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# A Review of Brand Activism in the Age of Black Lives Matter Movement

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**Abstract** – This study provides a critical review of the brand activism phenomenon against the background of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. It sought to address the gap in extant marketing strategy and brand crisis literature by synthesizing the literature on the socio-political actions and behavior of American corporations and their leaders in response to the racial justice protests as well as the attendant criticism by stakeholders to the stance taken by various corporations in response to pressure by activists. The results underscore the influential role of brands as social agents who by engaging in political activism and aligning with consumer values, possess the capacity to shape public sentiment, stimulate corporate responses, and instigate societal transformation, consequently impacting corporate performance. However, concerns have been raised regarding brands exhibiting a lack of congruence, authenticity, and substantive action. Furthermore, contentious stances and motivations driven primarily by commercial and financial interests have also come under scrutiny. The study recommends that brand activism should exhibit a strategic alignment with the brand's purpose, permeating all aspects of the organization. This alignment should be tangible and quantifiable, thus allowing for the assessment of its impact and effectiveness.

**Keywords** - Brand activism, Corporate Political Activism, Social Media Activism, and Black Lives Matter.

**Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and/or Practitioners** – The findings of the study offer valuable insights and guidance to marketing educators, researchers, and practitioners regarding the evolving attitude of brands toward socio-political activism. It also addresses the evolving landscape of brand activism, thus providing practical implications for firms and managers regarding the management of brand activism campaigns, as well as how to respond when they become the focus/target of a socio-political protest. Additionally, this study brings into focus the role that moral appeals coupled with political consumption can play in motivating pro-social behavior by brands. The study employed a narrative literature review (NLR) approach, integrating elements of systematic research (SR) methodology to examine 17 empirical studies.

## Introduction

### Background

Over the past several years, the uproar over the violent deaths of young Black men and women at the hands of White police officers, along with accompanying charges of institutionalized racial inequality, has led not only to social media activism (e.g., #BlackLivesMatter) but also to offline activism (e.g., the U.S. national anthem protests) (Chon & Park, 2019). Since the tragic demise of George Floyd at

the hands of the police, thousands have taken to the streets to protest the racism prevalent across America and beyond. For protestors, it is a situation that cannot be tolerated any more; for many brands, it is a communications crunch, as they are faced with a delicate, if not a particularly heart-wrenching dilemma: to speak up in support, or to stay glossy, sanitized and silent? (Stoppard, 2020).

Following weeks of riveting nationwide protests against police brutality and systemic anti-Black racism, some of the nation's largest corporations responded with public declarations that Black Lives Matter (Davis & Warren, 2020). Chief executives at tech companies ranging from Uber to Facebook have broadcasted public notes to express support for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, while companies like Amazon and Twitter have plastered their platforms with banners or changed their profile pictures in support. Apple and Google, two of the largest consumer tech brands, moved to quickly update their maps to reflect changes to newly named streets in the district and elsewhere, too (Lerman, 2020).

These leaders hope that their political activism will help shape public opinion and potentially lead to lasting change, while simultaneously cementing their reputation as moral leaders and change agents. In addition, the companies hope to develop stronger ties with employees and customers, who are increasingly politically active themselves and expect the same from the brands they buy (Gaukel, 2022; Moorman, 2018). This is an enormous U-turn from the past, when brands preferred to stay neutral (Stoppard, 2020), and often avoided aligning themselves with political and social issues for fear of alienating swatches of consumers or striking the wrong tone (Meyers, 2020).

With an increasing number of companies taking a public stance on social-political issues, brand activism has become a growing area for research in advertising (Clemensen, 2017; Freeman, 2010) and marketing (Bhagwat *et al.*, 2020; Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020) fields. It is therefore not surprising that in 2016, the Marketing Science Institute (MSI) identified the issue of whether brands should take such stands as one of the 'critical issues emerging in the not-too-distant marketing future' (Marketing Science Institute, 2016), and it underscored that it will be important for managers to know whether courting controversy is likely to help or hurt their brand (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

Despite increased socio-political involvement by organizations, research examining brand activism — including how, why, and when this strategy is effective — is sparse (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020; Villagra *et al.*, 2021), particularly marketing studies with a focus on structural and systemic anti-Black racism (Francis, 2020). Accordingly, the current study sought to address the gap in extant literature by examining the BA phenomenon in the context of the BLM movement. It is informed by the fact that in the divisive social and political climate that exists in today's America, corporations and brands are facing a serious challenge on how to align their values and the socio-political causes they wish to identify themselves with. The question many are asking is: "What exactly is brand activism and why is it important to American corporations?" Also, "Do brands have an obligation to speak out on social and political issues?" If so, "how should they engage or participate in activism without damaging their reputation."

## **Objective of the Study**

This study sought to conduct a comprehensive analysis of brand activism in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement. It scrutinizes the socio-political behavior and actions of American corporations and their leaders in response to the BLM movement epitomized by the protests and demonstrations in US cities. Additionally, it highlights some of the notable public relations campaigns advocating for change as well as responses from brands, media companies and agencies as they took a stance against racism and social injustice. By so doing, it seeks to make theoretical, policy as well as practical contributions to the controversial topic that is brand activism by providing insights into

how major brands could pursue socio-political activism in an age of constant controversy.

## **Organization of the Study**

The study is organized as follows: (1) introduction, (2) literature review, (3) research methodology, (4) findings, (5) conclusion and recommendations, and finally (6) references.

