

How to effectively communicate brand activism

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Abstract

Given the growing expectations on the part of stakeholders for brands to assume greater responsibility towards social issues, it would be expected that most brand campaigns taking an active position on relevant socio-political issues, as is the case with brand activism campaigns, would receive positive feedback from the public. However, there is evidence that brand activism is not always a winning strategy for brands, and can even harm them, especially if the communication of activist campaigns is not efficient, is not aligned with the brand's conduct or stakeholder's values or is not considered authentic. In this way, various authors advocate a strategic approach to brand activism, in which companies seek to have an impact on a socio-political level without losing business performance. Based on an extensive review of the most prominent literature in the area and real examples of successful and unsuccessful activist brand communications, this article explores a strategic aspect to brand activism, providing insights into how brands can effectively communicate the causes they defend. Since brand activism remains a non-consensual concept in the business world, this literature review aims to contribute to the debate on how brands can positively engage in brand activism, obtaining greater support from all stakeholders.

Keywords: Brand activism communication; Strategic brand activism; Cause-stakeholder alignment; Brand-Cause fit; Authentic brand activism; Dialogical communication.

1. Introduction

Activism is not a new phenomenon at the corporate level. Social issues have influenced companies' business strategies from a very early age, and the relationship between business and society has been addressed both in academia and in the business world (e.g., Aguinis & Glavas, 2012). However, if initially these activities were an exception within the marketplace, recently more and more companies and even CEOs are getting publicly involved in socio-political issues (Chatterji & Toffel, 2018; Coombs & Holladay, 2017; Korschun, 2021).

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Several companies have been recently supporting social issues and causes through activist actions, such as activist communication campaigns, partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), creation of petitions, or protests organization (Eilert & Cherup, 2020; Swaminathan et al., 2020), and using their platforms to take strong positions on issues that belonged exclusively to the social and political arena (Parcha & Kingsley Westerman, 2020). In fact, nowadays companies are no longer just responding to their social responsibilities but adopting a more demanding role in society, assuming themselves as protagonists in the processes of social change and seeking to inspire stakeholders to also contribute to these changes (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

From an organizational perspective, Sarkar and Kotler (2018) describe this phenomenon as brand activism, a values-driven strategy of brands, focused on the biggest and most pressing issues facing society and related to the common good. In the same line, Eilert and Cherup (2020) state that brand activism refers to a company's willingness to take a stand on social, political, economic, and environmental issues to create societal change by influencing the attitudes and behaviors of actors in its institutional environment. In brand activism strategies, as advocated by Moorman (2020) and Vredenburg et al. (2020), brands become not only activists, but also educators/advocators, raising awareness and encouraging behavioral and socio-political change for the creation of a more egalitarian and sustainable society. With this strategy, companies can not only improve important socio-political challenges, but also respond to the current demands of stakeholders, who increasingly show concerns about the social and environmental policies of companies and pressure brands to contribute to social change (e.g., Wright, 2020).

Given the potential of brand activism to fostering win-win situations for companies and stakeholders, it would be expected that the number of firms taking an active position on social issues would increasingly grow (Toit, 2016) and that the feedback from the public would be mostly positive (Barton et al., 2018; Shetty et al., 2019). However, there is evidence that brand activism can either be a winning strategy or have negative consequences for companies, depending on how effectively companies manage to implement these strategies (Cammarota et al., 2021; Eyada, 2020). The risk can be even greater for brands with high market shares, as dominant brands have more customers to lose and less to gain (Hydock et al., 2020).

The fact that brand activism is often considered a riskier strategy when compared, for example, to Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), is mostly related to brand activism addressing controversial, contested, or polarized socio-political issues (e.g., racism, sexism, or global warming), challenging social conventions, so brands run the risk of alienating certain stakeholders (Coombs & Holladay, 2017; Moorman, 2020). The controversial nature of brand activism is even highlighted in some definitions of the concept, such as that of Dodd and Supa (2015) and Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020), who define brand activism as the act of taking a stand on socio-political issues on which society has not yet reached a consensus. Controversial issues have competing values and interests, engender disagreements about assertions or actions, are politically sensitive, and arouse strong emotions (Nalick et al., 2016), so the response to brand activism can vary greatly, even within the various stakeholder segments (Pimentel & Didonet, 2021). At the same time, when brands address socio-political causes or events, the company's positioning on these topics become part of the brand's identity, which can strengthen the brand-stakeholder relationship but also alienate some stakeholder groups if they don't agree with the company's opinion (Jungblut & Johnen, 2021), feel offended by it (Barros, 2019) or feel that the brand is engaging with the cause only as a marketing strategy to increase sales or obtain corporate benefits (Eyada, 2020).

Consequently, the reasons driving brand's activist actions are doubly scrutinized (Kozinets & Jenkins, 2021; Lin, 2018), to identify whether these actions stem from authentic motives or are a marketing move to increase products/services sales and generate profits (Garfield, 2018). In cases where stakeholders do not agree or accept the brands' activist message, brands can suffer painful losses, for example in terms of market value (Villagra et al., 2021), financial performance, customer equity and

reputation because of potential loss of customers (Méndez-Suárez & Crespo-Tejero, 2021), as well as harm company-stakeholders relations, with stakeholders having negative reactions towards the brand, such as backlashes or boycotts (McDonnell & Werner, 2016; Moorman, 2020).

