

Weaponized Relatability: How Creators Leverage Performative Allyship to Manipulate Consumer Emotions

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Abstract: This paper explores the concept of weaponized relatability in contemporary digital advertising, focusing on how performative allyship is used by brands and influencers to influence consumer perception and behavior. As advertising increasingly relies on emotional storytelling and perceived authenticity, relatability has emerged as a key persuasive tool. However, this paper argues that such relatability is often strategically constructed, blurring the boundary between genuine expression and commercial intent. The study on this topic examines how performative allyship operates through parasocial relationships and platform-driven engagement systems, enabling corporations and creators to project alignment with social justice causes without enacting meaningful change. It identifies key drivers of this phenomenon, including profit motives, social media incentives, avoidance of accountability, and systemic privilege.

We further analyze the consequences of these practices, highlighting their role in eroding consumer trust, generating public backlash, fostering cynicism, and undermining support for marginalized communities. By situating weaponized relatability within broader advertising and media dynamics, the paper emphasizes its ethical implications and its impact on the credibility of digital communication.

Overall, the study contributes to the understanding of how emotional authenticity is commodified in algorithm-driven environments, calling attention to the need for more critical evaluation of socially driven marketing practices.

Keywords: *Weaponized relatability, Performative allyship, Emotional storytelling, social media marketing, Influencer culture*

1. INTRODUCTION

The digital transformation of advertising has led to a significant shift from overt persuasion to subtle, emotionally driven engagement strategies. Contemporary advertising genres particularly influencer marketing and native advertising prioritise relatability and perceived authenticity as key drivers of consumer trust and loyalty. Rather than presenting products through traditional promotional appeals, advertisers increasingly embed messages within personal narratives that simulate everyday experiences. This shift aligns with research indicating that emotional resonance and perceived authenticity significantly enhance audience engagement, parasocial interaction, and purchase intention (Kutlaca & Radke, 2022; Witte, 2025). As a result, advertising content is no longer easily distinguishable from organic communication, reflecting a broader convergence of media, identity, and commerce.

Within this evolving landscape, weaponised relatability can be understood as a strategic advertising mechanism in which emotional expressions are deliberately constructed to appear authentic while serving persuasive goals. Studies highlight that audiences are more responsive to content that conveys vulnerability, imperfection, and emotional transparency, as these elements strengthen perceived trustworthiness and relatability (McKellar, 2021; Keys-Kukoricza, 2023). However, such emotional displays are often shaped by platform algorithms and engagement metrics, encouraging creators and brands to perform rather than genuinely express emotions. This results in a hybrid advertising genre where storytelling, emotional labour, and branding intersect, blurring the line between authentic self-presentation and calculated persuasion (Hadley, 2022; Black, 2026).

The implications of this phenomenon are both theoretical and ethical. As emotional expression becomes commodified, consumers may find it increasingly difficult to distinguish between genuine relatability and strategic manipulation. Research suggests that this ambiguity enhances persuasive effectiveness while simultaneously raising concerns about transparency, trust, and the long-term credibility of digital advertising (Khan, 2023; Cizek & Lim, 2025). Consequently, weaponised relatability represents a critical development in contemporary advertising theory, illustrating how affective engagement and performative authenticity function as powerful tools in shaping consumer behaviour within algorithm-driven environments

2. PROBLEM ANALYSIS

Performative allyship is the practice of symbolically or outwardly speaking out about social justice causes through words, posts, and shallow gestures but doing little to improve the conditions that plague marginalized groups (Spielmann et al., 2022). It has become one of the defining ethical challenges of our time. The central problem this paper investigates can be stated plainly: the tools and language of solidarity, shared pain, mutual recognition and the promise of belonging are increasingly being weaponized by those who have no intention of redistributing power or resources.

Weaponized relatability operates in the following way. A corporation, political figure, or institution identifies a marginalized group that is experiencing visible, documented harm. Rather than addressing the structural causes of that harm, the actor deploys empathetic language, inclusive imagery, and symbolic gestures that create the impression of alignment with the group's struggles. This impression serves the actor's interests in the form of consumer loyalty, political capital, or public goodwill while costing the marginalized group nothing in return, or actively costing them trust, energy, and the dilution of their message.

