



## **Degree Program in Marketing**

Course of Product & Brand Management

**More than just an idea:  
the value of concreteness  
within brand activism policies**

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To the dreams I have fulfilled,  
to those I will fulfill,  
and to those that will never come true.  
Because dreaming is as valuable as living,  
and there is nothing more beautiful  
than living a dream.

To my family,  
who allowed me to dream.

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## Introduction

In the dynamic realm of global commerce, the relentless pursuit of profit dictates the frenetic pace of business activities. The marketplace, epitomized by the bustling corridors of Wall Street, serves as a microcosm of this economic ethos, where ceaseless transactions and decisions shape the trajectory of nations and societies. In this milieu, the dominance of profit-driven enterprises, orchestrated by CEOs, directors, and investors, appears immutable. However, among this prevailing narrative, an inquiry emerges: are there viable alternatives to the imperative of profit? (Hart & Milstein, 2003)

Amidst the whirlwind of global commerce, the conventional narrative of profit-driven enterprises dominating the marketplace faces a compelling challenge. Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Brand Activism emerge as potent forces, offering alternative pathways to an economic organization that transcends the narrow confines of profit maximization. (Herzberg & Rudeloff, 2022)

This thesis embarks on an exploration of these transformative paradigms, situating them within the historical trajectory of enterprise for profit. By dissecting the origins and evolution of CSR and Brand Activism, this study unveils fissures in the prevailing economic model, beckoning toward a paradigm shift. Through a synthesis of empirical evidence, theoretical frameworks, and case studies, this research elucidates the mechanisms through which CSR and Brand Activism serve as vehicles for societal change and ethical business practices.

Furthermore, this thesis investigates the interplay between these alternative approaches and traditional profit-driven enterprises, shedding light on synergies, tensions, and opportunities for collaboration. This study seeks to delineate pathways toward a more inclusive, sustainable, and socially responsible economic landscape by critically examining the assumptions, motivations, and impacts of CSR and Brand Activism.

To do so, this thesis will explore both the most successful cases in economic history and those that, conversely, have hindered the social progress of companies.

Through an empirical study, it will seek to understand how businesses should engage with brand activism, examining various approaches to effectively conveying messages. The

research will be grounded in the Construal Level Theory, analyzing the dynamic between abstract and concrete elements in brand activism campaigns.

The aim is to assess whether the nature of the message influences consumer trust and to explain the patterns that emerge. In this way, the thesis aspires to provide practical insights for navigating the complex landscape of social values in today's business world. Thus, the thesis wants to explore, understand, and guide the relationship between companies and their social role. It will begin with an extensive literature review, followed by a study to analyze how these concepts manifest in practice, offering real-world examples and actionable recommendations.

The ultimate goal of this work is to inspire stakeholders across sectors to adopt and advocate for alternative economic models grounded in ethics, equity, and environmental stewardship. This is an important purpose because embracing these principles is likely the only viable path toward building a better future.

# Chapter 1: From Profit to Purpose: Corporate Social Responsibility

## 1.1 The charging bull: the company is a profit machine

*“There should be no confusion... business corporation is organized and carried on primarily for the profit of the stockholders. The powers of the directors are to be employed for that end.”* (The Michigan Supreme Court, 1919)

The famous Dodge vs. Ford (1919) decision represented a breaking point in modern economics by affirming the supremacy of shareholders in the management of the company. Through this sentence, the court effectively institutionalized the notion that profit maximization is the paramount objective of corporate activity. This prioritization of shareholder wealth aligns seamlessly with the broader neoliberal zeitgeist, characterized by a fervent embrace of privatization and a delineation of distinct roles within the economic landscape. However, the concept of companies is something that is constantly evolving because it is closely linked to society. (Leung, 1997)

The very name corporation from the Latin corpus suggests this almost carnal link between the company and the human being who is its creator. In his work, Eric Chaffee (2017) identifies three dominant theories of the corporate concept that help to understand this evolutionary trend:

1. Artificial Entity Theory: Corporations are tied to the government, which grants them to exist by determining the scope and regulation of the enterprise. (1800 – 1850)
2. Real Entity theory: Corporations have their own identity, separated by state, owners, and managers. (1850 – 1930)
3. Aggregate theory: Corporation is the sum of the individuals who also own the obligations among them. (1930 – 1970)

The underlying principle across these periods is the pursuit of profit, with companies operating and existing primarily to generate wealth for their shareholders.

However, this prevailing perspective also opens the door to a problematic dynamic centered on share value. In this scenario, decisions are frequently driven by the immediate

objective of boosting share prices, often at the expense of considering the long-term outlook and sustainability of the company. This inefficiency led many to wonder if this was the best strategy to ensure the success of the company. (Deakin, 1997)

The late 1960s and early 1970s marked a pivotal period in the questioning of the purely profit-driven enterprise model. This era coincided with a significant economic boom that propelled the industrialization of Western economies, fostering a pervasive sense of prosperity. This newfound affluence facilitated a shift in perspective, prompting individuals and institutions to contemplate aspirations beyond mere financial gain. (De George, 2005)

Those years can be said to mark the turning point of the Kuznets curve for the western world in which the economic prosperity achieved by a large part of the population interrupted the growth of consumption-related pollution, opting for more ecological solutions. (Dinda, 2004)