For this reason, and despite brand activism being primarily linked to intangible values and social or other non-commercial purposes, several authors advocate a strategic approach to brand activism, in which eventual gains and losses must be calculated before the company assumes a public stance in the socio-political landscape (e.g., Korschun, 2021; Moorman, 2020) and brands' stances and actions are communicated effectively so that they are well perceived by the target audience (Key et al., 2021; Zdravkovic et al., 2010). Indeed, only if brand's activist communications are well perceived and accepted by stakeholders can companies be able to promote effective social changes and obtain legitimacy and support from their stakeholders and society itself (e.g., Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Despite the relevance of the topic and the recent great attention from the media and public relations agencies regarding brand activism, research on brand activist communication and its impacts is still very scarce, compromising the adoption of this strategy by businesses. This article aims to provide insights into how brands can effectively approach and communicate activist causes, based on an extensive review of the most prominent literature in the field and real examples of successful and unsuccessful activist brand communications. More specifically, this literature review discusses and debates the factors that brands must consider in their activist communications to truly promote social change without experiencing backlashes or loss of support from their stakeholders, thus contributing to brands' greater awareness of how they can positively engage in brand activism and cause impact.

2. A strategic approach to brand activism

From a strategic perspective of brand activism, the objective of companies that engage in activism should be, on the one hand, to have a socio-political impact and, on the other, to protect and even improve business performance, not needing to give up of profits or market share to be politically active, as long as they do it effectively (Korschun, 2021). Currently, avoiding taking a stand, or trying to appear neutral on a controversial issue, can also pose risks for brands, so companies should not simply ignore brand activism but adopt a strategic perspective in their approach (Blanco et al., 2023; Vredenburg et al., 2018). Companies must therefore justify the definition of the issue to be addressed, its legitimacy and the company's own legitimacy to address the subject, defining specific guidelines and protocols to address social issues (Coombs & Holladay, 2017), particularly on those most directly related to their core business and operations (Lin, 2018). Champlin et al. (2019) and Eilert and Cherup (2020) also argue that, before engaging in an activist strategy and claiming a social issue as an integral part of brand positioning, companies should consider whether they have the knowledge and moral authority to address the issue and how effectively communicate their understanding and stance on the issue.

In this perspective, Pimentel and Didonet (2021) argue that companies should plan and implement their activist actions and communications in the same way that they implement other corporate strategies, encompassing three steps.

The first step is to define the strategy content, which includes defining its purpose and consists of the set of choice of issues, relationships, goals, timing, and resources that are deployed for competitive advantage. When defining the issues to be addressed, Kozinets and Jenkins (2021) and Korschun (2021) argue that it is important for companies to understand the socio-political concerns of their stakeholders, as well as their position on the issues the company intends to defend, rather than adopting a responsive stance to any social problem. This may imply, for example, debating the involvement in certain causes with the company's employees (Chatterji & Toffel, 2018). This is because one of the major reasons for risk in activism strategies is the existence of a gap between the values of the business and those of its stakeholders, so organizations must create a strategy that bonds their values to the values of their

stakeholders and society itself, which is only possible when companies understand the demand and expectations of stakeholders in relation to social issues (Kumar, 2020). Chatterji and Toffel (2018) and Lin (2018) also adds that companies should invest their capital and expertise in issues of which they have knowledge and for which they offer a comparative advantage, in addition to verifying whether their internal policies reflect the purpose and identity they seek to project in the activism campaign, authentically articulating their core values and missions.

The next step is the strategy formulation process, which is an iterative decision process to determine how the strategy will be implemented. This encompasses, for example, market analysis, stakeholders' behavior understanding, target segmentation and selection, risk assessment, positioning, partnerships, communication strategies and action plans (Pimentel & Didonet, 2021). Risk types and sources must be identified, cataloged, and tracked to develop early warning indicators of potential problems and action plans for sudden problems (Korschun, 2021). This can be done, for example, by searching news stories and social media discussions on the cause and the surrounding societal debate from a variety of sources, from mainstream to niche sources (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022). In addition, Eilert and Cherup (2020) argue that companies can define a series of influence strategies to shape the attitudes and behaviors of stakeholders in relation to the socio-political cause defended, for example by internally institutionalizing policies that support the social issue, creating/changing market norms, providing persuasive data/information about the cause, partnering with other companies or NGOs, or even taking more extreme actions such as organizing protests and boycotts. With regard to partnerships, carrying out public-private partnerships, for example with local governments, can help companies to direct the problem framework towards issues of public interest and generate debates that bring greater public attention and/or monetary support to the cause (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Finally, the last step corresponds to the strategy implementation, that is, the actions taken by the company to implement the strategy, which can be managed within the scope of marketing-mix (Pimentel & Didonet, 2021). Romani et al. (2015) add that, once the strategy is implemented, companies must continually monitor adverse reactions to it, planning response strategies (such as communication campaigns or public relations activities) to activities judged as controversial or negative that provide convincing explanations about the company's actions, in order to prevent the spread of negative effects such as bad publicity and negative word-of-mouth. For their part, Vredenburg et al. (2020) further suggest that labels, third-party certifications, or verified activist ratings should be created to help brands evaluate and prove their activist efforts.

Still from a strategic point of view, Chatterji and Toffel (2018) point out that companies should always establish metrics to assess the impact of brand activism, such as retweets, mentions in the media, public opinion polls or real changes in policies and/or attitudes/behaviors. Pimentel and Didonet (2021) also analyze the possible outcomes of brand activism programs, establishing that the implemented strategy can be evaluated in terms of operational results (e.g., metrics related to stakeholder mindset, product-market performance, stakeholder and society behavior, etc.), financial performance (e.g., sales revenue, profit, revenue growth, investor returns, equity risk, etc.), relational outcomes (such as the improvement of the company-stakeholder relationship), as well as in terms of social change, such as changes in legislation and policy-making, improvements in social and environmental well-being, or changes in culture and/or public opinion. Regarding social change, companies can evaluate the results of their activist strategies from a top-down or bottom-up point of view. From a top-down perspective, companies influence social institutions that affect the legitimacy of the issue directly, for example, through the legal environment (Eilert & Cherup, 2020). Alternatively, companies can also create change by influencing individual actors such as employees, customers, suppliers, or other companies, thus creating bottom-up change (Stephan et al., 2016). These bottom-up strategies make the causes known and normalize the problem in the market and, over time, can help to produce, support and/or accelerate a change in the stakeholder value system (Eilert & Cherup, 2020).

