



THE ERA OF “WOKE-WASHING”: HOW CONSUMERS PERCEIVE BRAND ACTIVISM?

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**L'ÈRE DU « WOKE-WASHING » : COMMENT LES CONSOMMATEURS
PERÇOIVENT L'ACTIVISME DE MARQUE ?**

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L'ÈRE DU « WOKE-WASHING » : COMMENT LES CONSOMMATEURS PERÇOIVENT L'ACTIVISME DE MARQUE ?

Résumé : Alors que la recherche consacrée à l'activisme de marque (AM) se développe, nous ne savons pas comment les consommateurs perçoivent l'AM et son influence sur la relation avec les marques. Cette recherche exploratoire vise à comprendre la perception et les réactions des consommateurs face aux campagnes d'AM à travers une double perspective - cognitive et affective. Premièrement, il contribue à mieux délimiter la définition d'AM de marque à partir de construits étroitement liés. Deuxièmement, basée sur une technique projective AOL, d'un côté affectif, cette étude révèle le rôle potentiel de la distance psychologique dans la perception par le consommateur des efforts de la marque soutenant une cause sociale et souligne la légitimité de la marque acquise en s'engageant dans l'AM. Du côté cognitif, cette étude montre les incitations managériales derrière les marques à s'engager dans l'AM, tout en offrant aux consommateurs un moyen d'exprimer leur identité et leurs valeurs.

Mots clés : Activisme de marque; Relation consommateur-marque; Qualité de la relation avec la marque

THE ERA OF “WOKE-WASHING”: HOW CONSUMERS PERCEIVE BRAND ACTIVISM?

Abstract: While research dedicated to brand activism is growing, we still do not know how consumers perceive brand activism (BA) and how it influences their relationship with brands. This exploratory research aims at gaining a better understanding of the perception and reactions of consumers towards BA campaigns through a dual perspective - cognitive and affective. First, it contributes to better delineate the construct of BA from closely related constructs. Second, based on an AOL projective technique, from an affective perspective, this study reveals the potential role of psychological distance in consumer's perception of the brand's efforts in supporting a social cause. It underlines the acquired brand legitimacy through engaging in brand activism. From a cognitive perspective, this study shows the managerial incentives behind brands in engaging in brand activism, while also providing a way for consumers to express their identity and values.

Keywords: Brand Activism; Consumer-Brand Relationship; Brand Relationship Quality

THE ERA OF WOKE BRANDS: HOW CONSUMERS PERCEIVE THE NEW WAVE OF BRAND ACTIVISM

Introduction

The question surrounding the dilemma of whether brands should take stances to enable social change is of growing interest. The growing popularity of brand activism is not something left to coincidence. A total of 50% of the consumers believe that brands are a force to be reckoned with in helping to solve major issues in their respective countries (Edelman, 2018). Brands are steering consumers towards making purchase decisions based on their values, practicing the “belief-driven buying” (Edelman, 2018, p.10). Moorman (2020) advanced the idea that brands can be viewed as “political actors” who responsibly contribute to their surrounding environment. Research papers have begun to consider brand activism as their main focus of research (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020) and appear among the Marketing Science Institute (2020)¹ research priorities. Especially, Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) explored consumer’s attitudes when brands court controversy by endorsing a particular sociopolitical cause. While opening a new and fertile area for research, the consumers’ perception of brand activism, as well as the influence of brand activism on their relationship with brands, is still understudied. The main objective of the paper is thus to gain a deeper understanding of the perceptions and reactions of the consumers towards brand activism campaigns by answering the following research question: From an affective and a cognitive perspective, how do consumers perceive a brand activism campaign? The present paper is organized into three sections. The first section is dedicated to the literature review of brand activism and consumer-brand relationships. The second section is dedicated to the presentation of our methodology relying on the Album On-line (AOL) technique. Finally, in the third section, after presenting the results, we discuss them and draw conclusions and limitations that will enable us to guide future research.

