



Understanding Brand Activism as A Marketing Strategy: A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

In response to the digital technology-driven shift in younger generations and the evolving values of citizen-consumers, brands are now expected to align with individual identities, fostering deeper connections with customers. This has given rise to brand activism as a pivotal marketing trend for differentiation in a competitive landscape. This article investigates the state of brand activism in marketing strategy literature while identifying research gaps. Conducting a systematic review of 1010 articles following PRISMA guidelines, this research explores the effects of brand activism on consumer behavior and attitudes, consumer-brand relationships, and financial performance. Additionally, this research examines the benefits and risks of employing brand activism as a marketing strategy.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Digital acceleration and social media networking have transformed the interaction dynamics between brands and consumers. Hyper-connectivity has allowed brands to reach broader markets and assume more significant societal roles (Gielens & Steenkamp, 2019). Crucially, brands are no longer regarded merely as a company's ownership but as an entity that belongs to the community (Swaminathan et al., 2020). Consumers now wield more influence than ever in deciding which brands to endorse. Consumers generally support brands that align with their values (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Hong & Li, 2020; Klostermann et al., 2021; Mirzaei et al., 2022). Consumers make purchase decisions based on factors beyond economic considerations or personal interest. They also consider values and their roles as social agents (Edelman, 2018; Kotler and Sarkar, 2017). The personal interests of consumers have shifted toward socio-political engagement. In today's society, numerous contentious socio-political issues dominate public discourse, and social media platforms facilitate diverse groups in participating in discussions on polarizing topics, such as racial equality, travel and immigration bans, LGBTQ rights, and social justice (Korschun, 2020; Kotler and Sarkar, 2017).

However, consumers express their interest in these issues and increasingly demand that brands and companies take a stance and publicly demonstrate their alignment or opposition (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Bhagwat et al., 2020). In response to these demands, many brands, known as Brand Activism, have accepted the challenge and actively engaged in socio-political activities. Brand Activism is defined as the involvement of corporations or brands in contentious and polarizing political and social dialogues in society (Batista et al., 2022; Berestova et al., 2022; Fayez et al., 2022; Ferrucci & Schauster, 2022; Hong & Li, 2021; Koch, 2020; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Mirzaei et al., 2022; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Rivaroli et al., 2022; Shetty et al., 2019; Sibai et al., 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Numerous U.S. companies participate in Brand Activism by taking a stand on contentious issues. For instance, Delta Airlines and Dick's Sporting Goods distanced themselves from the National Rifle Association (N.R.A.) to promote responsible gun regulations and safety. They revoked discounts and ended affiliations with the N.R.A., aligning their brands with their values (Klostermann et al., 2021; Mirzaei et al., 2022).

Starbucks also embraced Brand Activism while suspending the U.S. travel ban and refugee program. They pledged to hire 10,000 refugees worldwide by 2022, demonstrating their commitment to addressing immigration and refugee rights, a highly debated issue (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Rim et al., 2019). While Brand Activism has been extensively researched, it remains a relatively new and evolving concept (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Lim & Young, 2021). There is a noticeable lack of comprehensive scholarly literature addressing brand activism within marketing strategy. This study aims to bridge that gap by synthesizing and developing a marketing strategy framework.

Brand Activism as a Marketing Strategy: Review Framework

The term "Brand Activism" was introduced by (Saklar & Kotler, 2018). The advancement of technology has brought about a transformation in society and consumer behavior, leading both corporations and consumers to envision brands as more human-like entities. Brands are now expected to engage in activism and challenge consumption, production, policies, and ideologies for societal good (Koch, 2020). (Saklar & Kotler, 2018) observed a shift in companies' approach from being corporate-driven to being value-driven. This implies that companies must identify their inner purpose and strive to deliver meaningful values to society.

Despite the wide variety of areas that brand activism can encompass, researchers in the academic literature tend to interpret and refine its definition to be more specific and focused. It is defined as the public action of a brand or an individual affiliated with a brand, wherein they openly express their non-neutral position or stance on contentious social or political matters such as immigration, gun control, and gender roles (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Moorman, 2020; Schleier, 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Vredenburg et al. (2020) introduced the characteristics of brand activism as 1) being driven by the brand's purpose and values; 2) addressing controversial, contested, or polarizing socio-political issues; 3) brand activism can take either progressive or conservative stances, influenced by political ideology, religion, and other belief systems; and 4) brands contribute to socio-political causes through their messaging and business practices.

Furthermore, Sibai et al. (2021) present additional attributes that characterize activist brands: 1) a moral subject; 2) that reforms dominant moral judgments, promoting alternative judgments; 3) promoting social benefits and social justice. Based on the identified characteristics, Brand Activism stands out as a more radical and distinct concept compared to Corporate Social Responsibility (C.S.R.) (Coman et al., 2022; Dodd & Suppa, 2015; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Rim et al., 2019; Sibai et al., 2021). (Dodd & Suppa, 2015) underscore a notable distinction between Brand Activism and Corporate Social Responsibility (C.S.R.). Brand Activism emphasizes addressing contentious or controversial societal issues, whereas C.S.R. is more oriented toward supporting prosocial causes or contributing to the overall societal well-being.

Most authors suggest that Brand Activism primarily addresses controversial and polarized socio-political issues, involving participation in broader societal conversations where the distinction between right or wrong, good or bad, is subjective and influenced by personal moral stance, value system, beliefs, religion, and ideology (Alharbi et al., 2022; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Klostermann et al., 2021; Sibai et al., 2021). The study by (Dodd & Suppa, 2014; Batista et al., 2022; Coman et al. 2022; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Parcha & Westerman, 2020; Clemente-Mediavilla et al.; 2021) elaborated on this concept, highlighting that the issues addressed through Brand Activism are not necessarily linked to the company's primary business activities. According to (Rim et al., 2019), such advocacy expressions can be either ad hoc or planned.

In summary, Brand Activism is defined as 1) Brand or company involvement, as well as representation of individuals affiliated with the brand/company, in discussions about controversial, debatable socio-political issues; 2) Taking one side's partisan stance on sociopolitical issues, either supporting or opposing them; 3) Brand Activism encompasses both tangible and intangible actions. Tangible actions can include providing financial support to specific groups or communities, engaging in funding initiatives, or supporting specific organizations. Intangible actions involve carrying out controversial advertisements, advocating contentious causes through messaging, making changes to logos and packaging, creating social media posts with advocacy-related content and hashtags, and implementing corporate policies that support social causes, such as hiring immigrants (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Hydock et al., 2020); 4) The issues addressed through Brand Activism are not necessarily linked to the company's primary business activities; 5) Distinguished from C.S.R., Brand Activism does not focus on the common good or generally accepted issues; 6) Involves moral subjects and reforms of dominant moral judgments.