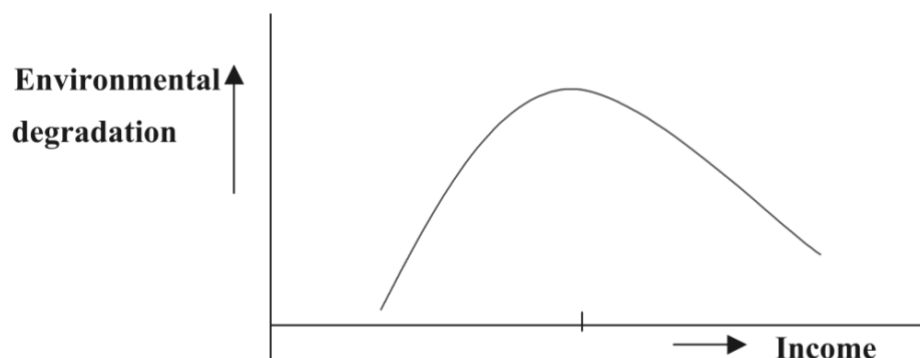


Figure 1. The Kuznets Curve. (Dinda, 2004)

In 1971, against this backdrop of economic expansion and societal introspection, the Committee for Economic Development introduced a seminal document titled 'Social Responsibilities of Business Corporations'. This policy statement, now regarded as a cornerstone of modern economics, heralded a paradigm shift by formally recognizing the social role of businesses within their communities. For the first time in economic discourse, corporations were acknowledged not solely as profit-seeking entities but as integral contributors to the social fabric. (Wells, 2002)

This watershed moment marked a departure from conventional wisdom, signaling a broader recognition of businesses' responsibilities beyond financial metrics. It laid the groundwork for a more inclusive and holistic approach to economic development, one that emphasized the symbiotic relationship between corporate success and societal well-being.

Milton Friedman, the esteemed economist and recipient of the Nobel Prize for Economic Sciences in 1976, etched his name into the annals of economic history with a seminal article that continues to reverberate through scholarly discourse. In this influential piece, Friedman vehemently contested the burgeoning principles of corporate social responsibility, staunchly advocating for a singular focus on profit generation as the sole responsibility of businesses. (Friedman, 2007)

Friedman's critique centered on the notion that attributing social responsibilities to artificial entities, such as corporations, was inherently flawed. He argued that when executives assumed roles beyond profit maximization, they deviated from their primary function and instead morphed into quasi-governmental agents. Drawing a parallel to taxation, Friedman contended that diverting resources towards social causes mirrored the coercive mechanisms of a centralized state, thereby encroaching upon the principles of a free-market economy espoused by Adam Smith. (Schwartz & Saiia, 2012)

In essence, Friedman's scathing rebuke underscored his staunch defense of economic liberalism and laissez-faire capitalism. He adamantly rejected the notion of businesses acting as societal stewards, asserting that their sole obligation rested in the pursuit of profit.

In Friedman's portrayal, the economic landscape mirrors Arturo Di Monica's iconic "Charging Bull" sculpture—an emblem of relentless, unyielding market forces charging forward without regard for social considerations. Yet, amidst this depiction of a ferocious economy lies an intriguing possibility: what if, instead of viewing social needs as impediments, businesses could harness them as catalysts for growth?

## 1.2 The crisis of certainties

The credibility of an economic system exists until it collapses. It is not a mathematical axiom. It is not a diamond. It is perishable and, as such, destined to end.



The relentless pursuit of profit, once hailed as the cornerstone of economic success, began to lose its luster as mounting scandals and corporate misdeeds tarnished the reputation of multinational corporations. These scandals, often characterized by unethical practices and disregard for social and environmental concerns, shook public confidence in the integrity and credibility of corporate entities.

Events such as the Enron scandal, WorldCom accounting fraud, BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill, Volkswagen emissions scandal, and Facebook Cambridge Analytica exposed the dark underbelly of corporate behavior, revealing instances of deception, negligence, and exploitation. These high-profile cases shattered the illusion of corporate infallibility and underscored the urgent need for change. (Cole et al., 2021)

Indeed, these cases manifest a weakness of the entire capitalist system by undermining one of its theoretical foundations, such as Adam Smith's invisible hand. What is evident, in fact, is how mere economic self-interest no longer promotes general welfare. The division between ownership and executives gives rise to agency problems that no longer make this economic axiom subsist.

Moreover, the use of perverse compensation schemes based on fixed and rigid criteria also encourages unethical behaviors. If, indeed, the remuneration of employees is based on monthly results, it will be difficult to foster long-term planning by increasingly favoring false raises to meet targets.

The repercussions of these scandals extended far beyond the boardrooms of implicated companies. They eroded public trust in corporations, heightened skepticism toward business practices, and fueled demands for greater transparency, accountability, and ethical conduct. The notion that profit maximization should be the sole objective of corporations came under scrutiny, as it became evident that prioritizing short-term gains could lead to long-term harm to society, the environment, and even shareholders themselves. (Stout, 2012)

Another important point in this reputational crisis is raising awareness about the impact of corporations on the climate crisis. CDP Carbon Majors Report 2017 shows how more than half of global industrial emissions since human-induced climate change has been officially recognized can be attributed to just 25 corporate and state-owned manufacturing entities, and this percentage rises to 71 percent of greenhouse gasses when considering 100 fossil energy producers. (Griffin et al., 2017)

Consumers are becoming increasingly aware of the environmental problem and are also beginning to take autonomous actions related to the topic. Looking at data from Deloitte's 2023 report, one in three consumers have stopped buying certain brands for reasons related to ethical or sustainable concerns, there is an increased focus on product circularity, and the use of personal transportation has significantly reduced. All these factors lead to companies being observed with a more critical eye and often failing to pass muster. (Deloitte, 2023)

In the wake of these crises in corporate credibility, there emerged a growing recognition of the limitations of traditional economic paradigms that placed profit above all else, prompting calls for a shift towards more holistic and responsible business models.

