

Brand Activism: The Roles of Brand Legitimacy and Psychological Distance in the Consumer–Brand Relationship

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Abstract

• Objectives

According to the theory of the relationship between the consumer and the brand, this research aims to discover the mechanisms by which consumers approve, disapprove, or ignore brand activism campaigns from an affective and cognitive point of view.

• Methodology

This research analyses two brand activism campaigns, one social and the other environmental. It is based on a qualitative study protocol (36 participants), using the online Album On-Line (AOL) technique with 24 respondents, enriched by 12 semi-structured interviews.

• Results

This study reveals: an emotional mechanism, psychological distance, and a cognitive mechanism, brand legitimacy. This research highlights the three pillars of legitimacy (moral, cognitive, and pragmatic). Furthermore, if the brand is perceived as being too far removed from the cause, consumers feel detached from the brand and question its legitimacy.

• Managerial implications

These results suggest ways to mitigate the negative effects and enhance the positive impact of brand activism campaigns by (1) strengthening brand legitimization strategies and (2) reducing the psychological distance between consumers and the cause supported by brands.

• Originality

This article draws on the conceptualization of the duality of consumers' mental representations to offer a better understanding of the relationship between the consumer and the brand in the case of real brands.

• **Keywords:** Brand activism, brand relationship quality, legitimacy, psychological distance.

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The dilemma facing brands as to whether they should adopt a sociopolitical stance to enable social change is of growing interest. Brands can steer consumers towards making purchase decisions based on their values and ‘belief-driven buying’ (Edelman, 2018, p. 10). The concept of brand activism has gained traction by allowing brands to communicate their position on controversial sociopolitical issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Moorman (2020) proposes that brands can be seen as political actors who contribute responsibly to their environment. In this vein, research papers have begun to focus on brand activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020; Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020). Academic research has mainly investigated brand activism through a theoretical framework and conceptual papers (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Moorman, 2020; Mirzaei et al., 2022), with few researchers adopting an empirical approach (Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020; Nassar et al., 2021; Schmidt et al., 2021). For example, Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) present a new fertile area for research by showing that positive attitudes towards the fictitious brands in their study decreased among consumers who disagreed with the cause being championed, whereas there was no significant effect among consumers who supported the brand’s stance (Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020). In contrast, Schmidt et al. (2021) show that brands adopting a brand activism strategy are viewed more positively than their neutral counterparts. Although these are valuable findings, they do not clarify how brand activism campaigns affect consumer–brand relationships. Pham’s (2009) conceptualisation of the duality in consumers’ mental representations (affective and cognitive) offers a better assessment of the consumer–brand relationship (Valette-Florence and Valette-Florence, 2020). By building on that conceptualisation, the main objective of this paper is to explore the consumer–brand relationship in the brand activism context from a dual perspective (affective and cognitive). To do that, we

address the following research questions: How do brand activism campaigns affect the consumer–brand relationship? More precisely, how do the affective and cognitive dimensions of consumer representations of brand activism campaigns affect the consumer–brand relationship? Building on these dual mental routes, either affective or cognitive, this research contributes to the uncovering of hidden mechanisms by which consumers agree with, disagree with, or ignore brand activism campaigns. The paper is organized as follows. The first section is dedicated to a literature review of brand activism and the consumer–brand relationship. The second presents our methodology of using a triangulation method based on the album on-line (AOL) technique and semi-structured interviews. We then present the results, discuss our findings, make managerial implications, and identify limitations that will guide future research.

Literature Review

Definition and Delineation of Brand Activism

As brand activism is a relatively new concept, the related definitions are still emerging in the academic literature. By taking a stance on sociopolitical issues, brands appeal to consumers who hold similar values (Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). The definition of brand activism has evolved by focusing on sociopolitical causes, which are defined as ‘salient unresolved social matters on which societal and institutional opinion is split, thus potentially engendering acrimonious debate among groups’ (Nalick et al., 2016, p. 386). From this perspective, Vredenburg et al. (2020, p. 3) provide a definition of brand activism as ‘a purpose- and values-driven strategy in which a brand adopts a non-neutral stance on institutionally contested sociopolitical issues, to create social change and marketing success’. To be successful, brand activism requires this

strategy's components – its objective, values, sociopolitical message, and business practice (Vredenburg et al., 2020) – to be aligned in the presence of an adequate context, since certain causes would be considered more controversial than others (Mirzaei et al., 2022). Therefore, brand activism forms a bridge between the marketplace and society by combining values and actions as a strategy (Nassar et al., 2021). The nascent concept of brand activism is still being developed and conceptualized, but it should be differentiated from closely related marketing concepts such as corporate social responsibility (CSR), corporate political activity (CPA), and corporate social advocacy (CSA). Nassar et al. (2021) state that activism goes further than CSR efforts, with the main difference being a particular cause's level of controversy. CSR activities have by nature low levels of controversy (Bhagwat et al., 2020) and take the form of philanthropic actions (e.g. donations) or business practices (e.g. manufacturing) (Peloza and Shang, 2011). CSR activities benefit a company's reputation and are thus supported by consumers and managers (Peloza and Shang, 2011). However, brand activism is highly controversial and generates debate around issues such as racial or gender equality (Vredenburg et al., 2020). CSR involves refraining from expressing controversial opinions and maintaining good relationships with stakeholders (Mishra and Modi, 2016), whereas brand activism aligns with specific political ideologies and values, thus favoring a section of the brand's audience (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

From a political perspective, companies can choose to engage in CPA, which is a goal-oriented strategy (e.g. campaign donations and lobbying) aimed at government and other political decision-makers to ensure financial profits for the company (Hillman et al., 2004). CPA operates at the corporate level to influence political entities and does not disclose its actions to the public (Lux et al., 2011). However, brand activism campaigns

are public, so expressing the brand's position on a controversial sociopolitical topic can divide the opinion of its target audience (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Companies participate in CSA to communicate their public stance on important sociopolitical issues (Dodd and Supa, 2014). They announce their positions on controversial issues through chief executive officer (CEO) statements (Dodd and Supa, 2014). Consumers respond positively to CSA when their own opinions align with those of the brand (Dodd and Supa, 2014). Brand activism shares similarities with CSA in terms of partisanship, as both strategies are oriented towards communication around sociopolitical issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Dodd and Supa, 2014), but there are also differences between them. CSA focuses on written communications (e.g. CEO statements) (Dodd and Supa, 2014), whereas brand activism aligns messaging and practice to communicate the brand's position on a cause (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Brand activism also differs from CSA in terms of the targeted stakeholders. CSA operates at a strategic corporate level where the influence of stakeholders (managers, investors, and employees) plays a role in the advocacy message (Chatterji and Toffel, 2018), whereas brand activism operates at the brand level and focuses on the targeted consumer base when selecting a cause (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Benefits and Drawbacks of Brand Activism