While Brand Activism is rooted in values, ideology, and belief systems, it predominantly falls under the umbrella of marketing strategies and has been extensively studied from a

marketing perspective. Despite its connection to societal issues and cultural relevance, the primary focus of research and analysis on Brand Activism has been centered on how it impacts consumer behavior (Johnson et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2020; Swimberghe et al., 2011), purchase intention (Chatterji & Toffel, 2019; Dodd & Supa, 2015; Korschun et al., 2016; Park & Jiang, 2020), brand perception and attitude (Alharbi et al., 2022; Batista et al., 2022; Hong & Li, 2021; Intravia et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2020; Klostermann et al., 2021; Leak et al., 2015; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Xu et al., 2021; Parcha & Westerman, 2020; Schmidt et al., 2021; Schleier, 2021; Shetty et al., 2019), firm value (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Pasirayi et al., 2022), market reaction (Hydock et al., 2020; Villagra, Monfort, et al., 2021), and overall marketing outcomes. Additionally, (Weber et al., 2021) state that political polarization impacts marketing by altering consumer psychology and the overall marketplace. Political polarization impacts consumer behavior, corporate interactions with stakeholders, and marketing strategies related to market segmentation, targeting, product development, and consumer engagement.

In this literature review, we use a structured framework for our analysis to guide our selection of articles. According to (Korschun et al., 2020), the definition of marketing has evolved. It is now seen as activities involving creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that provide value to customers, clients, partners, and society. Furthermore, our study argues that marketing and politics are intertwined and mutually influential due to various factors, one of which is citizen stakeholders. These stakeholders, including consumers, employees, business partners, and community members, play a dual role in shaping and being shaped by both the business and political realms. They invest personal resources like money, votes, time, and effort to influence corporate policies or brand actions by signing petitions, social media posts, and boycotts. In this context, value-brand identity has become crucial as it impacts consumer purchasing decisions and preferences. The values and identity of consumers influence them as citizen stakeholders within the broader societal context.

In summary, our framework highlights how increasing political polarization among consumers and society at large compels businesses and brands to adopt new marketing strategies that align with their cultural beliefs. This approach, known as brand activism, can reshape how businesses approach segmentation, targeting, product development, and marketing communications (Korschun et al., 2020; Weber et al., 2021). When a company engages in brand activism, it affects marketing, branding outcomes, stakeholder interactions, and consumer behavior (Weber et al., 2021).

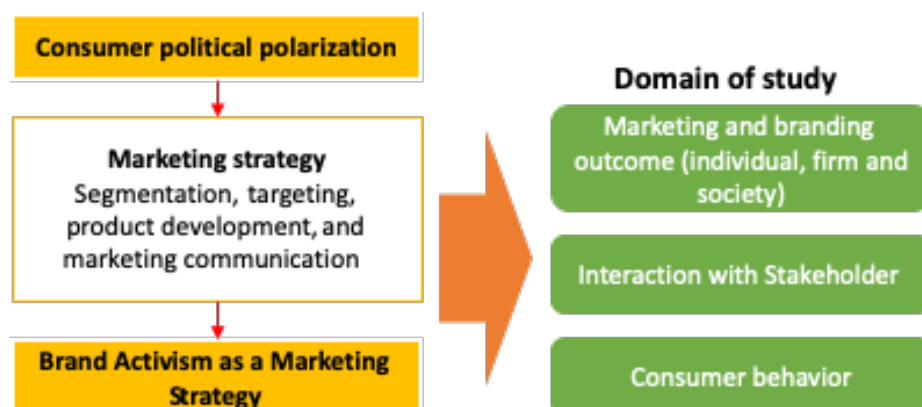


Figure 1. Review Framework

By examining studies related to Brand Activism published between 2011 and 2022, this study extends previous reviews and aims to identify gaps in our understanding of the evolution of Brand Activism research. Through this analysis, the paper provides valuable insights into areas that require further investigation and clarifies the research trajectory in this field. This literature review encompasses five research questions (R.Q.), as listed below:

RQ1: How many publications focus on growth-related Brand Activism and contribute to developing marketing strategy insights?

RQ2: What research methodologies are employed in studies on Brand Activism as a marketing strategy?

RQ3: What is the current state of knowledge regarding Brand Activism?

RQ4: What are the benefits and risks of using Brand Activism as a marketing strategy?

RQ5: What research gaps exist concerning the study of Brand Activism and its relationship with marketing strategy?

2. METHODS

The systematic review process in this study adhered to the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analysis (PRISMA) guidelines as outlined by Moher et al. (2010). The PRISMA diagram was a valuable tool during the search activities, aiding in informed decision-making for literature selection by applying inclusion and exclusion criteria (Stovold et al., 2014). Our approach in this study aligned with the identification, screening, eligibility, inclusion, and data extraction phases recommended in the PRISMA guidelines. The initial steps involved defining the research scope per the research objectives. The primary objective was a comprehensive review of existing research on Brand Activism within the marketing strategy domain. During the initial review of relevant articles, it became evident that several synonymous terms in the academic realm represent Brand Activism. These include Corporate Social Advocacy, Corporate Sociopolitical Activism, Corporate Political Advocacy, Corporate Political Activism, Sociopolitical Activist Brand, Social Justice Branding, C.E.O. or Manager Activism, and others.

Consequently, these keywords were incorporated into our search strategy. ProQuest and Scopus databases were chosen due to their extensive records and comprehensive social science databases. In ProQuest, we set initial inclusion criteria for Scholarly Journals, Conference Papers and Proceedings, Dissertations and Theses and restricted the search to English language sources. We excluded sources such as magazines, wire feeds, newspapers, blogs, podcasts, and websites. Additionally, we augmented our search with articles identified in the references of manual research. We also utilized a citation-based literature mapping tool called Research Rabbit, wherein we inputted one or more seed papers, and the tool generated relevant papers based on these seeds. Ultimately, the initial search yielded 1010 articles.

Article Selection Criteria

This review study employed specific criteria to filter out irrelevant articles. Four primary criteria were used to assess and select studies for inclusion in our analysis: (1) The study's primary focus must align with the marketing strategy outlined in Figure 1 of our Review Framework. (2) The unit of analysis should pertain to firms, brands, and stakeholders, including consumers and the public as a whole. (3) Articles solely concentrating on sociology,

politics, or public relations were excluded. (4) Studies considered for inclusion were limited to those published between 2011 and 2022.

Data Selection and Analysis

Data selection followed the PRISMA diagram (Figure 1). In the first phase, articles were reviewed by assessing titles and abstracts. In this phase, redundant or irrelevant articles were excluded. This initial screening yielded 102 articles. Subsequently, full-text availability was checked, and articles were partially reviewed, with further exclusions based on the established criteria. The final number of articles selected for analysis was 40, published between 2011 and 2022. In the final steps, full-text articles were thoroughly reviewed, providing comprehensive insights into the evolving studies related to Brand Activism within the academic literature, particularly within the marketing strategy framework.