Enterprises began to embrace the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR), acknowledging their broader role to stakeholders beyond shareholders. CSR emphasizes the importance of ethical business practices, environmental stewardship, and corporate citizenship. Companies that once operated solely for profit began to integrate social considerations into their decision-making processes, recognizing that sustainable business practices are not only morally imperative but also essential for long-term success and resilience. (Pomeroy & Dolnicar, 2009)

Carson (2003), who is the main source of this paragraph, emphasizes one last point in connection with this stakeholder theory, namely the need to place side constraints on the promotion of stakeholder interest. The idea of relying, in fact, on the benevolence of executives is unrealistic and can lead precisely to structural crises. Legal intervention to regulate the limits of these actions is therefore also necessary and crucial.

### 1.3 Sustainable development: a three-actor game

The interplay between state and enterprise is the basis of the economic system. There is a continuous interchange between the holders of legal and economic power, which often influence and overlap. The role of the state is crucial in creating the playing field in which companies can freely compete against each other. This is one of the cardinal principles of neoliberal economics pronounced by Smith in his "The Wealth of Nations" that cannot be questioned. But to date, the role of the state goes beyond it, through its regulatory function, the government addresses market failures, such as monopolies, externalities,

and information asymmetries, ensuring a level playing field for businesses and consumers alike. At the same time, through fiscal and monetary policies, it manages macroeconomic variables like inflation, unemployment, and economic growth, aiming to maintain stability and promote sustainable development. Sometimes, the state also intervenes directly in the economy with its own companies to secure public utility goods. These goods and services, essential for the well-being and development of society, may include utilities like water, electricity, and telecommunications, as well as transportation infrastructure and healthcare. (Reinert, 1999)

On the other hand, companies play a crucial role in creating and sustaining financial wealth, generating employment opportunities, and improving the economic and social conditions of nations. In the last years, with the process of globalization, we are witnessing a new phenomenon in the economic landscape characterized by the proliferation of multinational corporations (MNCs).

These MNCs wield significant economic power, with their operations spanning across multiple countries and sectors. Furthermore, it's worth noting that the economic value generated by these corporations is often concentrated in the hands of a relatively small number of people. Studies show that the economic value of the global economy is primarily driven by just 147 MNCs, highlighting the phenomenon of centralization of economic power.

This concentration of power among a select group of corporations has profound implications for their relationship with states and governments. MNCs often possess considerable influence over government policies and regulations, shaping the regulatory landscape to align with their interests and priorities. Additionally, the mobility of capital and resources across borders enables MNCs to leverage their economic clout to negotiate favorable terms with governments, sometimes at the expense of social and environmental considerations. (Babic et al., 2017)

As the power dynamics between businesses and governments evolve, each actor assumes distinct spheres of influence and responsibility, with the first focusing on the economic side and the others on the social aspects. Yet, with the growing economic clout of corporations, they also bear accompanying burdens. The pressing imperative to address societal challenges has heightened citizen expectations regarding the role of businesses

in contributing to solutions. In light of these challenges, governments, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders must engage in dialogue and collaboration with businesses to ensure that economic growth is inclusive, sustainable, and aligned with broader societal goals. According to data, partnerships between government and businesses are four times more likely to yield optimal results than businesses working alone. (Edelman, 2023)

Indeed, while traditionally within the purview of governments, the inability to comprehensively address all social problems has prompted a shift. Private entities, recognizing the urgency and magnitude of these issues, are stepping in with direct and indirect interventions. This trend underscores not only the expanding influence of businesses but also the increasing recognition of their potential to drive meaningful social change alongside government efforts. (Drucker, 1984)

The inability of states to effectively address these challenges stems from several factors. Firstly, governments often face constraints in terms of both time and human resources. Tackling complex social problems requires long-term commitment and patience, qualities that may conflict with the short-term nature of political cycles and the urgency of electoral timelines. Additionally, the scale and scope of government interventions often necessitate immediate nationwide implementation, leaving little room for experimentation and piloting of initiatives to refine their effectiveness.

This institutional gap creates a legal vacuum within which companies can operate, not solely out of philanthropic motives, but rather to advance their own interests. This principle is encapsulated in the notion of "doing well by doing good," where businesses align their corporate social responsibility efforts with their strategic objectives and bottom-line interests. As such, companies may view social initiatives not only to contribute positively to society but also as opportunities to enhance their brand reputation, mitigate risks, and drive long-term business success. This principle underlying the conception of shared values presented by Porter and Kramer thus sees social activity no longer as a cost to the firm, but rather as a profit opportunity arising from the elimination of structural problems. Specifically, the two economists show how going to reinvent products to meet the demand for social needs, cover gaps in the value chain by ensuring greater transparency and quality of work and fostering the emergence of economic

clusters not only bring enormous benefits to society but more importantly ensure the sustainability of one's business. (Porter & Cramer, 2018)

Businesses have the unique capacity to turn societal challenges into opportunities for innovation and value creation having such an impact on the three spheres of economy, society and environment.

While it may seem that people are the passive recipient of these initiatives, in reality, they play a central role as the driving force behind organizational actions. Whether referred to as citizens or consumers, people's expectations shape the decisions and behaviors of organizations, ultimately determining their success or failure in addressing social, economic, and political issues. The people then are not the spectators, but rather the puppet master who pulls the strings of the show, directing the behaviors of the other two entities with their decisions.

Thus, the chessboard of the game was presented, with its pawns, their roles, and powers. This modeling of the three actors also allowed us to introduce the three primary spheres of influence of economy, society, and environment. A three-player game in three areas whose ultimate goal is to achieve sustainable development.