Thus, as stressed by Moorman (2020), brands must approach activism from a strategic point of view and should not be political unless they are able to do so consistently, connecting with target markets in a tactical way. To be able to build a positive connection with their stakeholders in activist campaigns, brands must then clarify the link between their socio-political strategy and their business strategy, which can be done particularly through their communication activities (Morhart et al., 2015).

3. Effective communication of brand activism: insights and examples

Since brand activism involves a public statement by companies in relation to socio-political issues, through which companies proactively seek to change public opinion and try to raise awareness and galvanize additional support around the issue, communication is a very important part of these campaigns and must be supported by a well-defined alignment between the brand's purposes, values, and practices (Korschun, 2021). Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) states that brand activism requires significant structural changes in social communication and responsibility practices, since all messages, slogans and content are based on values.

Activist brand campaigns thus not only make it possible to publicize the cause defended by the brand, but also end up transmitting the values and beliefs that the brand defends and, therefore, allows stakeholders to assess their identification with the company, namely whether it is in sync with their personal moral foundations (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). The greater the identification of stakeholders with the values defended by the brand, the better their attitude towards the activism campaign and the brand itself, allowing it to obtain very positive gains in terms of brand support (e.g., Cammarota et al., 2021), brand reputation (e.g. Vredenburg et al., 2020), brand loyalty (e.g., Chatterji & Toffel, 2018), brand trust (e.g., Kumar, 2020), sales volume (e.g., Shetty et al., 2019), stock returns (e.g., Blanco et al., 2023), or employee retention (Moorman, 2020), also strengthening the brand-stakeholder relationship, which can often lead to boycotting movements, that is, the deliberate purchase of the brand's products/services, in support of its policies and stances (e.g., Kumar, 2020).

In this way, the literature has pointed out some key factors that brand activist communication must encompass to effectively defend a socio-political cause and create positive social change, while it congruently mirrors the brand's mission and purposes, reinforces the brand's legitimacy as an activist and promotes positive strategic results for the brand.

3.1. Alignment of the cause with the values of stakeholders

Stakeholders' positive or negative response to a brand activism campaign often depends on how much the brand defends or violates social norms accepted by its audience (Shivakanth et al., 2019) and whether it addresses topics relevant to their own life experiences (Baek et al., 2017). Since the target audience's perceptions are influenced by their interests, education, income, or social status, they usually have certain issues they care most about (Eyada, 2020). At the same time, brand stakeholders can be more progressive or conservative, which also influences the greater or lesser pressure they place on brands to get involved in activism and the way they react to brand activist campaigns (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018).

In fact, there are still many consumers and other stakeholders who believe that a brand should not take a political stand, promote socio-political ideas, or get involved with them (Cammarota et al., 2021), which can result in a negative feeling towards activism campaigns, boycotting the company and causing negative word-of-mouth (D'Arco & Marino, 2018). The industry in which the company operates can also affect stakeholders' response to activism campaigns and the effectiveness of these actions, given the greater or lesser pressure of stakeholders for the company to give an opinion and act to resolve sensitive issues (Pimentel & Didonet, 2021). For example, there are certain types of industries, such as the

tobacco industry, which may be evaluated as more regressive and will not suffer so much pressure from their stakeholders to take a stand on topics such as health (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). On the other hand, if a brand makes frequent statements about a certain social issue, this creates an expectation for it to continue to address the topic or speak out when there is some controversy about the subject (Korschun, 2021).

In this way, the alignment of brand activist actions with the values of key stakeholders, especially consumers, reduces the risks of brand activism (Korschun, 2021), as individuals tend to consider their beliefs and moral values as the prevailing, making it extremely difficult for them to change their beliefs to align with those of the brand or to accept views that are completely opposite to their own (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). This point is supported by previous studies, which have shown that consumers' negative emotions towards brands can result from a variety of reasons, including political motivations (Sandikci & Ekici, 2009) and ideological incompatibility (Hegner et al., 2017). It is thus important for brands to understand the perspective and expectations of stakeholders in relation to the cause they are supporting and communicating, to better predict their reaction and be prepared for it (Kumar, 2020), as well as to understand how it can affect the company-stakeholders relationship (Korschun, 2021). For instance, some stakeholders may feel more attached to brands because of the greater alignment between the brand activism campaign and their values and ideology. On the other hand, some stakeholders may feel annoyed, betrayed, or angry at a brand when they perceive a lower degree of self-brand congruity regarding the stance communicated by the company (Schmidt et al., 2022). As such, the congruence between stakeholders' ethics and the cause defended by the brand is pointed out as a requirement for a positive response in relation to the activist campaign and the company/brand itself (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Hydock et al., 2020). However, no matter how much brands try to understand stakeholders' expectations in relation to the cause they intend to defend, there is always a part of stakeholders who may be against the brand's activist positioning, so the most important thing is that brands understand what the majority of stakeholders expect from them in relation to the cause (Moorman, 2020).