1. Theoretical Framework

1.1 Brand Activism.

Vredenburg et al. (2020, p.3) defined authentic brand activism as “a purpose- and values-driven strategy in which a brand adopts a nonneutral stance on institutionally contested sociopolitical issues, to create social change and marketing success.” By bringing brands out of neutrality into taking public stands on controversial dividing issues, brands may alienate some consumers when voicing their position towards a particular controversial polarizing issue (Dodd & Supa, 2014; Moorman, 2020). Working from a relatively new perspective, the definitions surrounding brand activism are still emerging into the academic literature such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA), and Corporate Political Advocacy (CPA) and clearly define the concept, through comparison to these closely related overlapping concepts is missing. Corporate Political Advocacy (CPA), refers to “voicing or showing explicit and public support for certain individuals, groups, or ideals and values with the aim of convincing and persuading others to do the same” (Wettstein & Baur, 2016, p. 200). Corporate Social Advocacy (CSA) is considered a way for organizations to take a stand for their various stakeholders, such as customers, partners, employees, and the community it operates in (Chatterji and Toffel, 2018). Brand activism is considered a natural

¹ https://www.msi.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/MSI_RP20-22.pdf

evolution of CSR with an emphasis on values as the main driver of the strategy (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018), by aligning both messaging and corporate practices conforming to the brand purpose and values (Vredenburg et al., 2020). The marketing strategy targets controversial partisan sociopolitical causes (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Meanwhile, CSR balances the relationship with the various stakeholders by endorsing non-controversial causes (Mishra and Modi, 2016) alongside their business operations (Van Marrewijk, 2003). Brand activism shares similarities with CPA and CSA, in their choice of partisanship when endorsing causes and supporting issues. The mixed response from consumers can be either positive or negative, according to their alignment with the brand's position (Dodd & Supa, 2015). However, the main difference that sets brand activism apart from CSA and CPA is the choice of stakeholders. While CSA and CPA operate on a strategic corporate level where the influence of various stakeholders (managers, investors, employees), play a role in shaping the nature of the advocacy message (Dodd and Supa, 2014; Wettstein & Baur, 2016), brand activism focuses on the consumer, when choosing which cause to align with (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

1.2. Consumer-Brand Relationship :

Fournier (1998) considered that brands could hold meaning for consumers in the environment where they operate because brands craft personalities through their managerial activities, making them capable of forging bonds and relationships with their consumers. Henceforth, brand activism plays an intricate role in consumers' lives. Brand Relationship Quality (BRQ) plays a role as a gauge of the strength and complexity of the person-brand relationship (Fournier, 1998). Nyffenegger et al. (2015) define hot BRQ as the connection between consumers and brands through feelings, while cold BRQ refers to the opinions and judgments resulting from the evaluation of the brand (Nyffenegger et al., 2015). BRQ offers a multifaceted overview of the relationship between consumers and brands, through affective elements and cognitive elements (Fournier, 1998). This research aims to provide insight into the relationship between brands practicing brand activism, and consumers through a dual perspective (affective and cognitive). To guide the study, we formulate the following research question: From an affective and a cognitive perspective, how do consumers perceive a brand activism campaign?

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Selection of Brand Activism Campaigns

Brand activism has been previously discussed from a conceptual angle (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020). Despite the recent work of Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020). There is still a lack of empirical research for this phenomenon. To answer our research question, we compiled a total of 17 brand activism campaigns launched in the market in the last decade. We conducted a pre-test to select one campaign as our visual. The pre-test consisted of sending a list of brand activism campaigns to 5 branding experts. Scores ranging from 0 to 5 were attributed to the responses according to chosen criteria². The compilation of the scores attributed by the specialist allowed us to choose a campaign by Ben & Jerry's, launched in 2016 to support the "Black Lives Matter" movement (see Appendix.1)

2.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The objective of this exploratory research is to delve deeper into the quest of understanding brand activism from the perspective of the consumer. The main objective of the AOL projective technique is to investigate and understand the linked representations of any