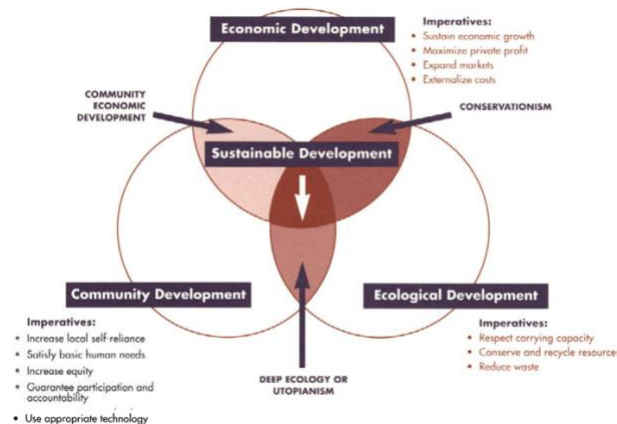


Figure 2. Three-ring sector view of sustainable development (ICLEI, 1996).

This is why the interaction among these three sectors is often depicted as the intersection of three circles, with sustainable development residing at the center where all parts overlap. Because in the cooperation of these three actors the balance for economic, environmental and social sustainability can truly be found. (ICLEI, 1996)

However, Giddings et al. (2002) propose an alternative to this model. They argue that considering the areas as independent is a limitation that doesn't reflect reality, where there

is a fundamental interdependency between them. The three economists thus construct a model that accounts for the dependency mechanisms linking the economy to society, as a human creation and tool, and society to the environment, without which the survival of the species would be impossible.

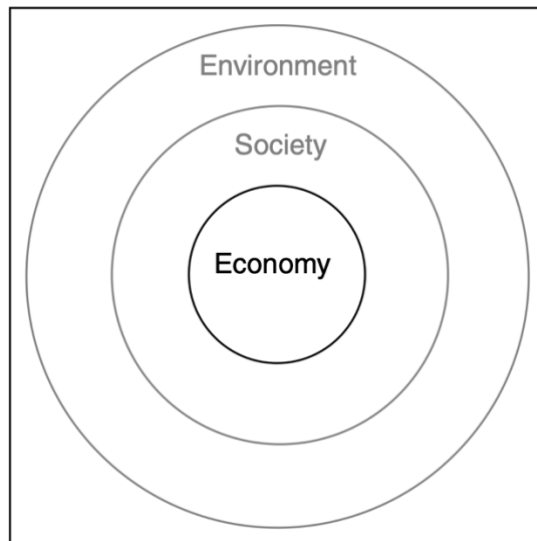


Figure 3. Nested sustainable development (Giddings et al., 2002)

In an extreme interpretation of their theory, the economists even go so far as to eliminate the distinction between society and the economy, merging them into a single category of human activities.

Regardless of which theory one chooses to adopt, sustainable development relies on the interdependence of these three factors with the three actors beyond, that working together has the power to guarantee a better future for the next generations.

#### 1.4 Do you trust me? Edelman Trust Barometer

In love as in money, trust is the basis of success. As shown earlier the various scandals, recent wars, and economic crises have strained the relationships between political/economic institutions and their stakeholders. To better understand the relationship between these concepts, we start with the definition of trust proposed by Gambetta (2000):

*"Trust (or, symmetrically, distrust) is a particular level of the subjective probability with which an agent assesses that another agent or group of agents will perform a particular action, both before he can monitor such action (or independently of his capacity ever to be able to monitor it) and in a context in which it affects his own action."*

So, trust can be summarized as the confidence that someone will behave in a certain way, the assurance that someone will act in the way hoped.

In organizational studies, trust plays a dual role, serving as both a driver of governance structure and a form of governance itself. On the one hand, trust can act as a substitute for formal organizational mechanisms, reducing the need for stringent safeguards against opportunistic behaviors. Instead of relying solely on contractual agreements and monitoring systems, organizations may foster trust among stakeholders, which in turn promotes cooperation and mitigates the risk of opportunism.

On the other hand, trust can also function as a governance structure based on informal control mechanisms rather than formal rules and regulations. In this context, trust reduces transaction costs by facilitating smoother interactions and fostering a culture of collaboration and openness. This informal governance structure encourages continuous improvement and innovation, as individuals feel empowered to take risks and share ideas without fear of reprisal. (Sako, 2006)

With a definition of trust established and its organizational implications outlined, it's valuable to quantify and shape this concept further.

The Edelman trust barometer is a research conducted by a communications agency aimed at analyzing this sentiment in-depth and giving a comprehensive overview of its evolution over time. The following statements in this section will refer to reports conducted in recent years to highlight the evolution of the trust landscape in recent history.

Let's start with the main assumption that people do not trust, over 60% of the population believes that politicians, business leaders, and journalists are purposely trying to mislead people.

However, this general sentiment is characterized by many nuances. While it is indeed true that there is a general reluctance to trust institutions, businesses, with 63 percent, turn out to be the only repositories of trust by the population among NGOs, governments, and the

media. This finding carries with it some consequences, to borrow a famous phrase from the comic world: “With great power comes great responsibility.”

Indeed, the trust placed in businesses by the public, not only validates their actions but also legitimizes their involvement in addressing issues. Even if they may extend beyond their traditional scope of expertise. In the eyes of many, businesses are perceived as more ethical and competent than governments, making them better equipped to tackle a wide range of challenges.

The Institute for Human Rights and Business (IHRB) has identified ten significant challenges for 2024, reflecting the complex and evolving landscape in which businesses operate. These challenges span a wide range of issues, from the burgeoning space race to the delicate task of balancing the online world with daily life.

One critical challenge is the sustainable management of vital resources, including mines, oceans, and farms. As demands on these resources continue to grow, businesses face increasing pressure to adopt responsible and sustainable practices to ensure their long-term viability.

Furthermore, achieving a balance between work and other aspects of life emerges as a key theme. The importance of fostering employer-worker partnerships and creating inclusive, safe, and sustainable cities is emphasized, with a particular focus on integrating green initiatives to combat climate change.