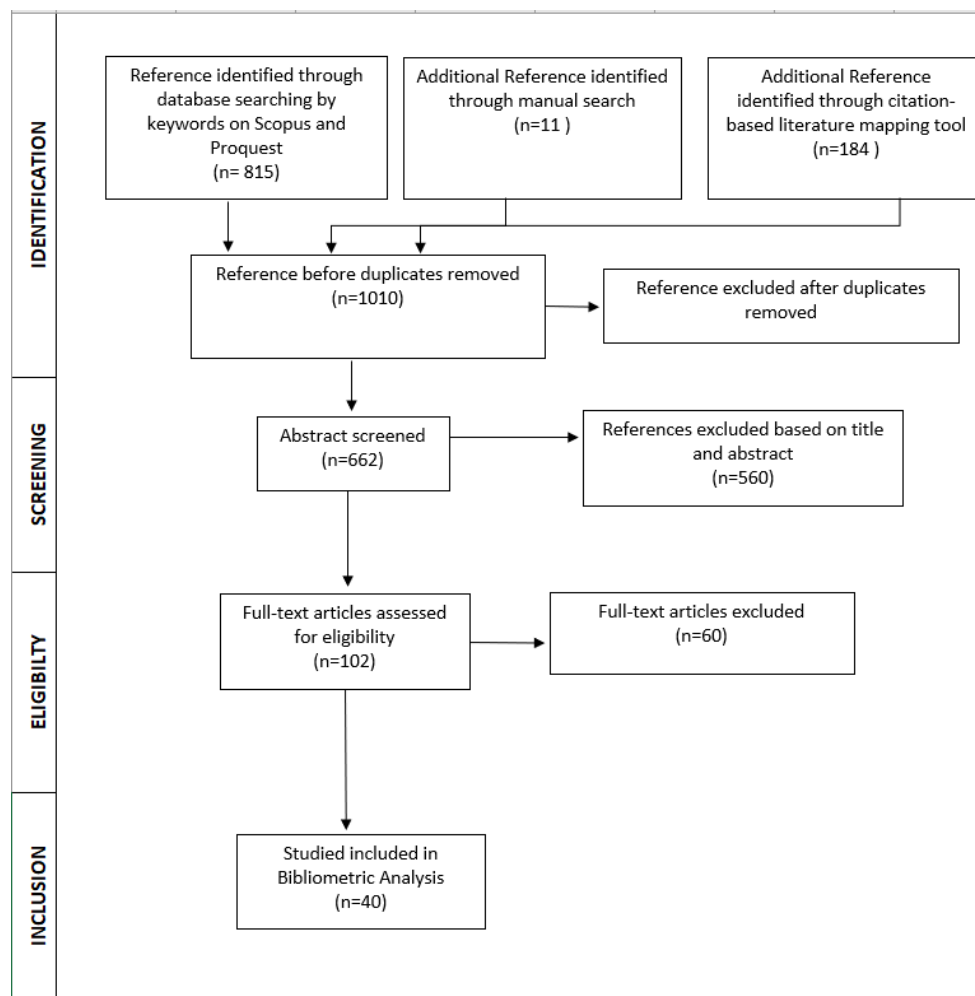


Figure 1. PRISMA Flow Diagram

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Growth of Publications Related to Brand Activism

From the selection of 40 articles in this systematic review, it was observed that these studies were published between 2011 and 2022 (see Figure 2). In 2020, there was a significant increase in articles and the number of publications concerning brand socio-political activism (n=10, 25%). The following year, 2021, witnessed the highest number of publications and

articles (n=13, 31%). The number of studies remained substantial in the subsequent year, 2022, although there was a slight decrease (n=10, 24%).

Figure 3 illustrates that developed countries have made the most substantial contributions to the published articles on Brand Activism, totaling 40 articles from 2011 to 2022. The countries that published the most articles on Brand Activism were the U.S.A., UK, Sweden, and Spain. The U.S.A. led the way with the highest number of articles discussing Brand Activism, boasting 25 articles. This result is unsurprising, given that the U.S.A. is at the forefront of Brand Activism practice.

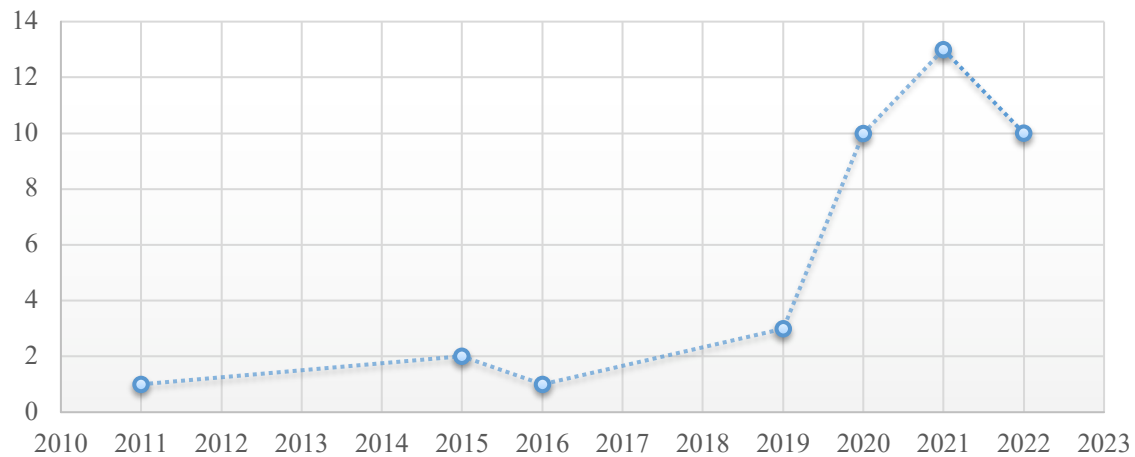


Figure 2. Frequency of Articles per Publication Year

Brand Activism has gained increasing prominence in the United States, with numerous examples of companies publicly expressing their stances on contentious socio-political issues. This is particularly relevant in the United States due to the nation's strong emphasis on democracy, serving as the cornerstone of modern liberalism. This ideology blends the principles of civil liberty and equality with a commitment to social justice and a well-regulated mixed economy.

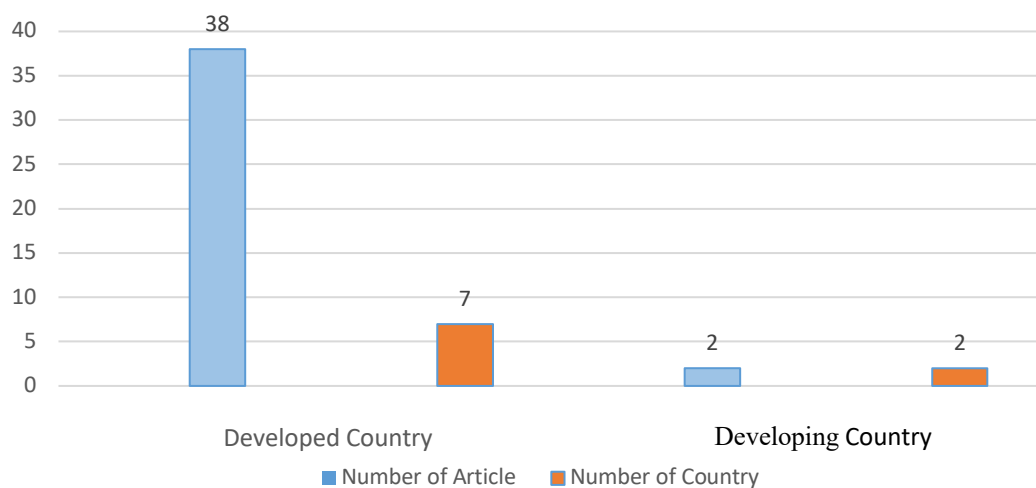


Figure 1. Countries That Produced Publications on Brand Activism

Table 1. List of Publishers

Publishers	Count
Journal of Business Research	4
Journal of Product & Brand Management	4
Sustainability	4
Public Relations Review	3