² comprehension, word length, congruence between image and text, clarity

given consumption experience (Vermette, 2007, 2008). Two groups of six participants were recruited for this study, each group was exposed to one scenario (affective or cognitive), and a campaign of brand activism. The groups were equally divided in gender and education level, their ages ranged between 17 years old and 58 years old. The AOL technique follows a three-step approach. In the first step, participants are exposed either to a cognitive or affective scenario to unearth their thoughts or emotions towards a particular brand activism campaign. Then participants are asked to search online for the most representative pictures related to either their thoughts or feelings. In the second step, we create a collective album assembling all pictures of the individual albums gathered in the previous step. The participants have access to the collective album, with the option of changing their previous albums or keeping their initial choices intact. In the final step, each participant rates the photos displayed in the final collective album from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree), to evaluate whether the chosen keywords correspond with the pictures. Finally, the data analysis was carried out according to an individual difference scaling (INDSCAL) procedure first proposed by Kessous et al. (2017). The procedure yields a common space where the distances between the keywords are displayed, based on their respective ratings. Henceforth, we conducted a hierarchical cluster analysis to determine the clusters sharing similar meanings. The two final maps show the axes, alongside the clusters of items in circles according to their respective themes (See Fig.1 and Fig.2).

3. Findings

The interpretation of the cognitive and affective representations for the brand activism campaign is presented in two mappings. In the affective scenario results, we identified four main axes representing the perception of feelings and emotions by consumers: unfairness, morality, idealism, and realism. The “unfairness” axis represents negative feelings awakened in consumers through brands participating in brand activism, we identified the two following clusters: The “anger/protest/disagreement” cluster represents the accumulation of negative emotions resulting in resentment and prompted consumers into taking action and voicing their protest in support of the sociopolitical issue endorsed by the brand. On the other hand, the “oppression” cluster represents the desperate situation endured by consumers directly affected by the sociopolitical causes, indicating how the brand activism strategy impacts their lifestyle. The “morality” axis represents when brands express themselves through political investment by raising awareness on the current imbalanced situation, in proximity we identified the two following clusters: The “political investment” cluster represents the political awakening of brands to their environment, they are becoming aware of their role, and the power they have to support the cause in communication and practice. The “bitterness” cluster refers to consumers feeling misunderstood by brands endorsing popular sociopolitical causes, they perceive them as hypocritical, which leads them into feeling bitter towards those brands. The “idealism” axis represents when consumers are optimistic about the potential positive changes, we identified the following cluster: The “optimism” cluster represents the positive outlook that consumers have on the future, they see brands as a valuable tool in attaining the future where these sociopolitical causes cease to be a pressing concern. The “realism” axis represents the perceived support from brands through brand activism, we identified the following cluster: The “support for change” cluster represents consumers perceiving brands who encourage change and support sociopolitical causes through brand activism as being well-founded and genuine.

In the cognitive scenario results, we found four main axes representing the perception of consumers’ thoughts and opinions: business orientation, value orientation, collective actions, and individualism. The “business orientation” axis represents the commercial aspect of the marketing strategy, we identified the following cluster: The “managerial incentives”

cluster, in which consumers consider brand activism as a strategy that promotes social change and profit. The “value orientation” axis represents brands expressing their values through brand activism, in proximity we identified the following cluster: The « ethical commitment » cluster represents consumers perceiving brands engaging in brand activism as a long-term ethical engagement. The “collective actions” axis describes brands into voicing their political standing, we identified the following cluster: The « political drivers » cluster represents how consumers view brands as the political actors that will remedy the shortcomings of the overwhelmed governmental agencies and tackle important sociopolitical issues. The “individualism/self-expression” axis shows the role of brands play in the self-expression of consumers’ identity, we identified the following cluster: The « individual drivers for action » cluster represents how consumers lean towards brands who communicate the same values as then, considering them as a channel for their self-identity and a projection of their values.