## **Literature Review**

### **Activism**

While there is no single definition of activism, activism is broadly defined as a “process by which groups of people exert pressure on organizations or other institutions to change policies, practices, or conditions the activists find problematic” (Smith, 2005). On the other hand, Sarkar and Kotler (2018) define activism as consisting of efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to make improvements in society. The Oxford English Dictionary (2019) defines activism as “The policy of active participation or engagement in a particular sphere of activity; spec. The use of vigorous campaigning to bring about political or social change.”

### **Definition of Brand Activism**

Brand activism is the act of publicly taking a stand on divisive social or political issues by a brand or an individual associated with a brand (Kotler & Sarkar, 2017). Brand activism takes place when a company or brand publicly endorses a social, economic, environmental, cultural, and political issue that aligns with its core values and vision (Shetty *et al.*, 2019). Brand activism has now become a popular corporate strategy through which brands take a public stance on what they think is “good” for society (Cian *et al.*, 2018). According to Schmidt *et al.* (2022), the motivation for companies and brands to take a stance on an issue could be based on a number of reasons: because it aligns with their core values and the founder’s vision for the company, for good publicity, to help their businesses’ bottom line, or for any number of other reasons (Hodge, 2020).

Brand activism may take the form of making an open statement in the public domain, lobbying for the cause, donating money to the particular cause, and making a cause-related statement through their marketing and advertising communication. This form of activism not only gets the attention of their target customer base but also creates a “buzz” or publicity around the brand (Shetty *et al.*, 2019). Additionally, activism helps companies and brands by having a positive impact on their profits, enhancing customer loyalty, and identifying with those customers who share common values and principles. (Shetty *et al.*, 2019).

Brand activism has been gaining in popularity since the late 2000s, as brands become increasingly vocal on socio-political issues through the use of advertising. Be it voicing support for Black Lives Matter (Nike) or hitting out at ‘toxic masculinity’ (Gillette), brands are willingly aligning themselves with significant social and political causes and actively ‘taking a stand’ (Glozer, Crane, & Hinds, n.d.). This is a significant change from the past where brands used to avoid political messaging for fear of offending clients with different views. The danger now is not being committed enough (Chittrakorn, 2020).

**Table 1. Synopsis of the Conceptual Domains Associated with Brand Activism**

<b>Domain</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Researcher</b>	<b>Example</b>
Corporate-Sponsored Activism	Openly aligning of corporations with social activists to protest the social practices of other companies, industries, or States	McDonnell, (2016)	Partnering or actively participating in social activist campaigns.
CEO Activism	The practice of CEOs speaking out on issues unrelated to their company's core business	Chatterji & Toffel, (2019)	CEOs public statements, press releases, social media posts.
Commodity Activism	Misleading and fraudulent practices to fool the consumer with strategies aimed at securing ever-larger profits	Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, (2012)	Misleading engagement with unethical organizations, green washing or pink washing, woke washing, etc.
Corporate Sociopolitical Activism	Public demonstration (...) of support for or opposition to one side of a partisan sociopolitical issue	Bhagwat <i>et al.</i> , (2020)	Press releases, and social media posts, for example, involving low levels of monetary investment.

Source: Pimentel & Didonet (2021)

## **Consumer Brand Activism Framework**

A review of literature reveals that brand activism is a multi-faceted construct composed of various dimensions. The most prominent framework is by Kotler & Sarkar (2017), which identified six brand activism domains or categories. These are as follows:

**Table 2: Consumer Brand Activism Framework**

<b>No.</b>	<b>Domain</b>	<b>Features</b>
1.	<b>Social activism</b>	Includes areas such as equality – gender, LGBT, race, age, etc. It also includes societal and community issues such as education, school funding, etc
2.	<b>Legal activism</b>	Deals with the laws and policies that impact companies, such as tax, workplace, and employment laws
3.	<b>Business activism</b>	Is about corporate governance – corporate organization issues such as CEO pay, worker compensation, labor and union relations, governance, etc.
4.	<b>Economic activism</b>	May include minimum wage and tax policies that impact income inequality and redistribution of wealth.
5.	<b>Political activism</b>	May include minimum wage and tax policies that impact income inequality and redistribution of wealth.
6.	<b>Environmental activism</b>	Deals with conservation, environmental, land-use, air and water pollution laws and policies.

Source: Kotler & Sarkar (2017)

Sarkar and Kotler (2018) posit that brand activism represents a “natural evolution beyond the values-driven Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) programs” (p. 570). They also contend that with CSR & ESG being largely corporate and market-centric, they lack the urgency and boldness to challenge the status quo (established value system and norms) in most companies (2018, pp. 570-581). Unlike CSR, which is principally concerned with upholding principles of corporate citizenship, brand activism focuses on addressing the most pivotal and urgent challenges facing society (2018, pp. 577-581) by taking a stand on controversial social or political issues for which society has yet to reach consensus.

## Summary

Table 3 provides an overview of the literature summary based on a narrative review of major brand activism studies. It contains information about the study’s authors, objectives, methods, findings, and its contribution.