Brand activism may present valuable opportunities for brands. Moorman (2020) reveals perspectives that may justify the adoption of brand activism as a strategy and enable brands to take a stand as political actors. In the long term, a brand activism strategy can contribute to brand equity (Vredenburg et al., 2020). It can also be used to differentiate the brand from competitors which choose to remain neutral (Moorman, 2020). Brands can assume the role of

political actors and challenge the status quo by taking sides on controversial issues (Moorman, 2020; Mirzaei et al., 2022), while those engaged in brand activism can seek to convince consumers and other organisations to join their stance on an issue (Korschun, 2021). Hence, brand activism relies on a perception of authenticity (Mirzaei et al., 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020). However, these activist efforts may not be relevant to a section of a brand's audience, and the adopted cause may alienate one faction in favour of another (Moorman, 2020). Brand activism as a strategy can therefore carry significant risk for brands. Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) found that positive attitudes towards the brand decreased when the consumer disagreed with the brand's stance but did not change significantly when consumers supported the cause (Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020). Although social change is a noble pursuit, brands are threatened by consumer mistrust due to perceptions of woke-washing, whereby brands exploit activism to achieve their business objectives (Vredenburg et al., 2020). According to Schmidt et al. (2021), brands that take a stance on important sociopolitical issues can create strong emotional connections with consumers, but only if it is seen as more than just communication. This implies that commerciality and cause can coexist, as long as the former does not compromise the latter. The opportunistic side of brand activism is to position the brand at the center of attention without contributing to the cause in any way (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Consumer Relationships with Brands: Affective and Cognitive Routes

Fournier (1998) suggests that consumers form an individual relationship with a brand in the same way that they form relationships with other people. From this perspective, the consumer-brand relationship theoretical framework appears particularly appropriate for exploring the relationship in the brand

activism context. The consumer-brand relationship is complex by nature, and brand activism adds another layer of complexity due to consumers' divisive responses (Vredenburg et al., 2020). As consumers form mental representations, either cognitive (based on characteristics) or affective (based on feelings or emotions) (Pham, 2009), the literature suggests studying the relationship between consumers and brands by using the cognitive and affective routes (Valette-Florence and Valette-Florence, 2020). More precisely, the concept of brand relationship quality (BRQ) has been defined as 'a customer-based indicator of the strength and depth of the person-brand relationship' (Fournier 1994, p. 124). BRQ is a higher order construct capable of evaluating a brand from a cognitive perspective or an affective perspective (Fournier, 1998). Nyffenegger et al. (2015) posit two dimensions in their BRQ conceptualisation ('hot' and 'cold' BRQ) to better understand the consumer-brand relationship. The hot components refer to the emotional intensity of the relationship between the consumer and the brand, while the cold components refer to a consumer's evaluation and judgement of the brand and its performance. Hence, for a comprehensive assessment of the consumer-brand relationship in the brand activism context, our exploration research considers both dimensions when operationalising the BRQ construct. Our approach takes into account that these two dimensions are not only activated simultaneously (Pham, 2009). Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) highlight an asymmetry in consumers' attitudes towards the causes which points to underlying mechanisms influencing the consumer-brand relationship. Building on Pham's (2009) conceptualisation of the duality in consumers' mental representations (affective and cognitive), the main objective of this paper is to explore the consumer-brand relationship, in the context of brand activism, from a dual perspective (affective and cognitive).

Methodology: Triangulation of Qualitative Methods

Our methodological approach follows a qualitative perspective allowing us to explore consumers' affective and cognitive representations of brand activism through an AOL projective technique and semi-structured interviews. The objective is to lay the groundwork for the consumer–brand relationship in a brand activism context and to study this intricate relationship through the dual affective and cognitive dimensions. The qualitative data collection involved 36 participants recruited through snowball sampling.

Method 1: AOL Projective Technique

The AOL projective technique enables consumers to express themselves through visual depictions to facilitate the transfer of meaning and knowledge (Vermette, 2007). We decided to select one brand activism campaign with a social focus and one with an environmental focus (Appendix 1a and 1b). Two groups of six participants were recruited for this study through snowball sampling, and each group was exposed to a scenario (Appendix 2). Groups were evenly divided by gender and level of education, with each group comprising three women and three men. Survey participants chose pictures that expressed their affective or cognitive illustrations and explained their choices. Data analysis was carried out according to a proximity analysis (INDSCAL) proposed by Kessous and Valette-Florence (2019). This displays a common space where the graphic distances between keywords are estimated according to the ratings assigned to the word linked to each photograph.

Method 2: Semi-Structured Interviews

The second stage of data collection was carried out through 12 semi-structured interviews. Our purpose was to delve deeper into the dual representations (affective and cognitive) of consumers towards brand activism campaigns. The interviews were conducted in person and through video calls. The participants were equally distributed according to gender, age and socio-professional category (Appendix 3). In the interviews, respondents were first asked broad questions about brand activism then questions about campaigns that they may have encountered. Our interview guide was divided into two main themes: affective representations of consumers and cognitive representations of consumers. The semi-structured interviews were followed by thematic analysis (Appendix 4).

Results: AOL Projective Technique

The AOL projective technique results are represented by perceptual mappings with clusters of keywords sharing similar meanings and are structured around two main axes. Four distinct mappings (Figures 1 to 4) are then displayed of the consumers' affective and cognitive experiences with brand activism campaigns. We hence analyse the results for each dimension (affective and cognitive), first through the axes represented on the mappings and then through the clusters related to each axis. We then show the similarities and differences between the two affective mappings and the two cognitive mappings.

Affective representation of brand activism

From an affective perspective, these two mappings illustrate consumers' responses

to the social brand activism campaign (Figure 1) and the environmental brand activism campaign (Figure 2).

The graphic displaying the affective scenario for the social brand activism campaign (Figure 1) was structured around two main axes: temporal perspective and justice. The affective social campaign mapping showed six clusters: political investment, support for change, oppression, optimism, bitterness, and anger/protest/disagreement. The vertical axis showed two types of consumer expectations of activism efforts from a temporal perspective (present vs future). The support-for-change cluster pointed to a brand's ability to drive change, thereby reducing the temporal distance between the consumer and the desired outcome for their chosen cause. The optimism cluster referred to consumers feeling optimistic about change; they believed the future envisioned by the campaign was achievable.