4. Discussion & Conclusion

We contribute to the growing literature of branding and brand activism by providing a clearer understanding of the concept, through comparison to closely related overlapping concepts such as CSR, CPA, and CSA. We ascribe to the tenets of the consumer-brand relationship (Fournier, 1998). Mukherjee & Althuizen's (2020) research concluded that consumers’ attitudes towards brands engaging in brand activism decreased when they disagreed with the stance, but did not change when they agreed with the stance. We endeavor to push this research further by exploring the relationship between consumer and brand from a dual perspective in a brand activism context. Our findings especially uncovered an understanding of the consumers’ perceptions of brand activism campaigns from an affective point of view. The resulting mapping in the affective scenario presents a total of six clusters (Fig.1). We chose to focus on two important clusters in this discussion: optimism, and support for change. On one hand, the “optimism” cluster refers to the positive outlook on the future, the consumers foresee a positive change brought forward by the efforts of the brands through brand activism. We could explain it by psychological distance (Liberman, Sagristano, Trope, 2002). According to Liberman, Sagristano & Trope (2002), people tend to construe future events as ideal in their perception, thus putting them in a position where they could view the aspired future envisioned through the campaign as more positive than the near future. On the other hand, the “support for change” cluster puts brands using brand activism as engines of social change, thus consumers may be inclined to perceive those brands as legitimate (Suchman, 1995). Legitimacy is linked to the perception of consumers, who judge the performance of the brand according to the prevalent social norms, values, and beliefs (Suchman, 1995). Our findings especially uncovered a deeper understanding of the consumers’ perceptions of brand activism campaigns from a cognitive point of view. The resulting mappings in the cognitive scenario present a total of four clusters (Fig.2). We chose to focus on two important clusters in this discussion: managerial incentives, and individual drivers for action. On one hand, The “managerial incentives” cluster represents the reasons driving brands to position themselves as champions of political and social causes, while also risking alienating a fraction of the public (Vredenburg et al.,2020). Brands are aware of the greater risk of engaging in a brand activism campaign, however, the potential rewards from the targeted group of consumers are important enough to persuade a position-taking stance on important sociopolitical issues (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). On the other hand, the “individual drivers” cluster embody consumers using brands engaging in brand activism as channels for the self-expression of their identity and values (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). This study is limited by the use of one campaign, which pushes us to endeavor to expand our findings (and by the same occasion, confirm or invalidate the present findings) by launching another AOL qualitative data collection on another brand and another cause, followed by a

quantitative investigation. Thus, we ask ourselves the following questions: Is brand activism a new means to favor consumer-brand identification through shared values, and foster perceptions of legitimacy? Does psychological distance play a role in the consumers' perceptions of causes and issues endorsed by the brand? Can congruence be considered a central mechanism in the relationship between consumers and brands practicing brand activism?

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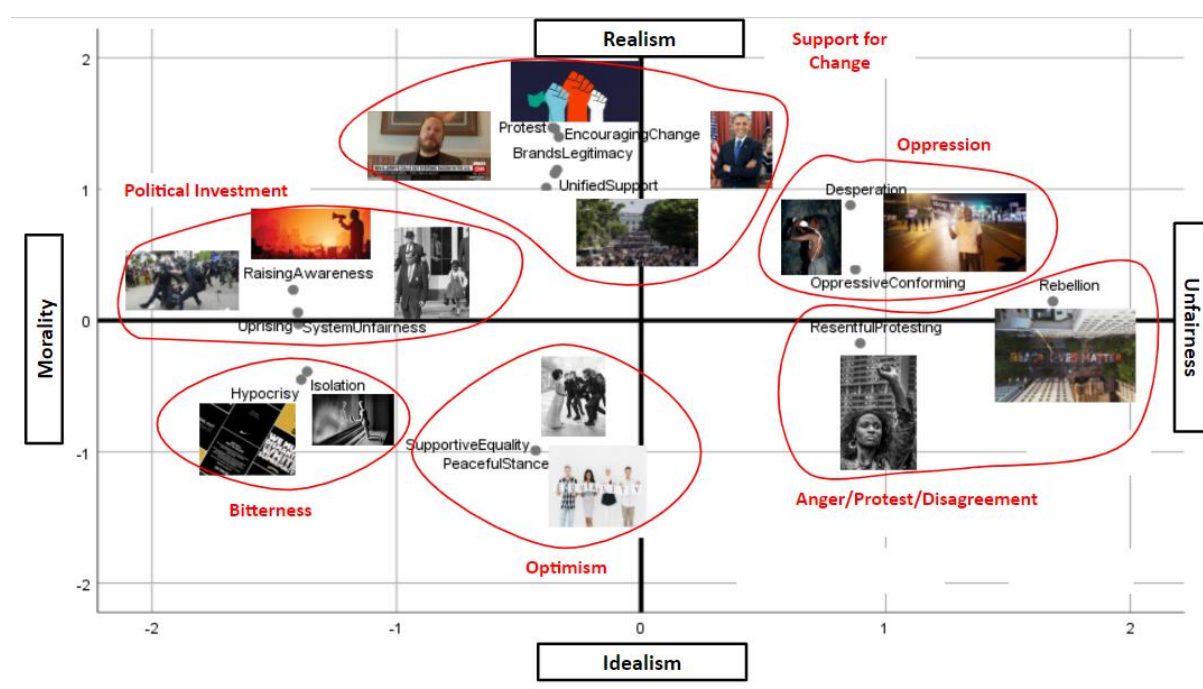