**Table 3: Literature Summary of Select Brand Activism Studies**

Author(s)	Objective	Methodology	Findings	Contribution
Dodd & Supa (2014)	To assess the influence of corporate social advocacy on consumer purchase intentions.	Experimental methodology and nationally representative sample of 500 U.S. consumers (n=500)	Higher alignment with a corporate stance leads to increased purchase intentions, while lower alignment results in reduced purchase intent.	Demonstrates that CSA has tangible outcomes for organizations.
Clemensen (2017)	To examine how consumers feel about companies taking political stances	Quantitative analysis of research questions whereby testing of hypotheses was done on online survey data of 813 participants.	Both millennial and non-millennial consumers would be more likely to stop purchasing a product due to a political statement that a company had made	Offers recommendations on how corporations can strategically practice CPA (i.e. take a CPA stance) so as to avoid antagonizing both consumers and employees.
van den Broek <i>et al.</i> , (2017)	Evaluate the effect of online protests and mitigating firm response on stakeholder evaluation.	Regression analysis that includes an event study and an online experiment	Online protests can cause financial, reputational, and sales damage/harm to firms; Firms can exacerbate or reduce the damage by their response.	Provides managers with useful insights that can help them optimize their response when they become the focus/target of an online protest.
Manfredi-Sánchez, (2019)	Investigates how political issues are broached by activist companies in their authentic brand strategies	Triangulation of both qualitative and quantitative techniques based on a sample of 45 advertising campaigns.	Classified and analyzed four broad categories employed by activist brands in their advertising and marketing activities: politics & regulatory affairs, economy & business, society and environment	Breaks down how brands can use socio-political messages, slogans, and content to make their corporate communication more persuasive and for their commercial benefit.
Shetty <i>et al.</i> (2019)	To study the perceptions of millennials towards brand activism	A quantitative HTAB (Hypothesize, Test, Action, Business) methodology with a	Millennials prefer to buy a brand aligned with a cause or purpose and discontinue support if the	Advises brand managers to adopt a strategic approach towards activism and to cautiously steer their brands

		sample of 286 respondents.	brand behaves unethically. Also, gender and income do not significantly influence their perceptions of brand activism.	through this complex and contested landscape
Sobanda (2019)	Explores how and why “intersectional” feminist and Black social justice activist ideas are drawn on in “woke” marketing content	Interpretive and critical discursive analysis of “intersectional” feminist advertising & “woke” marketing content	Illuminates how and why brands employ various stereotypes based on race and gender for their prosocial marketing	Highlights the marketing responses to recent socio-political discourse and movements such as BLM through the lens of advertising.
Bhagwat <i>et al.</i> , 2020	Investigates the relationship between Corporate Sociopolitical Activism and Firm Value	Event analysis using hypotheses tests with a data set of 293 CSA events conducted by 149 firms.	CSA outcomes vary across stakeholder groups with investors reacting unfavorably to firms engaging in CSA vis-a-vis customers who react favorably.	Advances the marketing strategy literature and the nascent work on activism by introducing CSA as a new potential firm strategy.
Kelly (2020)	Examines the commercialization of activism and ‘marketized philanthropy’ through Nike’s Ad campaign	Critical analysis of Nike’s Ad campaign featuring Colin Kaepernick.	The cooption of socio-political activism by powerful commercial interests inhibits meaningful structural change in society	Commercialization of social activism eliminates or negates its transformative potential.
Vredenburg <i>et al.</i> , (2020)	Studies how consumers and citizens evaluate the authenticity of socio-political activities and practices by activist brands and corporations	Critical review of literature that draws on theory to inform a typology of brand activism	Consumers’ view of a brand’s sociopolitical stance as authentic is based on a history of brand purpose, values, and consistent pro-social corporate practices & messaging	Proposes a theoretical typology of authentic brand activism that helps corporations to align their marketing with brand purpose, values, and prosocial corporate practices and thus avoid perceptions of “woke washing” by consumers and citizens
Aronsson & Kato, (2021)	To investigate how consumers respond to social activism advertisements by brands	Quantitative research with an abductive research approach that used an online survey	Corporate social activism has an overly positive impact on consumer-based brand equity	Demonstrates the impact of social activism advertisements on consumer-based brand equity and consumer purchasing engagement
Ferenius & Kotras (2021)	To investigate which antecedents affect consumers’ perception of the authenticity of brand activism	A deductive approach whereby four hypotheses derived from the theory were quantitatively tested using structural equation modeling based on data collected from 305 participants in a web-based survey.	There is a significant positive relationship between each of the antecedents (impact, uniqueness, heritage, and continuity) and the perceived authenticity of brand activism	Contributes to the empirical literature on antecedents of brand activism by suggesting and validating four antecedents of consumers’ perceived authenticity of brand activism.
Jungblut & Johnen, (2021)	To investigate the effectiveness of different political brand communication by FMCG companies	Two experiments using a regression model with a convenient sample of 184 cases with different sets of brands, issues, and countries.	Shows that boycotting outweighs buycotting, implying that political brand communication is a risky strategy	Contributes to the understanding of political consumerism behavior by providing/showing the conceptual differences between boycotting and buycotting.
Klostermann, Hydock & Decker (2021)	To investigate the mitigating effect of corporate political advocacy (CPA) on brand perception; (ii) the mitigating effects	Regression analysis based on event study of 106 CPA events and weekly consumer brand perception data	CPA had a negative effect on consumers’ brand perceptions; online protests were driven by the CPA effort and had a	Confirms the mitigating role of CPA as a corporate response strategy following online protests.