Overall, these challenges underscore the multidimensional nature of the environment in which businesses operate. They highlight the need for businesses to adopt innovative and responsible approaches to address pressing societal issues while also ensuring their own long-term sustainability and success. As said before, the collaboration between businesses, governments, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders will be essential in navigating these challenges and driving positive change. (Institute for Human Rights and Business, 2024)

In the face of societal challenges and institutional gaps, businesses have assumed a critical role in addressing pressing issues and filling the void left by other institutions. According to the Edelman Trust Barometer (2023), a significant portion of the population across various countries recognizes the need for companies to engage with society, even if it entails a certain level of politicization of business activities.



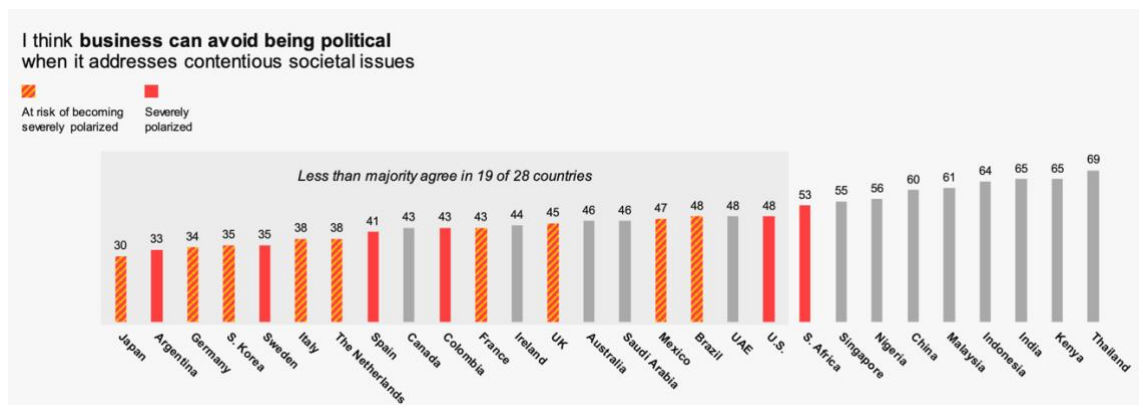


Figure 4. Risk of Politicization (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2023)

However, from an economic standpoint, this trend carries inherent risks. The politicization of business activities can lead to a polarization of the brand's image, potentially alienating segments of its audience and sparking conflict. In today's interconnected world, where social media amplifies both praise and criticism, businesses must navigate carefully to avoid being drawn into contentious political debates that could harm their reputation and bottom line. It is the so-called social guillotine, capable of cutting off companies and people involved in activities not in line with the social context. Moreover, the phenomenon of polarization is increasingly prevalent globally. A pervasive lack of trust and a shared identity exacerbate societal divisions, leading to heightened polarization among the masses. This trend is particularly evident in countries with strong democratic traditions, such as the United States, France, and Italy, where deep-seated ideological differences are driving societal fragmentation and discord.

Polarization is essentially a matter of relational distance, depicting the degree of separation between individuals or factions across diverse domains. This divide encompasses varying levels of support for specific policies, sentiments regarding social aspects and their associated groups, core values, and overall lifestyle preferences. To register as distinct on any of these fronts, groups must maintain internal coherence, setting themselves apart from competing factions. (Abramowitz and Saunders, 2008)

The inclination to gravitate towards opposing poles poses a significant risk, particularly in a democratic framework where a fundamental level of solidarity is essential for its functionality. Intolerance towards those situated at the opposite end of the spectrum can escalate into conflicts, potentially jeopardizing the integrity of the democratic system. (Kreiss & McGregor, 2024)

This was starkly illustrated by the events of the Capitol Hill attack in January 2021 which demonstrated the weakness of the system in the face of the exacerbation of the ideals.

Even in this crisis scenario, companies are seen as possible unifiers, 68% of those interviewed believe that brands can use their power to create a shared identity and thus strengthen the social fabric. This momentum can also represent a strong point for the company, in fact 63% of the over 32,000 interviewees say that they purchase and recommend brands based on their beliefs and values and 69% of employees say that having a social impact is an important element when considering possible job offers.

In this context, businesses face a delicate balancing act. While they have a responsibility to engage with societal issues and contribute to positive change, they must do so in a way that is authentic, inclusive, and aligned with their core values. By adopting a nuanced and empathetic approach, businesses can navigate the complexities of today's polarized landscape and uphold their reputation as responsible corporate citizens. The company therefore discovers its social nature and to encourage this, it must advocate truths based on scientific realities and encourage economic optimism through the right investments and greater involvement of its community. In modern society, businesses therefore have not only the burden but the duty to fulfill their social role to stand out in the competitive landscape and satisfy the expectations of their stakeholders.

## 1.5 What a responsibility to be truly social

*“Corporate social responsibility is the continuing commitment by business to behave ethically and contribute to economic development while improving the quality of life of the workforce and their families as well as the local community and society at large.” - World Business Council for Sustainable Development (2000)*

Throughout this thesis, it has been observed the need for a paradigm shift in the conception of the enterprise. Showing that it's the company's duty not only to maximize profits but also to contribute positively to society. This responsibility extends beyond legal obligations to encompass ethical considerations, such as fair labor practices, environmental sustainability, and respect for human rights.

