Collective via Shape Magazine

inspired me. So I chose to make the collection a highlight reel, in a way, of many of the things we've contributed to society at large," said the designer of his inspiration for the show, "Wat U Iz," that referenced everyday objects created by Black inventors.

Looking at history to inform the present and future holds significance beyond the fashion industry. The solutions to several of our nation's challenges may lie in reconnecting with our roots as a nation and amplifying indigenous voices—experts see indigenous stewardship as a critical way to meet global conservation goals. Recently, Seattle firm LMN Architects worked with the Coast Salish tribes to design the Mukilteo Multimodal Ferry Terminal on a sacred waterfront in Washington. Designed to be both environmentally sustainable and respectful of the site's history as the fishing and burial grounds of the Coast Salish tribes, the project illustrates what the future of development could look like. Indigenous chefs are also beginning to gain global recognition. Sean Sherman, a

Minneapolis-based Oglala Lakota Sioux chef, authored *The Sioux Chef's Indigenous Kitchen*, which won the James Beard Award for Best American Cookbook in 2018, and was awarded the 2019 James Beard Leadership Award for his "efforts around the revitalization and awareness of Indigenous food systems in a modern culinary context." In 2020, he opened The Indigenous Food Lab, an education and training center that envisions "a future of developing and supporting Indigenous kitchens and food enterprises in tribal communities, bringing cultural, nutritional, and economic revitalization across North America." The Sioux Chef opened his first brick-and-mortar restaurant, Owamni, earlier this year.

Forced to endure a year of "unprecedented" times and weather a global crisis, this nation and its citizens have undergone fundamental changes. To navigate a post-pandemic future, brands must institute a value-first approach and satisfy a new and evolving set of expectations from consumers and employees alike.

Equality Agenda

02

91%

of submissions stated that inclusivity within a brand would positively influence their purchasing choices.

68%

of participants had experienced or witnessed discrimination within the industry.

83%

agree that the government should be playing a role in progressing diversity and inclusion within fashion.

1-3%

of venture capital funding typically goes to Black and Latino founders, and just 9% goes to women.

Source: [All-Party Parliamentary Group for Textiles and Fashion, Harvard Business Review](#)

"It's very expensive to be poor in the U.S.," says Josh Wright, executive director of ideas42, a behavioral design firm that aims to change the life path of resource-scarce families by using data from behavioral science to magnify the impact of anti-poverty efforts. From the start of the COVID-19 crisis, it was apparent that the economic fallout would affect marginalized and lower income communities the most. New initiatives strive to establish a more equitable future across industries.

LaToria Pierce is one of four entrepreneurs in the process of launching their own tech product to help cut down on excess costs of poverty for low-income individuals as part of the "Shared Prosperity Catalyst," an 18-month venture initiative backed by Wells Fargo and ideas42. Notably, each of the four candidates is from a low-income background, a person of color, a woman (or both), which allows them to empathize with and solve problems they've experienced firsthand. From Wells Fargo, each is receiving a yearly salary of \$75,000 with benefits,

\$120,000 in startup capital, and a 40% equity stake in the business they build, as well as connections to industry professionals available for advice and mentorship. With this support, Pierce is developing a "shared job model," in which two people, such as single mothers, would be able to share a single job role, splitting the work for a more flexible schedule and a steady income. This venture offers a beacon of hope for women that were disproportionately affected by the pandemic as three areas of our lives—workplace, home, and school—converged under one roof.

For the first time in history, the U.S. entered a "shecession"—an economic downturn where job and income losses affect women more than men. Companies are, in turn, attempting to establish gender equality in the workplace. American Express partnered with IFundWomen of Color for its 100 for 100 programs, offering 100 Black female entrepreneurs \$25,000 and 100 days of free access to business resources.