	that firm responses may have on the online protest's damage.		strong negative effect on brand perception.	
Duffy (2021)	To investigate the effects of perceived inauthentic brand activism on consumer brand engagement metrics and valence on Twitter	Quantitative analysis approach that tested hypotheses using a combination of the Kruskal-Wallis H test and the Pearson Chi-Square for a total number of 2,626 observations. (N=2626)	Brands will be negatively targeted if they engage inauthentically in an activist debate online.	Provides useful insight into the negative engagement outcomes when brands are perceived to engage inauthentically in an activist debate on Twitter.
Villagra <i>et al.</i> , (2021)	To investigate the moderating effect of consumers' political ideology on the relationship between corporate activism and brand equity.	A quantitative approach using the structural equation model (SEM) analysis of a sample of 1,521 individuals	Consumer's political ideology moderates the effects of corporate activism on company reputations and brand equity	Guides companies and managers in their corporate strategic decision-making that employ brand activism as a marketing strategy to engage consumers
Afego & Alagidede, (2022)	To investigate the nature and impact of CEO statements following racial justice protests in the US	Mixed Methods research using (i) content analysis and (ii) event analysis	CEOs primarily convey their stance using language that is emotive and empathic. CEO statements have an impact on the share price.	Highlights the role that affective appeal and moral emotion can play in evoking motivation for corporate activism, and the impact that this has on investor opinions' formation process.
Heatherly <i>et al.</i> , (2022)	To investigate the types and effect of corporate social activist (CSA) responses to BLM protests on corporate media coverage	Quantitative analysis using regression models (n = 50)	Corporate social advocacy leadership and corporate pledges had an effect on companies' media coverage while DEI initiatives did not	Provide useful insights regarding which specific corporate activities generated substantive earned media, enabling brands to better prepare for such crisis events and informing their media strategy.
Herzberg & Rudelof (2022).	To empirically investigate how brand activism, in comparison with CSR, impacts brand equity.	Exploratory online experiment with a single factor between-subjects design (n = 215)	(1) Brand activism has a positive impact on brand equity, while (2) no significant differences between the impacts of BA and CSR on brand equity could be found	Ascertain to corporate decision makers that BA can increase brand equity and compares its performance to CSR.
Wertley & Baker (2022)	To analyze and classify the content of organizational advocacy (OA) messages. made by the top 100 American brands in response to the murder of George Floyd	Thematic content analysis of Twitter statements	The statements contained two main themes: framing and acting.	Proposes an advocacy framework with 6 categories (3 for each theme) for organizations seeking a messaging strategy to respond to crises events e.g., backlash, canceling.
Wang & Bouroncle (2023)	To examine the extent to which the perceived corporate motives of engaging in CSA affect consumer skepticism and brand equity.	Quantitative analysis that employed linear regression analysis and hypothesis tests. An online survey was undertaken, resulting in a sample of 375 respondents.	A company benefits from CSA if its consumers perceive purely moral, altruistic, and ethical corporate motives. However, a CSA activity could also backfire if consumers perceive egoistic motives for engaging in CSA,	Argues that companies need to develop a good understanding of the consumers' attributions when engaging in CSA and proposes that they should stay vocal about where they stand on sociopolitical issues. Also classifies CSA as a subset of CSR.

Source: Researchers (2022)



# Methodology of the Study

The methodology for this study is outlined in the following sections.

## Research Design

Research on brand activism is still at an exploratory stage and in need of advancement and conceptualization (Cammarota *et al.*, 2023). Accordingly, this qualitative study is exploratory in nature and employs the literature review method of research to collate information, combine perspectives and synthesize research on the brand activism domain. As noted by Snyder (2019), literature reviews serve as invaluable tools for providing an overview of a certain issue or research problem. They are typically conducted to assess the current state of knowledge on a particular topic, facilitate the identification of research gaps, formulation of research agendas, or in-depth discussion of a specific subject matter. Additionally, reviews help in preventing unintended and redundant duplication of prior research (Boote & Beile, 2005). When appropriately conducted, review articles serve as crucial resources for practitioners seeking up-to-date evidence to inform their decision-making and professional activities (Paré *et al.*, 2015). Qualitative research typically limits itself to a few units, ranging a dataset size from around 20 to 40 (Schreier, 2018).

More specifically, a Narrative Literature Review (NLR) approach was used but included features of systematic research (SR) methodology (See Ferrari, 2015). Typically, narrative reviews are qualitative syntheses of the relevant literature, irrespective of whether or not they make use of statistical tests. Baumeister (2013) argues that NLRs are able to integrate studies that address different research questions and employ various methodologies.

## Literature Search

This study conducted an analysis of conceptual and empirical articles drawn from the marketing and communications fields. The inclusion criteria for the NLR were: conceptual and empirical peer-reviewed publications written in English with a time frame of 10 years. This temporal scope was informed by the fact that the inception of the BLM movement can be traced back to 2013 following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the tragic death of Black teenager Trayvon Martin (Wright, 2020). The exclusion criteria were: grey literature that was not empirical, articles for which full text was not available, or were not in English, or were older than 10 years old. The search strategy for the literature relied on a variety of information sources, which included (i) grey literature accessed via Google search, (ii) articles from scholarly journals that were accessed via Google Scholar, as well as (iii) high-quality peer-reviewed articles indexed in reputed databases such as SpringerLink, SCOPUS, DOAJ, and EBSCO. In line with Ferrari (2015), the following key concepts were transformed into keywords and used for searching and filtering out relevant literature (p. 232): Brand activism, corporate political activism, social media activism, and Black Lives Matter. The search strategy combined selected keywords ("brand activism", "social media activism", and/or "corporate sociopolitical activism") with ("Black Lives Matter").