As the proposed definition suggests, the company's role relates to considering the entire environment in which the business operates by taking into account all that network of

connections that managers use to carry on their business. It is thus possible to observe a shift in the company's interlocutor from shareholders to the entire community around the organization. They are the so-called stakeholders and include all those parties that are interested in or can influence the achievement of business results. (Freeman, 1984)

Clarkson (1995) subdivided them into primary and secondary stakeholders according to whether they are necessary or not for the enterprise's survival. Beyond this distinction, the shift in perspective towards a broader audience signifies a fundamental evolution in the way companies perceive their role in society. Embracing stakeholders beyond just shareholders acknowledges that success isn't solely measured by financial gains but also by an organization's positive impact on its employees, customers, suppliers, communities, and the environment. Freeman's stakeholder approach underscores the interconnectedness of these relationships and highlights that by prioritizing the interests of all stakeholders, a company ultimately secures its long-term success. This approach encourages businesses to move beyond short-term profit maximization and consider the broader implications of their actions.

What's intriguing about this perspective is that it aligns with the core principles of capitalism while expanding its scope. By recognizing that serving the interests of stakeholders ultimately serves the company itself, capitalism's fundamental principle of pursuing self-interest is fulfilled. However, it does so in a more nuanced manner, acknowledging that profit maximization cannot be divorced from societal and environmental responsibilities. In essence, this updated interpretation of capitalism acknowledges that businesses can thrive not despite their social and environmental obligations but because of them. By generating positive externalities for the broader community, companies contribute to a more sustainable and equitable economic system while still pursuing their interests. It's a win-win scenario where capitalism evolves to benefit both business and society.

Research consistently demonstrates that integrating CSR into business strategies yields numerous advantages for companies, ranging from enhanced employee engagement and productivity to improved talent acquisition and retention. When employees perceive their organization as socially responsible, they tend to feel more connected to their work and

are more motivated to contribute positively. Studies conducted by Babson College and IO sustainability inside the Project ROI have shown that companies with strong CSR initiatives experience a 7.5% increase in employee engagement and a productivity boost of up to 13%. Engaged employees are more likely to be committed to their roles, leading to higher job satisfaction and lower turnover rates, which can decrease turnover by 25 to 50%. Moreover, CSR has become a significant factor in talent acquisition, particularly among millennials, who prioritize purpose-driven work. Approximately 72% of millennials actively seek job opportunities that allow them to make a positive social impact. Furthermore, 45% of millennials are willing to accept a lower salary if it means working for a company that aligns with their values and contributes positively to society.

The benefits of ethical action extend beyond human resources to encompass significant reputational and economic gains for businesses. Research consistently indicates that consumers increasingly prefer to support companies that demonstrate a commitment to ethical practices, sustainability, and social responsibility. One of the most notable advantages of adopting ethical business practices is the positive impact on sales and reputation. Studies have shown that companies with strong CSR initiatives can experience a sales increase of up to 20%. Additionally, there is an expected reputational improvement of around 11%. Consumers are more likely to trust and support companies that demonstrate ethical behavior, leading to increased brand loyalty and positive word-of-mouth recommendations. These trends are reflective of a broader societal shift towards conscious consumerism, where individuals prioritize purchasing from companies that align with their values and beliefs. Research indicates that 76% of consumers believe that companies should address environmental sustainability, and 69% believe that companies should change their operations to promote diversity and inclusion. (Porter Novelli, 2023)

Corporate Social Responsibility can also be seen as a philosophical approach, the ability to respond to social pressure. (Frederick, 1994) In this perspective, the operation of the business is thus shaped by external expectations, in a kind of social agreement on the tasks of the business. This theory underlies the concept of legitimacy for which businesses derive their power and authority from society, and this power is contingent upon meeting the expectations and obligations set forth by society. When a business operates in a manner that is perceived as responsible and ethical, it maintains its legitimacy and societal

support. However, if a business fails to fulfill its social responsibilities or acts in ways that are perceived as harmful or unethical, it risks losing its legitimacy and facing backlash from stakeholders. (Moir, 2001).

Beyond the underlying reasons what is interesting about CSR is the ability of companies to help society and keeping their economic role at the same time. Then it is not surprising that Bosch commits half of its research budget to pioneering technologies aimed at advancing conservation and environmental protection. Starbucks pledges to employ 10,000 refugees across 75 nations within the next five years, embodying a proactive approach to global inclusion and social responsibility. (Bosh Media, 2022; BBC, 2017)

Additionally, Levi Strauss's Water Less program stands as a beacon of sustainable innovation, slashing water usage in manufacturing by an impressive 96 percent for select styles, exemplifying the company's dedication to environmental stewardship. (Thorpe, 2011)

These examples show the real impact these activities can have on society with the company taking on a new role and going to fill administrative gaps, but as always it is not all sunshine and rainbows.

## 1.6 The problem of being good

Despite the undoubted advantages of ethical behaviors, making the right choice is not always easy. The concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) is inherently beneficial as it addresses societal needs that may not be fully met by government initiatives. As we saw, this proactive engagement not only contributes to economic and social development but also enhances corporate reputation and fosters stakeholder trust. However, it's imperative to carefully evaluate the execution of CSR activities to ensure they are aligned with the genuine needs of communities and stakeholders. Indeed, if on a conceptual level, going out of the economic zone and filling areas of need left uncovered is good, the way in which this is done can be reviewed.