Figure 1: Affective mapping of the social brand activism campaign

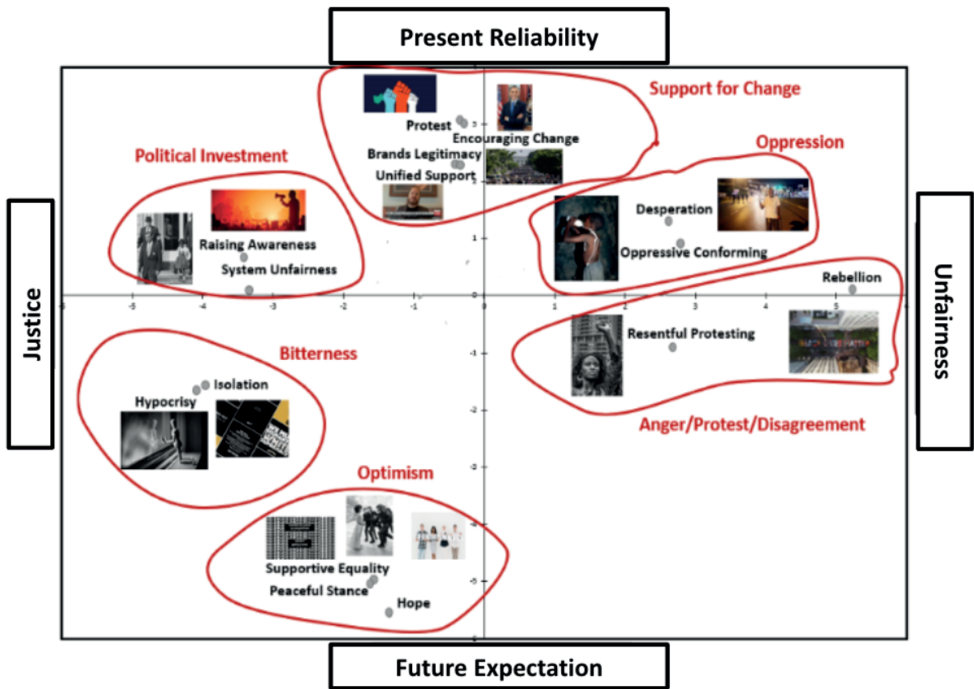
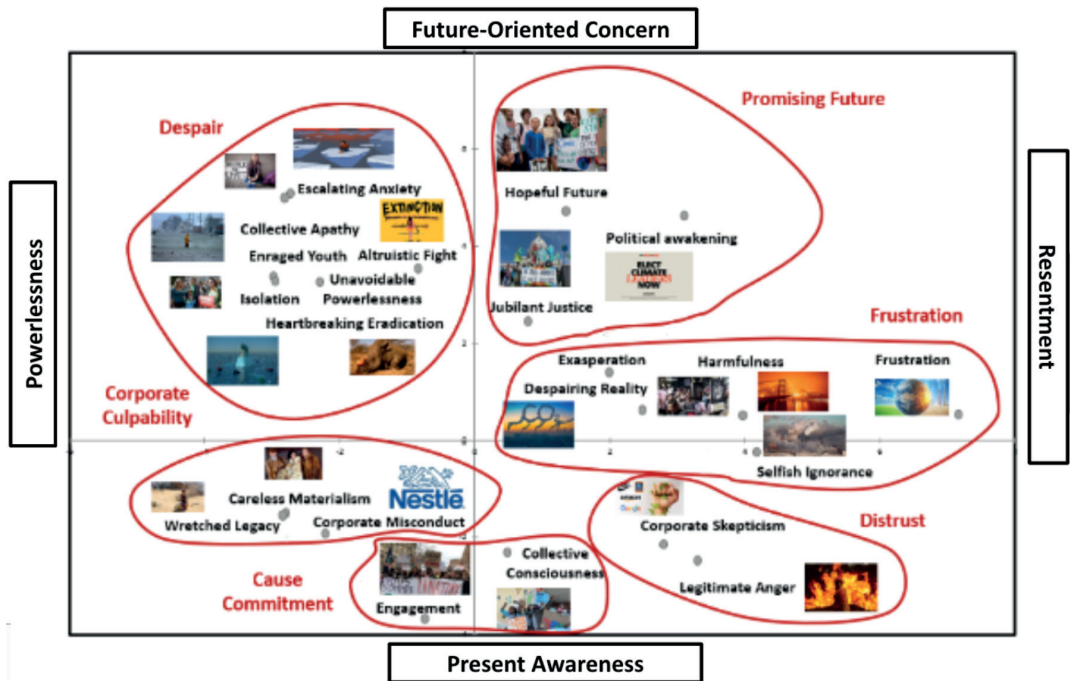


Figure 2: Affective mapping of the environmental brand activism campaign



The horizontal axis was based on consumer perceptions of justice and unfairness. Respondents experienced a mix of negative emotions triggered by the brand activism campaign due to their proximity to the cause in question (e.g. anger/protest/disagreement). The political investment cluster displayed a brand's engagement through activism; consumers were therefore more inclined to contribute positively by engaging with the brand (and the cause).

The graphic displaying the affective scenario for the environmental brand activism campaign (Figure 2) was structured around two main axes: temporal concerns and levels of anger. The affective environmental campaign mapping showed six clusters: despair, promising future, corporate culpability, cause commitment, distrust, and frustration. The promising future and cause commitment clusters signalled the engagement of consumers with brand activism campaign efforts in both the present and the future. Attempts to foster social change through brand activism are deemed long-term projects combining the efforts of both the brand and its consumers. Consequently, consumers positively commit to the brands to facilitate change. However, consumers experience a myriad of negative feelings associated with anger and resentment due to the direct impact of the cause on their lives; one could argue that consumers are the first victims of sociopolitical issues. We propose two types of powerlessness felt by consumers in this case: active and passive. The active powerlessness represented by the resentment axis includes the frustration and distrust clusters, which reflect how current social settings irritate consumers in their daily lives. In these cases, brand activism efforts appear lacking against the magnitude of the sociopolitical issue. The passive powerlessness displayed through the despair cluster signals consumers who have resigned themselves to the current reality and do not believe a brand can foster

change. They are detached from the entire process and do not think the strategy will amount to anything. Additionally, active powerlessness occurs when consumers, who are closely connected to sociopolitical issues, feel frustrated and powerless in addressing persistent social injustices despite their efforts. Passive powerlessness, on the other hand, involves a resigned state where consumers lack trust in brands' ability to drive societal change, leading to a distrustful attitude towards brand activism strategies due to perceived insincerity or a belief that brands shouldn't be involved in addressing societal issues.

From an affective perspective (Figures 1 and 2), the two AOL maps linked to social and environmental brand activism campaigns share some similarities and differences. The first similarity is manifested through the psychological proximity dimension in both affective mappings, which include the promising future and optimism clusters. Sociopolitical causes are a long-term commitment for both the consumer and the brand. Thus, consumers felt close to the cause and wished to see positive results in the near future. The second similarity is manifested through the display of negative emotions about the brand activism campaign and, by extension, the brand. As sociopolitical issues affect the lives of consumers, they experience a mixture of negative feelings such as anger and bitterness due to psychological proximity. However, the higher degree of lack of enthusiasm in the environmental AOL mapping indicates resignation among consumers.

Cognitive representation of brand activism

On the cognitive side, two mappings illustrate consumers' responses to the social brand activism campaign (Figure 3) and the environmental brand activism campaign (Figure 4).