However, it is important to note that this is not a new or recent phenomenon. Back in the 90's and 00's, corporations and organizations began recognizing the monetary value of appearing socially conscious (Martell, 2020). While this gives us a part of the base of the history of manipulation for commercial benefit, this problem has intensified drastically through the years with the help of Fake social media campaigns, where visibility is currency and where public pressure can be quickly satisfied by a well-crafted post. The foundational mechanism enabling weaponized relatability is the parasocial relationship (PSR), a one-sided psychological bond in which followers experience emotional attachment to, and perceived intimacy with, influencers who are unaware of their individual existence (Horton & Wohl, 1956). PSRs are not a side effect of influencer marketing; they are its core product. Research consistently shows that parasocial bonds mediate the relationship between influencer credibility and purchase intention ($\beta = 0.331$, $p = 0.000$) (Tripopsakul & Hoonsopon, 2024), meaning the stronger the parasocial connection, the more persuasive the commercial message.

Critically, PSRs operate by bypassing rational evaluation. When followers perceive an influencer as 'someone like me,' product recommendations feel like advice from a trusted friend rather than an advertisement. Performative allyship is not only an individual creator phenomenon. At the corporate level, it manifests as woke washing, defined by Sobande (2019) as a brand "attempting to market themselves as being concerned with issues of inequality and social injustice when the brand's actions do not indicate any sustained commitment to addressing such matters. "The discrepancy between marketing communication and actual organizational practices is central to this definition (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Brands deploy influencers as credibility proxies for woke-washing campaigns. When Nike featured Colin Kaepernick in the 'Dream Crazy' campaign, when thousands of brands changed their logos to rainbow colors for Pride Month while funding anti-LGBTQ+ legislators, or when corporations issued Black Lives Matter statements without changing discriminatory internal practices in each case, influencer amplification was integral to the strategy. More than half of consumers globally (52%) report having seen false or misleading sustainability claims from brands (Kantar, 2023), yet the emotional resonance of the content often overwhelms this skepticism.

With most mass communication taking place on social media compared to individuals accessing it through newspapers, televisions or radio channels in recent times, the relatability of content has increased drastically, which would result in a directly proportional relationship between Engagement & Emotional response and Engagement & Action where the loss is guaranteed.

In conclusion, performative allyship is not a failure of effort, it is a calculated theft, borrowing the pain of marginalized communities to build reputations while ensuring the systems that produce that pain remain fully intact. This one-sided relationship between the benefitters and the sympathizers leads us to quoting this issue as Weaponized Relatability.

2.1 Causes

2.1.1 The Profit Motive

At its core, performative allyship and weaponized relatability are economic phenomena. Corporations exist to generate profit, and genuine structural change like closing pay gaps, diversifying leadership, lobbying for protective legislation, funding community infrastructure is expensive, disruptive, and often commercially inconvenient. Symbolic solidarity, on the other hand, costs almost nothing. A redesigned logo, a carefully worded social media post, or a limited-edition Pride collection requires a fraction of the investment that genuine equity work demands, yet delivers many of the same reputational rewards.

What makes this particularly insidious is that it works. Consumers respond positively to brands that appear socially conscious, often without investigating whether that appearance corresponds to any real action. This creates a market incentive to perform solidarity rather than practise it because performance is cheaper, faster, and safer than the alternative. Organizations quickly learn that they can extract consumer loyalty, investor goodwill, and favorable media coverage from a well-timed campaign while simultaneously funding political activity, maintaining unequal pay structures, and preserving homogeneous leadership teams that contradict every value being publicly celebrated. The profit motive does not just enable weaponized relatability. In many cases, it actively produces it.

2.1.2 The Social Media Incentive

Social media has fundamentally changed the economics of public solidarity. Before the digital era, expressing support for a marginalized community required some form of sustained engagement such as attending events, donating money, showing up in physical spaces. The effort involved created a natural filter between intention and action. Social media removed that filter entirely. Today, expressing solidarity requires nothing more than a tap, a share, or a filter applied to a profile photograph, and the social rewards: likes, shares, affirmation, a sense of community belonging, arrive almost instantly.

