

Brands Taking a Stand: Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing?

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Abstract

In today's marketplace, consumers want brands to take a stand on sociopolitical issues. When brands match activist messaging, purpose, and values with prosocial corporate practice, they engage in authentic brand activism, creating the most potential for social change and the largest gains in brand equity. In contrast, brands that detach their activist messaging from their purpose, values, and practice are enacting inauthentic brand activism through the practice of "woke washing," potentially misleading consumers with their claims, damaging both their brand equity and potential for social change. First, the authors draw on theory to inform a typology of brand activism to determine how, and when, a brand engaging with a sociopolitical cause can be viewed as authentic. Second, a theory-driven framework identifies moderate, optimal incongruence between brand and cause as a boundary condition, showing how brand activists may strengthen outcomes in an increasingly crowded marketplace. Third, the authors explore important policy and practice implications for current and aspiring brand activists, from specific brand-level standards in marketing efforts to third-party certifications and public sector partnerships.

Keywords authentic brand activism, authenticity, woke washing, purpose driven organizations, brand purpose, branding, political advocacy, prosocial consumption

“Stakeholders are pushing companies to wade into sensitive social and political issues — especially as they see governments failing to do so effectively.”

—Larry Fink, BlackRock chief executive officer (2019)

“We must dismantle white supremacy. Silence is not an option....”

Four years ago, we publicly stated our support for the Black Lives Matter movement.

Today, we want to be even more clear about the urgent need to take concrete steps to dismantle white supremacy in all its forms.”

—Ben & Jerry’s (2020)

Brand activism (Moorman 2020; Sarkar and Kotler 2018) is an emerging marketing tactic for brands seeking to stand out in a fragmented marketplace by taking public stances on social and political issues. Yet, taking a public stance of this nature has never been more divisive—or risky. From boycotting Gillette razors and burning Nike running shoes to canceling Costco memberships, consumers are responding vocally to brands taking a stand. Procter & Gamble’s razor brand Gillette tackled toxic masculinity in a 2019 viral video campaign. Yet, with 901,000 dislikes on YouTube and only 468,000 likes in the first few weeks of the campaign alone (Al-Muslim 2019), many expressed alienation and criticized the activist messaging, raising questions about whether Gillette was merely “virtue signaling.” It was unclear to these consumers what values or practices supported the Gillette campaign, especially considering Gillette continued to charge higher prices for women’s products via the “pink tax” (Ritschel 2019). Following the now-iconic 2018 Colin Kaepernick “Dream Crazy” campaign, during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests worldwide, brands including Nike stepped up messaging in support of racial justice, yet consumers and critics pointed to woeful lack of supportive values, purpose, and practice, such as having Black board members (Ritson 2020). Yet, even clear transparency about brand practice and values in support of a sociopolitical cause does not shield brand activists from controversy. Brands that support specific public health efforts (e.g., Costco asking customers to wear face masks in store) during the Covid-19 pandemic faced pushback, membership cancellations, and boycotts from consumers who deemed the issue controversial (Walansky 2020). Brands are now seemingly comfortable alienating some consumers to address contested and polarizing sociopolitical issues (Dodd and Supa 2014; Korschun et al. 2019; Moorman 2020; Nalick et al. 2016; Smith and Korschun 2018; Wettstein and Baur 2016), from sexual harassment, systemic racism, and public health, to LGBTQIA+ rights, reproductive rights, gun control, and immigration.

However, when brands become activists in the sociopolitical sphere, their underpinning motives are increasingly scrutinized (Holt 2002), and negative attributions can impede business returns and brand equity (Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen 2010). In short, consumers may not believe brands when they engage in activism (Alhouti, Johnson, and Holloway 2016; Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen 2010; Vredenburg et al. 2018). Marketing academics (Kotler and Sarkar 2017; Moorman 2020) and practitioners (Unilever 2019b) have highlighted the importance of authenticity in brand activism and the dangers of brands not “walking the talk,” with 56% of consumers indicating too many brands now use societal issues primarily as a marketing ploy to sell more of their product (Edelman 2019). At the same time, consumers increasingly expect big brands to enter the sociopolitical domain (Hoppner and Vadakkepatt 2019): 65% of individuals want companies and chief executive officers to take a

stand on social issues (Barton et al. 2018; Edelman 2018; Larcker and Tayan 2018; Sprout Social 2017). Therefore, achieving and communicating the authenticity of brand activism—defined here as the alignment of a brand’s explicit purpose and values with its activist marketing messaging and prosocial corporate practice—emerges as being critically important for marketing success as well as potential for social change arising from this strategy. In this work, we view marketing success in terms of brand equity, which results from a positive response to the brand driven by strong, favorable, and unique brand associations held in consumers’ minds (Keller 1993). What factors make brand activism an authentic and therefore successful strategy for building brand equity and nudging social change? And importantly, what can marketers do to ensure that such activist marketing does not circumvent the policy conversation or inspire consumer mistrust?

The present research examines brand activism as an emergent marketing strategy. Despite organizations’ increased sociopolitical involvement, research examining brand activism—including how, why, and when this strategy is effective—is sparse. Thus, this research makes four main contributions. First, we define and delineate the concept of authentic brand activism, differentiating it from previous corporate social responsibility (CSR) conceptualizations. In so doing, we introduce the notion of authenticity as encompassing mutually reinforcing and supportive brand purpose, values, messaging, and corporate practice. We advance the argument that authenticity of brand activism is determined by the alignment between three key characteristics of the brand: (1) its core purpose and values as a reflection of employees, brand promise, and caretaking of stakeholder needs and wants and how those are articulated and understood in the marketplace; (2) the messaging type and content circulated through brand vehicles, traditional media vehicles, and peer-to-peer and social media vehicles/channels; and (3) its corporate practices and how key stakeholders catalogue, demonstrate, and interpret these practices in the marketplace.

Second, we build a theory-based typology of brand activism, which distinguishes different forms of activism in terms of a brand’s adoption of activist marketing messages (high to low) and a brand’s employment of prosocial corporate practices in support of the sociopolitical cause (high to low). Most notably, the typology identifies brands that exhibit authentic brand activism as determined by the alignment of purpose and values with activist marketing messaging and prosocial corporate practice. Authentic brand activism can be contrasted with the practice of “woke washing” (Sobande 2019; Vredenburg et al. 2018), exemplifying inauthentic brand activism in which activist marketing messaging about the focal sociopolitical issue is not aligned with a brand’s purpose, values, and corporate practice. The term “woke” is of African-American origin, a “byword for social awareness” (Merriam-Webster 2017). Specifically, woke washing is defined as “brands [that] have unclear or indeterminate records of social cause practices” (Vredenburg et al. 2018) but yet are attempting “to market themselves as being concerned with issues of inequality and social injustice” (Sobande 2019, p. 18), highlighting inconsistencies between messaging and practice (Vredenburg et al. 2018). Overall, the typology provides a theoretical foundation for brand activism by identifying, defining, and distinguishing four types of brand activism.