Figure 3: Cognitive mapping of the social brand activism campaign

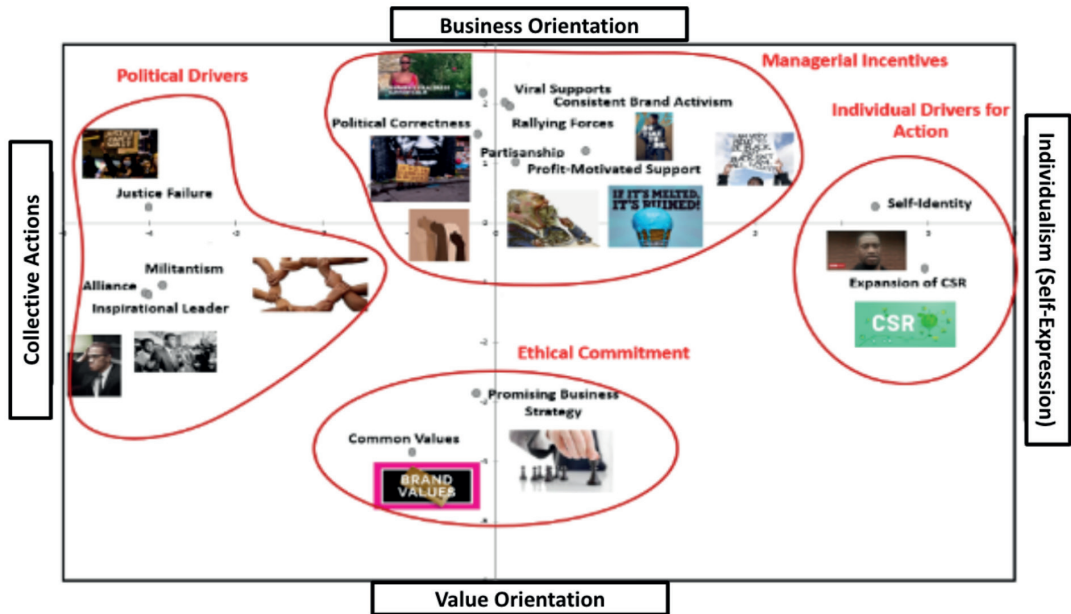
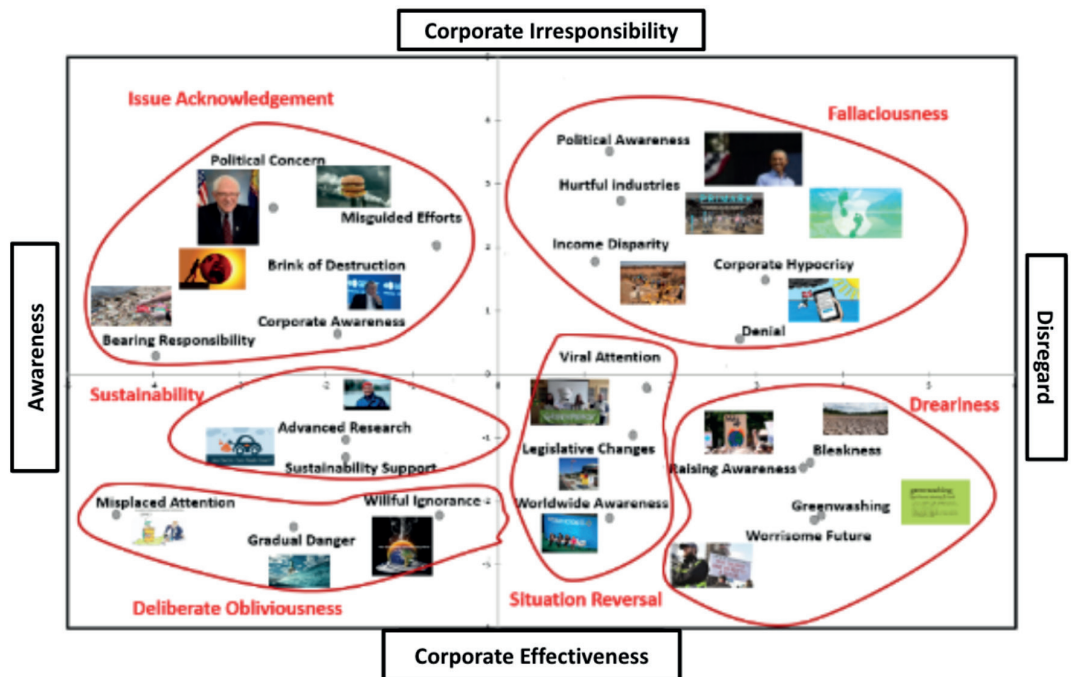


Figure 4: Cognitive mapping of the environmental brand activism campaign



The graphic displaying the cognitive scenario for the social brand activism campaign (Figure 3) was structured around two main axes: brand activism orientation and the nature of the actions. The cognitive social campaign mapping shows four clusters: managerial incentives, political drivers, ethical commitment, and individual drivers for action. The vertical axis shows two different orientations for the brand activism campaign (business *vs* value). The ethical commitment and managerial incentives clusters show the dual benefits for a brand and society that may result from a brand activism campaign. A commitment to society's demand for action through brand activism efforts may enable consumers to consider the brand as legitimate. The horizontal axis shows two ways in which brands can act through brand activism campaigns (collective *vs* individual). A brand's political awakening, driven by political issues, pushes it to use its resources to promote meaningful change. Brands act as legitimate leaders of change to create a political impact in their environment (e.g. political drivers). Brands also express their self-identity, political ideology, and values more accurately through brand activism campaigns (e.g., individual drivers for action).

The graphic displaying the cognitive scenario for the environmental brand activism campaign (Figure 4) was structured around two main axes: degree of effectiveness and degree of awareness. The cognitive environmental campaign mapping showed six clusters: issue acknowledgement, fallaciousness, deliberate obliviousness, sustainability, situation reversal and dreariness. The situation reversal and sustainability clusters point to the significant role brand activism plays as the starting point for long-term political change. The degree of brand awareness is highlighted by the issue acknowledgement cluster, whereby brands are essential legitimate actors in drawing attention to important divisive

sociopolitical issues. In this case, brands are seen as leading change related to the chosen sociopolitical cause. However, consumers' negative responses are observable through the fallaciousness and deliberate obliviousness clusters, whereby they accused brands of being hypocritical by expressing an empty message of change without contributing to the cause.

From a cognitive perspective, the two AOL mappings reveal both similarities and differences. The two mappings show similar clusters associated with political awakening and change (e.g. situation reversal and ethical commitment). These clusters indicate the role brand activism plays in political change, which enables the brand to conform to societal norms and enhance its legitimacy. However, there are differences between the two cognitive perspectives. Social mapping shows that brand activism can be used as a channel through which brands can communicate their values more accurately. However, the environmental mapping illustrates negativity toward brand activism campaigns due to brands' wilful ignorance and the perceived hypocrisy witnessed by the consumers (e.g., deliberate obliviousness and fallaciousness).

In summary, the affective and cognitive mapping of consumer responses to brand activism campaigns enables us to investigate interesting themes linked to psychological distance and its impact on the cause (consumer optimism about the future) and the brand activism campaign (the brand's long-term commitment to social change). The psychological distance can enhance feelings of optimism about the future, or it can overwhelm consumers and increase their negative emotions towards a cause and, by extension, the brand. Furthermore, brand activism enables brands to present themselves as legitimate political actors. The differences between the two mappings suggest that, when it comes to social

causes, brands are perceived as legitimate. However, the environmental cause also arouses feelings of doubt among consumers which subsequently leads to perceptions of falseness. Environmental causes have been central to CSR activities, but disillusionment arises from the lack of tangible results and instances of “greenwashing,” leading to consumer distrust. Continuous exposure to negative environmental news causes emotional fatigue and doubts about individual efforts for meaningful change.

The selected brands had a history of activism (Appendix 5), but our results show little difference between the brands themselves. Interestingly, consumers may develop a higher level of detachment towards environmental causes than social causes. The presence of negative clusters suggests that consumers have been continually exposed to messages encouraging green initiatives, but the outcomes of such messages remain unclear. Building on the results of the AOL projective technique (Appendix 6), we chose to deepen our exploration phase through semi-structured interviews to uncover themes relating to the affective and cognitive aspects of the consumer–brand relationship.

Results: Semi-Structured Interviews

We based our assessment of data saturation on the initial approach proposed by Guest et al. (2006) and concluded that a sample size of 12 is often sufficient in this case on a relatively homogeneous sample. The results of these semi-structured interviews are presented in three sections. The first section illustrates affective consumer responses through a spectrum of emotions (positive or negative) or emotional detachment – felt by consumers when exposed to brand activism campaigns. This variety of responses stems from their perceived proximity to or distance from the cause and the campaign. The second section tackles the cognitive aspect of

consumer responses, such as the perception of legitimacy or lack thereof. Finally, the third section focuses on how brand activism affects the consumer–brand relationship.