A paradoxical example of support and backlash for a brand activist campaign, based on stakeholder values, concerns Nike's 2018 controversial campaign with the American footballer Colin Kaepernick, who became a civil rights activist in the United States of America (USA). Kaepernick knelt during the pre-game national anthem in 2016, in silent protest at police brutality and in the wake of several police shootings of unarmed African American men (Chadwick, & Zipp, 2018). At the time, Kaepernick was highly criticized by conservative pundits, veterans and the former president Donald Trump decrying the protests as disrespectful to the American flag, ending up opting out of the contract with his club and being indirectly banned from the National Football League (Brito, 2022). In 2018, Nike strategically decided to make Colin Kaepernick the face of its "Just do it" 30th anniversary campaign, with the slogan "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything" and created a fund to support Colin's causes (Chadwick & Zipp, 2018).

With the launch of this activist communication campaign, the sportswear brand received an enormous positive, but also negative, feedback. Most of the brand's stakeholders showed great support for the cause, with the campaign winning the award for outstanding commercial at the Creative Arts Emmys, and Nike sales surging 31% in days after Colin Kaepernick ad unveiled and the company's stocks rising by 5% in the weeks following the advert's release (The Guardian, 2019). Just ten days after the campaign launch, Nike reached its all-time high on the stock market and made six billion dollars (Novy-Williams, 2018). However, the brand also suffered an intense backlash from Republicans supporters, who started the "Burn Your Nikes" movement in protest the campaign, posting videos on social networks portraying them destroying Nike's products, and urging people to stop buy the brand's products (BBC, 2018). Also, the hashtags #nikeboycott and #boycottnike gathered more than a billion impressions and were the third and fourth most popular hashtags in the conversation around Nike after #justdoit and #nike at the time (Eyada, 2020). Despite this, Nike has gradually built up an anti-racist position, shared among most of its stakeholders and intensified over time with its efforts and measures

of responsibility in the areas of Diversity and Inclusion to promote an inclusive environment and attract a more diversified workforce, demonstrating an internal and external commitment to this issue (Nike, 2020).

3.2. Brand-cause fit in activist communication

In their efforts to design effective activist campaigns, brands should also look for a common thread, which conceptually unites the brand and the social problem addressed in a single communication proposal (Cachay-Marín et al., 2022). This idea is summarized in the concept of brand-cause fit (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Champlin et al., 2019) or company-cause fit (Alcañiz et al., 2010) – a congruence or similarity between the brand's identity, values, purpose, sphere of activity and business practices with the defended cause (Handa & Gupta, 2020). This adequacy implies a clear relationship between the company/brand and the cause (Das et al., 2020; Nan & Heo, 2007), either through its positioning and image (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988), product line (Abitbol, 2019), or target audience (Champlin et al., 2019). Simmons and Becker-Olsen (2006, p. 155) define the degree of fit between a brand and a cause as high when “the two are perceived as congruent (i.e., as going together), whether that congruity is derived from mission, products, markets, technologies, attributes, brand concepts, or any other key association”. Furthermore, the fact that the brand has historically been related to the defense of social issues or that it addresses certain social topics multiple times also contributes to the perceived brand-cause fit (Cammarota et al., 2021).

Brand activism-related literature (e.g., CSR, cause-related marketing, corporate philanthropy) has extensively documented that brands choose to support causes with which they have a high degree of fit. This is because this adjustment is expected by stakeholders (Trimble & Rifon, 2006; Varadarajan & Menon, 1988), even when the cause is less desirable (Barone et al., 2007). Likewise, within the brand activism literature, Shetty et al. (2019) and Zdravkovic et al. (2010) also found that, for a brand's position on a socio-political issue to be successful, companies must align their stance on the defended issue with their core values. A high-fit leads to a positive effect on stakeholders, increasing brand credibility (Trimble & Rifon, 2006) and brand loyalty (Zdravkovic et al., 2010), improving brand image (Smith & Langford, 2009), and leading to greater purchase intent (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006; Smith & Langford, 2009), better response to social campaigns (Handa & Gupta, 2020), association of social campaigns with altruistic company motives (Koschate-Fischer et al., 2012) and greater intentions to engage in positive word-of-mouth about the social campaign (Handa & Gupta, 2020).

For instance, to protect animal rights in the cosmetics industry, in 2017 The Body Shop launched the campaign #ForeverAgainstAnimalTesting, calling for a global ban on animal testing in cosmetic products and ingredients by 2020. In partnership with the non-profit organization Cruelty Free International, the brand raised public awareness about this problem through social media and launched an online petition against cosmetic animal testing. The Body Shop was founded by British businesswoman and environmental and human rights activist Dame Anita Roddick and has always been linked to the protection of sustainability, adopting animal-friendly testing methods for all its products, involving computer data and laboratory-created tissues (The Body Shop, 2023a). At the same time, the global beauty brand has a history of more than 35 years of environmental activism, with several activist campaigns in defense of biodiversity, animal rights and climate awareness. The brand has already teamed up with several NGOs and other companies, such as Greenpeace, the World Land Trust or TerraCycle, to create campaigns and actions to promote, for example, the use of renewable energies, recycling or to regenerate forests and reconnect endangered species (The Body Shop, 2023b). Given the good fit between the brand's mission and values and the activist campaign carried out, the brand achieved great

support from the public, garnering 8.3 million signatures on its online petition against cosmetic animal testing, delivered to the United Nations, and getting several countries to change their policies regarding animal testing (The Body Shop, 2023a).

In turn, the lack of this adjustment can lead to a more critical attitude of stakeholders towards the brand/company (Nan & Heo, 2007), creating a feeling of distrust and perception of inauthenticity (Trimble & Rifon, 2006), as well as to negative attitudes and skepticism towards the brand, even regarding previously appreciated brands, as there is an inconsistency between prior expectations and new information (Simmons & Becker-Olsen, 2006). Coombs and Holladay (2017) also evidence that if there is a strong disconnection between the company and the social issue, stakeholders are likely to ignore the issue because they would consider that the company did not have the right to address it.