Third, building on the typology and reflecting on the growing use of brand activism, we identify a boundary condition of brand activism: congruence between a brand activist (with a reputation based on purpose, values, messaging, and practice) and the sociopolitical cause it is partnered with. Based on theory, we examine how brands pursuing a sociopolitical cause that is moderately and optimally incongruent with the brand’s reputation are likely to strengthen brand activism outcomes. However, such a strategy risks disengaging from the

brand's core purpose, with potential to both mislead consumers and imperil attempts at driving social change.

Throughout, we point to the new space brand activism occupies as a private mechanism—whether appropriate or not—for framing problems of public interest in alternative ways (Dunn 2015; Stewart 2013). A goal throughout this work is to examine policy implications for marketers who wish to ensure that their brand activism's expressed and implied claims are clear and authentic, and aid rather than detract from the development of practical solutions to yield social change.

Conceptual Development

Defining Authentic Brand Activism

The literature identifies several defining elements of brand activism (Sarkar and Kotler 2018) and brand political activism (Moorman 2020) that set them apart from other, marketing-related CSR activities (see Table 1). Overall, brand activism is different from CSR in two distinct ways. First, CSR more strongly emphasizes actions, and the consequences of those actions (i.e., reputation, sales), than it does inherent company values (Wettstein and Baur 2016). Second, CSR activities are viewed as beneficial by the majority of society. In contrast, brand activism lacks this type of consensus because there is often no universally “correct” response to the sociopolitical issues involved (Korschun et al. 2019; Nalick et al. 2016), or in some cases, these issues may not be perceived as problems that need solving (i.e., homelessness). Consequently, brand activism is an evolution of CSR (Sarkar and Kotler 2018).

Table 1. Brand Activism and CSR Marketing Activities.

CSR Activity	Cause Promotion and Cause-Related Marketing	Corporate Social Marketing	Advocacy Advertising	Brand Activism
Form	Monetary (also involves advertising)	Advertising	Advertising	Advertising and practice
Aim	Seek to influence consumer perception through company-cause associations	Seek reputational and economic benefit via consumer appreciation of association with cause/issue	Incite institutional change through shifting public opinion and behavior	Support a cause, raise awareness, change behavior, and encourage sociopolitical change; also seeks reputational and economic benefit via consumer appreciation of association with cause
Initiative (Kotler, Hessekiel, and Lee 2012)	Marketing driven	Marketing driven	Marketing driven	Purpose and values driven
Degree of controversy	Noncontroversial charity, cause, or event	Noncontroversial issue	Noncontroversial issue	Controversial sociopolitical cause, issue, charity, or event
Nature of issue	Progressive	Progressive	Benefit industry	Progressive or conservative
Issues addressed	Social, environmental	Social, environmental	Political	Social, political, environmental, legal, business, or economic
Nature of engagement	No/minimal internal practice	Messaging only, no internal practice	Messaging only, no internal practice	Alignment between messaging and practice
Illustrative topics	Breast cancer research, Red Cross, UNICEF	Issues affecting the corporation's immediate industry	Issues involved with firms' operations, defending themselves from criticism; mainly occurs in harmful industries such as oil and tobacco	Immigration, gender rights, LGBTQIA+, U.S. gun reform, and climate change
Example	Pampers donates a portion of its profit to UNICEF for vaccine against neonatal tetanus	Heineken began a “drink responsibly” campaign	R.J. Reynolds disputed the harmfulness of smoking	Gillette viral ad explores toxic masculinity
Indicative Literature	Crimmins and Horn 1996; Kotler, Hessekiel, and Lee 2012; Varadarajan and Menon 1988	Haley 1996; Inoue and Kent 2014; Kotler and Lee 2005	Cutler and Muehling 1989; Fox 1986; Haley 1996; Menon and Kahn 2003	Dodd and Supa 2014; Korschun et al. 2019; Moorman, 2020; Nalick et al. 2016; Sarkar and Kotler 2018; Smith and Korschun 2018; Wettstein and Baur 2016

Drawing on and extending Moorman's (2020) work on brand political activism, we formally define and examine 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. This introduces four defining characteristics key to our examination of brand activism (see Table 2):

1. The brand is purpose- and values-driven;
2. It addresses a controversial, contested, or polarizing sociopolitical issue(s);
3. The issue can be progressive or conservative in nature¹ (issues are subjective and determined by political ideology, religion, and other ideologies/beliefs); and
4. The firm contributes toward a sociopolitical issue(s) through messaging *and* brand practice.

We briefly discuss each of these four characteristics next. First, brand purpose is central to authentic brand activism and focuses on a brand's contribution to wider public interest and societal goals (The British Academy 2019). Therefore, authentic brand activism prioritizes the delivery of social and environmental benefits (Bocken et al. 2014) beyond immediate economic interests of the brand (Sarkar and Kotler 2018; Wettstein and Baur 2016). In its extreme form, this may be viewed as a political mission of brands embedded within their purpose, usually as a by-product of their leaders (i.e., Patagonia; Moorman 2020). Yet brands may also see their very purpose as educators for a better society (i.e., shifting consumer behavior) or see themselves as significant and legitimate sources of cultural power, thus providing them the responsibility to incite societal change (Moorman 2020).

Second, brand activism has extended beyond achieving societal impact to engaging with controversial, contested, and polarizing sociopolitical issues. Contested or controversial issues have competing values and interests, engender disagreements about assertions or actions, are politically sensitive, and arouse strong emotions (Flinders University 2019; Nalick et al. 2016). Thus, not all customers have the same values as the brand, and the brand could potentially alienate certain consumer groups more than others (i.e., the issue is polarizing; Moorman 2020). Third, brand activism is further characterized by the adoption of either progressive or conservative stances on sociopolitical issues. This activism can address any sociopolitical issue along the political divide (Moorman 2020); however, the nature of these stances are subjective based on political ideology (Chatterji and Toffel 2018) or religion.

As a final defining characteristic, brand activism involves both intangible (messaging) and tangible (practice) commitments to a sociopolitical cause. Therefore, brand activism goes beyond mere advocacy/messaging (i.e., Dodd and Supa 2014; Nalick et al. 2016; Wettstein and Baur 2016) and involves alignment with corporate practices that uphold brand purpose and values. Messages are backed up by tangible changes within the organization to support employees, customers, and stakeholders through, for example, modifications to corporate practice and organizational policies (Kapitan, Kennedy, and Berth 2019), monetary donations (Crimmins and Horn 1996), and partnerships (Duane and Domegan 2019) aimed at facilitating social change. Yet, prosocial corporate practices vary considerably in terms of how deeply they are embedded in the business. For example, a one-off donation to the LGBTQIA+ community likely has a lesser impact than a change in organizational policy to allow parental leave for same-sex couples and the adoption of a gender-neutral bathroom policy. Long-term and embedded commitments may thus yield greater social impact.

Table 2. Defining Characteristics of Brand Activism.