Emotional Spectrum of Brand Activism: Psychological Distance

The interviews elicited an array of extreme emotional responses ranging from positive, negative, and complete emotional detachment from the cause, the campaign, and, by extension, the brand. Positive reactions were collected in the form of manifestations of optimism that the brands were stepping into a role that urgently needed to be filled. Consumers lauded the brand’s initiative in taking a lead with such pressing issues, as expressed here by Ayoub: *“Everyone has a right to their opinion, even brands. And if a brand decides to join a movement and try to make a change for the better, they are more than welcome to do it!”* The participants were invested because brand activism campaigns constitute a potential solution for sociopolitical causes by having the resources and platforms to offer substantial help. As Lucie said: *“Well honestly, it’s not all bad, right? There is a lot of potential in that, often untapped, which makes me feel happy and inspired when brands offer real help to those in need... We gotta start somewhere after all!”*.

At the other extreme, as respondents expressed their anger and contempt due to their responsiveness to the cause, the campaign may channel the wrong attention towards the brand if it is handled as just another publicity strategy. As Safiya noted: *“If I take the example of Pepsi’s BLM [Black Lives Matter] campaign... I feel nothing but contempt for this advertising, which infantilizes and simplifies a cause as complex and tragic as BLM. I mean, especially since the tone used does not suit the topics discussed...”*. The present concern for participants when confronted with a brand activism campaign

is the looming threat of woke-washing. Whether the emotional intensity displayed by the participants was positive or negative, it is an indicator of psychological proximity to the brand activism campaign and, by extension, the brand.

Although they had encountered at least one example of a brand activism campaign by the time of the interview, some respondents felt detached from the relevant cause and campaign due to being distant from them. The consumer attributed profit-motivated intentions to the brand. For example, Anne said: *“I’m a little cynical, but I don’t think brands care about these issues and their impact on affected citizens... Let’s be real here, the benefit will always be money”*. Consumers can feel distanced from actively supporting efforts to address sociopolitical issues for a variety of reasons such as disillusionment or a belief that individual action is not effective in bringing about meaningful change. For instance, Ben raised the issue: *“Most of the campaigns which are, you know, protecting the environment and fighting climate change – I feel this type of activism is doomed to fail in the end. It will make some development in protecting the planet but... it’s going to be too late”*. The distance between consumers and brand activism campaigns can grow for two reasons. From the brand’s perspective, profit-making motives are attributed to it. From the consumer’s perspective, it is a simple lack of belief that these strategies will result in any meaningful long-term change.

Cognitive Spectrum of Brand Activism: Brand Legitimacy

From a cognitive perspective, the respondents evaluated the brand and its brand activism campaign and assessed legitimacy (or lack thereof) according to Suchman’s (1995) conceptualization by dividing legitimacy into three sub-dimensions: moral, cognitive, and pragmatic. When the sociopolitical stance

is linked to the brand’s values and moral stance, naturally the perception of legitimacy rests on its moral dimension. Eris expressed this concern: *“Buying is such a headache if you want to be woke too! Like I think a brand’s ideology is a very important part of my purchase process concerning any item, then problem solved! I can justify spending money on a company that shares my values.”* A brand’s cognitive legitimacy can also be brought into question, so the decision to express a political orientation or value alignment is no easy task. Consumers look at the brand’s previous efforts for indications of continuity and cohesion to assess whether the brand is legitimate. As Victor noted when comparing Ben & Jerry’s with Pepsi: *“It depends on the brand, if we take the example of Ben & Jerry’s, their social commitments seem normal and logical to me because they always have similar approaches. For other brands, like Pepsi for example, I only feel disappointed with their advertisements, which are always off the mark. Their lack of tact only reminds me that they are only multinationals with people who do not feel concerned by current social issues.”* From a more pragmatic perspective, as consumers are exposed to a vast array of brands broadcasting their products and services, the choice becomes difficult. Hence, they prefer to refer to the attributes of the goods when making purchasing decisions. As Amir said: *“It’s time to be real about all of this! You cannot be picky and choosy when you are on a budget! Sometimes a good product is simply good... I mean... yeah, look at Nike! I had the sneakers for two years, imagine two years! And they never let me down! Why would I begin looking for an alternative when it worked for me?”*

The dissonance created by political stances being introduced into the process of choosing brands is resolved through an assessment of the price and quality of products. Some respondents found the government lacking in effort and resources, and thus they urged

brands to take the initiative and become legitimate political actors. Hence, brands do not have the option of staying silent and are being thrust into the spotlight of brand activism, as expressed here by Lucas: *“However, it is quite possible that brands, in a surge of capitalism and the quest for gain, play the game by wanting to appear in tune with their audience, and communicate messages in favor of a lambda social issue just to sell their products and not to be ‘cancelled’ in the event of inaction”*. Another group of respondents seemed to pin responsibility on brands by perceiving them as hypocritical and accusing them of bringing additional harm to sociopolitical causes by turning them into publicity stunts, as expressed here by Ben: *“I think that in general, we have a distrust in authority, especially towards governments. But brands are also organizations, and they are even more exploitative. So no, they are not legitimate”*. The view that brands are not legitimate political actors is based on the idea that brands should focus solely on providing goods and services, and they should not involve themselves in political issues or activism.

Consequences of Brand Activism for BRQ

Brands are trying to bridge the gap between society’s prevalent sociopolitical issues and their target consumer bases. Our results show that the added component of brand activism has an effect on the consumer–brand relationship. Consumers who agree with a brand’s stance express their positive support through purchase intentions by Amina, who said: *“I am buying products every day... It is absolutely marvelous that I can contribute to some good, especially when it is a cause that is close to me. It makes me happy”*. As such, consumers reward brands through purchasing behaviour and apparent commitment. The respondents also praised brands that draw attention to important sociopolitical issues such as social discrimination rather than

staying neutral. As Lucie said: *“For example, the Nike campaign did make me more engaged in the subject of racism and racial injustice as well as more prone to buying Nike over other brands to support what it stands for”*. Nike gained a head start in the debate around racial discrimination and has cemented itself as a unique brand leading the conversation around this particular cause. Brands differentiate themselves from the competition and reinforce their sociopolitical credentials. Consumers signal their own ethical and political positioning through this purchase. In short, they are committed to the brand, what it stands for, and what it represents, as stated here by Ayoub: *“I would share their desire for change because, in that case, I would feel that there might actually be a slight chance to make that change possible. As I mentioned, such brands are big players, so it is always an attractive option to associate myself with brands like these!”*. Therefore, brands are not only stepping into the spotlight as key figures in sociopolitical struggles but also encouraging consumers to engage with the campaign and, by extension, the brand.

The semi-structured interviews allowed us to uncover various themes linked to the affective and cognitive aspects of the consumer–brand relationship. Our results were stable compared to those generated by AOL, the previous qualitative method of investigation.

Triangulation Synthesis

As we opted to adopt a mixed methods approach, we needed to combine our findings and triangulate our results. Therefore, we utilized a holistic triangulation (Turner et al., 2017) to assess brand activism more thoroughly and explain the rationale behind the respondents’ various responses to the strategy. We uncovered the relationship between consumers and brand activism

campaigns from different methodological perspectives (Appendix 7).