The search strategy also involved manually selecting additional publications cited in the articles obtained from the initial search. This cycle was repeated until reaching a 'saturation point' (Randolph, 2009). Once a primary bulk of articles was obtained, the selected articles were documented and checked for suitability. The fitness of the obtained articles was screened according to the following criteria: key results, suitability of the methods used to test the hypothesis, quality of the results obtained, interpretation of the results, and impact of the conclusions in the field (see Ferrari (2015, p.232). Studies that didn't meet the criteria were excluded and relevant information from the remaining

ones (i.e. study's authors, objectives, methods, findings, and contribution) was synthesized and recorded in a summary table. For this study, a total of 20 articles were reviewed as shown in Table 3.

## **Limitations**

Despite certain limitations in the search method, such as the preference for original articles over other narrative reviews addressing the same subject matter and the occasional inaccessibility of full texts of some selected studies, these challenges were proactively managed to the best extent possible. The inclusion of grey literature helped to address the bias for original articles from electronic databases while ensuring a diversity of sources. Additionally, a record of the inaccessible papers was maintained, allowing for subsequent retrieval through communication with the respective authors via email requests.

## **Findings**

### **Significance of Brand Activism**

The significance of brand activism is five-fold:

#### ***Influencing Public Opinion***

Brands are critical vehicles of meaning in our world and taking a leadership role is a natural step for these powerful cultural agents that can influence commerce and community life (Moorman, 2018). Against the backdrop of nationwide protests, rioting, and civil unrest, numerous brands, corporations and prominent personalities boldly decided to stand for important causes with the hope that their political activism would help shape public opinion and potentially lead to lasting change, while simultaneously cementing their reputations as moral leaders and change agents (Moorman, 2018). However, it is important to note that choosing an issue relevant to your company will impact how the public reacts to your brand activism. For instance, in 2015, the Starbucks '*Race Together*' campaign that sought to spark discussion about the topic of race following the shootings of two unarmed black men, and the civil unrest that followed, received public backlash and mockery for what many saw as an insincere gesture. Critics viewed the #racetogether campaign as misguided, questioning how a meaningful conversation about race could be held at a busy Starbucks, while others saw it as an opportunistic marketing ploy (Quick, 2020).

#### ***Eliciting Corporate Action***

Since the killing of George Floyd, brands, that often remain silent when it comes to social justice issues such as systemic racism for fear of alienating their consumers, began speaking out, along with ad agencies and media professionals (Ad Age, 2020). While making a statement is important, many brands have gone beyond just speaking out in support of racial justice by taking actions that support long-term systemic solutions and impact. One of the popular responses has been pledging financial resources to address the systemic racism against black people in the US. For instance, Disney, one of America's favorite media companies for children and adults pledged \$5 million to nonprofits that "advance social justice" with the first allotment of \$2 million going to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Similarly, in response to the protests, L'Oreal, the

cosmetics company, committed \$500,000 to groups such as Black Lives Matter, Color of Change and the NAACP. The brand also pledged to install a so-called “Diversity & Inclusion Advisory Board” that would be charged with implementing initiatives like “Employee Engagement & Internal Change,” “Community Engagement & External Change” and “Company-wide Education” (Mainwaring, 2020).

### ***Driving Social Change***

Brands are powerful social actors that embody ideas and meanings important to society. This role places them in a position of power (and some might say responsibility). From the perspective of brand activism, this offers a natural bridge to involvement in related societal-level debates. (Holt, 2002). Consumers believe brands drive social change better than governments can and that it is easier for brands to have an impact on society (Edelman, 2018). This is based on the “brands as educators view”, according to which, a company uses its marketing prowess to move consumers in a direction that is better for society (Moorman, 2020). This educator role can arise from brand resources and authority, such as that captured in Swaminathan *et al.* (2020, p. 32): “With a stronger voice comes the added responsibility of addressing important social issues in ways that can help society move forward.” Clemensen (2017, p. 11), also argues that “the more business power a corporation has, the more responsibility it has to society”. Companies, therefore, have the ability to use their influence to serve as a force for positive action and social change by taking a public standpoint on issues and supporting something greater than corporate profit. Taking a stand, however, opens brands up to potential public backlash, so businesses must act carefully (Hodge, 2020).

### ***Moral-Value Alignment***

Brand activism does not operate in a vacuum but apes the demands of a generation with certain political and social values (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). Today’s consumers want to support companies that use their influence to enact social and political change. It’s therefore becoming more important than ever for brands to demonstrate how their products support their purpose (Taulbee, 2019). Consequently, when a brand takes a stance on a divisive social or political issue, it provides consumers with a unique opportunity to assess whether its moral foundations are aligned with their own (Klara, 2017; Oster, 2018; Steimer, 2017), that is, to assess the level of self-brand similarity in the domain of moral judgments (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Brand activism thus provides consumers with an opportunity to assess the degree of resemblance or alignment between a consumer's self-concept, values, and identity, and the attributes or characteristics associated with a particular brand. This allows consumers to determine whether a brand's moral foundations are aligned with their own (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). If and when consumers learn and evaluate brands and their parent company's moral misconduct, the hateful feelings that it induces motivate consumers to adopt anti-brand behaviors such as including boycotting, culture jamming, online activism, and several other forms of active resistance (Romani *et al.*, 2015).