The way CSR is implemented warrants careful examination and analysis. This entails ensuring that CSR efforts are not merely superficial gestures but are genuinely impactful

and sustainable. Additionally, companies should prioritize transparency, accountability, and collaboration with stakeholders to maximize the effectiveness and legitimacy of their CSR initiatives. The inherent ambiguity of corporate social responsibility can indeed be problematic, as it opens the door for companies to interpret and implement CSR activities in ways that may prioritize their own interests over genuine societal impact. This lack of clarity can lead to inconsistencies in CSR practices across industries and undermine the credibility and effectiveness of CSR efforts as a whole. (Pérez & Rodríguez del Bosque, 2013)

In the void of clarity, companies may exploit Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as a façade, utilizing it to obscure their true practices from both consumers and regulators. This act of misleading takes the common name of greenwashing and can be defined as the act of disseminating disinformation to consumers regarding the environmental practices of a company. (Baum, 2012) Greenwashing tactics often involve the strategic manipulation of information to present a more favorable image of a company's environmental practices than may be warranted. Selectively disclosing positive information allows companies to highlight their environmental efforts while downplaying or omitting less flattering aspects of their operations. Similarly, diverting attention away from minor issues serves to distract consumers from potential shortcomings or areas where the company may fall short of environmental standards. (de Freitas Netto et al., 2020)

These deceptive practices can have significant consequences for consumer trust. When consumers perceive that a company is engaging in greenwashing, it undermines their confidence in the authenticity of the company's environmental claims. This skepticism can lead consumers to question the company's integrity and credibility, potentially resulting in a loss of trust and loyalty. Moreover, greenwashing not only damages consumer trust but also risks tarnishing the reputation of the entire industry. When one company engages in deceptive practices, it can erode trust in other businesses within the same sector, leading to broader skepticism and cynicism towards environmental claims across the board. (Szabo & Webster, 2021)

In addition to consumers, another party on whom CSR practices if badly managed can have negative effects is regulators. CSR activities can influence regulators in several ways, shaping the regulatory landscape and impacting industry standards. Companies that demonstrate strong CSR commitments may seek to persuade regulators that additional controls or regulations are unnecessary, arguing that their voluntary initiatives adequately address societal concerns. By showcasing their proactive efforts in areas such as environmental sustainability, fair labor practices, and community engagement, these companies may aim to portray themselves as responsible corporate citizens deserving of regulatory leniency. Through strategic communication and advocacy, companies may argue that their CSR initiatives effectively address societal concerns, rendering further regulatory intervention redundant. This influence on the regulatory framework can create entry barriers for companies that want to enter the market and must spend money to adapt themselves to the new rules. (Hilliard, 2019)

To be fair, there is still very little legislation on CSR activities. Indeed, one of the most significant criticisms of CSR initiatives is that it relies solely on voluntary adherence is the lack of precise rules and tangible, measurable results. Without clear guidelines and regulatory oversight, there is often ambiguity surrounding the expectations and outcomes of CSR activities. This can lead to inconsistencies in implementation and a lack of accountability, making it difficult to assess the true impact of CSR efforts.

Anyway, significant efforts have been made on the regulatory side to provide scientific validity to the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). A first concrete attempt was made in 2000 with the UN Global Compact a framework featuring ten principles to provide companies with a pattern of alignment with social practices, focusing specifically on four areas: human rights, labor, environment, and anti-corruption. However, this scheme lacks an accountability system that can give it substance. To solve this, the Global Reporting Initiatives (GRI) was then introduced, a set of guidelines, on a voluntary basis, to produce reports even on intangible values typical of social impact activities. (Tamvada, 2020)

On this line, a notable improvement was made with the development of Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) scores, a rating system that evaluates companies based on

their performance in these three key areas. Originally conceived with a financial intent, ESG scores have evolved over the years to become a comprehensive indicator of a company's commitment to CSR issues. By assessing factors such as environmental sustainability, social responsibility, and governance practices, ESG scores provide investors, stakeholders, and the public with valuable insights into a company's overall sustainability performance. (Clément et al., 2023)

Another important step was done with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which represent a comprehensive framework for addressing the most pressing societal and environmental challenges facing the world today. Consisting of 17 goals with specific targets, the SDGs encompass a wide range of issues, including poverty alleviation, gender equality, climate action, and sustainable consumption and production. Crucially, the SDGs recognize that achieving sustainable development requires collective action from all sectors of society. Businesses, governments, and civil society actors are all called upon to play a role in advancing the SDGs and creating a more sustainable future for all. (United Nations, 2015)

The private sector, in particular, is seen as having unique strengths that can contribute significantly to the achievement of the SDGs. These strengths include innovation, responsiveness to market demands, efficiency in resource allocation, and the provision of specific skills and resources. By leveraging these strengths, businesses can drive meaningful progress towards the SDGs and contribute to positive social and environmental outcomes. Furthermore, the SDGs represent a collaborative effort, with input and participation from various stakeholders, including the private sector. Businesses are actively involved in shaping the trajectory towards achieving the SDGs, contributing to addressing complex challenges. (Scheyvens, 2016)

An interesting factor in this whole regulatory diatribe is that it can easily be traced back to a cardinal principle of corporate sustainability theory: "The triple bottom line". This concept developed by Elkington (1999) in his famous book, "Cannibals with forks: The triple bottom line of 21st century business," proposes a system of reporting on business performance based on three lines of analysis Profit, planet, and people. Profit refers to the traditional bottom line of financial success, while the planet encompasses environmental



considerations such as resource use, pollution, and climate change impacts. People, on the other hand, focus on social aspects such as employee well-being, community engagement, and human rights. Integrating these three dimensions into their reporting and decision-making processes, it provides a holistic system to which all other theoretical arguments can be carried over, ensuring a successful form of corporate sustainability.

## 1.7 The evolution of social discourses

Now that we have an overview of the concept of corporate social responsibility, we can go on to analyze the managerial implications of this paradigm shift. Kotler et al. in their book "In Good Works" identify six main activities that a company can pursue about social causes, three of which are related to marketing operations, while the other three are related to business in general. This section will introduce the main concepts of each category emphasizing the findings and advantages of each.