Psychological distance: From proximity to detachment in brand activism

The fluctuations in the affective responses result from variations in the psychological distance between consumers and the brand activism campaign. Psychological proximity is a sign that the consumer is involved in the sociopolitical cause or directly affected by its repercussions. The respondents expressed strong emotional responses (positive and negative: hope, intimacy, and happiness vs anger, frustration, and indignation) when they felt psychologically close to the cause. Emotional intensity signals that the consumer believes in the cause's impact and the brand's ability to foster change. The respondents expressed positive emotions about seeing a shift in the social responsibility narrative. However, the respondents also expressed feelings of anger and frustration at the brand's shy efforts in tackling sociopolitical issues. In both cases, the respondents believed in the cause's impact and the brand's ability to foster change. Furthermore, the AOL projective technique added depth to the psychological distance aspect which was displayed through a temporal dimension. As the temporal dimension is one of the sub-dimensions of psychological distance, the respondents expressed emotional responses when they felt psychologically close to the cause. Temporal proximity fostered emotional responses (either positive or negative) as some participants mentioned popular causes such as BLM. When the psychological distance grew wider (temporal distance, in this case), the respondents expressed feelings of detachment towards the brand activism campaign. This emotional detachment is due to doubts about a brand's capability either to solve these complex sociopolitical issues or to bring about any significant change, or even doubts related to the brands' motivations for

engaging in brand activism strategies (profit-making motivations).

Legitimacy: Tridimensional legitimacy in brand activism

As brands become political leaders in the brand activism context (Moorman, 2020), questions arise regarding their legitimacy. Although the AOL results show that brands are legitimate actors based solely on the moral aspect of legitimacy. The semi-structured interviews added another layer of complexity by detailing three dimensions of legitimacy: moral, cognitive, and pragmatic. These dimensions each play a role in conveying the legitimacy of a brand's activism and are used as the basis for consumer decisions over whether to engage with the brand. In contrast, the lack of legitimacy was a point of concern for the respondents who expressed perceptions of woke-washing (especially in the case of environmental causes). According to them, the brands are forced to conform by speaking out on important issues and seek only to use brand activism as a new profit-generating strategy. This perceived lack of legitimacy leads consumers to accuse brands of using activism for 'woke-washing' or profit-motivated ambitions. The use of conventionally legitimate brands as visuals in the AOL did not stop these perceptions. In conclusion, the tridimensional aspect of legitimacy gives a brand sufficient leverage to reinforce its chosen dimension in a brand activism context.

Consumer–brand relationship in brand activism: Engagement and purchase intention

Our research framework is built upon studying the consumer–brand relationship in the brand activism context. Brands engage in this risky strategy in the hope of gaining their target consumer base's approval and commitment. The results from both of our methods showcase that consumers do reward a brand's activism efforts by engaging with

it and purchasing its products or services. In this case, brand activism is a dual channel through which brands display their values and political orientation, and consumers align with brands that best represent them. Therefore, consumers may be swayed into purchasing one brand over another due to their respective activism efforts. The results also show that the consumer–brand relationship is reinforced through both the affective and cognitive paths. As consumer–brand engagement is a multidimensional concept with affective and cognitive aspects, we can safely assume that the two main mechanisms uncovered through the affective route (psychological distance) and cognitive route (brand legitimacy) lead to consumer–brand engagement in the brand activism context. Consumers feel more engaged by brands that have moved away from neutrality and voiced their sociopolitical stances, and they are also more inclined to contribute positively by engaging with the brand (and the cause).

In conclusion, our triangulation results point to the existence of dual routes for consumers' representations of brands in brand activism. The affective route points to the presence of psychological distance as a main mechanism, where psychological proximity manifests in extreme emotional responses (positive or negative emotions), and psychological distance is displayed with emotional detachment. The cognitive route points to the perception of legitimacy (through the three dimensions: moral, cognitive, and pragmatic), or the perception of hypocrisy.

Discussion

Theoretical Contributions

The consumer–brand relationship is complex by nature, and brand activism adds another layer of complexity due to consumers' diverse responses (Vredenburg et al., 2020). The controversial nature of brand activism

campaigns currently in the marketplace has resulted in extreme responses ranging from support to extreme displeasure (Vredenburg et al., 2020). In this section, we discuss how brand activism influences the consumer–brand relationship. The imbalance highlighted by Mukherjee and Althuizen (2020) suggests that there are underlying mechanisms guiding consumers' responses to brand activism campaigns. Previous research on brand activism has pointed to the political role of brands (Moorman, 2020) through brand activism. In some cases, consumers express their disagreement when the cause is misaligned with their values (Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020). In other cases, as shown by Schmidt et al. (2021), brands that adopt a sociopolitical stance are viewed more positively by consumers than those that stay silent. Hence, our research is aimed at shedding light on the concept of brand activism and the mechanisms that may influence consumer–brand relationships. The dual representation of mental representations, either affective or cognitive, helped us to uncover hidden mechanisms by which consumers agree with, disagree with, or ignore brand activism campaigns. This paper contributes to the growing literature on brand activism (Table 1) and extends the existing literature in three distinct ways.

First, our research contributes to the brand activism literature by identifying psychological distance as a determining factor in eliciting strong responses (either positive or negative) or indifference from consumers. Psychological distance refers to the level of proximity or remoteness experienced by an individual (Troepe and Liberman, 2010). The proximity between the brand's supported cause and its consumers can be split into two emotional reactions. Some respondents felt hopeful and optimistic at seeing causes garnering such positive attention through these campaigns. The reduced psychological distance between the brand activism campaign (and, by extension, their supported

Table 1: Theoretical Contributions of Our Research

	Previous Literature	Our Research Contribution
Positive Aspect of Brand Activism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Schmidt et al. (2021) show that brands that adopt a sociopolitical stance are viewed more positively by consumers than those that stay silent. – Brands can gain legitimacy over time through consistent and continuous support for the sociopolitical causes with which they are associated (Nassar et al., 2021). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Psychological proximity plays a role in positively engaging with the brand (who speaks out about a certain cause) through intense emotions expressed by the consumers (positive & negative). – This research highlights the tri-dimensionality of brand legitimacy (pragmatic, cognitive, moral), while specifying the role-played by pragmatic legitimacy in promoting purchase intentions, even when the consumers disagreed with the cause.
Negative Aspects of Brand Activism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Consumers express their disagreement when the cause is misaligned with their own values, but do not react with the cause is aligned (Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020). – Brands are threatened by consumer mistrust due to perceptions of woke-washing, whereby brands exploit activism to achieve their business objectives (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Schmidt et al., 2021). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The misalignment of consumers' reactions towards brand activism is due to their emotional detachment, which is a symptom of a high psychological distance between the consumer and the brand. – The lack of legitimacy is highlighted through the perception of hypocrisy due to the gap between the brand's claims and practices.

causes) and the respondents resulted in a closer and more intimate relationship (Van Boven et al., 2010). For other respondents, the psychological proximity triggered negative emotions like anger or frustration due to the sense of urgency (Didi-Alaoui and Cova, 2021). Intense emotions are a sign of close proximity to the brand, hence the psychological distance between the consumer and the brand is reduced. In the latter case, our research shows that when psychological distance grows, support for the sociopolitical cause reduces. Furthermore, the distance between a brand's campaign-supported cause and the consumer can make consumers become detached from brand activism efforts. Consumers feel detached and aloof from the brand activism campaign due to the increasing psychological distance between the two parties (Van Boven et al., 2010). Therefore, consumers feel less emotionally intense about the campaign and psychologically distant from the brand. This detachment was exacerbated in the case of the

environmental campaign, as the respondents had lost interest in such causes due to the lack of tangible results over the years.