Characteristic	Definition	Links to Brand Activism	Example
Purpose and values driven	Brand purpose is embedded as well as derived from its core values. Thus, a brand is not driven solely by profit but focuses on a brand's contribution to wider public interest and societal goals (The British Academy 2019), prioritizing delivery of social and environmental benefits (Bocken et al. 2014).	Brand activism, driven by brand purpose and values, seeks to impact sociopolitical issues beyond immediate economic interests (Sarkar and Kotler 2018; Wettstein and Baur 2016).	<i>Unilever</i> : 28 "sustainable living" brands (i.e., brands focused on reducing environmental footprint and increasing social impact) (Unilever 2019a). <i>Tony's Chocolonely</i> : created a reference price (living income) for cocoa and seeks to cooperate with other chocolate companies to create change in the industry (Tony's Chocolonely 2020). <i>Patagonia</i> : created "Action Works" to connect committed individuals to organizations working on environmental issues and donates 1% of sales to such organizations (which has encouraged other companies to do the same starting "1% for the Planet") (Patagonia 2018).
Contested, controversial, and polarizing Sociopolitical issues	Controversial issues have competing values and interests, engender disagreements about assertions or actions, are politically sensitive, and arouse strong emotions (Flinders University 2019; Nalick et al. 2016). While what represents a contested issue may change over time and differ across culture, current issues in the media include climate change, sexual harassment, gender equality, LGBTQIA+ rights, racism, immigration, gun control, reproductive rights, and public health.	Brands are choosing to, and are comfortable with, alienating certain consumers by engaging with divisive sociopolitical causes (Smith and Korschun 2018).	<i>Gillette</i> : advertisement and donations to charities addressed toxic masculinity (AI-Muslim 2019). <i>Nike</i> : advertisement featuring Black Lives Matter protestor and former NFL football player Colin Kaepernick addressed racial inequality (Boren 2018).
Progressive and conservative stances	Adoption of progressive or conservative stances. Both may be considered prosocial as they believe their actions benefit society (Chatterji and Toffel 2018; Eisenberg 1982).	Brand activism can address any sociopolitical issue along the political divide (subjective based on political ideology or religion) (Moorman 2020).	<i>Dick's Sporting Goods</i> : The firm was historically a supporter of the U.S. National Rifle Association and a purveyor of firearms and, thus, had a conservative following. Dick's outlawed the sale of assault-style rifles in their stores following the Parkland, Florida, school shooting in 2018, prompting backlash from a largely conservative customer base. In contrast, gun control consumers supported this action, as it aligned more with their values (Edgecliffe-Johnson 2018). <i>Nordstrom</i> : The firm discontinued the fashion line of Ivanka Trump, the daughter of President Donald Trump. Supporters of Trump started a "Boycott Nordstrom" social media campaign. Yet, Nordstrom was previously boycotted by people who did not support Trump (Creswell and Abrams 2017).
Messaging and practice	Brand activism involves both intangible (messaging) and tangible (practice) commitments to a sociopolitical cause (Delmas and Burbano 2011).	Brand activism goes beyond merely advocacy/messaging (i.e., Dodd and Supa 2014; Nalick et al. 2016; Wettstein and Baur 2016) and involves alignment with corporate practices that uphold brand purpose and values.	Messaging: Several CEOs spoke out against U.S. President Donald Trump's immigration ban (Cohn 2017). (CEO statements) The 2017 Super Bowl commercials were acknowledged for drawing attention to immigration, gender, and environmental rights (WGSN Insider 2017). (Advertising) Practices: Target's introduction of gender-inclusive bathrooms advocated for transgender rights. (WGSN Insider 2017). (Organizational practice) Procter & Gamble's commitment to donate \$3 million to relevant causes following the Gillette toxic masculinity campaign (Gillette 2019). (One-off support) Kenco's "Coffee vs. Gangs" project, which trains young men in Honduras to be coffee farmers, not gang members (Holder 2017). (Continued support)

Authenticity of Brand Activism

We conceive authentic brand activism as a strategy in which brands have clear purpose- and values-driven communication around an activist stance on sociopolitical issues while also engaging in prosocial corporate practice. Authentic activism thus matches a brand's purpose and values with activist marketing messaging and corporate practice. Each of these four factors (purpose, values, messaging, and practice) influences, determines, and builds on one another in a holistic system to create authenticity. That means that when messaging, for example, operates independently of corporate practice, purpose, and values, authenticity of brand activism is compromised. Likewise, when practice is misaligned with purpose, values, and messaging, that practice is perceived as being inauthentic.

To guide our understanding of authenticity, we borrow from the concepts of decoupling and greenwashing (Delmas and Burbano 2011). In the brand activism context, we contend that the absence of authenticity is greater than a mere failure to align prosocial corporate practice with messaging, which distinguishes it from decoupling per se. Aligned practice and messaging is necessary but not sufficient to grow and maintain authentic brand activism; brands must also show symmetry and a match between their purpose, values, messaging, and practice. When authentic brand activism is achieved via the alignment of these four factors, consumers more likely perceive a brand's position on the focal sociopolitical issue as relevant, truthful, and dependable.

In contrast, some brands may disconnect their communications from brand purpose, values, and corporate practice when engaging with sociopolitical movements out of a sense of urgency and market responsiveness (Campbell 2007; Georgallis 2017), which can result in woke washing. For instance, Nike continued to sponsor the NFL teams that rejected Colin Kaepernick after he knelt as a Black Lives Matter protester, despite embracing Kaepernick as its endorser (Carp 2018). In this example, as in greenwashing, firms and brands may mislead consumers about a firm's sociopolitical performance or the social benefits of the product (Delmas and Burbano 2011). Thus, tactics may not express sustained brand purpose, values, and prosocial corporate practice (Georgallis 2017; Pope and Wæraas 2016) and lead to an emergent division between marketing message and supportive practice (Campbell 2007). Consumers can also perceive brands to use societal issues as a marketing ploy to sell more of their product (Edelman 2019), thus questioning the motive as well as the social impact of brand activism that is disconnected from purpose and values and misaligned with corporate practice.

Importantly, firms that woke wash can jeopardize the impact of authentic brand activism. If consumers do not trust brand activism as an authentic way to drive social change for sociopolitical issues, then the strategy is rendered less effective for social good outcomes. Activist marketing messages that contain content or claims that are unsubstantiated and are important to a customer's decision to buy can yield irreparable harm to consumer trust. To protect the authenticity of their efforts, brand activists might consider what a reasonable consumer would interpret and what the expressed and implied claims are about the brand's support for a social or political cause.

Addressing questions of authenticity, then, is key to how brand activism may be perceived and received in the marketplace. We next map out a typology that shows how brands now align (or fail to align) purpose, values, messaging, and practice to illustrate how the marketplace has evolved to make room for brand activism.

Typology of Brand Activism

We propose a typology of brand activism that varies the degree of activist marketing messaging (high to low) with the degree of prosocial corporate practice (high to low), resulting in four quadrants (see Figure 1). Each quadrant depicts a form of brand activism that, when authentic, relies on articulated purpose and values as well as practice and messaging. We note one caveat to the interpretation of the proposed typology: we consider both the messaging and practice axes of our typology to be continuous, ranging from high to low. Therefore, we also conceive of the forms of brand activism as falling along a continuum on which there will be gradual and nuanced differences between brands. For parsimony, we categorize brands into four discrete forms of brand activism, as shown in the typology, and derive the description of each form from exemplars. However, in practice the boundaries between these forms may be blurred (Wettstein and Baur 2016). The following subsections expand on each form.