This architecture actively rewards performance over practice. Platforms are designed to maximize engagement, and emotionally resonant content by declarations of solidarity, expressions of outrage, displays of collective identity which generates far more engagement than the slower, less dramatic work of structural change. The result is an environment in which the performance of allyship is constantly incentivized and the practice of it is structurally invisible. Nobody gets thousands of likes for quietly reviewing their organization's pay equity data or lobbying their local representative on Indigenous land rights. But a rainbow logo or a black square? That spreads instantly, creating the impression of mass solidarity while demanding nothing of the people participating in it. Social media has made it possible to feel like you are doing something important while doing nothing at all, and weaponized relatability has learned to exploit that feeling with precision.

2.1.3. Fear of Genuine Accountability

Genuine allyship is frightening to institutions and individuals who hold power, because it requires something that power instinctively resists: being held accountable to specific, measurable, public commitments over a sustained period of time. When an organization commits to closing its gender pay gap by a named percentage, or to divesting from projects built on unconsented Indigenous land, or to publishing its political donation records, it creates expectations that can be verified, challenged, and used as

grounds for criticism if unmet. That vulnerability is real, and for institutions accustomed to controlling their own narratives, it is deeply uncomfortable.

Weaponized relatability solves this problem elegantly. By deploying the language of solidarity that is emotionally resonant and culturally valued without attaching it to any specific, verifiable commitment, organizations create the impression of accountability while maintaining complete freedom from it. Vague statements like "we stand with this community" or "we are committed to doing better" generate positive social responses without creating any standard against which the speaker can be judged. This is not accidental. It is a deliberate communication strategy designed to occupy the space where accountability should exist, preventing genuine scrutiny by performing the appearance of openness. The fear of real accountability is therefore not just a cause of performative allyship; it is one of its primary engineering principles.

2.1.4. Systemic Privilege and Willful Ignorance

Perhaps the deepest cause of performative allyship is the most uncomfortable to name: those who benefit most from systems of inequality are also the least motivated and often the least equipped to understand how those systems work. Privilege operates partly by making itself invisible to those who hold it. When your race, gender, sexuality, or class position has never been a source of disadvantage, it is genuinely difficult to see the structural forces that make it a source of advantage. This is not always conscious. But it is, in many cases willful, meaning that the information is available, the testimony of marginalized communities is accessible, and the choice to remain uninformed is itself a choice.

Weaponized relatability thrives in this environment because it allows those who hold structural privilege to acknowledge that injustice exists, which feels progressive and costs nothing without ever examining their own role in sustaining it. It produces a form of awareness that is carefully bounded: aware enough to generate the emotional satisfaction of appearing on the right side of history, but not so aware that it demands any genuine redistribution of power, resources, or opportunity. This bounded awareness is socially comfortable precisely because it never crosses into the territory where genuine change becomes necessary. It allows the beneficiaries of unequal systems to celebrate the language of equity while ensuring that the systems producing inequality are the ones from which they profit and remain structurally intact and largely unexamined.

2.2 Impact

2.2.1. It damages consumer trust and brand authenticity

Performative allyship where brands post symbolic support for social-justice causes on social media and in advertisements (e.g., black-out posts, rainbow-themed straplines, or one-off Pride or Black-Lives-Matter-themed campaigns) without meaningful internal change undermines how consumers perceive the brand's authenticity (Spielmann, Dobscha, & Shrum, 2023). Instead of seeing the brand as genuinely aligned with social-justice values, many consumers interpret these actions as calculated, image-driven moves designed to capture attention and sales rather than to address systemic inequities (Xue & Mattila, 2024).

This erosion of trust does not remain confined to the campaign itself; it often spills over into how consumers view the brand's communications more broadly, including unrelated product lines and future "purpose-driven" initiatives (Spielmann et al., 2023). As a result, brands that rely on performative allyship risk being seen as opportunistic, which makes it harder to build long-term emotional connections with socially conscious consumers who expect consistency between rhetoric and real-world practice (Xue & Mattila, 2024).

2.2.2. It triggers online backlash and organized anti-brand behavior

Because social-media platforms amplify user scrutiny, performative allyship can quickly become a flashpoint for public criticism and coordinated anti-brand behavior (Kumar, 2025). When consumers detect that a brand's messaging contradicts its past actions or ongoing practices such as continuing to exploit labor, maintain exclusionary hiring, or profit from marginalized identities users often mobilize around hashtags, memes, and review campaigns to call out the hypocrisy (Spielmann et al., 2023).