Second, this study extends and enriches the literature on brand activism and legitimacy. Brands position themselves as champions of political (social or environmental) causes in what they claim are long-term and sustainable ways (Vredenburg et al., 2020). They are aware of the risks of engaging in brand activism campaigns, but taking a sociopolitical stance offers brands a way to communicate and support sociocultural norms to gain legitimacy in the eyes of their consumers and, by extension, other stakeholders (Du and Vieira Jr., 2012). To benefit from these potential rewards, brands engaging in brand activism efforts need to be perceived as legitimate. According to Suchman (1995, p. 574), brand legitimacy is “a general perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs and definitions”. The

concept of brand legitimacy is tridimensional (Suchman, 1995): cognitive legitimacy, moral legitimacy, and pragmatic legitimacy. Hence, brands can gain legitimacy over time through consistent and continuous support for the sociopolitical causes with which they are associated (Nassar et al., 2021). We take Nassar et al.'s (2021) findings a step further by delimiting three dimensions (moral, cognitive, and pragmatic) of brand legitimacy that prompt consumers to engage (or not) with the brand. We found pragmatic legitimacy to be a potential factor in persuading consumers to purchase the brand, even when they do not agree with the brand's activism stance. Our projective technique was based on conventionally legitimate brands, and the consumers' responses were mitigated even in the case of legitimacy. Hence, this research shows that legitimacy is an essential part of brand activism, but it does not guarantee the strategy's success. Our paper advances Mukherjee and Althuizen's (2020) research by adopting real brand activism campaigns as our visuals (in the projective technique phase) as opposed to the fictional brands used in their experimental study.

Based on two types of brand activism campaigns (social and environmental), our results indicate more negative implications for the environmental campaign than the social campaign. Consumers can become critical of a brand and suspect it of opportunism and lacking legitimacy (Nassar et al., 2021). Our study suggests that the gap between a brand's actions and sociopolitical stance can lead to allegations of hypocrisy (Wagner et al., 2009), which is defined as the general distance between claims and actions (Wagner et al., 2009), and can negatively impact consumer-brand relationships (Magnoni, 2016). From a cognitive perspective, the perceived level of hypocrisy towards brand activism campaigns, created due to the gap between the brand's claims and their practices, will engender a lack of legitimacy (Cho et al., 2015).

Finally, this study enriches the brand activism literature by adopting a new perspective on the consumer-brand relationship. Thanks to the use of the BRQ construct (Fournier, 1998) and distinguishing between affective and cognitive representations (Pham, 2009), this research highlights consumer engagement with the brand and purchase intentions as a consequence of the consumer-brand relationship in brand activism. The communication of a brand's values and political orientation is a clear proclamation of its self-identity, and consumers are more likely to interact with a brand that has similar values (Sen et al., 2014). Hence, the consumer-brand relationship in the brand activism context is taken to another level through affective, cognitive, or dual routes. Hence, our research can provide additional depth to Mirzaei et al.'s (2022) findings by shedding light on the role played by legitimacy and psychological distance in communicating authenticity and, by extension (through dual paths, affective and cognitive), consumer-brand engagement.

Managerial Implications

From a managerial perspective, as brand activism can generate a high degree of controversy, we propose steps managers can take to mitigate the related risks. They should consider brand legitimacy and psychological distance when designing brand activism campaigns. For managers wishing to leverage brand legitimacy, we adapt three legitimation strategies (Suchman, 1995) to the brand activism context:

- 1. Adaptation:** Moral legitimacy is the moral positioning of a brand (e.g. values and political orientation). The brand needs to adapt to the values and political leaning prevalent in its environment, especially its consumer base.
- 2. Communication:** Brand activism provides the chance for a brand to communicate its values, political ideology, and commitment

to the cause. To be perceived as valid, communication in brand activism has to be rooted in practice to reinforce cognitive legitimacy in the minds of consumers, who can then safely categorize which brands engage in activism and which do not.

3. **Selection:** Pragmatic legitimacy points to a brand's ability to deliver the products or services promised. In the event of ambiguity or potential backlash risks, the brand's activism can be predicated on pragmatic legitimacy to guide consumers' purchase intentions and interactions with the brand.

Our research also highlights psychological distance as a mechanism that can determine a campaign's success. Since our results point to psychological proximity as an indicator of consumers' interest in and alignment with a cause, we outline some recommendations for reducing the psychological distance between the consumer and the brand activism campaign.

1. **Emotional priming:** The use of affective visuals (priming emotions in consumers) could result in less psychological distance (Trope and Liberman, 2003) than the use of cognitive visuals. Consumers are more likely to be involved when they are emotionally invested (be it positively or negatively).
2. **Feasibility:** The campaign should emphasize feasibility, with a clear plan and ideas for executing it to achieve the desired change. This can be done by mentioning the cost of the endeavor, the length of the procedure, the steps required, and the parties involved (Trope and Liberman, 2010). The goal here is to reduce any uncertainty that consumers may have.
3. **Time and place:** The campaign should be conducted at a time when the sociopolitical cause is an issue for the public. In terms of place, the geographical zone of impact for the cause is a factor

in the psychological distance. The intricacies of the BLM movement spoke more to people in North America than in Central Europe, so North Americans felt closer to the campaigns and the cause during 2020.

We recognize that each brand has a specific case that needs to be addressed on its own, however, for the sake of generalization, we added potential scenarios that can help businesses utilize these two concepts (Table 2).

Conclusion

This study has limitations which offer opportunities for future research. Firstly, as our exploratory study relied on a limited number of participants, our research would benefit from larger-scale replication to test the results. Secondly, the brands chosen for this research are popular in the activist arena and considered legitimate due to their CEOs' stances on social (Ben & Jerry's) and environmental (Patagonia) issues. While this research shows that even brands with a long history of activism are not guaranteed success with this strategy, future research could focus on brands with different levels of legitimacy. Thirdly, brand legitimacy needs to be studied to establish quantitatively which dimensions (cognitive, moral, or pragmatic) influence consumers. Future research could explore the role of consumer-brand identification through values and political ideology in brand activism. Future research could also explore how legitimacy and authenticity interact and influence the consumer-brand relationship. Additionally, any future brand activism strategy should consider the influence of the context (political, geographical, and social) on the perception of the controversy degree. Finally, future studies could also investigate how varying sources and levels of psychological distance influence consumer responses to brand activism campaigns.