Absence of Brand Activism

Brands in the “absence of brand activism” category (quadrant 1) are those that have yet to adopt prosocial corporate practices in their approach to the marketplace and that do not have prosocial brand purpose and values or use activist marketing messaging. They operate without consumer expectations that they will become involved in brand activism and tend to be situated in industries that do not traditionally depend on partnering with sociopolitical causes to source their brand legitimacy. Examples include companies such as Caterpillar and other business-to-business companies, as their marketing is not consumer driven. Caterpillar, the world’s largest construction equipment manufacturer, has relied on traditional business-to-business sales and promotion strategies since its 1925 founding. The firm’s consumer-centric “Built for it” campaign in the mid-2010s provided a glimpse into its brand, showcasing videos of Caterpillar equipment playing Jenga with 600-pound blocks and powering an entire village (Maddox 2015). However, the brand so far has not addressed sociopolitical causes, instead advocating for economic development projects in emerging economies to provide new markets for its construction products.

As the marketing system evolves (Layton 2015), these types of industries may need to acknowledge changing social norms and the expectations of brands taking a stand. As brand activism becomes more anticipated and even demanded (Barton et al. 2018; Edelman 2018; Larcker and Tayan 2018; Sprout Social 2017), brands in the absent-activism quadrant may begin seeking ways to adopt prosocial brand purpose, values, corporate practices, and related marketing messaging, especially as emerging markets like the ones Caterpillar courts offer potential for growth. This is akin to how sustainable purpose and stances have come to be expected of not only consumer-facing brands, but also the manufacturing and client-facing industries that supply such consumer brands (Kapitan, Kennedy, and Berth 2019). Key to growth for such brands, consumers are also tolerant of first steps to grow activist values and practices, so long as brands are transparent (Du, Bhattacharya, and Sen 2010).

Silent Brand Activism

Silent brand activists (quadrant 2) embrace sociopolitical causes as part of their core mission or strategic focus. However, they are more likely to operate quietly behind the scenes, working on long-term integrated prosocial corporate practices that are part of their modus operandi and inherently linked to their purpose and values. At present, such brands tend to be smaller and have less brand power in the marketplace despite activism on contested issues. For instance, HoMie, an Australian clothing label created in Melbourne, aims to transition youth out of homelessness through the provision of income, job skills, and mentorship (www.homie.com.au). Silent brand activists may also include B-Corps whose products inherently lead to a better world, through, for example, sustainability (e.g., Klean Kanteen's reusable food and beverage containers).

Brands in the silent quadrant have the least to lose by entering the activist marketing messaging arena, because they already have prosocial brand purpose, values, and corporate practices to align with their messaging, a necessary first step toward authentic brand activism. Even internationally renowned brands such as Kraft Heinz (whose stated purpose is "growing a better world") could benefit from generating more explicit marketing messaging around their prosocial practices. For example, when the U.S. government endured its longest-ever shutdown in 2018–2019 and workers went without pay for more than a month (CNN 2019), Kraft launched a "Kraft Now, Pay Later" initiative to provide food to those affected by the shutdown and also asked consumers to donate to charity in lieu of payment to Kraft (McAteer 2019). However, the campaign forwent marketing messaging, focusing on practice. Because it was led by purpose-driven prosocial practice, Kraft could have benefited from publicizing its actions through marketing messaging, creating positive brand equity.

Authentic Brand Activism

Brands in the authentic brand activism category (quadrant 3) are perceived as authentic because their brand purpose and values, activist marketing messaging, and prosocial corporate practice are aligned—for example, buy-one, give-one shoemaker TOMS, ice cream maker Ben & Jerry's, and outdoor apparel brand Patagonia, whose values-driven messaging and practices are in sync with progressing social change (i.e., sustainability, equity, transparency). Ben & Jerry's has embraced activism around economic, social, and product quality values since the 1980s. Ben & Jerry's focus on quality products has encouraged its adoption of sustainable food systems, use of fair trade products, and opposition to the use of bovine growth hormones, meaning it buys its dairy from farmer cooperatives. The ice cream

makers have a premium product whose activist messaging clearly aligns with the well-defined long-term prosocial practices that underpin its purpose and values.

Authentic brand activism is superior to other forms of brand activism for two reasons. First, it involves truthful alignment of the activist marketing messaging with purpose- and value-driven prosocial corporate practice, serving as a necessary catalyst for social change. Second, it delivers the greatest brand equity outcomes. Just as brands serve as signals for product positioning (e.g., Wernerfelt 1988), they can serve as signals of a firm's position on a sociopolitical issue. When a brand's signal is credible, such as when a brand is demonstrably willing and able to deliver on its sociopolitical claims, it can lower consumers' information costs and perceived risk associated with choosing a brand. This in turn increases consumer-expected utility (Erdem and Swait 1998), in which consumers view the brand as delivering added value (i.e., brand equity; Farquhar 1989).

When a brand is perceived as acting in a manner that is ethical and true to its values, these positive associations likewise become linked with the brand as part of the knowledge structure that consumers hold of the particular brand. This can subsequently lead to favorable responses, thereby also delivering brand equity (Keller 1993). Consumer-based brand equity (e.g., increased utility, positive brand knowledge) should be reflected by purchase decisions and subsequently drive longer-term market outcomes of brand equity (Silverman, Sprout, and Pascal 1999; Srivastava, Shervani, and Fahey 1998). Therefore, authentic brand activists build brand equity for the current campaign as well as increasing the likelihood that future (authentic) campaigns will further contribute to brand equity.

Although many examples of authentic brand activism involve liberal, progressive stances on current topical issues, conservative brand activism can, by our definition (taking a nonneutral stance on a controversial matter), also be authentic if messaging and prosocial corporate practice align with a firm's explicit purpose and values. For example, chicken fast-food restaurant Chick-fil-A is well-known for embracing conservative Christian values and embodying these values in wide-ranging practices from being closed on Sundays to donating to anti-gay marriage organizations. Chick-fil-A's messaging around opposing same-sex marriage and financial support of organizations with the same beliefs aligns with the firm's values, purpose, and prosocial corporate practice, requisite to be classified as authentic brand activism.

Authentic brand activists have begun to evolve their stances rapidly, in some cases adopting causes and messaging that are less congruent with their established reputations. For example, ice cream maker Ben & Jerry's has entered sociopolitical conversations beyond its roots of environmental activism. In 2018, it introduced the 'Pecan Resist' flavor to advocate for voting Democrat during U.S. midterm elections in 2018 (Knoebel 2018), and in 2020, it encouraged consumers to "dismantle white supremacy" as it advocated for specific practices such as passage of the H.R. 40 bill in the U.S. Congress to create a commission to study and recommend solutions for hundreds of years of Black discrimination (Ziady 2020). Both theory and practice converge to show limited, marginal returns for brand equity for an authentic brand activist that continues with the same strategy that created its initial activist image. As more brands seek to adopt activist positioning (i.e., Campbell 2007), several authentic brand activists have begun to refresh their image via moderately incongruent sociopolitical cause messaging (i.e., Mandler 1982). We elaborate further on the potential role of incongruence in driving brand equity in the section "Mapping Outcomes of Optimal Incongruence."