### ***Driving Corporate Performance***

Brand activism seeks to influence firm performance outcomes, specifically those related to increased revenues, brand equity, and customer loyalty, as well as aiming for social change (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020, p. 29). As previous research has shown, when the effectiveness of brand activism strategies is high, these actions can lead to multiple positive outcomes (Berestova *et al.*, 2022; Herzberg & Rudelof, 2022) such as increased brand support and brand reputation, greater brand image, higher sales volume, higher market and firm’s value, increased online exposure, higher engagement on social media, greater

purchase intention, customer loyalty, greater consumer willingness to pay a higher price, consumer gratitude, admiration, and advocacy, and a larger hiring pool (Miguel & Miranda, 2023, p. 157). This implies that the risk of having the courage to pursue brand activism pays off for decision-makers (Herzberg & Rudelof, 2022, p. 12). Consider Nike's experience following its affiliation with Colin Kaepernick: Upon launching the BLM campaign with the iconic civil rights activist and American football star, the brand witnessed a notably positive consumer response, despite the moderately incongruent brand-cause alignment and their limited track record in pro-social corporate practices, messaging, purpose, and values (Boren, 2018; Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020). While the company faced consumer backlash, including the destruction of previously purchased merchandise, the campaign demonstrated commercial success, it experienced a significant surge in online sales by 31%, along with substantial earned media and free publicity valued at approximately 43 million dollars (Sterling, 2018).

## **Responses by Brands to the Black Lives Matter Movement**

With the US facing a wave of protests around systematic injustice, police brutality, and racial inequality, major brands and companies are wading into the national conversation by actively expressing their views on polarizing political and social issues. According to Salinas (2020b), *brands* have responded to the BLM movement in various ways, but most reactions fall within four categories:

### ***Communications-Driven Initiatives***

In the wake of George Floyd's tragic demise, numerous corporations, including Twitter, Netflix, Disney, Nike, Adidas, Amazon, Spotify, Microsoft, and Accenture, released statements expressing solidarity with the black community. However, critics argued that these statements, although well-intentioned, have a limited impact on dismantling systemic racism (Salinas, 2020b). A survey conducted among 1,990 U.S. adults revealed that communication-based actions, such as official statements in support of protesters, do not significantly enhance the company's favorability perception (Salinas, 2020b). Nevertheless, when executed effectively, communication-centric initiatives can yield substantial benefits for businesses. For instance, Nike is reported to have earned significant media attention with the 2018 advertising campaign that highlighted Colin Kaepernick's protest against systemic racism in the US. According to 4C Insights, a data analytics and media technology firm, this led to a 76 percent surge in brand-related Google searches, a 1,678 percent spike in social media mentions, and a 31 percent growth in online sales (Chitrakorn, 2020).

### ***Society-Oriented Initiatives***

In the wake of the BLM protests, brands such as Airbnb, Adidas, Apple, Amazon, Coca-Cola, Facebook, Nike, Uber, Warby Parker and YouTube announced that they will be donating significant amounts to organizations and initiatives fighting inequality and systemic racism, or have committed to award grants to black-owned businesses. Major Wall Street firms such as Bank of America pledged \$1 billion to help communities address economic and racial inequality while Goldman Sachs created a \$10 million fund for racial equity (Chan & DiMauro, 2020). On the other hand, sports brands are focusing on other social issues such as the education of black students. For instance, Adidas announced that it would cover 50 annual university scholarships for outstanding black students over the next five years, while Nike seemed to suggest that part of the \$40 million it will invest over the next four years to support social justice will also be funneled towards education initiatives (Salinas, 2020b).

### ***Brand Management-Driven Initiatives***

According to Salinas (2020b), brand management-driven initiatives fall within two specific clusters: (i) companies that are conducting reviews of their brand identities or brand portfolio to evolve or remove ‘brands with racist origins’; and (ii) brands that have reviewed their association with social media platforms. In the first cluster, we find brands like PepsiCo, which is removing the Aunt Jemima brand, which originated in a racial stereotype, and Mars, which has decided to evolve its Uncle Ben’s brand for similar reasons. In the second cluster is Patagonia, which pulled ads from Facebook and Instagram as part of the “Stop Hate for Profit” campaign, which asks all businesses to “stand in solidarity with deeply held American values of freedom, equality and justice and not advertise on Facebook’s services in July.” The objective, in both cases, is to align the brand identity and portfolio with the corporate values and changing consumer expectations regarding equality, equity and social justice (Salinas, 2020b).

### ***Talent Management-Driven Initiatives***

Words without action feel meaningless to many consumers (Salinas, 2020a), who want more than just words – they want changes in hiring practices, recruitment, promotion practices, or scholarships for underprivileged groups (Garg, 2020). This point has been understood by a number of big corporations and brands that are seeking to make diversity and inclusion a key strategy of their social change initiatives. For instance, Adidas, the global sports brand, announced a series of talent-related measures, promising to hire Black and Latino professionals for 30% of all new positions in the United States (Salinas, 2020b). On his part, BlackRock CEO Larry Fink vowed to increase the number of black staff it employs by 30% come 2024 (Fink, 2020). Besides investing in and partnering with organizations in the Black community that fight for racial equity, Uncle Ben’s also pledged to increase diversity in its talent and leadership pipeline in order to make the systemic change needed (Welstad, 2020).