For example, in 2021 Victoria's Secret's VS Collective campaign attempted to a rebranding by replacing its traditional ambassadors – the so-called Angels, models that meet strict standards of beauty and weight – for a group of seven women from diverse backgrounds (sports, activism, journalism, representation, plus size model, etc.) renowned for their accomplishments and stands on social causes, who would serve as Victoria's Secret ambassadors and brand advisors. The campaign suffered an intense backlash from consumers, who do not recognize the purpose of inclusion in the brand, which has been repeatedly criticized for its culture steeped in misogyny, bullying, and harassment episodes (Bondy, 2021). In fact, in 2018, in an interview with Vogue magazine, Ed Razek, then-chief marketing officer of Victoria's Secret's parent company, L Brands, said that casting trans models would ruin the “fantasy” aspect of the show and that no one has interest in fashion shows with plus size models (Phelps, 2018). In 2019, more than 100 models signed an open petition written to Victoria's Secret's CEO, calling upon the lingerie giant to protect its models against sexual misconduct. The group wrote another letter in 2020, alleging a brand culture of misogyny and abuse (Ushe, 2021). In 2021, Victoria's Secret launched its swimwear collection using plus-size models in its campaign. However, people couldn't find realistic plus sizes in stores (Huber, 2021). Thus, analyzing the campaign feedback on social networks, Cammarota et al. (2021) concluded that by taking a radically different stance from its previous values, purpose and objectives, addressing a cause that is not consistent with what the brand had been claiming and that is not related to its previous practices, VS Collective campaign caused a series of negative reactions to the brand, with many consumers claiming not recognizing the brand.

As such, Nan and Heo (2007) argue that brands need to carefully address social issues to ensure a link between the company and its actions, to guarantee that stakeholders perceive them as socially motivated and not just seeking profit or competitive advantages. On the other hand, there are also some authors who argue that brand-cause fit is insignificant for the success of campaigns supporting social causes (e.g., Das et al., 2020; Lafferty, 2007), or that a moderate degree of incongruity between the brand and the cause can instigate more intense favorable responses, as long as the actions are perceived as authentic and altruistically motivated, such as delight and greater satisfaction (e.g., Vredenburg et al., 2020). Likewise, even when there is an adequate brand-cause fit, brand activism can also be ineffective if consumers see those actions as insincere (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006).

3.3. Authenticity in brand activism

The construct of “authenticity” has been considered crucial in brand activism and a necessary condition to achieve successful forms of activism (Hydock et al., 2020). In the CSR literature, several studies had suggested that the effects of corporate social activities are moderated by the reasons that stakeholders attribute to the involvement of companies with the causes (e.g., Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Lichtenstein et al., 2004). This assessment depends in part on whether stakeholders consider the company's motives to be selfish/profit-driven or altruistic/public service, authentic and sincere (Corcoran et

al., 2016), although some stakeholders are tolerant of the idea that part of the motivation behind corporate social initiatives may include promoting the company's bottom line (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004). This is also visible in the field of brand activism, in which the results of these strategies largely depend on whether stakeholders perceive brand approaches as altruistic or purely economically motivated (e.g., Key et al., 2021; Mirzaei et al., 2022; Shetty et al., 2019). In fact, previous research suggests that assessing the motivations behind corporate initiatives as altruistic and transparent can positively influence brand authenticity (Joo et al., 2019).

The concept of brand authenticity has been described in the literature by several authors who associate its conceptualization with factors such as the history of a brand, its origin, its manufacturing methods, brand credibility, as well as moral issues (e.g., Morhart et al., 2015; Napoli et al., 2014). Morhart et al. (2015: 203), for example, proposed a perceived brand authenticity model based on four dimensions of brand authenticity – continuity, credibility, integrity and symbolism – defining the concept as “the extent to which consumers perceive a brand to be faithful toward itself (continuity), true to its consumers (credibility), motivated by caring and responsibility (integrity), and able to support consumers in being true to themselves (symbolism)”. Napoli et al. (2014) propose a three-pillar measure of brand authenticity, capturing concepts such as quality commitment, heritage, and sincerity (loyalty to the brand's values and identity), while Newman (2019) proposes that authenticity should be conceptualized as the extent to which there is a synergy between an entity's internal states and external expressions. In the context of brand activism, Mirzaei et al. (2022) identified six dimensions for authenticity: (1) social context independency (independent campaigns from topical and trendy social issues); (2) inclusion (neutral messages in terms of gender, race, age, political matters, etc.); (3) sacrifice (the extent to which a brand is prepared to forgo profit to support the cause, demonstrating that the brand is financially committed to social issues); (4) practice (the extent to which brands act on what they preach); (5) fit (brand-cause fit); and, (6) motivation (perception about the brand's intentions to defend the cause – profit-seeking and self-centered versus other-centered and genuine). These dimensions are intrinsically related to each other, although Mirzaei et al. (2022) reported that the lack of fit and practice are the main barriers to the perception of authentic brand activism.

In this way, to be considered authentic in activism, brands must maintain a continuous alignment between declared intentions and implemented actions, realizing how they can address the social issue in a genuine and complete way, before claiming the issue as part of their positioning strategy (Champlin et al., 2019). In the same vein, Moorman (2020) stresses that companies should not be political unless they are able to do so consistently, connecting with target markets in an authentic way, since stakeholders only trust brands that remain loyal to a given position. Authenticity can thus be a strategy to overcome skepticism, an almost natural reaction for brand activism, complementing the communication campaigns with an active position in relation to social issues (Schmidt et al., 2022).

Based on the degree of activist marketing messages (low to high) and the degree of pro-social corporate practice (low to high), Vredenburg et al. (2020) create a typology of brand activism that results in four quadrants.