Inauthentic Brand Activism

Brands in the inauthentic brand activism category (quadrant 4) are already embracing activist marketing messaging that communicates their support of sociopolitical causes. However, such brands lack explicit brand purpose and values and either do not exhibit substantive prosocial corporate practices or actively hide their absence of practices. This can render perceptions of their brand activism as insincere, inauthentic, or even deceptive. The increased transparency of brand behavior and thus accountability (Schultz, Hatch, and Larsen 2000) makes it risky for brands to be in this quadrant. The stakes are high for these brands; they tend to be consumer facing and are attempting to respond quickly to the rising tide of consumer expectations that brands take a stand on issues of political and social import (i.e., Barton et al. 2018). However, not only does inauthentic brand activism have negative brand equity implications via unfavorable brand associations and false signaling; it is also unethical as it can involve making misleading and unsubstantiated claims that engender consumer distrust (similar to greenwashing; i.e., Kapitan, Kennedy, and Berth 2019), which further limits the potential for social change.

Woke washing, in this context, exemplifies inauthentic brand activism efforts. In attempting to reach a youthful audience in 2017, Pepsi turned to reality TV star Kendall Jenner and the Black Lives Matter sociopolitical cause. The ad co-opted imagery of a peaceful protestor facing down armed troops and made light of the movement, as Jenner delivered a can of Pepsi to police and the protest turned into a block party. Pepsi did not have a brand purpose, values, or a related history of prosocial corporate practice in support of Black Lives Matter and did not have a history of brand activist messaging for other social causes. The brand was called out nearly unanimously online for its resulting inauthentic take. In this instance, Pepsi's Kendall Jenner ad can be considered woke washing: it had a strong activist message and a large platform and audience for its message; however, the brand did not have the values-driven prosocial corporate practices to support such a bold message.

In 2018, Irish gambling brand Paddy Power pulled a stunt with an empty double-decker bus it called "the official bus of gay professional footballers," an attempt to point out that it was a "statistical anomaly" that no Premier League players are openly LGBTQIA+. It sent the bus to the Pride parade in Brighton, United Kingdom, to encourage gay players to identify themselves, an unwelcome message that many consumers viewed as pressuring people to come out. Though Paddy Power did pair this effort with donating money to the Attitude Foundation every time anti- LGBTQIA+ Russia scored at the 2018 FIFA World Cup, the donation effort was central to the bookmaker's bottom line as a bet maker for sports. As a result, the pro-Pride messaging was perceived as woke washing, because it was not values driven and was not substantially supported by prosocial action.

Boundary Conditions of Brand Activism: Optimal Incongruence

Brand activism is fast being adopted in the marketplace (i.e., Knoebel 2018; Moorman 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2019). Indeed, the cases examined here, from global operations such as Gillette to local offerings like HoMie, suggest brand activism is steadily growing and is likely to become ubiquitous. How sustainable then are these brand activism outcomes in the typology?

Viewing the brand activism strategy through the lens of branding theory, which depicts brands and their attributes as networks of cognitively linked associations (Collins and Luftus 1975), brands seek to possess points of parity and points of difference to build equity (Keller, Sternthal, and Tybout 2002). While CSR-related marketing activities have been reduced to a baseline requirement (Fleming and Jones 2013)— a point of parity— brand activism as a more novel, less expected activity, is at present arguably a point of difference. The four characteristics of authentic brand activism— being purpose- and values-driven, controversial, progressive or conservative, and embodying message and practice —set brands that engage this strategy apart from competitors. Over time, however, brand activism is also likely to become common practice and be reduced to a point of parity (in the same way that, e.g., retailers offering reusable, green shopping bags has become an expectation). Consumer trends indicate this trajectory for brand activism as individuals demand greater accountability and responsibility from brands (Edelman 2018, 2019).

This section explores factors that have potential to amplify or attenuate the strategic outcomes of brand activism. Namely, we focus on congruence between the brand (with a reputation determined by purpose, values, messaging, and practice) and the controversial sociopolitical cause it engages with in activism attempts. We explore these factors with the use of a strategic framework that maps outcomes (ranging from satisfaction, to delight, to outrage) of differing levels of congruence between brand and cause. In so doing, we draw on theory from sociology, psychology, business, and the humanities and adapt these to the present context. Thus, the goal of this strategic framework is to develop theory of brand activism by assessing the boundary conditions of brand activism as it becomes an expected practice.

Optimal Incongruence Between Brand and Sociopolitical Cause

Congruence is widely used in marketing research to capture how audiences process and perceive partnerships (Cornwell, Weeks, and Roy 2005) and their outcomes (Kamins and Gupta 1994). Congruence is assessed on the basis of a match between a brand and its partner in terms of “mission, products, markets, technologies, attributes, brand concepts, or any other key association” (Simmons and Becker-Olsen 2006, p. 155). Congruence, however, may not be enough to trigger consumer attention and engagement as more brands adopt brand activism (i.e., Knoebel 2018; Vredenburg et al. 2019).

The marketplace has yielded rapid development of brand activism strategies; in particular, brands sometimes adopt sociopolitical causes that do not always align with established brand reputation. Examples of this observed incongruence between brand and cause come from not only inauthentic brand activists such as razor maker Gillette tackling toxic masculinity, but also authentic brand activists such as Ben & Jerry’s, with an ice cream brand calling for investigation into systemic racism. Theory points to why a brand might stand to gain greater brand equity from brand activism when it chooses a sociopolitical cause that is moderately and “optimally” incongruent (i.e., Cornwell, Howard-Grenville, and Hampel 2018; Mandler 1982; Warren and Campbell 2014). This pairing, compared with a completely congruent pairing, encourages consumers to engage in greater elaboration and deeper processing, resulting in potentially more intense reactions (Mandler 1982). Congruent relationships are less noteworthy and, therefore, do not prompt extensive elaboration or deep processing (Martindale 1991). Thoughts generated when there is higher congruence between a brand and a cause could be positive or negative yet mild in intensity. When there is low congruence, there may be a logic or information gap too significant for consumers to make sense of

(Cornwell, Howard-Grenville, and Hampel 2018). In contrast to both of these extremes, moderate incongruence between source and object (i.e., a brand and cause) are regarded as inherently more interesting, leading to more elaborate evaluations (Mandler 1982).

A parallel argument is made in the advertising literature: “Novel and surprising stimuli which spontaneously attract attention require a greater effort of processing than do more familiar stimuli” (Kahneman 1973, p. 4). Consequently, consumers might add to, alter, or rebuild their knowledge structure of a brand based on new distinct brand attributes, claims, and evaluations (Keller 1993; Morrin 1999).

Provided that the updated understanding, expectations, and knowledge structure of the brand are positive, moderately incongruent brand activism can increase brand equity. Specifically, moderate incongruence between a brand’s reputation via its explicit purpose and values and a sociopolitical issue, such as men’s razor maker Gillette paired with toxic masculinity as a cause, creates an opportunity for consumers to actively evolve their understanding and expectations for the brand (e.g., Cornwell, Howard-Grenville, and Hampel 2018). A moderate mismatch between brand and cause, therefore, might be optimal for brands in terms of the equity outcomes of their brand activism.