This backlash can crystallize into online collective action, where individuals across platforms organize boycotts, tag-the-brand complaint threads, or create viral content that spreads the critique beyond the brand's original audience (Kumar, 2025). For brands, this means that a single performative campaign can generate reputational damage that outlasts the campaign's short-term visibility, especially when the backlash is framed as a moral or ethical issue rather than a simple marketing misstep.

2.2.3. It fosters consumer cynicism and compassion fatigue

Repeated exposure to performative allyship within consumerist formats such as "awareness-themed" limited-edition products, aesthetic-heavy Pride filters, or highly stylized anti-racism campaigns can condition consumers to treat activism as a trendy, emotionally charged backdrop rather than as a sustained social-justice effort (Xue & Mattila, 2024). Over time, audiences may develop a sense of moral fatigue, viewing each new cause-related marketing push as "more of the same," which reduces their emotional investment and behavioral response (Kumar, 2025).

This cynicism also makes it harder for brands to successfully communicate even well-intentioned campaigns, because consumers have been conditioned to associate activist-themed marketing with insincerity, commodification, or profit-driven opportunism (Xue & Mattila, 2024). Instead of deepening engagement, performative allyship can therefore dull the audience's receptiveness, leaving consumers less likely to click, share, donate, or take other forms of action the next time a brand taps into a social-justice issue.

2.2.4. It harms marginalized communities and weakens long-term loyalty

Marginalized communities are often the focal points of performative allyship campaigns featured in ads, influencer content, and branded events while continuing to face systemic barriers in hiring, pay, leadership, and product design (Xue & Mattila, 2024). This dissonance creates a sense of tokenism, where communities feel their identities and struggles are used as marketing props without tangible improvements in their lived conditions or representation within the brand's own operations ("Shopping for a Cause," 2021).

Such treatment not only strains the relationship between the brand and the communities it claims to support but also weakens long-term loyalty among younger, values-driven consumers who closely monitor brands' alignment with social-justice principles (Spielmann et al., 2023). These consumers may remain loyal only as long as the brand's messaging resonates with their values; once they perceive the messaging as performative, they are more likely to switch to competitors that demonstrate consistent, visible commitments to equity and inclusion (Xue & Mattila, 2024).

3. CASE STUDIES

3.1 Case Study 1: The Kendall Jenner Pepsi Ad (April 2017)

Background

In April 2017, Pepsi released an advertisement featuring Kendall Jenner drifting away from a photoshoot to join a street protest. In the climactic moment, she hands a can of Pepsi to a police officer the crowd cheers, and all tension dissolves. The protest was deliberately styled to evoke the visual language of the Black Lives Matter movement (Martell, 2020). The ad's premise was that a consumer product, offered in the right spirit, could bridge the divide between communities demanding justice for state violence and the institutions perpetuating it.

The Backlash

Critics immediately identified the ad's appropriation of BLM's imagery a movement born from the deaths of Black Americans at the hands of police and its repackaging as a feel-good commercial moment. Bernice King, daughter of Martin Luther King Jr., responded by posting a photograph of her father being pushed back by police, noting pointedly that if only he had known all he needed was a Pepsi. The ad was pulled within 24 hours.

How weaponized relatability and performative allyship operated here:

1. Extracted the aesthetic without the substance. Protest signs read "join the conversation", language so deliberately vague that all political content had been stripped out. The movement was reduced to a mood and colour palette resolvable by a soft drink (Martell, 2020).
2. Centered the wrong person entirely. Kendall Jenner, a white, wealthy celebrity with no connection to the movement and no personal risk made the gesture and received the celebration. The community whose struggle was borrowed became backdrop (Dobscha et al., 2021).
3. Proposed a commercial product as adequate response to structural violence, framing the problem as one of interpersonal warmth rather than institutional accountability, solvable for a dollar fifty at a convenience store. This trivialisation of systemic injustice is one of weaponised relatability's defining features (Wikipedia, 2024).
4. Was commercially calculated from the start. Pepsi was responding to market research showing younger consumers favoured socially engaged brands. The protest aesthetic was chosen because it tested well, not because of genuine understanding of what it represented (Oetzel, 2022).