The first quadrant is the absence of brand activism, which includes brands that lack pro-social purpose and values or have not yet adopted activist communications or corporate practices. These companies operate without stakeholder expectation that they will engage in brand activism and tend to be in sectors that traditionally do not rely on partnering with socio-political causes to gain brand legitimacy (Vredenburg et al., 2020). These brands can however start taking their first activist steps at any time and are likely to be well accepted by stakeholders as long as they are transparent (Du et al., 2010).

On the other hand, there are companies that have socio-political causes as part of their core mission or strategic focus, adopting long-term integrated pro-social corporate practices that are part of their *modus operandi* and are inherently linked to their goals and values, but not adopt communication messages

that position them in the market as corporate social activists (Vredenburg et al., 2020), as is the case of many B-Corps¹ (Cammarota et al., 2021). These companies are in the quadrant that Vredenburg et al. (2020) called “Silent brand activism”, having a great strategic opportunity to use marketing to highlight authentic activist practices as they already have a pro-social brand purpose and corporate practices to align with their message (Vredenburg et al., 2018).

The third quadrant – Authentic Brand Activism – is the ideal form of brand activism and the one that allows the effectiveness of this strategy, being defined by Vredenburg et al. (2020) as the alignment of a brand’s purpose and values with its activist marketing messages and factual prosocial corporate practices. This applies to both progressive and conservative stances on social issues, having a greater ability to facilitate social change and gain brand equity. The authenticity of brand activism is then determined by the alignment between three key brand characteristics: (1) its core purpose and values, as a reflection of employees, brand promise and commitment to stakeholder needs and wants; (2) the type of message and brand activist content conveyed through branded vehicles, traditional media and digital channels; and (3) corporate practices and how key stakeholders catalogue and interpret these practices in the marketplace (Vredenburg et al., 2020). In the same vein, Key et al. (2021) add that authenticity in brand activism arises when the brand’s narratives and presentation are consistent with the reality of the socio-political cause the brand supports. As stated by Hydock et al. (2020), Korschun (2021), Vredenburg et al. (2020) and Wright (2020), with regard to brand activism, stakeholders demand more from organizations than activist communication messages, wishing that brands complement these messages with consistent internal and external proactive strategies and practical solutions, such as establishing partnerships with NGOs whose purposes facilitate social change, donate to the cause, include diversity of races and ethnicities in advertising campaigns, promote the recruitment and training of minorities or develop programs to combat inequalities. For the notion of authenticity in activism, it is also relevant to exist a personal conviction on the part of CEOs about the social topics covered. In this way, there will be consistency in the approach to social topics over time and coherence with these social motivations in all company practices and decisions, thus more easily involving employees and other stakeholders in the defense of the cause (Chatterji & Toffel, 2018).

IKEA is an example of a brand that has been authentically engaging in brand activism, involving intangible (messages) and tangible (practical actions) commitments with a socio-political cause, particularly at an environmental level. In terms of communication, the brand has already launched some environmental activist campaigns, encouraging its consumers to adopt more sustainable consumption practices. For example, IKEA’s “Repurposeful Instructions” campaign, launched in 2021 on traditional and digital communication channels, promoted the reuse of the brand’s products, with a collection of 12 creative ideas using IKEA’s iconic assembly instructions that show how to upcycle some of its popular products and help breathe new life into old furniture (Keighran, 2021). At the same time, the brand has shown an effort to become more sustainable, namely by partially equipping its stores with solar panels, growing plants on the roofs and LED lighting, eliminating all single-use plastic from all stores, creating a product repurchase and resale service, and using renewable, recycled, or recyclable materials in the manufacture of its products. IKEA is also committed to use only renewable and recycled materials until 2030, as well as to reduce the total ecological footprint by an average of 70% per product. In addition, IKEA aims to ensure zero-emission freight transport services for customers by 2025, has already tested the alternative to selling products through rental of goods in the Netherlands, Sweden, and Switzerland, and is involved in several environmental projects, such as reforestation or forest protection and management projects, in order to reduce its ecological footprint (IKEA, 2023).

1. B-Corps are businesses that demonstrate high social and environmental performance, are accountable to all stakeholders and exhibit transparency in communicating their performance (B Corp, 2023).

In contrast, when there is no coherence between brand activist messages and their practical actions, when brands lack an explicit purpose and values and do not carry out substantive pro-social corporate practices, or when they actively hide the absence of these practices, one can say that brands incur in an inauthentic form of brand activism – woke washing (Vredenburg et al., 2020). The term “woke” is of African American origin and a synonym for social awareness, so woke washing can be defined as brands that have an obscure or indeterminate conduct with respect to social practices, but that adopt a strong communication regarding socio-political issues, declaring its support for specific socio-political actions and movements (Sobande, 2020). In these cases, companies show inconsistencies between messages, internal policies/values, and social actions and/or approach the subject without knowing and understanding it properly (Chatterji & Toffel, 2018). Often, these brands only engage in socio-political movements due to the pressure or urgency in responding to market expectations or for performance/profit reasons, ending up disconnecting their communications from their purpose, values, and corporate practices (Barton et al., 2018). This gives rise to an opportunistic involvement that can result in the perception of brand activism as false, inauthentic, or even misleading (Vredenburg et al., 2020). In turn, woke washing and brand moral violations can lead to the emergence of perceptions of hypocrisy among stakeholders (Wagner et al., 2009) and hateful feelings towards the brand, including disgust, anger/fear and contempt (Romani et al., 2015), potentially damaging companies in terms of reputation and brand equity and weakening their ability to generate social change (Camarota et al., 2021; Key et al., 2021; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