Consumer Response to Optimal Incongruence

Whether moderate incongruence between brand and activist cause will ultimately generate positive or negative response depends in part on whether the brand’s stance on the cause being contested threatens or affirms a consumer’s values. We build on the preceding discussion of congruence (i.e., Mandler 1982) with theory in sociology, psychology, social science, business, and humanities (i.e., Alden, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2000; Warren and McGraw 2016; Woltman Elpers, Mukherjee, and Hoyer 2004) to further propose that a departure from standard and mainstream social norms for a brand embracing a sociopolitical cause is an incongruence that can surprise consumers. The positive or negative interpretation of that unexpected brand activism campaign depends on how benign the viewer perceives the violation of social norms to be (i.e., Warren and McGraw 2015, 2016). Contested social norms in brand activism are a violation that some consumers will view as a threat to their identity and well-being but others will view as benign and harmless (McGraw and Warren 2010).

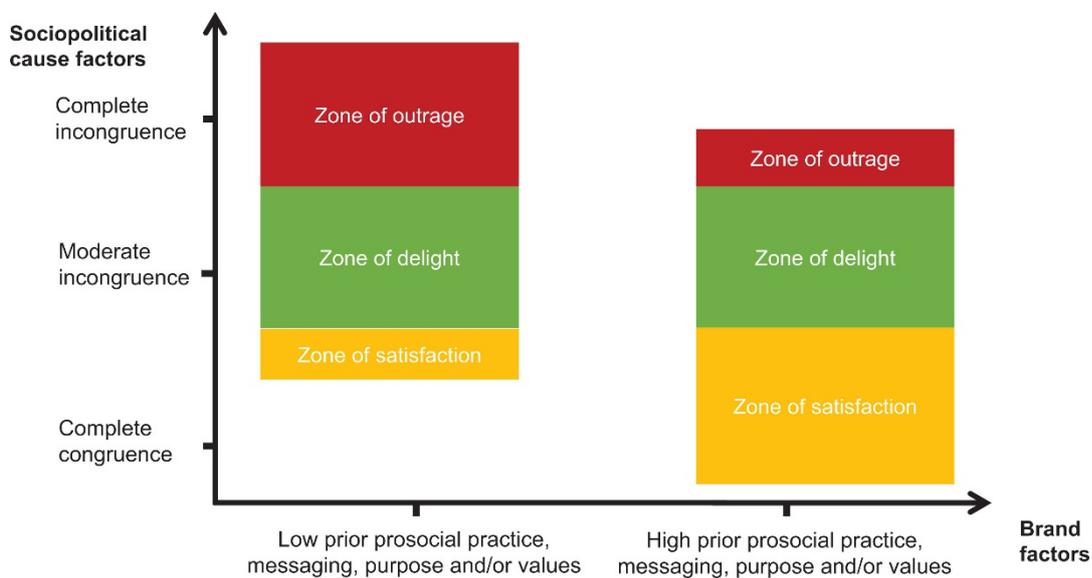
Brand activism that lies outside the boundaries of expectation for either the brand itself or the sociopolitical norm it advocates can still yield positive responses. Three things are needed for incongruity of brand’s reputation and activist cause to be optimal in driving consumer delight: (1) the brand activist message is a divergence from standard norms and/or the brand’s prior reputation, (2) the viewer perceives the divergence to be nonthreatening, and (3) the brand diverges from a social norm in a bounded, but not extreme, way (i.e., Warren and Campbell 2014; Warren and McGraw 2015).

If the brand activist message does not diverge from the norms for either the social cause or the brand’s reputation via its explicit purpose, values, and long-term established prosocial corporate practices, it can lead to consumer satisfaction— but is less likely to cause delight or outrage. If viewers perceive the divergence to threaten their identity or normative belief structure (i.e., McGraw and Warren 2010), it can lead to consumer outrage, but not to delight or satisfaction. Finally, if the brand exhibits moderate incongruence in messaging, rather than extreme divergence or complete incongruence (i.e., Warren and Campbell 2014; Mandler

1982), then it can avoid producing outrage, but only if the viewer perceives the brand activist message as a harmless or perhaps welcome violation of social norms, leading to delight. This means that audience receptivity determines impact in this strategy: consumer perceptions and responses vary based on their own acceptance of social norms being challenged by brand activism.

Mapping Outcomes of Optimal Incongruence

We propose a theory-driven model that maps consumer reactions—ranging from satisfaction, to delight, to outrage—to optimal incongruence between a brand and sociopolitical cause (see Figure 2). On the vertical axis, we explore how complete congruence, moderate (optimal) incongruence, and complete incongruence between the brand and the cause it engages with can lead to different consumer responses, depending on the company’s reputation for prosocial corporate practice and explicit purpose, values, and messaging. In part, these consumer responses are driven by consumer advocacy against misleading with a message too far removed from the brand’s core offerings and purpose.



Brands with little or no established prosocial corporate practice, messaging, purpose, and values have the least appropriate reputation for a new activism campaign involving a sociopolitical cause to align with. Thus, absent-activist and inauthentic brand activist firms (see Figure 1) are most likely to fall into this category because they have nonexistent or indeterminate records of prosocial corporate practice and either lack or have not articulated clear messaging, purpose, and values. For these companies, nearly any brand activism initiative will be perceived as moderately incongruent. For instance, efforts to build a socially responsible reputation tend to benefit brands with a negative corporate image (Ulke and Schons 2016). Therefore, the absence of expectations based on prior practice and values would indicate that marketing efforts based on sociopolitical alignment operate in a narrow zone of consumer satisfaction (e.g., Oliver, Rust, and Varki 1997; see Figure 2), which results in an increased likelihood of an extreme reaction, be it positive (delight) or negative (outrage). Such firms have a higher chance of drawing consumer delight by partnering with sociopolitical issues that are moderately incongruent with their current brand reputation. Yet these same firms also run a higher risk of drawing consumers into the zone of outrage, in

which a more clearly incongruent activist message results in negative brand response and brands could be accused of misleading consumers or of being inauthentic.

By contrast, brands that have established prosocial reputations for corporate practice, messaging, purpose, and values and can expect markedly different consumer reactions. These are silent brands or authentic brand activists (see Figure 1) that already embrace prosocial corporate practice, messaging, purpose, and values. Brand activism then can attract a much broader zone of consumer satisfaction, as shown in Figure 2. This satisfaction indicates that marginal improvement in related brand attitudes occurs for each instance of engaging with a sociopolitical cause that is highly aligned or completely congruent with the preexisting brand reputation. For instance, corporations with an existing positive reputation for social responsibility tend to benefit less from more communications around their positioning (Ulke and Schons 2016). Although these messages satisfy and deliver on consumer expectations of the brand, they generally fail to inspire or delight (Schneider and Bowen 1999).