Publishers	Count
Psychology and Marketing	2
Lund University (thesis)	2
Communication and Society	1
Communication Research Reports	1
Corporate Communications	1
El Profesional de la Información	1
International journal of business communication	1
International Journal of Research in Marketing	1
International Journal of Strategic Communication	1
Journal of Brand Management	1
Journal of Business Ethics	1
Journal of Communication Inquiry	1
Journal of Interactive Marketing	1
Journal of Marketing	1
Journal of Marketing Communications	1
Journal of Marketing Research	1
Journal of Nonprofit and Public Sector Marketing	1
Journal of Public Policy and Marketing	1
Journal of Public Relations Research	1
Management Communication Quarterly	1
Organization & Environment	1
Problems and Perspectives in Management	1
Social Science Research Network	1

Table 2. Theoretical Foundation

Theory	Studies	N
Consumer behavior (Consumer engagement, consumer reaction, involvement and attitude change, brand advocacy, brand boycott)	Korschun et al. (2016), Shetty et al. (2019), Parcha & Westerman (2020), Rim et al. (2019), Berestova et al. (2022), Batista et al. (2022)	6
Signaling Theory	Bhagwat et al. (2020), Park & Jiang (2020), Villagra, Monfort, et al. (2021), Pasirayi et al. (2022)	4
Self-identity theory (alignment and authenticity)	Schmidt et al. (2021), Mirzaei et al. (2022), Flight & Coker (2022)	3
Issue ownership theory	Lim & Young, 2021, Sterbenk et al., 2021	2
Attribution Theory	Ferenius & Kotras, 2021, Kim et al., 2020	2
Moral theory (moral rationalization)	Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020, Swimberghe et al., 2011	2
Theory of Public Sphere	Hill (2020)	1
Theory of Planned Behaviour	Dodd & Supa (2015)	1
The theoretical framework of the spiral of silence	Hong & Li (2021)	1
Social Marketing and Social Justice Branding	Smith et al. (2021)	1
Social Exchange Theory and Brand related construct	Johnson et al. (2021)	1
● Construal Level Theory (CLT) and psychological distance ● Consumer-company identification ● Signaling theory	Xu et al. (2021)	1
● Identity-based consumption ● Negativity bias	Hydock et al. (2020)	1
● Negotiation of Free Speech Boundaries ● Moral judgement	Sibai et al. (2021)	1
Audience-centric approach Perception of Responsibility	Coman et al. (2022)	1
Brand perception and brand value	Klostermann et al. (2021)	1
Brand positioning	Koch (2020)	1
Citizen-consumer perspectives	Manfredi-Sánchez (2019)	1
Cognitive Dissonance and Halo Effect	Leak et al. (2015)	1
Communication messaging and brand relationship	Fayez et al. (2022)	1
Congruence Theory	Vredenburg et al. (2020)	1
Consumer behaviour Consumer-brand congruence Cognitive-dissonance theory	Alharbi et al. (2022)	1
Consumer behavior, brand cause-fit and perceived authenticity	Schleier (2021)	1
Consumer-brand relationship	Rivaroli et al. (2022)	1
Credibility, reputation and Brand Equity	Villagra, Clemente-Mediavilla, et al. (2021)	1
Nonmarket strategy	Chatterji & Toffel (2019)	1
Paradigm Repair	Ferrucci & Schauster (2021)	1

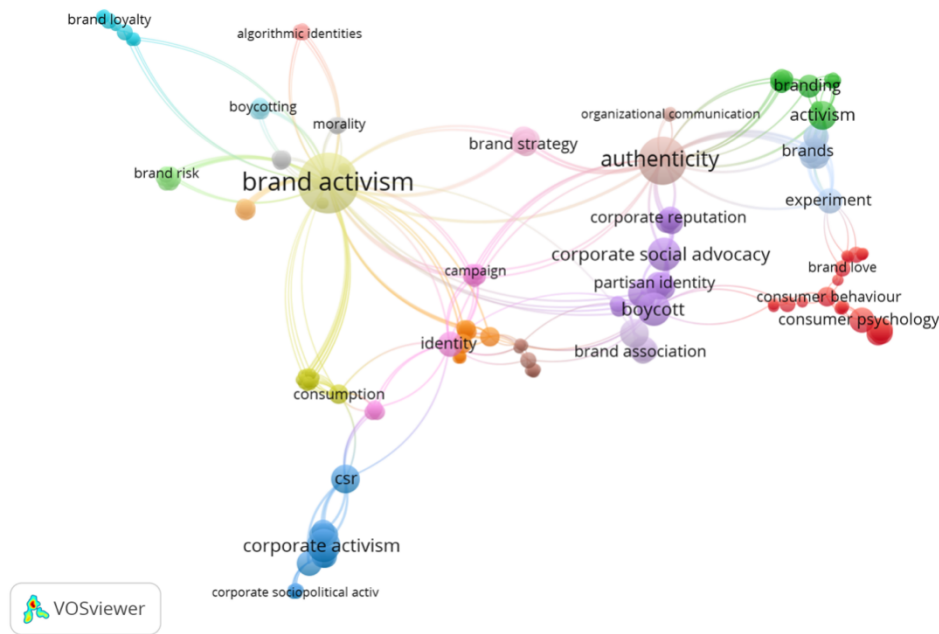


Figure 2. Bibliography Visualization of Brand Activism

Analysis of Research Methodology Used in Brand Activism Studies

This subsection offers an overview of the research methodologies commonly employed by researchers to analyze Brand Activism practices. A research method is a specific procedure or technique used to identify, select, process, and investigate a particular topic or address research questions.

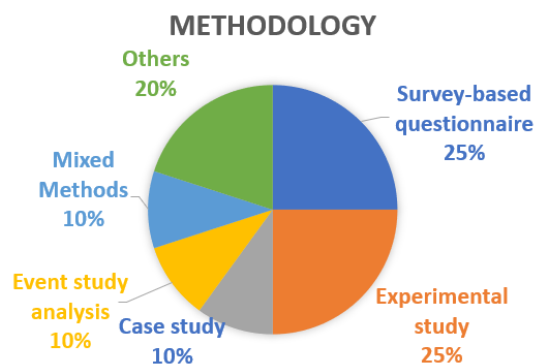


Figure 3. Research Methodology Used in Brand Activism Studies

Both qualitative and quantitative methodologies have been utilized in researching Brand Activism, as demonstrated in Table 3. The top five methods frequently used by academics to study Brand Activism include Quantitative Survey-based Questionnaires (n=10, 25%), Experimental studies (n=10, 25%), Event study analysis (n=4, 10%), Mixed methods (n=4, 10%), and Case studies (n=4, 10%) (See Figure 4). Other methods were also employed (n=8, 20%), including Content analysis (n=2), Frame Field Experiment (n=1), Modelling (n=1), Textual analysis (n=1), Social network analysis (n=1), Framing analysis (n=1), and Theory-driven framework (n=1). The chart in Figure 4 illustrates that most academics opt for quantitative studies as their preferred approach to comprehending Brand Activism.

Brand Activism as a Marketing Strategy

The relationship between brands, businesses, and consumers has evolved significantly due to social media and technological advancements. The growth of social media has opened a new channel for businesses to interact with consumers (Hong & Li, 2020; Lim & Young, 2021; Schmidt et al., 2021); as a result, brands are now perceived as human entities and social media serves as a means of communication that showcases the identity and personality of a brand (Deloitte Insights, 2020). Furthermore, the prevalence of divisive socio-political issues in public discourse, coupled with the growing polarization of society's political identities, is driving shifts in consumer behavior (Schmidt et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2021). Edelman (2018) found that over 60% of consumers have become "belief-driven buyers," deciding on brands based on their stances on social issues, which can influence their choices, loyalty, or avoidance of specific brands. In the highly competitive marketplace, businesses must differentiate themselves to attract customers. As marketing trends shift from corporate-driven to value-driven, one way to stand out is to establish emotional connections with customers by communicating the company's principles and values by taking a stance on socio-political issues (Dodd & Supa, 2015; Hong & Li, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018; Lim & Young, 2021; Schmidt et al., 2021).