In the wake of George Floyd's death last summer and the increased media coverage of the Black Lives Matter movement, there was widespread recognition of inequities in how Black people are represented. A wave of initiatives promised everything from anti-bias training to shop-in-ships dedicated to Black-owned brands. The 15 Percent Pledge pushed many U.S. businesses to disclose information and promise progress. However, the fashion industry is still mainly in the planning and promises stage. A *New York Times* report reveals an industry that is quick to talk and slow to change. Focusing on 64 brands, 15 major department stores, and online sellers, the report found that, of the 69 designers and creative directors spotlighted, only four are Black. Focused on the UK market, a [research paper](#) published by industry advocacy group Fashion Roundtable in partnership with the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Fashion and Textiles, found that 68% of research participants said they had experienced or witnessed discrimination within the industry. "The fashion industry, its leaders and stakeholders face a choice whether to ignore the detrimental and poisoning effects of structural racism, ableism, and gender discrimination; to lose potential revenue; and foster stagnation, or to seize this as an exciting opportunity to show leadership by reflecting on and changing internal structures and practices," concludes the report.

Brands would do well to start implementing equitable solutions as consumers and employees continue to adjust their behavior to align with their values. In the same paper by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Textiles and Fashion, 91% of submissions stated that inclusivity within a brand would positively influence their purchasing choices and 88% said they were not represented in fashion campaigns, shoots, or on the catwalk. Inaction on social and cultural issues may no longer be an option for companies looking to attract the next generation.

Hippy Feet

Founded by 27-year-old Sam Harper, Minneapolis-based [Hippy Feet](#) is much more than a sock and apparel brand. The company's innovative Pop-Up Employment program provides transitional jobs for over 120 homeless youth ages 16-24, with particular attention for people of color.

Bento

Today, over 50 million people in the United States experience food insecurity and don't know where their next meal will come from. [Bento](#) is a platform that uses SMS text messaging to connect people with convenient, healthy, pre-paid meals from nearby restaurants.

Life Unseen

LIFEWTR and Issa Rae are working together to fight for fair representation in the arts. In April 2021, they launched [Life Unseen](#), which celebrates creative diversity and addresses systemic disparities that prevent equal access to and stifle exposure within the arts. Focusing on more inclusive products and programs allows brands to diversify their workforce and customer base.

Rebellious Inclusivity

03

Finding new ways to challenge the status quo, brands and consumers alike are forging a future they are proud to be a part of. Consumers are driving acknowledgment and acceptance of a wider range of experiences and demanding that brands do the same through innovation, redesign, and representation. Shelley Zalis, CEO of [The Female Quotient](#), a women-owned business committed to advancing equality, recently shared the results of a new study, which seeks to better understand the influence inclusive marketing has on consumer behavior. 64% of consumers surveyed said they took some sort of action after seeing an ad they considered to be diverse or inclusive. This percentage is higher among specific consumer groups including Latinx+ (85%), Black (79%), Asian/Pacific Islander (79%), LGBTQ (85%), millennial (77%), and teen (76%) consumers. Inspired by this shift in behavior, brands are focusing on underserved markets and prioritizing inclusivity.

Hoping to make the future of medicine and sexual health more equitable for all, the finalists of the 2021 Index Award tackle gendered issues in medicine that have long been ignored or considered taboo. “There is still so much shame around female, trans and non-binary bodies that impose harmful barriers to healthcare,” said Liza Chong, CEO of the award’s nonprofit organization, [The Index Project](#). “A culture of silence persists around a number of important topics, ranging from women’s sexual pleasure to the long-term implications of childbirth, serving to sideline vital conversations and deny people access to helpful and even life-saving resources.” Frederik Petursson Madsen, a finalist, created [Qui](#), which is taking a new approach to contraception, enabling women to insert a vaginal capsule that provides effective birth control without the harmful side effects women have grown used to.

41%

of Gen Z identify themselves in the middle of the masculine to feminine scale.

46%

of Gen Z value brands that don’t classify by gender.

+116%

Searches for “[gender fluid](#)” are +116% to last year. Searches for “[gender neutral](#)” are +39% to last year.



One out of four people live with a disability, but only 1% of ads represent them.

64%

of consumers surveyed said they took some sort of action after seeing an ad they considered to be diverse or inclusive.





Founded by sexual assault advocate and designer Antya Waegemann, [Margo](#) aims to improve the experience of reporting and collecting evidence with a redesigned sexual assault evidence kit and an integrated digital platform that improves case management and tracking. "I really believe that a product itself can change a system in a way that sometimes policy cannot," says Waegemann.