Instead, brands with already established prosocial corporate practices and messaging alongside clearly articulated purpose and values might benefit from pursuing a strategy of optimal incongruence to create intense consumer delight rather than yield milder customer satisfaction. Theory shows why: brand activism started as a point of difference for many brands; however, because of the evolution of social norms, what was previously a point of difference is fast becoming a point of parity (Keller, Sternthal, and Tybout 2002; Layton 2015).

Consumers now expect a certain base-level of brand activism for most consumer-facing brands. To help brands with a history of prosocial corporate practice get noticed, marketers are beginning to push for optimal incongruence between the brand and the sociopolitical cause featured in its activist messaging. For brands with reputations for authentic activism, the risk of entering the zone of consumer outrage should be lower than for brands with no record of prosocial corporate practice. Consumers extend such brands the benefit of the doubt (Tsarenko and Tojib 2015; see Figure 2), which leaves more room for authentic brands to experiment with causes that extend their authentic brand activism image. For instance, ice cream brand Ben & Jerry's— long known as a “do-gooder” brand that since 1985 has had a reputation for supporting the community, the environment, and sustainable food systems— in recent years extended its brand activist focus to the imprisonment and criminal system. It launched a “Justice Remix'd” flavor and movement focusing on criminal justice reform, introducing a new, moderately incongruent, and more controversial sociopolitical cause to its repertoire. By 2020, Ben & Jerry's campaign against systemic racism included pushing for the reinstatement of the Civil Rights Division in the U.S. Department of Justice and calling on President Donald Trump to publicly disavow white supremacists— all on the back of a prosocial ice cream flavor.

Discussion

Policy Implications of the Brand Activism Typology

Brand activism emerged as a strategy in the vacuum of trust for traditional institutions. Brands' focus on matters of public interest effectively privatizes the framing of social problems, part of the shift from public to private service documented by marketing and public policy scholars (i.e., Dunn 2015; Stewart 2013). The appropriateness of this private

mechanism for opening debate on matters of public interest is a keen question that requires further investigation. In general, however, the goals, objectives, and end states for brand activism remain unclear and unchecked in the same way as traditional institutions that also include societal benefit as a core guiding principle, such as governments, schools, and religious organizations.

The policy implications of the brand activism typology presented herein serve as guidelines for brands to maximize the authenticity of their activism strategy. We encourage three key routes to lift informed consumer choice and safeguard the brand activism strategy's potential impact for social change (Stewart 2014): brand-level policy, third-party certifications, and the establishment of public-private partnerships.

First, responsibility for the success of authentic brand activism in driving social change rests in brand-level policy designed to protect perceptions of authenticity. Brand activists should adopt clear guidelines for wording choice as they perform legitimate marketing and business activities. Authentic brand activists should, we propose, avoid misleading and irrelevant claims while embracing specificity in their activist messaging, following precedent set by anti-greenwashing standards (i.e., ISO 14024 2018). Authentic brand activists should avoid making broad, unqualified general social benefit claims such as “working for social good,” “socially responsible,” “a socially conscious brand,” or “we promote well-being.” Such claims can be difficult for consumers to substantiate. Instead, messages should be qualified with precise social benefits, using “clear, prominent and specific language” as is of noted importance for avoiding greenwashing in common regulatory guidance (FTC 2019). For instance, cloud-based accounting software firm Xero clarified a World Mental Health Day pronouncement that its focus on “promoting well-being” includes reducing the stigma of mental health by replacing “sick leave” with “wellbeing leave entitlements,” allowing its 2,000 employees to take time off for mental health days as well as physical health needs (Barker 2018). Thus, brands taking a stand should not highlight small or unimportant benefits; rather, they should focus on substantial efforts in the activist arena.

Misleading and irrelevant claims on packaging and/or in advertising and promotional material can also create confusion. To mitigate this confusion, brands might follow shoe brand AllBirds' strategy: the firm added carbon footprint scores to its shoes, with specific amount of carbon emitted (i.e., 7.1 kg of carbon per shoe). Similarly, brands could indicate what percentage of the product's or service's profits support refugee resettlement, criminal justice funding, or anti-political action committee lobbying efforts. If a brand aims to portray its authentic investment and commitment to social change via its activist stance, setting and articulating specific benchmarks will encourage consumer trust in the process. In this way, measurable goals and specificity in language for messaging, purpose, values, and practices are a vehicle for trust and social change.

Second, consumers often lack tools to evaluate the products and services that authentically offer activist support for sociopolitical issues (i.e., Press and Arnould 2009). Third-party certifications are thus an important mechanism to bridge the gap in consumer knowledge and trust driven by brands' increasing presence in activist causes (Lai 2019). How do consumers know which activist messages to trust? Eco-labels on products, for instance, can serve as certification for attributes that require credence when the valued attribute is not directly observable (i.e., Daugbjerg et al. 2014). A verified social or activist rating could be incorporated into Sustainalytics' (2020) ESG (environment, social & governance) ratings for investments, become part of Euromonitor International's expanding Ethical Label passport

database, or become rated as part of the Tearfund (2019) reporting that currently focuses on grading brands' ethical fashion. An expansion of B Corporation certification might label vetted activist brands or stamp approval on vetted activist marketing or associated products or services. Importantly, for such ratings and/or activist labels to be effective, consumers must possess knowledge of the rating or labeling standard and have a high degree of trust in the rating process (i.e., Daugbjerg et al. 2014), including the rating institutions.

Finally, authentic brand activists have a growing ability to set the agenda or frame problems of public interest (Dunn 2015; Stewart 2013). It might thus be incumbent upon traditional policy-making institutions and brand activists to seek partnerships that lend legitimacy to the efforts of both. Public sector partnerships with local governments, not-for-profits, and nongovernmental organizations can help drive the problem frame for matters of public interest and yield debate that exposes attention to viable solutions, from funding for refugee resettlement to reforming police profiling of minorities. Public sector partnerships, sponsorships, and oversight of brand activism efforts could deepen and advance brand practice, purpose, values, and messaging while bringing much-needed consumer attention and/or monetary support to the nonprofit sector of change agents.

Woke washing is a particular risk to the ability of authentic brand activism to translate to social change. Woke washing, which inauthentically presents brand activism messaging with no aligned prosocial purpose, values, and practices, risks diverting attention and income away from legitimate not-for-profits or entities from consumers who vote for or against a cause with their dollars spent on a brand (Sen, Gürhan-Canli, and Morwitz 2001; Shaw, Newholm, and Dickinson 2006). Such inauthentic brand activism can also generate messages that have the potential to mislead or deceive about true practice and underlying meanings for sociopolitical engagement, further reinforcing the importance of the aforementioned implications. The success of authentic brand activism rests with brands protecting perceptions of authenticity. If consumers do not trust brand activism—because of, for example, woke washing, unclear and vague language in marketing or business activities, or unclear relationships to nonprofits—then brand activism efforts are less likely to yield actual social change. Trust in authenticity is fundamental to brand activism.