Table 2: Scenarios for Managerial Implications

Concept	Scenario
Brand Legitimacy (High)	<p>In the case of high legitimacy (in all three dimensions: cognitive, pragmatic, and moral), the brand is in a good position to continue its activism efforts, foster trust, and make a positive impact on society:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Being consistent in its actions while maintaining integrity throughout the organization, the brand can further strengthen its moral legitimacy and solidify its position as a credible advocate for social or environmental change practice. Brands with high legitimacy can effectively continue their activism efforts.
Brand Legitimacy (Low)	<p>If a brand lacks legitimacy in any of the three dimensions (cognitive, pragmatic, and moral), it may face challenges in continuing its activism efforts. Without a strong foundation in legitimacy, the brand should consider assessing legitimacy gaps and determine the specific dimensions that require improvement on the three dimensions as the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Focus on enhancing the brand's knowledge, expertise, and credibility. Communicate the brand's expertise and knowledge to gain trust and legitimacy in the marketplace. – Emphasize practical solutions and tangible outcomes. Showcase the brand's ability to deliver results and effectively address societal concerns. – Align the brand's values with the prevailing causes and concerns of the target (social inequality, concerns over the environment, etc..).
Psychological Distance (Near)	<p>A brand with low psychological distance refers to a brand that has a strong connection and closeness with its target audience or customers. To preserve this closeness, the brand should consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Anticipate changes and proactively adapt to meet evolving consumers' demand for change. Hence the brand reinforces its customer-centric approach and maintains a low psychological distance. – Actively engage with customers on social media platforms where they spend their time. Respond to their comments, inquiries, and feedback in a timely and authentic manner.
Psychological Distance (Far)	<p>A brand with high psychological distance refers to a brand that is distant or disconnected from its target audience or customers. Therefore, the brand should consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Develop an emotional connection with the target audience by showcasing their same values, and heightens their emotions towards the brand. – Involve customers in the brand's processes of brand activism campaign.

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Appendices

Appendix 1a: Visual image of the social brand activism campaign

Source: Ben & Jerry's (2016)



Appendix 1b: Visual image of the environmental brand activism campaign

Source: Patagonia (2019).



Appendix 2: AOL Scenario Prompts

Affective Scenario	Focus on the emotions and feelings provoked by the Brand Activism campaign. How do you feel about the campaign? What sort of feelings do you have regarding the campaign (positive or negative, a mix of both)? What feelings resurge about the brand after seeing the campaign?
Cognitive Scenario	Focus on the thoughts provoked by the Brand Activism campaign. What comes to your mind after seeing the visual? What do you think about the campaign? What sort of opinion do you form regarding the campaign (e.g. trust, satisfaction)? What do you think about the brand after seeing the campaign?

Appendix 3: Semi-Structured Interview Participants

N°	Name	Gender	Occupation	Âge
1	Eris	Female	Unemployed	28
2	Anne	Female	Homemaker	57
3	Bianca	Female	IT Engineer	22
4	Lucie	Female	College Student	21
5	Safiya	Female	Graduate Student	25
6	Amina	Female	Office worker	42
7	Ali	Male	College Student	20
8	Ayoub	Male	Graphic designer	27
9	Ben	Male	Biochemistry Engineer	28
10	Lucas	Male	Entrepreneur	36
11	Victor	Male	Public function worker	40
12	Amir	Male	College Student	19

Appendix 4: Coding Details of the Semi-Structured Interviews

The literature review around the consumer–brand relationship and its affective and cognitive dimensions allowed us to form an a priori coding process. Subsequently, we completed the coding process after the interviews were concluded. We were able to identify three main themes: affective dimension, cognitive dimension and consumer–brand relationship consequences.

Affective Dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – (High/Low) Psychological Distance – Positive emotions and negative emotions – Detachment
Cognitive Dimension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Pragmatic Legitimacy – Cognitive Legitimacy – Moral Legitimacy – Hypocrisy
Consequences of the Brand–Consumer Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Engagement to the Brand – Purchase Intentions

Appendix 5: Choice of the AOL visuals for the Social and Environmental Campaigns

For the pre-test we compiled 12 Brand Activism campaigns launched over the past decade. The brands and their campaigns were selected based on their relevance to past brand activism literature (Vredenburg *et al.*,2020; Moorman, 2020; Mukherjee and Althuizen, 2020), in which they have repeatedly been cited as prime examples of the application of strategy in the field. We chose to focus on the brand activism campaigns’ visual images to reinforce the credibility of the results. We asked five branding experts to select the most relevant campaigns according to four criteria (comprehension, word length, congruence between image and text, and clarity). We were able to select the brand activism campaigns that would communicate the cause without ambiguity. Scores ranging from 0 to 5 (0 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) were assigned, compiled and ranked to select two brand activism campaigns (one social and one environmental).The selected social brand activism campaign was launched by Ben & Jerry’s in 2016 to support the Black Lives Matter movement by speaking out against racial injustice and discrimination (Figure 1a). The selected environmental brand activism campaign was launched by Patagonia in 2019 to support the election of climate-conscious congress representatives (Figure 1b).

Appendix 6: Synthesis of the AOL Results

Scenario		
Campaign	Affective	Cognitive
Social	Temporal distance: The display of positive emotions (optimism) in the case of temporal proximity or, in some cases, negative emotions (anger and resentment). Engagement: With the brand and the cause.	Legitimacy: Brands are considered legitimate political actors in their environment, hence highlighting the legitimacy aspect in brand activism. Self-identification: Brands express their self-identity, political ideology and values more accurately through brand activism campaigns.
Environmental	Temporal distance: The display of negative emotions in the case of temporal proximity or, in the opposite case, the display of resignation and detachment in the case of temporal distance. Engagement: With the brand and the cause.	Legitimacy: Brands are considered legitimate political actors in their environment, hence highlighting the legitimacy aspect in brand activism. Hypocrisy: Consumers harbour perceptions of brands as lacking legitimacy and ‘woke-washing’.

Appendix 7: Synthesis of the Triangulation

	Semi-Structured Interviews	AOL Projective Technique
Affective	Psychological proximity: Consumers expressed strong emotional responses (positive and negative: hope, intimacy, happiness vs anger, frustration, indignation) when they felt psychologically close to the cause. The emotional intensity signals that the consumer believes in the cause's impact and the brand's ability to foster change.	Psychological proximity: Adding depth, the psychological distance aspect was displayed through a temporal dimension, in which consumers felt closer to causes that affect the present. The temporal dimension is one of the sub-dimensions of psychological distance. Hence, consumers expressed emotional responses (positive and negative: hope, intimacy, happiness vs anger, frustration, indignation) when they felt psychologically close to the cause.
	Psychological distance: In cases of high psychological distance, consumers expressed their indifference, resignation towards the cause and, by extension, the campaign.	Psychological distance: In cases of high psychological distance, consumers expressed their detachment especially in case of environmental campaign.
Cognitive	Legitimacy: Consumers view brands as legitimate when they engage in brand activism efforts. This legitimacy is displayed through three dimensions: pragmatic, cognitive and moral.	Legitimacy: Consumers consider brands as legitimate political actors, thus solidifying the legitimacy aspect in brand activism.
	Hypocrisy: A perceived lack of legitimacy leads to accusations from consumers, who link brand activism to 'woke-washing' or profit-motivated ambitions.	Hypocrisy: The use of conventionally legitimate brands as visuals in the AOL did not stop consumers from harbouring perceptions of brands as lacking legitimacy and 'woke-washing'.
Consumer-Brand Relationship	Purchase Intentions: Consumers may be swayed into purchasing one brand over another due to their brand activism efforts. Engagement: Consumers feel more engaged by brands that have taken a step away from neutrality and voiced their sociopolitical stance.	Engagement: Consumers are more inclined to contribute positively by engaging with the brand (and the cause) as well.