For example, in 2017, attempting to reach young audiences, Pepsi created an ad with the celebrity Kendall Jenner, addressing activist movements like the Black Lives Matter. In the ad, Kendall Jenner uses a Pepsi drink to ease tension between civil rights activists and police forces, transforming a protest into a party environment. The ad led to a backlash with numerous criticisms, not only for the use of a white model in the ad, but also for the lack of sensitivity about the reason for these protests and the countless violent clashes that had already occurred between activists and police over the years, with the brand becoming a trend on Twitter for the worst reasons (Solon, 2017) and ending up removing the ad from the Web (Quenqua, 2017). In addition, Pepsi was not a brand with an assumed commitment to support racial non-discrimination, nor did it have a history of actions or communications related to this or other social causes. The ad can then be considered woke washing since the message conveyed was not substantially supported by pro-social values and actions (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

3.4. Engaging and dialogical activist communication

The strategic planning of brand activism implies not only ensuring a natural adequacy of brand activist stances with the socio-political values of its stakeholders and with corporate values, and the active and authentic involvement of brands with the defended causes, but also that such stances and actions are communicated effectively so that they are well perceived by the target audience (Key et al., 2021; Zdravkovic et al., 2010). Brand activism communication must thus be done both externally, for example, through posts on social networks or through traditional media, and internally, communicating the brand's position to employees, so that they can also act in the same direction (Chatterji & Toffel, 2018).

While the Internet was a strong driver for companies to realize the need to start adopting activist postures, since digital platforms began to be widely used by stakeholders to expose their socio-political demands to brands, it also became one of the most important means for the communication of their stances and actions regarding social issues, with brands becoming increasingly aware and interested in the use of digital technologies to get involved in the struggle for social change (Barros, 2019; Lee & Yoon, 2020; Shah et al., 2013). In fact, in the findings of Sprout Social's 2019 #BrandsGetReal survey, while most consumers believe that brands should take a stand on public issues, nearly half of consumers

(47%) want brands to take a stand on social media. Likewise, 67% of consumers say brands are effective at raising awareness around important socio-political issues when they speak out on social media (Sprout Social, 2019).

Even though the Web and social media conceive greater power to anti-brand groups to damage the name of companies (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006), the interactive nature of digital platforms has also given companies greater opportunities to understand how they can address social issues, being able to use the internet as an “open forum” to gain insights, understand the beliefs of its stakeholders regarding social issues, realize how to approach the topics and even transform a possible negative impact on the brand into improvements in its conduct (Shah et al., 2013). Communication on social networks is participatory and collaborative, being therefore capable of structuring a dynamic of involvement and building meaningful relationships (Osei-Frimpong & McLean, 2018). In fact, from these channels, companies are able to reach a wide audience and interact directly with their public, allowing them to perceive, almost in real time, how campaigns are being perceived through the community’s reaction to their activist messages (Mohr et al., 2001). Likewise, digital platforms also make it easier to spread word-of-mouth about a specific campaign (Corcoran et al., 2016), increasing its potential to go viral (Lee & Yoon, 2020). In addition, brands can also take advantage of the potential of digital platforms to test various approaches to activism, assessing how the market responds to each of these actions and adapting their conduct to the obtained results (Moorman, 2020). As stated by Pöyry and Laaksonen (2022), brands can take advantage of social media to understand what triggers opposing stakeholders, designing brand activist campaigns that are less susceptible for stakeholders’ anti-brand actions, for example by avoiding certain trigger words, proactively addressing most typical criticism, and ensuring alignment in other communications.

Thus, most brand activist movements and campaigns have been done through digital media, such as websites, blogs and social networks like Facebook, Instagram and especially Twitter, promoting the company’s values/purpose and including central socio-political issues (Bowen & Aragon-Correa, 2014; Chatterji & Toffel, 2018; Taylor et al., 2001). In addition, companies also resort to other methods and tools to communicate their activist efforts, such as media advertising, company reports, press releases and product information (Bowen & Aragon-Correa, 2014; Sibai et al., 2021). These combination of digital with other communication practices allows brands to reinforce their support for activist causes in a transmedia logic (Yoo et al., 2021) and, in this way, effectively engage with stakeholders (Vredenburg et al., 2020). In the same way, Bhagwat et al. (2020) also found that, in financial terms, is more beneficial for activist companies to take a stand in coalition with other companies rather than alone, thereby expanding the means of communication and the reach of the campaign, and sharing resources and risks (Cammarota et al., 2023; Hambrick & Wowak, 2021).

According to Key et al. (2021) and Taylor et al. (2001), brand activist communications should always be based on dialogic communication, through the constant promotion of interactions and the provision of relevant information to the target audience. In particular, companies must take into account the holistic process of how their audience receives and understands their storyline, creating campaigns that do not significantly deviate from the target audience’s expectations and experiences and their understanding of a socio-political issue. Likewise, the brand’s point of view needs to be conveyed consistently in all its communications, capturing, building, and reinforcing the underlying logic of its stance, in order to decrease the dissonance between the company’s values and history and brand activism. Finally, companies must be intentional in the way they communicate their position, basing it on real evidence as a way to minimize the risk of alienation and maximize their ability to create and nurture support from all stakeholders (Key et al., 2021).