In recent research, a significant factor driving a company's involvement in socio-political issues is the influence of consumers and the general public (Alharbi et al., 2022; Berestova et al., 2022; Coman et al., 2022; Fayez et al., 2022; Hill, 2020; Klostermann et al., 2021; Mirzaei et al., 2022; Pasirayi et al., 2022; Rim et al., 2019; Schleier, 2021; Sterbenk et al., 2021; Sibai et al., 2021; Villagra, Clemente-Mediavilla, et al., 2021). Often skeptical of major public institutions and the government, consumers now look to brands and businesses to drive positive change (Ferenius & Kotras, 2021; Schleier, 2021; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). Brands are seen as trustworthy social agents with the power to influence public policy and legislative decisions (Coman et al., 2022; Rim et al., 2019; Xu et al., 2021). This demand for companies to engage in socio-political issues also comes from stakeholders like state legislators, investors, and employees, who share similar concerns (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Flight & Coker, 2022; Pasirayi et al., 2022; Schmidt et al., 2021; Sterbenk et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2021). Furthermore, businesses may align themselves with an issue that resonates with their values, branding, or capabilities. The stronger this alignment, the more positively their messages on that issue are perceived (Lim and Young, 2021; Sterbenk et al., 2021). Personal beliefs of company leaders can also play a role in a company's involvement in an issue (Chatterji & Toffel, 2019; Leak et al., 2015; Sterbenk et al., 2021).

Numerous studies have explored brand activism as a critical factor influencing consumer attitudes, behaviors, the brand-customer relationship, and financial outcomes. Consumers closely scrutinize a brand's stance on controversial topics, whether it is neutral, in agreement, or disagreement (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Dodd & Supa, 2015; Hong & Li, 2021; Hydock et al., 2020; Korschun et al., 2016; Klostermann et al., 2021; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Pasirayi et al., 2022; Rim et al., 2019; Schmidt et al., 2021). Brands that choose to engage with these contentious issues often adopt a value-driven strategy rooted in ideology, beliefs, moral principles, and political orientation, signaling their socio-political identity to consumers, employees, and other stakeholders (Park & Jiang, 2020; Pasirayi et al., 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020). For instance, Chick-fil-A has publicly expressed an anti-LGBTQ stance through its charitable donations, reflecting its religious and conservative values, which influence its marketing strategy. A value-driven strategy also leads to adjustments in product development and marketing communications, as seen with Ben & Jerry's ice cream brand aligning its packaging and menus with its political orientation. Companies may express their stance

through campaigns, financial support, or corporate policies, such as their approach to hiring immigrants. A company's involvement in a socio-political issue can significantly impact its image and strategic decisions. By signaling corporate values and socio-political identity, companies attract consumers who share similar values while distancing those whose values do not align (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Schmidt et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2021). This dynamic plays a crucial role in consumer segmentation and targeting, where the socio-political orientation of consumers is a valuable variable for market segmentation (Weber et al., 2021). The following sub-section will delve into the mediating and moderating variables. Mediating variables clarify that before consumers form perceptions, take actions, and decide about a brand, and they undergo a judgment process when processing or providing feedback on the brand's activist actions. These mediating variables include consumer-brand identification, the perceived fit between the brand and the issue, and the perceived authenticity of the brand's activism. Meanwhile, moderating variables explain the factors influencing the magnitude of brand activism's impact on outcomes. Specifically, these moderating variables encompass a consumer's social perception, personal ideology, moral values, and ethical judgments.

Consumer-brand Identification

The concept of consumer-brand identification has been employed in brand activism studies by (Alharbi et al., 2022; Hydock et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Park & Jiang, 2020; Xu et al., 2021), adapting this concept from Bhattacharya and Sen (2003). Consumer-brand identification describes how consumers connect with a company based on their perception that the brand's identity holds personal importance and contributes to shaping their self-identity and self-image (Park & Jiang, 2020; Xu et al., 2021). When consumers have a high level of consumer-brand identification, their self-image closely aligns with the values and image of the brand. Previous studies have empirically shown a positive correlation between consumer-brand identification and marketing outcomes (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Xu et al., 2021). In other words, consumers tend to choose brands they perceive as aligning with their self-image to express their identity (Bhagwat et al., 2020).

In the context of brand activism studies, it is found that consumer-brand identification plays a mediating role in shaping consumer behavior and attitudes. In line with (Alharbi et al., 2022; Bhagwat et al., 2020), the alignment of values between the consumer and the brand significantly influences an individual's brand preference, purchase decision, and the decision to recommend a boycott. Furthermore, consumer-brand identification significantly correlated with attitudinal loyalty (Park & Jiang, 2020). (Xu et al., 2021) study elucidates the intricate relationship process involving consumer-company identification and its impact on consumer expectations, attitudes, boycotts, and purchases. This examination considers the perceived psychological distance from the company. When consumers perceive a closer psychological distance from the company, they tend to develop a strong identification with the company, resulting in elevated expectations for the company.

Additionally, it is essential to highlight that as consumer-company identification intensifies, there is an overall increase in boycott (purchase) and boycott intentions among people. However, individuals also have an in-group commitment influenced by group norms that affect their boycott intention. Furthermore, (Hydock et al., 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020) explain that the influence of consumer-brand identification on brand attitude is asymmetric. The study consistently found that when consumers disagree with the brand's stance, it decreases brand attitude. However, there is generally no significant effect on brand attitude when consumers agree with the brand's stance. This phenomenon was elucidated by Hydock et al. (2020) from the perspective of negativity bias, indicating that negativity bias

affects the influence of brand activism on an individual level, suggesting that individuals tend to respond more strongly when they encounter opposition or negativity.

Perceived Brand-issue Fit

Perceived brand-issue fit is described as the alignment between a controversial issue or topic that a brand addresses and the brand's values or image as perceived by consumers (Coman et al., 2022; Lim & Young, 2021; Mirzaei et al., 2022; Parcha & Westerman, 2020; Pasirayi et al., 2022). In contrast to Corporate Social Responsibility (C.S.R.), the controversial issues that a company addresses in its brand activism may not be directly tied to its core business operations. Nevertheless, customers still anticipate an alignment between the issues raised and the company's well-established meaning, image, positioning, and culture. When a company engages in brand activism, consumers assess whether the issues addressed align with the values the company has upheld over time.

Perceived brand-issue fit plays a role as an antecedent of perceived brand activism authenticity (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Schmidt et al., 2021), predictors for corporate reputation (Lim & Young, 2021), attitude change (Parcha & Westerman, 2020), and firm value (Pasirayi et al., 2022). Consumers evaluate the alignment between the brand and the issue based on the company's identities and motives, as highlighted in studies by (Kim et al., 2020; Korschun et al., 2016). In their study, (Korschun et al., 2016) found two distinct perceptions of brand identity: the result-oriented and value-oriented company and these perceptions significantly influence consumer purchase intention. Consumers expect a value-oriented company to take a stand, and their purchase intention decreases when the company remains neutral. Conversely, in the case of a result-oriented company, consumers perceive the company as hypocritical when it takes a stand, leading to a lower purchase intention when the company participates in the issue.