It is not uncommon for consumer products to help shape culture. As the women's healthcare industry undergoes a much-needed transformation, so too do the men's fashion and beauty industries. During the [Spring 2022 runway](#) season, menswear designers explored the concept of masculinity, offering twists on silhouettes, prints, and colors that blurred the line between masculine and feminine. Sam Cheow, a senior vice president at Estée Lauder Companies, told Vogue, "We're seeing a shift in men's appetite to purchase both skincare and makeup, accelerated by the pandemic which has led to a general increasing focus on self-care." Estée Lauder is funding men's makeup startup [Faculty](#),

a brand that describes itself as "modern grooming for the new masculinity." Among the celebrities tapping into this space is Professional athlete Alex Rodriguez, who launched his Blur Stick concealer as part of his campaign for men's wellness with Hims. Rapper Lil Yachty wants to remove the stigma around men wearing nail polish with his new brand. Launched in May of this year, [Crete](#) is a unisex brand that allows anyone "to show their creative side." The rapper believes that "there will come a day when people won't gender accessories or clothes or makeup." In June, Harry Styles reportedly registered for a new trademark for "wholesale perfume and cosmetics," sparking rumors that he, too, is starting a beauty brand of his own. In March, Shiseido Men relaunched their skincare line and makeup line "specially developed to improve men's confidence," as stated in their press release.

Gender lines will continue to blur as the next generation pushes for an entirely genderless future. Rob Smith, founder of gender-free fashion brand [Phluid Project](#),

said at a WWD event in November 2019 that 56% of Gen-Z consumers shop “outside their assigned gendered area.” So it is no surprise that with buying power of \$143 billion, Gen Z is paving the way for gender-inclusive acceptance. According to [Vice](#), 41% of Gen Z identify themselves in the middle of the masculine to feminine scale, and 48% value brands that don’t classify by gender. Among labels exploring this space is [Marc Jacobs](#), whose polysexual capsule collection, “[Heaven](#),” launched last September. Jacobs describes it as a line for “girls who are boys and boys who are girls and those who are neither.” In July, [Gucci](#) set a new standard for luxury brands by launching a genderless section on its website called [MX. Tommy Hilfiger](#), in partnership with activist and actress Indya Moore, is designing clothing free from gender binaries in the brand’s new pre-fall 2021 capsule collection, Tommy X Indya. The genderless movement is gaining traction online. Searches for “[gender fluid](#)” are +116% to last year, while searches for “[gender neutral](#)” are +39% to last year. On TikTok, #genderless has 50 million views and counting.

Innovation often precedes meaningful cultural change, and digital avatars are doing just that in the push for inclusive design. ‘Shunning the notion that one size fits all, their looks are disruptive to the outdated beauty system,’ reads a statement from Rendoo and NAMESldn, who created Java, Unix, and Mosi to represent more diverse characteristics and unique features among digital models, exemplified by Mosi’s hyperpigmentation and Java’s plus-size

body shape. These new avatar models are a digital representation of the continued democratization of the modeling industry, as the use of ‘real’ and plus size models continues to rise, representing the 70% of women in the US who wear a size 14 or larger, according to NPD. This push for representation extends to the disabled community. According to the Heat Test Report, one out of four people live with a disability, but only 1% of ads represent them. Praised in the past for featuring plus size and body-diverse models, Rihanna’s [Savage x Fenty](#) has recently expanded inclusion one step further by featuring models with visible disabilities like limb differences. In addition to representation, many brands are focusing on adaptive design. Unilever is breaking the mold with Degree Inclusive, a radically redesigned deodorant package that makes uncapping and applying deodorant easier for people with limited upper mobility. Expected to release before April 2023, Honda’s “in-shoe navigation system” is a device for visually impaired people. It attaches to the wearer’s shoes and helps to navigate them to their desired location, which is predetermined by using a smartphone app that sends information to the device.

No longer shackled to the status quo, the next generation is leading an inclusivity movement that gives space to long underserved markets. Innovations in the healthcare, fashion, beauty, and technology industries will only continue to build a future that better represents the demographics and values of today’s consumer.



01 Rebuild



02 New Frontier



03 Activist Economy



04 Altered State



05 Sustainable Standard

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