Figure 1: Mapping of the results in the Affective Scenario

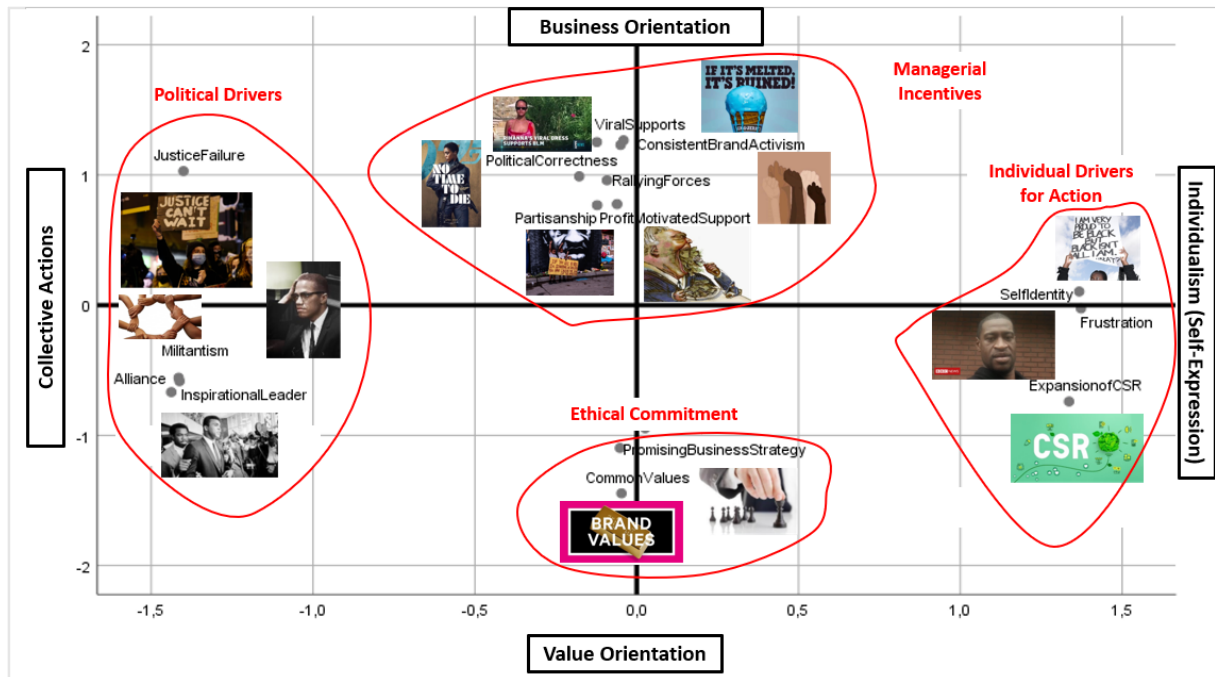


Figure 2: Mapping of the results in the Cognitive Scenario

Appendix 1. The final chosen visual for the AOL



Source: Ben & Jerry's (2016)