Implications of the Framework of Optimal Incongruence

Over time, as brands partner with sociopolitical causes (which may be more or less congruent with the brand) and forge their reputations, different brand activism outcomes can be observed. Consider Nike: when the firm launched its now-iconic Colin Kaepernick Black Lives Matter campaign, consumers responded extremely positively on the balance (i.e., delight) (Boren 2018) to what was a moderately incongruent brand–cause pairing combined with Nike's absence of an established reputation for prosocial corporate practice, messaging, purpose, and values. However, Nike's more recent developments, such as declaring Juneteenth an annual paid company holiday (Badenhauser 2020) have been met with positive, yet noticeably milder, reactions from consumers (i.e., satisfaction). As our theoretical model shows, this subdued reaction is due to Nike gradually building a reputation for anti-racist corporate practice, messaging, purpose, and values since it first vocally aligned to Black Live Matters in 2018.

The theoretical model proposed herein depicts and provides a theoretical explanation for this pattern of consumer responses based on optimal incongruence between the brand and sociopolitical cause and the brand's reputation. As brand activism becomes more widespread

(Edelman 2018; 2019), consumers' appreciation of such strategies becomes more sophisticated, and the execution of brand activism will need to evolve similarly. The theoretical model identifies optimal incongruence as a possible avenue through which brands are differentiating their activism strategies and maximizing outcomes.

Second, from a practical point of view, this theorizing suggests that authenticity may be necessary but not sufficient for brand activism in the long term. Optimal incongruence is an additional consideration in the assessment of brand activism, namely, in the selection and evaluation of a partner cause. Related literature (e.g., cause-related marketing) has extensively documented that brands choose causes with which they have a high degree of fit (Ellen, Webb, and Mohr 2006; Kuo and Rice 2015), even when the cause is less desirable (Barone, Norman, and Miyazaki 2007). We present an alternative view for the brand activism context: while complete congruence between brand and cause can lead to positive outcomes, these outcomes tend to be milder in intensity (i.e., satisfaction rather than delight) than in the case of moderate "optimal" incongruence, though this further depends on a brand's reputation for activism. Thus, it could be useful for brands, when initiating an activism campaign, to conduct an ad hoc study of their target market with the aim of uncovering perceived congruence of the brand-cause pairing, as well as the alignment with consumers' values. In advancing optimal incongruence as a boundary condition of brand activism, we make connections to and extend earlier research on congruence in marketing (e.g., Mandler 1982).

Future Research

This research is one of the first investigations of authentic brand activism, and thus, numerous future research opportunities remain. Research is needed to understand not only consumers' expectations of brand activism but also marketers' motivations to engage with this new approach, chiefly the strategic decision-making process behind brand activism. How are brands harnessing consumer and big data insights to determine which causes should spur brand activism efforts? Such work should also extend to the involvement and alignment of brand stakeholders. These elements are key to a coherent brand messaging strategy (Orazi et al. 2017), and stronger forms of stakeholder marketing that reflect more normative, macro/societal, and network-focused orientations are needed (Laczniak and Murphy 2012).

In this work, we note that brand activism in its current form means taking steps that may alienate one set of consumers in order to appeal to a different target market segment. Practitioners are adamant that brand activism strategies are useful when targeting millennials and Gen-Z, for instance (Smiley 2019). To what extent might brand activism messages that target one clear segment while alienating other segments be more effective for niche brands than for mass-marketed brands? While the present typology suggests global brands with long and checkered histories suffer from a lack of substantive prosocial corporate practice, purpose, and values to support their messaging, it is not yet clear if they can shift into authentic brand activist status as effectively as smaller, more nimble niche brands.

Brand activism must involve firm performance outcomes, specifically those related to increased revenues, brand equity, and customer loyalty, as well as aiming for social change. Measures of brand activism success must encompass both internal and external organizational data. Future research could empirically examine the impact of brand activism on revenue and sales, measure brand equity (including reputation; Netemeyer et al. 2004), and undertake surveys of employees and customers to understand attitudes toward the brand and organization. Online communications can be examined, including trending brand-related

hashtags or social media mentions, impressions, click-through rates, reach and frequency, website visits, and earned media value.

Apart from performance outcomes, the objective of brand activism is to foster meaningful social change. We suggest that future researchers investigate ways to measure the “cause and effect” of brand activism campaigns on social change across attitudinal (e.g., national polls showing increased support for gun control), behavioral (e.g., drops in gun ownership), organizational (e.g., gun control policy implementation within organizations), political (e.g., increased political support for gun reform, introduction of new gun control policy), and financial (e.g., monetary support for gun control nongovernmental organizations) metrics. In addition, social impact should be examined across internal (e.g., employees) and external stakeholders (i.e., customers, community, media, and government). Lessons can be learned from other domains concerned with program or intervention evaluation, such as the literature on social marketing evaluation (Stead and McDermott 2011) and the social impact of social enterprises and not-for-profits (Ebrahim 2019). Further, questions have arisen concerning the “like” and “share” nature of the social media aspects of brand activism campaigns: Do consumers feel they are contributing to social change through passive liking, sharing, and commenting? Does this “clicktivism” deter consumers from taking real action toward social change? Therefore, key questions remain about measuring the success of brand activism.

Finally, ethical considerations must also be explored. Involvement in sociopolitical causes, which are usually of a sensitive nature, requires reflection on the ethicality of private industry and for-profits becoming involved for unclear motives, an inherent challenge of social activism (Brenkert 2002). Is it ethical to become involved, even with for-profit motives, if it contributes to communicating, advancing, and debating a sociopolitical issue in the public sphere?

Conclusion

Social good is entering the mainstream. Driven by an increasingly polarized society, controversial issues such as the climate crisis, Black Lives Matter, and the #MeToo movement are serving as catalysts for mainstream brands to define problems of social interest and refocus on doing social good. Drawing from the literature on CSR, branding, advertising, ethics, and marketing, we advance a theoretical typology of authentic brand activism (Figure 1). Specifically, we argue the alignment of activist marketing messages with brand purpose, values, and prosocial corporate practice contribute to perceptions of authenticity. The brand activism typology can serve as guidance for brands on how to best employ this strategy, capitalizing on benefits while not disregarding due process.

Further, our framework of optimal incongruence (Figure 2) provides a theory-driven explanation of where marketers have begun to move regarding the tactical execution of their brand activism strategy. We advance theory to demonstrate that, while authentic brand activism resulting from aligned, values-driven messaging and practice is key to the long-term success of an activist brand, theory and rapidly evolving practice shows that pursuing moderate misalignment of brand and cause can strengthen the outcomes of brand activism.

Finally, brand policy to curate perceptions of authenticity is key, from engaging in public-private partnerships that add legitimacy to social change efforts, to ensuring authentic brand activism is vetted via third-party certifications and suggesting brands adopt specific,

measurable language standards in marketing. This adds weight to the call for marketing to raise its aspirations and operate under higher standards of marketing practice (Sheth and Sisodia 2007). Overall, as the acceptance of brand activism evolves, pressure will be on brands to walk the talk as they continue to innovate ways to engage a dispersed digital audience.

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Notes

1 Whether based on progressive or conservative stances, both envision their activities to benefit others and thus, both are considered prosocial. In this article, we view prosocial practices as subjective to sociopolitical stances that reflect political and/or religious ideology. Prosocial behaviors are voluntary, intentional, and motivated (whether positive, negative, or both) behaviors that result in benefits for another (Eisenberg 1982).

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