Furthermore, (Kim et al., 2020) found that consumers' perceptions of a company's brand activism motives significantly affected their attitudes and behaviors. If the campaign was seen as driven by company values, it led to more positive attitudes and increased intentions for positive word of mouth (PWOM). On the other hand, if the activism was perceived as ego-driven or due to stakeholder pressures or image concerns, it resulted in less favorable attitudes and stronger intentions for Negative Word of Mouth (NWOM).

Perceived Brand Activism Authenticity

Consumers often question the motives behind companies' participation in brand activism actions (Ferenius & Kotras, 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020). They wonder whether a company's support for socio-political issues is genuine and aligned with its core values or if it is merely a strategic move to follow trends and seek opportunistic profits from the publicity gains, sometimes referred to as 'woke-washing' (Moorman, 2020; Sterbenk et al., 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Therefore, several academic literatures emphasize the importance of authenticity in brand activism. Authenticity in brand activism practice is defined as the alignment of a company's or brand's values with its activist marketing messaging and corporate practices (Ferenius & Kotras, 2021; Fayez et al., 2022; Moorman, 2020; Schleier, 2021; Schmidt et al., 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020). According to (Lim & Young, 2021), in the context of brand activism, authenticity refers to the genuineness and consistency of a firm's commitment to the advocated issue, reflecting the organization's true identity. In the study by (Rivaroli et al., 2022), authentic brand activism is defined as a concept that encompasses

not just the message conveyed by the company through the brand but also the entirety of the company's business practices.

In the study by (Fayez et al., 2022), it was found that brand activism authenticity serves as a mediating factor in the relationship between brand activism and the development of brand love. This study reveals that different forms of communication (financial, non-financial, and rhetorical) have varying effects on brand authenticity, and whether they lead to brand love depends on the brand equity level (high vs. low). The findings suggest that for brand activism messaging to be regarded as genuine or authentic, it must emphasize a specific non-financial commitment. However, it is more effective for high-equity brands to include a financial commitment in the messaging for better outcomes. The subsequent studies by (Lim & Young, 2021; Schmidt et al., 2021; Clemente-Mediavilla et al., 2021) confirm that perceived authenticity in brand activism positively influences corporate reputation. When consumers perceive brand activism as authentic, it leads to the development of brand trust, which subsequently influences brand loyalty, as indicated in the study by (Rivaroli et al., 2022). (Hydock et al., 2020) emphasize that authenticity is a mediating factor between brand activism and individual-level choices. When a brand is perceived as lacking authenticity, positive feelings and consumer identification become neutral because consumers do not believe the brand genuinely communicates its true values and character.

Consumer's Social Perception

From various brand activism studies, a recurring pattern emerges of mediator groups that affect the size of the impact of brand activism on marketing outcomes. This pattern aligns with the ideas (Ordabayeva et al., 2022), suggesting that consumers' social perceptions impact consumer behavior at three levels: the individual level (self), others, and the broader system or society.

Self: When responding to brand activism actions, individuals go through a process at the individual level that influences their attitudes and behavior towards a brand. In this context, individuals are driven by their emotions and feelings. Research conducted online indicates that individuals who engage in boycotts are often motivated by anger and a belief in their ability to make a difference (self-efficacy). As a result, they tend to be more vocal and mobilized than those who support the brands, as observed in the study by (Rim et al., 2019). A study (Hydock et al., 2020) conducted a market study to explore the effects of Brand Activism from the perspective of identity-based consumption and negativity bias. The findings indicate that at the individual level, negativity bias plays a significant role in influencing how people respond to Brand Activism. It is found that individuals show stronger reactions when they encounter opposition to the company's Brand Activism. (Leak et al., 2015) discovered that consumers' anger plays a moderating role in the influence of brand activism on changes in brand attitude. However, if the prior attitude toward the brand is positive, a halo effect occurs, resulting in consumers experiencing less anger when the brand engages in activism.

Others: Consumer responses to brand activism are also influenced by social perceptions of other people's consumption preferences and experiences. (Parcha & Westerman, 2020) suggest that individuals make judgments based on the evaluations made by others. In this case, when a brand engages in activism, it significantly impacts an individual's attitude when other brands or companies support the statement. Furthermore, in identifying with the brand and the issues raised by the brand, in-group commitment (group norms) is also a predictor of consumer purchase and boycott intention (Xu et al., 2021). In-group refers to the social group in which individuals form their identity.

Broader system: (Hong & Li, 2021), using the theoretical framework of the spiral of silence, found that the escalation of consumer support towards Brand Activism depends on the opinion in the environment, meaning that individual reactions are influenced by society. Smith et al. (2021) reached a similar conclusion, stating that the escalation of public backlash is influenced by the facilitative environment surrounding the issue. The studies suggest that negative news about a brand, such as public backlash or boycott campaigns from opposing groups, can lead to a significant escalation due to its impact on individual reactions and the magnitude of public support. On a different note, Klostermann et al. (2021) discovered that online protests can magnify the negative impact of Brand Activism on brand perception, making it more detrimental to the brand's image and reputation.

Consumer's Ideology, Religiosity, and Moral Ethical Judgement

The literature points to the importance of consumers' moral and ethical judgments, along with their ideological beliefs, in anticipating how brand activism influences marketing outcomes (Flight & Coker, 2022; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Swimberghe et al., 2011; Villagra, Clemente-Mediavilla, et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2021). (Flight & Coker, 2022) note that individuals with similar identity perceptions or political ideologies tend to exhibit similar behavioral patterns, including their attraction to brands. (Clemente-Mediavilla, et al., 2021) It discovered that brand activism's impact on brand reputation and equity is moderated by individuals' political ideologies, particularly among conservatives and liberals. Thus, consumer ideology can be a valuable tool for market segmentation and assessing the impact of brand activism (Hydock et al., 2020; Klostermann et al., 2021). Additionally, in a study by (Swimberghe et al., 2011), religiosity emerged as a predictor of consumer behavior in response to brand activism, primarily due to the moral and ethical judgment process. When an individual's religiosity conflicts with a brand's stance, they are more likely to express their disagreement through actions like boycotts. (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020) found that the moral reasoning process influences an individual's attitude toward a brand.

Marketing Output

Brand activism can predict marketing outcomes, which can be categorized into three main groups: consumer behavioral and attitudinal outcomes, consumer-brand relationships, and financial-related outcomes.