Key Takeaway

The Pepsi ad matters not because it was uniquely cynical, but because it was unusually transparent showing with rare clarity exactly how weaponised relatability works. The movement becomes marketing. The struggle becomes a backdrop. The corporation collects the goodwill while contributing nothing to the cause it has consumed (Coates, 2025).

3.2 Case Study 02: Bud Light (Anheuser-Busch) & Dylan Mulvaney (April 2023)

Background

In April 2023, Bud Light partnered with trans influencer Dylan Mulvaney for a limited promotional campaign, sending her a personalized can to mark her one year of publicly living as a woman. The campaign was a deliberate move to signal cultural alignment with trans visibility and attract a younger, socially progressive consumer demographic.

The Backlash and the Abandonment

The backlash from conservative consumers was immediate and aggressive. Rather than standing behind the partnership or the person they had publicly celebrated, Anheuser-Busch went silent (Belmont DAC, 2024). Executives distanced themselves from the campaign and from Mulvaney personally. She described the experience as deeply painful and isolating, left to absorb the full weight of public hostility while the brand that had extracted value from her identity retreated.

How Weaponized Relatability & Performative Allyship Operates Here

- The brand used Mulvaney's trans identity and cultural visibility as a marketing asset borrowing the social capital of a marginalized community for commercial benefit.
- When that association became costly, the corporation abandoned both the campaign and the person at its centre, with no public defense or accountability (Coates, 2025).
- The extraction was complete and the discard was clean: Bud Light gained visibility, absorbed criticism passively, and left Mulvaney to face the consequences alone.

Key Takeaway

This case illustrates what happens when inclusion is a campaign, not a commitment. The moment solidarity became commercially inconvenient, it evaporated, revealing that trans visibility had been used as a tool, not upheld as a value.

3.3 Case Study 03: Zimmermann Fashion (June 2020)

Background

In June 2020, amid the global wave of protest and corporate solidarity statements following the death of George Floyd, Zimmermann posted a Desmond Tutu quote on social media, publicly signalling solidarity with Black communities and presenting itself as aligned with the values of racial justice.

The Internal Reality

The response was immediate. Former employees and interns came forward with internal documentation demonstrating that the brand maintained explicit appearance requirements that effectively prohibited natural Black hairstyles. The gap between the public message and the internal culture was documented, not alleged, making the contrast stark and difficult to dispute.

How Weaponised Relatability Operates Here

Zimmermann borrowed the moral authority of the racial justice movement to signal virtue externally, while its internal practices remained discriminatory and unchanged. The quote did not represent a shift in values; it represented a communication strategy.

- The public post extracted cultural and moral capital from a movement rooted in the lived experiences of Black communities.
- The internal appearance policies imposed the very exclusions the brand's public messaging claimed to oppose.
- The contradiction was exposed not through investigative journalism, but by the people who had worked inside the institution whose experiences the brand's social media post erased.

Key Takeaway

Zimmermann illustrates the structural hypocrisy of the language of solidarity deployed externally while discriminatory norms are maintained internally. The post was not an error or oversight; it was a deliberate act of image management in a moment of heightened public scrutiny. The brand used the justice movement as a shield, not a mirror.

3.4 Case Study 04: Government Schemes & Statistical Allyship (Adivasi Communities in India)

Background

Central and state government schemes targeting Adivasi communities are routinely cited in policy documents and political speeches as evidence of the state's commitment to tribal welfare. These schemes are presented in the language of inclusion, development, and care and are frequently used as political evidence that structural inequalities are being addressed.

The Gap: Policy vs. Reality

Academic research and civil society monitoring consistently show significant gaps between scheme design and ground-level implementation (Xaxa, 2008):

- Funds are not fully disbursed to intended beneficiaries.
- Benefits fail to reach communities they are designed for.
- Schemes are structured around what administrators can deliver, not what communities have themselves identified as priorities.

How Weaponized Relatability Operates Here

The gap between policy statement and lived reality is itself the mechanism. The state deploys the language of care and solidarity using the rhetoric of tribal welfare to manage political optics without delivering structural change. This is not a failure of implementation alone; it is the strategic use of welfare language as performance. Padvī (2023) frames this as using the language of care to manage political optics without delivering structural change, a form of weaponized relatability in which statistical citations and policy naming substitute for accountability.

Key Takeaway

When the language of justice is institutionalized into policy frameworks without corresponding material outcomes, it functions as legitimization rather than liberation. The scheme becomes the alibi.

4. SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Accountability Metrics, Reporting and Transparency Standards:

Creators and brands should be required to show proof of what their allyship campaigns actually achieved, how much money they donated, what policies they supported or which community organizations they're partnered with. There should also be consistency in committing to causes throughout the year and not just when it is a trend or during awareness months. Platforms should also introduce a dedicated reporting feature that allows users, audiences and stakeholders to formally raise complaints against those who falsely claim to be allies in ways that harm a community's representation or accessibility. This mechanism would give affected communities a direct and structured way to hold actors accountable with effective outcomes.

4.2 Organizational Culture and Internal practice:

Organizations need to take an honest look at how they operate, who gets hired, promoted and whether people from marginalized groups are being paid fairly. There also need to be safe, anonymous ways for employees to report discrimination without worrying about losing their jobs. DEI programs should be treated as essential parts of how a company runs, not as optional extras that get cut when things get difficult. When leadership treats inclusion as a marketing tool rather than a real priority, performative allyship is always the result.

4.3 Media Literacy Education:

People need to be taught how to tell the difference between genuine advocacy and content that simply uses these causes to gain attention or make money. This is especially important for younger audiences who consume most of their information online. They should be taught to ask a few simple questions like, who profits from this message? What real action is being encouraged? Has this person or brand actually followed through in the past? Building this kind of critical thinking can help in creating awareness.

4.4 Community-centered and Participatory Practice:

The focus needs to shift away from the person claiming to be an ally and toward the community they claim to support. Too often, one or two people from a marginalized group are included just for the sake of appearances, without any real power or influence. Genuinely supporting community-led initiatives by funding them directly and creating real opportunities for people from marginalized groups to be in decision-making positions is necessary.

4.5 Platform Algorithm Reform:

Social media platforms reward content that gets emotional reactions, which makes performative allyship highly profitable. Platforms need to be pushed, either through public pressure or government regulation to stop amplifying content that exploits social causes without any impact. The EU's Digital Services Act is one example of how governments can begin holding platforms responsible for the kind of content their systems promote.

4.6 Verified Community Partnerships Badge:

Similar to a verified blue tick on social media, platforms could introduce a badge system where creators and brands are awarded a cause related badge only after submitting proof of an active, ongoing partnership with a recognized community. This gives audiences an immediate, easy-to-read signal of credibility.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this white paper has critically examined the rise of weaponized relatability as a defining feature of contemporary digital advertising, particularly within influencer culture and brand-led social messaging. What initially appears as authenticity, empathy, and social alignment is often revealed to be a calculated strategy that leverages emotional connection for commercial gain. By embedding persuasive intent within narratives of vulnerability and solidarity, brands and creators blur the boundaries between genuine advocacy and performative engagement, making it increasingly difficult for consumers to distinguish sincerity from strategy.

The analysis demonstrates that performative allyship is not merely an ethical oversight but a structurally incentivized practice shaped by profit motives, platform algorithms, and the avoidance of accountability. Social media ecosystems reward visibility and emotional resonance, enabling symbolic gestures to outperform meaningful action. As a result, the language of justice and inclusion is frequently detached from tangible change, reducing complex social struggles to consumable aesthetics. This not only weakens the credibility of digital communication but also risks normalizing superficial engagement with serious social issues.

Furthermore, the consequences outlined the erosion of consumer trust, public backlash, growing cynicism, and harm to marginalized communities highlighting the long-term unsustainability of such practices. When audiences repeatedly encounter insincere activism, they become less responsive, less trusting, and more critical, ultimately undermining the very engagement that brands seek to cultivate. More importantly, communities whose identities and struggles are appropriated bear the cost of misrepresentation and neglect, reinforcing existing inequalities rather than challenging them.

However, the paper also emphasizes that this trajectory is not irreversible. Through stronger accountability mechanisms, improved media literacy, ethical organizational practices, and platform-level reforms, it is possible to realign digital communication with genuine social responsibility. Moving forward, authenticity must be redefined not as a performance, but as a commitment which is measurable, consistent, and rooted in action.

Ultimately, dismantling weaponized relatability requires a collective shift: from passive consumption to critical evaluation, from symbolic gestures to structural change, and from performative allyship to meaningful, sustained solidarity.

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