## **Criticism of Brands Engaging in the BLM Activism**

There are a number of criticisms directed towards brand activism:

### ***Lack of Congruence***

While today’s consumers expect brands to take a stand on socio-political issues (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020), a number of firms engaging in activism have been criticized for the lack of congruence between their brand reputation and their chosen socio-political cause. Although moderate incongruence can enhance outcomes, it may divert from the brand’s core purpose, potentially misleading consumers and impeding social change efforts. For instance, Nike’s alignment with social justice and training shoes is seen as incongruent, casting doubt on the sincerity of their support. The company was criticized for what some consider as the non-existent relationship between social justice and equality and training shoes (Kelly, 2020). As Chadwick and Zipp (2018) have argued, “By exploiting injustice for commercial purposes, Nike may be undermining or demeaning the causes it declares to support.” Additionally, Nike’s continued sponsorship of NFL teams that rejected Colin Kaepernick based on his decision to kneel during the national anthem as a form of protest against racial injustice and police violence raises questions about the consistency of their activism stance.

## ***Lack of Authenticity***

Authenticity is understood as the set of values and beliefs that the organization defends and that make it unique, based on its consistent behavior over time (Garcia, 2020, p. 5-6). Authenticity is critical for corporate activism to be effective (Vredenburg *et al.*, 2020). In contrast, inauthentic brand activism reflects “woke washing” whereby activist advertising incorporates a socio-political issue that isn’t in line with the corporate practice, values and purpose (Sobande, 2019). The tricky part in today’s highly contentious political climate is ensuring one’s brand is seen as authentic in its activism (Hodge, 2020). Consumers are wary of marketing schemes and empty promises that are more about money-making and less about advocacy; they are looking for true activism and commitment to the well-being of their communities (Taulbee, 2019). Studies have shown that brands and companies engaging in activism that is perceived as insincere face public backlash and may alienate some of their consumers (Garfield, 2018; Duffy, 2021). A good example is Starbucks, which was ridiculed for tweeting its support for BLM while privately barring employees from wearing the movement’s logos (Phillipps, 2020). In a notable case, Pepsi encountered criticism for alleged inauthentic brand activism, commonly referred to as “woke washing.” This occurred after a 2017 advertising campaign featuring TV personality Kendall Jenner and incorporating the BLM movement. Critics argued that Pepsi lacked a defined brand purpose, values, or a track record of pro-social corporate initiatives in support of BLM or other social causes, making their involvement appear insincere (Vredenburg, 2020).

## ***Lack of Actions***

In their marketing campaigns, activist brands may incorporate subtle references to “wokeness” by employing imagery and language associated with social justice movements without explicit endorsement. Alternatively, such brands may overtly assert their “woke” stance by openly supporting specific movements and activists, often through financial contributions (Sobande, 2019). However, while showcasing support on social media is commendable, genuine brand activism is achieved by action and ‘walking the walk’ to reinforce words with meaningful action. It is therefore important that brands put their money where their mouth is when it comes to brand activism (Benner, 2018). As Ong (2020) has stated, companies can’t be content by only offering reassurance or feel-good messages. Actions that support the black community in meaningful ways show more impact than official statements (Salinas, 2020a). Brands need to move beyond superficial virtue signaling and demonstrate genuine commitment through tangible actions and meaningful impact (Mainwaring, 2020). Mere expressions of solidarity for movements like BLM and calls for tolerance and empathy are insufficient. Instead, brands should explicitly detail their strategies for addressing racism and broader social inequities (Bahr & D’Innocenzio, 2020). A case in point is Walmart, which faced allegations of exploiting black employees while ostensibly expressing support for the BLM cause, highlighting the need for substantive action (Davis & Warren, 2020).

## ***Contentiousness***

In our current polarized society, brand activism risks alienating loyal customers (Shetty *et al.*, 2019) as it may trigger opposition and consumer boycotts due to varying social, cultural, political, and environmental beliefs (Shetty *et al.*, 2019), potentially resulting in their attrition as clients or adversely affecting their purchasing intentions (Dodd & Supa, 2015; Villagra *et al.*, 2021). The BLM movement, in particular, has encountered criticism for being seen as confrontational and divisive by some (Clayton, 2018). Others have expressed concerns that the “Black Lives Matter” slogan may inadvertently neglect the value of non-Black lives, prompting some to advocate for the alternative phrase “All Lives Matter” (Atkins, 2018; Gale, 2020). For example, when Nike featured Colin

Kaepernick in their 2018 ads, it sparked a significant backlash, resulting in the burning of Nike products and the trending hashtag #justburnit, which trended alongside #BoycottNike (Kelner, 2018). The contentious nature of brand activism sets it apart from corporate social responsibility (CSR) or cause-related marketing (CRM) (Chernev & Blair, 2015; Luo & Bhattacharya, 2009), which typically concerns generally-accepted, non-divisive, pro-social issues such as supporting education or disaster relief initiatives that are unlikely to elicit a negative response from consumers unless the initiative is perceived as an insincere marketing trick (Wagner *et al.*, 2009; Yoon *et al.*, 2006).