Table 3. The Influence of Brand Activism on Marketing Output

Aggregate	Detail Construct	Author
Consumer behavioral and attitudinal outcomes	Brand attitude change	Leak et al. (2015), Mukherjee & Althuizen, (2020), Parcha & Westerman, (2020), Batista et al. (2022)
	Boycott/boycott participation	Swimberghe et al. (2011), Hong & Li, (2021), Rim et al. (2019), Xu et al. (2021)
	Boycott recommendation	Alharbi et al. (2022)
	Purchase intentions	Chatterji & Toffel (2019), Korschun et al. (2016), Dodd & Supa (2015), Alharbi et al. (2022)
	Complaint intentions	Swimberghe et al. (2011)
	Positive/negative WoM	Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020), Kim et al. (2020)
	Brand perceptions	Schmidt et al., 2021; Klostermann et al., 2021
	Avoidance intentions	Korschun et al. (2016)
	Brand preference	Alharbi et al. (2022)
	Consumer active reactions (retweets, quotes and replies)	Berestova et al (2022)
Consumer-brand relationship	Brand loyalty	Johnson et al. (2021), Park & Jiang (2020), Rivaloli et al. (2022)
	Brand love	Fayez et al. (2022)

Aggregate	Detail Construct	Author
Financial-related outcomes	Brand trust	Rivaroli et al. (2022)
	Firm value	Bhagwat et al. (2020), Villagra, Monfort, et al. (2021) Pasirayi et al. (2022)
	Brand market share	Hydock et al. (2020)
	Corporate Reputation	Lim & Young (2021) Villagra, Clemente-Mediavilla, et al. (2021)
	Brand Equity	Villagra, Clemente-Mediavilla, et al. (2021)

The Benefit and the Risk

A defining characteristic of Brand Socio-political Activism activities is that companies respond to socio-political issues by taking a stance and aligning themselves with a particular side. When brands engage in such conversations, they are compelled to pick a position and either challenge or defend the existing status quo (Moorman, 2020). This aspect can offer both advantages and risks to the company, as it might result in polarization and conflicting ideologies, morals, and values among consumers. (Dodd & Supa, 2015) suggest that Brand Activism can have a positive impact on consumer purchase intentions. The results reveal that purchase intentions are high when an individual's beliefs align with the organization's stance on the issue and vice versa. The congruence between beliefs and the company's position is a significant factor influencing purchase intentions. Shetty et al. (2019), who investigated Millennials' perceptions of Brand Activism, found that regardless of their gender and income, Millennials prefer to purchase brands that actively engage in Brand Activism.

The active involvement of a company or brand in Brand Activism can strengthen and reinforce its brand identity and brand equity (Schmidt et al., 202; Clemente-Mediavilla, et al., 2021). Moreover, implementing Brand Activism can lead to increased consumer engagement and foster a stronger emotional connection with the target audience. Consumers tend to favor brands that resonate with their values and self-identity (Intravia et al., 2020; Xu et al., 2021), leading to common behaviors such as an affinity for the brand (Flight & Coker, 2022) and a willingness to engage in "buycotts" or express purchase intentions (Xu et al., 2021). When brands take a stance on contentious issues, they often garner media attention, resulting in heightened visibility and increased recognition. This sets them apart from competitors who choose to remain neutral on such matters (Rim et al., 2019; Schmidt et al., 2021).

Despite its benefits, engaging in Brand Activism can be harmful and risky for the company (Kim et al., 2020). When a brand takes a stance on a particular issue, there will be those who agree and support the brand's actions, while others may disagree and express their opposition due to the company's stance conflicting with their values, morality, ideology, and religion (Leak et al., 2015; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Swimberghe et al., 2011). For instance, in the case of Nike, there were contrasting reactions from the public - some who shared similar values with Nike appreciated their steps, while others disagreed and responded with public backlash. Some individuals expressed their disagreement with Nike's decision to feature Kaepernick in their advertisement by announcing their intentions to boycott the brand. Some even went as far as threatening to burn their Nike sneakers or cut off the iconic swoosh logo from their socks as a symbolic gesture (Hydock et al., 2020).

According to several studies, Brand Activism practices also pose a threat to the company's financial performance and firm value in the stock market (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Hydock et al., 2020; Pasirayi et al., 2022; Villagra, Monfort, et al., 2021). In addition to the findings mentioned earlier, several studies also reveal that Brand Activism can trigger a rapid escalation of public reactions, resulting in a heightened intention among consumers to boycott the brand, fostering a negative perception toward the brand (Flight & Coker, 2022;

Klostermann et al., 2021), brand attitude (Kim et al., 2020; Leak et al., 2015; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Parcha & Westerman, 2020) and brand equity (Villagra, Clemente-Mediavilla, et al., 2021). This indicates that when Brand Activism is not well-received or is perceived negatively by certain segments of the public, the consequences for the brand can be severe and immediate (Hong & Li, 2021; Hydock et al., 2020; Klostermann et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2021).

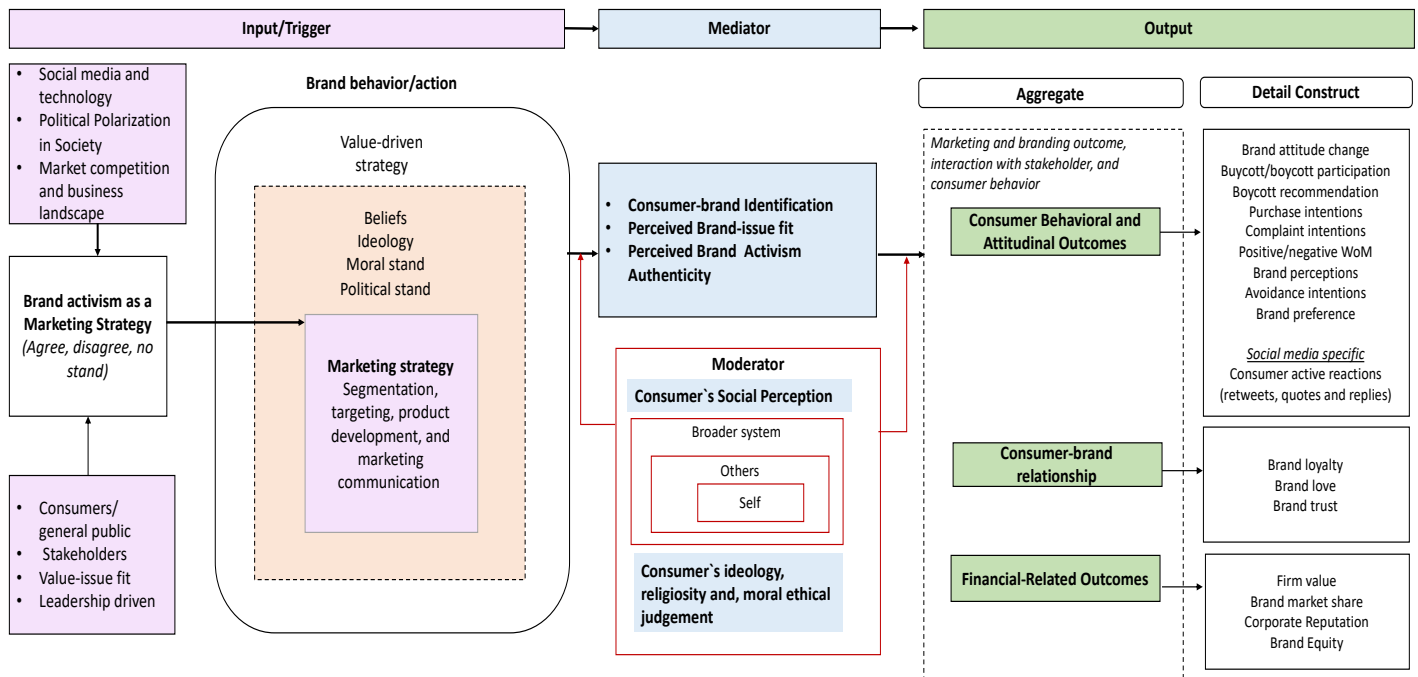


Figure 6. Conceptual Framework

5. RESEARCH GAP AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTION

The current body of literature provides initial insights into understanding brand activism within the context of marketing strategy. However, given the emerging nature of the brand activism field, some unexplored avenues and gaps warrant further research and examination. The first point to highlight is the asymmetrical impact of brand activism on attitude and behavior (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Xu et al., 2021). Further research is required to delve into the psychological perspective to comprehend this asymmetry better. For example, researchers can utilize concepts like the value-action gap or the theory of moral sentiment to investigate the psychological tension that arises when individuals respond to a brand's stance that contradicts their morals and values while simultaneously having a strong pre-existing relationship with the brand, such as brand attachment. Researchers may also explore other marketing outcomes, such as the impact of brand activism on consumer switching behavior. We also recommend exploring gender and demographic differences in responses, such as comparing older and younger generations.