A significant example of an effective and dialogic brand activist communication was Airbnb’s stance on Donald Trump’s anti-immigration measures, implemented in January 2017. These measures

severely restricted the possibility of travel and immigration to the USA of citizens from various largely Muslim countries in the Middle East and Northern Africa and suspended the Refugee Admissions Program in the USA for 120 days. Airbnb used its digital platforms to initiate the “We accept” campaign, a movement in defense of acceptance between people, promoting dialogue and inviting the public to react to the new measure (Airbnb, 2017a). The campaign was also communicated through traditional media, including an ad broadcast during the Super Bowl, the annual league championship game of the National Football League which is always watched by millions of people (Byford, 2017). The company also made communication engaging and interactive, encouraging its consumers to make their homes available to people who were unable to travel to the United States and to make donations to refugee aid organizations. Airbnb led by example by hosting refugees and citizens barred from entering the USA at the time (Airbnb, 2017a). In addition, the brand pledged to offer short-term accommodation to 100,000 people in need over the next five years and to donate \$4 million over the next four years to the International Rescue Committee, which supports the most urgent needs of the displaced worldwide (Airbnb, 2017a). With this activism movement, Airbnb achieved a huge reach on social networks, with the hashtag #weaccept being the most used on Twitter during the Super Bowl, with about 33 thousand tweets during the first half the game. Based on an internal monitoring by Airbnb, it was possible to perceive that the public’s reaction to the campaign was 85% favorable. Likewise, the public responded strongly to the brand’s call to accommodate displaced populations, with more than 15,400 enrollments by volunteers willing to welcome these people into their homes (Airbnb, 2017b).

On the other hand, Starbucks’ 2015 Race Together campaign was met by resistance especially due to the way it was communicated. The campaign aimed to spark a national conversation about race relations, following the incident of two unarmed black men getting shot by the police, with Starbucks’ trained baristas writing #racetogether on coffee cups and, if customers ask about it, they should hold a discussion with the customers about the subject. Additionally, the campaign communication involved a set of misguided “conversation starters” published in the daily American newspaper USA Today, and full-page ads in The New York Times and USA Today (Shah, 2015). However, Starbucks’ activist campaign was widely satirized and criticized, with customers stating that the brand did not adopt the best approach to the subject, arguing that a discussion on an important issue like racial equality can’t be made over a cup of coffee and whether it was really possible to have a conversation about the issue in a busy queue for a coffee, with an unfamiliar barista (BBC, 2015).

4. Conclusions and directions for future research

Companies have been traditionally considered to act in the economic sphere of society, but recent developments have shown a tendency of firms to expand their responsibilities towards society, acting to produce social or public good. Brand activism is today an increasingly popular marketing practice, through which brands address contested socio-political causes and communicate the brand’s values.

As brands increasingly take a stance on politically divisive issues, they also begun to be the target of negative or even hostile responses from stakeholder groups who do not agree with the brand stance or do not identify with the cause (e.g., Barros, 2019; Eyada, 2020; Jungblut & Johnen, 2021), and that may even be able to harm the brand in the market through anti-brand movements, such as boycotts or backlashes (e.g., McDonnell & Werner, 2016; Moorman, 2020). Nevertheless, the fact that addressing a politically contested topic may generate hostile reactions should not be a reason to avoid brand activism, since a large part of stakeholders already demand a leading role from brands in socio-political issues and those that do not take this role may even fall behind the competition. In fact, companies that engage in brand activism have lower market risks than companies that do not engage in this type of strategy (e.g., Blanco et al., 2023).

Given the risky nature of brand activism, the purpose of this paper is to explore a strategic perspective on brand activism, through which companies adopt a strategic management of socio-political issues, aligning the company values and its activist messages or actions with stakeholders' values, in order to improve the socio-political cause defended while avoiding significant risks for the brand performance and having positive impacts on the company's results. This implies dealing with a brand activism campaign as another business strategy, involving corporate tactics like market analysis, target segmentation, campaign results monitorization, metrics assessment or problem management, with the success of a brand activism campaign being largely dependent on a good communicative approach to the cause (e.g., Eilert & Cherup, 2020; Pimentel & Didonet, 2021). Through an extensive literature review and concrete examples, this article thus suggests four key-factors that brands should consider in their activist communications to address the cause effectively and achieve legitimacy and greater support from their stakeholders. First, brands must adopt activist communications that are in line with the political and moral values, needs and expectations of their stakeholders, since stakeholders' decision to boycott or support an activist brand is strictly related to their socio-political beliefs (e.g., Hydock et al., 2020; Schmidt et al., 2022). Likewise, there must also be a fit between the brand's identity, values, purpose, and business activity with the addressed cause, to ensure greater confidence on the part of stakeholders that the brand is socially motivated and really has the resources and ability to improve the defend issue (e.g., Champlin et al., 2019; Shetty et al., 2019). Authenticity is also a crucial factor in brand activism campaigns, concerning the alignment between brand communication and corporate practices and actions, since the higher the perceived altruism of companies, the more positively their activism actions will be regarded (e.g., Mirzaei et al., 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Finally, brand activist communications can be carried out in a wide variety of media channels, but must be engaging and mainly dialogical, involving stakeholders order to increase and nurture their support (e.g., Key et al., 2021; Taylor et al., 2001).

In this way, brands should carefully select their commitments to socio-political issues and create a coherent activist communication strategy that allows them to achieve legitimacy and credibility to take a position on a specific cause, as these affects the attitudes of individuals concerning the activist strategy implemented by the brand. However, it should also be noted that there is no uniform communication strategy for brand activism campaigns and, consequently, brands must conduct in-depth studies to understand whether and how the activist position should be communicated, through which channels, and the timing of messages.

Since scholars have begun to investigate brand activism only in the last few years, this strategy is still unclear and fragmented, opening space for a huge range of investigations into its antecedents, consequences, potential impacts, and the way in which it should be implemented. Regarding the strategic implementation and communication of brand activism, it would be interesting for future studies to test the impact of each of the mentioned key-factors in the success of a specific communication campaign or by comparing several activist communication campaigns, measuring both the results of the activist campaign from a social point of view and in terms of company performance. Another approach is to analyze stakeholders' response to brand activism when this is carried out strategically versus spontaneously. Complementarily, it would be also pertinent to analyze the best way for companies to be prepared to respond to stakeholders' anti-brand actions, exploring possible response strategies.

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