### ***Commercial and financial-based motivation***

Brand activism may also stem from financial or commercial interests, as companies seek to appeal to progressive consumers or potential well-educated employees who can positively impact their financial performance. As highlighted by Ballantyne, Warren, and Nobbs (2006), brands that distinguish themselves from competitors through distinctive and even unconventional marketing approaches are more likely to capture attention and influence consumer choice. Hence, skeptics view brands involved in activism as lacking authenticity, with others interpreting the backing of causes like BLM by major American corporations as a strategic marketing or branding tactic designed to boost their sales (Maks-Solomon, n.d.). While it may be fair to skeptically view companies that engage in brand activism, Garg (2020), points out that “the idea of brands now getting into controversial social causes and political issues, is relatively new, so we don’t know what the full impact of rebranding for a social cause – from a commercial sense – could be.” On the other hand, brands that stay silent or refuse to take sides are at risk of losing customers, investors, and revenue. An example of this is the Facebook boycott whereby hundreds of companies pulled their ads from Facebook in protest after the social media platform refused to take action against hateful content on its platform, as part of the #StopHateforProfit campaign (Haun, 2020).

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

### **Conclusion**

#### ***Brands are increasingly taking an activist stance***

In recent times, there has been a growing trend of brands adopting an activist position by openly expressing their views about polarizing socio-political issues. The willingness to engage in overt corporate-sponsored activism by aligning themselves with contentious social and political causes and actively ‘taking a stand’ marks a significant departure from the past whereby companies and brands preferred to stay silent in order to avoid antagonizing customers with different views. This evolution signals a new era of overt corporate-sponsored activism and signifies a readiness by firms to engage in meaningful socio-political discourse, thereby raising normative and ethical concerns.

#### ***Brand activism requires organizations to exercise caution***

Although evidence seems to suggest that consumers favor brands that support causes that resonate with their values, corporations are advised to approach brand activism with caution. They should selectively align with issues and exercise discretion in their public statements. This is due to the fact that in a polarized society like America, support for contentious matters is potentially divisive. Thus, brands need to navigate brand activism prudently, considering both its potential advantages and

drawbacks. Striking the right balance is essential for brands to authentically engage with societal matters while preserving their reputation and customer base.

### ***Brand activism is fraught with risk***

Brands are entering an era where many consumers feel that they should be vocal when it comes to supporting social and political hot-button issues such as systemic racial inequality and police violence. However, the alignment between a brand's public stance on an issue and consumers' beliefs is not always easy to achieve. For some brands, attempts to show solidarity have even backfired in a major way, resulting in backlash from the consumers and other stakeholders if the corporate activism is not aligned with the brand's vision and values, or if they feel uncomfortable with being associated with causes and issues they do not identify with. Nevertheless, it seems this is a risk more and more brands are now willing to undertake.

### ***Brand activism can seem hypocritical or dishonest***

As the role of brand activism has become instrumental in engaging consumers, brands have begun to incorporate additional advertising campaigns that incorporate socio-political causes such as BLM messaging. However, numerous brands that have come out in support of the BLM campaign have been accused of only paying lip service to the social justice issues/causes they are championing without taking concrete steps to effect real change. In effect, a brand's stance on social and political issues needs to be backed up by tangible, real-world initiatives; otherwise, it will be perceived as lacking credibility.

## **Recommendations**

### ***Brand activism should be aligned with its values***

In order to ensure that they're not contradicting what they say they stand for, brands should align their values with those of their customers, employees, and society at large. This alignment needs to be deeply rooted across all facets of an organization or business in order to effectively champion meaningful and progressive change across all facets of society. Rather than making empty statements that offer minimal support for a cause, the focus should be on making meaningful changes within the organization that will have a long-term impact. Top amongst these include actively promoting diversity and fostering an inclusive environment.

### ***Brands should be careful about the causes they choose to support***

Taking a stand opens brands up to potential public backlash, as certain stakeholders may be uncomfortable with particular socio-political causes. Corporations must therefore tread with caution when determining the socio-political causes that they are willing (or unwilling) to be associated with since they lack sufficient resources to address all of the issues in existence. That's why a decision by a brand to take a stand on divisive social and political issues should be strategically and carefully considered and aligned with the brand values. Otherwise, such polarizing activities can harm the brand's reputation and commercial health. This means that corporate leaders and managers should act sensibly by making trade-off decisions by carefully identifying and vetting political and social causes to find those that demonstrate strategic fit for the brand and its narratives in order to avoid putting their organizations and brand assets at risk.



### ***Brands should back their ideas and words with tangible actions***

Against the backdrop of political and social turmoil, many companies are using their influence to push for social as well as political change by aligning their brands with a socio-political cause or value system. However, in the case of BLM, brands should do more than virtue signaling i.e., issuing public statements or making social media posts in a show of solidarity with the movement. Today's young consumers want to see corporations and brands engaging in meaningful action that supports their stand on a particular issue. Otherwise, a brand comes off as hypocritical or inauthentic in its activism by engaging on behalf of an issue for good publicity or to help its bottom line. As the saying goes, "actions speak louder than words."

### ***Brand activism should be measurable***

Brand activism must go beyond surface-level gestures. It should be quantifiable, requiring brands to substantiate their commitments with tangible actions and measurable impacts. This may involve setting specific targets, tracking progress, and reporting on the outcomes of the socio-political causes they support. By adopting measurable brand activism strategies, companies can not only genuinely contribute to positive change but also earn trust and credibility from stakeholders. Additionally, quantifiable results serve as a basis for continuous improvement and refinement of brand activism strategies, driving more meaningful and sustainable change in the long term.

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