Additional research questions can include what actions a brand should take after experiencing adverse publicity events, such as a boycott. Furthermore, given the prevalence of brand activism in the online world, scholars should consider comparing online and offline communication channels and explore how various social media platforms distinctly influence firm value and other marketing outcomes. Moreover, concerning the unit of analysis, existing studies have predominantly focused on consumers or the general public. Future research has the potential to investigate brand activism from the perspectives of company employees and

various other stakeholders. Research has primarily been conducted in countries with individualist cultures, such as the U.S.A. Further research can explore the topic in countries with collectivist cultures for comparative insights.

6. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

Brand activism can be a powerful strategy for brands to engage with their target audience and demonstrate their commitment to socio-political issues. However, it is essential to recognize that brand activism also carries inherent risks, which brands should consider before diving into such practices. Several studies provide valuable guidance and recommendations for companies interested in brand activism. The first step for a brand or company considering brand activism is to assess and evaluate its existing values and the image they project to consumers. Brand managers must review past public communications, messages, and practices to ensure consistency (Lim & Young, 2021; Schmidt et al., 2021; Schleier, 2021). Pasirayi et al. (2022) found that promoting issues consistent with corporate values can help reduce financial losses in brand activism. The alignment between corporate values and the supported issue is crucial, particularly when dealing with polarizing issues. Firms should publicly support issues that align with their mission and values with confidence. Furthermore, ensuring that brand activism aligns with an organization's values is essential to prevent consumers from viewing it as opportunistic or inauthentic. By making sure that brand activism efforts reflect the company's core values, brands can establish a genuine and sincere connection with their audience, boosting credibility and trustworthiness (Lim & Young, 2021; Mirzaei et al., 2022; Rivaroli et al., 2022; Schmidt et al., 2021).

Additionally, Vredenburg et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of consistency not only between values and issues but also extending to activist marketing messaging and prosocial corporate practices. Rivaroli et al. (2022) highlighted the need for consistency between brand communication and actual business and branding practices. For example, a company promoting Black Lives Matter may face criticism if it lacks diversity among its employees, as it may be seen as inauthentic in its brand activism efforts. If brands are not known for social consciousness and suddenly support unrelated social issues that don't align with their values, image, and culture, they risk being perceived as hypocritical or "woke-washing." However, if they genuinely wish to engage, they should do so wholeheartedly from the start, involving both financial commitment and addressing counterarguments to demonstrate their genuine commitment to the cause (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Building legitimacy in brand activism requires time, effort, and continuous engagement (Lim & Young, 2021; Rim et al., 2019). Selecting topics and issues carefully and maintaining persistent and continuous activities over an extended period is crucial (Koch, 2020; Rim et al., 2019; Rivaroli et al., 2022; Schmidt et al., 2021; Villagra, Monfort, et al., 2021).

The next step is to analyze and survey the company's customer base and target market. This proactive approach allows companies to anticipate the potential impact of brand activism and its public reception. Consumers prefer brands that align with their identity and contribute to their sense of self by incorporating relevant cultural elements. Brands that help consumers create social personas through symbolic consumption are favored because they enable consumers to express and shape their social identities (Schmidt et al., 2021). Research shows that consumers' religion, political ideology, ethical perspectives, race, and social views influence their purchasing behavior, brand preference, brand attraction, and brand relationship (Alharbi et al., 2022; Flight & Coker, 2022; Swimberghe et al., 2011). Market segmentation based on consumer identity, such as political ideology or social views, is recommended (Flight & Coker, 2022). Klostermann et al., 2021 found that brands with a

highly homogenous customer base with similar socio-political views may engage in brand activism without significant negative repercussions. The support from customers who favor brand activism may outweigh the relatively more robust responses from those who oppose it or are skeptical of brand activism in general.

On the contrary, when a brand's customer base is socio-politically heterogeneous, reducing the negative effect of brand activism on brand perception becomes challenging. (Hydock et al., 2020) added that brands with politically diverse customers benefit small brands with a limited market share but may negatively impact large-share brands. Varying socio-political views within the customer base can lead to conflicting responses and make it difficult for brands to navigate brand activism successfully. Analyzing the consumer base, target audience, and market scale is crucial for informed decisions about participating in brand activism activities.

Furthermore, for brands engaging in brand activism, developing effective messaging strategies and maintaining positive relationships with existing consumers is crucial. Businesses should focus on clear and consistent messaging through well-coordinated marketing communications (Leak et al., 2015). Company leaders and employees must understand and embrace the supported issue, facilitated by internal branding and marketing strategies (Rivaroli et al., 2022). Another critical recommendation for companies or brands is to cultivate positive pre-existing relationships with consumers. By doing so, when they engage in brand activism, consumers may be more likely to separate their moral judgment or engage in moral decoupling. This can help mitigate the adverse effects of brand activism, preventing significant changes in brand attitude or reducing boycott actions or adverse reactions toward the brand (Leak et al., 2015; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). The choice of the source for the stand also affects consumers' reactions; the more distant the source, the more they tend to separate moral judgment. For example, a C.E.O. or manager's statement is perceived as more distant than the brand itself on social media statements (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

Moreover, based on research findings, if a company faces public backlash after taking a stand and then issuing an apology, this apology may worsen consumer perceptions, leading them to view the company as inconsistent and inauthentic (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Leak et al., 2015). Therefore, apologizing is not recommended in brand activism practice. Research findings from academic literature also provide recommendations for brand activism in the context of social media. For instance, when brands post messages with brand social activism on social media, consumers evaluate brands that reply using an assertive tone more favorably than those using a sarcastic tone (Batista et al., 2022). Going all out to express the company's values and beliefs through authentic brand activism can reinforce the brand identity and resonate more effectively with consumers.

7. CONCLUSION

The shift in consumer behavior and increasing polarization demand that brands participate in advocating socio-political issues. Although brand activism is relatively new, it has garnered significant attention from researchers. It has been studied from various perspectives and research methods, such as survey-based approaches, experiments, event study analysis, and case studies. Through the existing literature, we have explained how the process of brand activism can influence marketing outcomes like consumer attitudes and behavior, consumer-brand relationships, and financial outcomes. This influence is mediated by consumer-brand identification, perceived brand-issue fit, and perceived brand activism authenticity. The extent of this influence is affected by consumers' social perceptions, ideologies, levels of religiosity, and moral and ethical judgments. In this study, we have

outlined both the advantages and potential drawbacks of adopting brand activism. We have also provided managerial insights for those considering brand activism implementation and proposed directions for addressing gaps in future research.

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