'We received feedback': The commercialization of Juneteenth backfires for big brands

Marquise Francis  4-5 minutes  5/28/2022

Large corporations that initially sought to cash in on Juneteenth-themed items ahead of the new federal holiday on are now walking back their commercialization efforts after backlash on social media.

On Tuesday, Walmart said it would remove its store-brand ice cream celebrating Juneteenth amid growing condemnation of the retailer trivializing the day for profit.

"Juneteenth holiday marks a celebration of freedom and independence," the company said in a statement. "However, we received feedback that a few items caused concern for some of our customers and we sincerely apologize. We are reviewing our assortment and will remove items as appropriate."

Walmart's Juneteenth Ice Cream included a label that read: "Share and celebrate African-American culture, emancipation and enduring hope." (Walmart)

Juneteenth commemorates the day (June 19, 1865) when enslaved African-Americans returned in Galveston, Texas to news they were freed. On June 17, 2021, President Joe Biden signed a law that made Juneteenth a federal holiday.

Experts noted that marketing Juneteenth-branded products amounts to companies only profit off Black suffering — specifically the 400 years of slavery led to systemic disadvantages that persist today.

“It is hard not to worry that Juneteenth will be watered down or distorted now that it is a federal holiday,” Matthew Delmont, a historian at Dartmouth College, told Yahoo Finance. "Having this date on the national calendar every year offers an opportunity to talk honestly about our nation's history and to come together in community to celebrate the generations of Black Americans who have fought for freedom and equality."
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Ubunibi-Afia Short prepares to portray Nancy, a slave of Elihu Embree, the editor of "The Emancipator" an abolitionist newspaper, on the grounds of the Embree House Historic Farm, said to be part of the Underground Railroad, in Telford, Tennessee, U.S., June 19, 2021. REUTERS/Chris Aluka Berry

Kevin Cokley, chair of the educational psychology department at the University of Texas, told Yahoo Finance: “If Walmart did not think the commercialization of Juneteenth would not be profitable they would not have created Juneteenth ice cream. Period.”

Cokley added that “the true meaning of Juneteenth can easily be lost through consumerism and widespread consumption.”

As of Friday, Walmart continued selling numerous Juneteenth-themed books, party supplies and t-shirts, including one black tank-top with the phrase: “Because my ancestors weren’t free in 1976” – an apparent mistaken reference to the year of American independence in 1776.

“Juneteenth has been celebrated for more than 150 years without needing specifically-branded products,” Delmont said. “Attempts to profit from the holiday take attention away from the meaning of Juneteenth, because you don’t need to buy things to celebrate emancipation or the long road to freedom that followed.”

Walmart isn’t the only corporate culprit.

Dollar Tree, the discount variety store, also faced backlash for promoting a Juneteenth-inspired line of party supplies and tableware with the Pan-African colors of green, red, and yellow instead of Juneteenth official colors of blue, white, and red.

Dollar Tree did not respond to multiple requests for comment from Yahoo Finance. The products featured on their official Twitter page were also no longer available online as of Friday morning.

Overall, the commoditization of American holidays is a common occurrence.
“Once any signal event is declared a national holiday, it is subject to potential commercialization,” William Darity, a public policy professor at Duke University and racial equity expert, told Yahoo Finance.

Darity added that the Juneteenth's national acknowledgement, ironically, may take away from “the compelling need for a comprehensive national program for Black American reparations.”

“Imagine how different the landscape would look if Juneteenth had been designated as a federal holiday after reparations had been paid,” he said.

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