### **Cause Related Marketing**

Cause-Related Marketing (CRM) has emerged as a versatile and dynamic activity within the marketing landscape, offering opportunities for both profit and non-profit organizations, as well as consumers, to engage in social causes (Varadarajan & Menon, 1988). It links monetary or in-kind donations to product sales or other consumer actions, favoring a win-win-win situation among the actors. For the company, CRM can enhance brand reputation, build customer loyalty, and drive sales, all while fulfilling its CSR objectives. Non-profit organizations benefit from increased visibility, funding, and support for their social missions. Consumers are provided with the opportunity to make socially responsible purchasing decisions and contribute to meaningful causes through their everyday transactions. (Adkins, 2012)

While Cause-Related Marketing (CRM) initiatives are generally viewed positively, they can evoke skepticism if they lack clarity and transparency. It's crucial to provide detailed information about the cause being supported and ensure transparency regarding beneficiaries, participating products, program duration, contribution thresholds or limits, and any distribution channel restrictions (e.g., exclusivity for certain retailers). If clarity is not maintained, this activity can become counterproductive, leading to negative legal

and reputational repercussions for the company. A recent example involves the renowned Italian influencer Chiara Ferragni, who was embroiled in a scandal related to a false case of cause-related marketing. Consumers were led to believe that purchasing Balocco panettoni cakes, created in collaboration with Ferragni, had a charitable purpose, with a portion of the proceeds being donated to charity. However, it was later revealed that the donation had been made beforehand, regardless of the panettone sales. As a result, the antitrust authorities imposed a fine of EUR 1,240,000 and several brands stopped the collaboration with the influencer. (Giuffrida, 2024)

Regardless of this case, successful cause-related marketing initiatives can indeed yield a multitude of benefits for companies. By aligning with social causes and engaging in CSR efforts, companies can: attract new customers, reach niche markets, increase product sales, and build positive brand identity while raising significant funds for a cause. (Brønn & Vrioni, 2001)

### **Cause Promotion**

Cause promotion involves the utilization of corporate funds, in-kind contributions, or other resources to raise awareness and garner support for a social cause. These initiatives aim to promote fundraising efforts, encourage participation, or recruit volunteers for a specific cause. Menon and Kahn (2003) made a distinction in this sponsorship activity of cause, subdividing it into advocacy advertising, where the philanthropic message is completely independent of the company's product, and cause promotion where instead this link is more evident. In both cases, the primary benefits for corporations in these initiatives are typically marketing-related, including strengthening brand positioning, creating brand preference, increasing traffic, and fostering customer loyalty. Additionally, corporations may experience secondary benefits such as heightened employee satisfaction and the cultivation of stronger relationships with nonprofits and other businesses. Key factors for success in cause promotion include selecting an issue aligned with company values and products, ensuring long-term commitment, and maximizing media exposure. By following this strategy, the company can strengthen its image while contributing to its commitment to CSR.

### **Social Marketing**

*“A process that applies marketing principles and techniques to create, communicate, and deliver value in order to influence target audience behaviors that benefit society as well as the target audience.” – Kotler and Lee (2008)*

Corporate Social Marketing involves leveraging business resources to develop and implement behavior change campaigns aimed at improving public health, safety, the environment, or community well-being. The primary focus and intended outcome of these campaigns are to induce behavior change among target audiences. The process used to achieve this goal is that proper to strategic marketing, with situation analysis and the use of the marketing mix. Through this strategy, barriers are sought to be reduced by pushing people to change their behavior. In many ways it is similar to nudging with the peculiarity that the ultimate goal is a benefit not an individual but of the whole community. The following image explains well this logic consequentiality among the actions that bring to the final societal benefit.

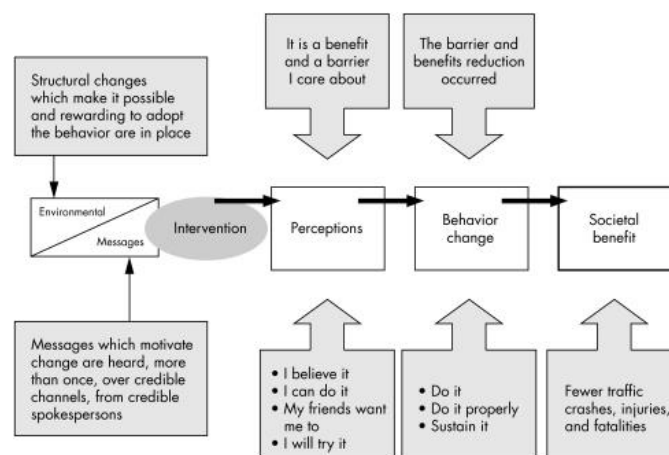


Figure 5. Social Marketing Flow (Smith, 2006)

## Corporate Philanthropy

Corporate philanthropy involves corporations directly contributing to charitable causes through cash grants, donations, or in-kind services. The landscape of corporate philanthropy has evolved, driven by internal and external pressures to balance shareholder wealth with social responsibility. Today, corporate philanthropy is characterized by a more strategic approach, with companies increasingly selecting social issues aligned with their business goals and objectives. There is a growing tendency to

focus on specific areas and establish long-term partnerships with nonprofit organizations. This shift reflects a desire to create more meaningful and impactful contributions to communities while also aligning with corporate objectives. Porter and Kramer (2002) suggest that corporations have the opportunity to leverage their charitable endeavors to enhance the quality of the business environment in the areas where they operate, thereby improving their competitive context. It is what they define as a convergence of interests. It enables companies to leverage not only their own resources but also the existing efforts and infrastructure of nonprofits and other institutions. Corporate giving continues to be a significant aspect of business operations, and recent data indicates a notable increase in charitable contributions. For instance, in Italy, corporate giving saw a substantial growth of 20.6% in 2020. (SDAB, 2020)

### **Community Volunteering**

Community volunteering initiatives are a concerted effort to mobilize employees, retail partners, and franchise members toward collective social responsibility. This initiative serves as a conduit for channeling individual altruism into impactful community engagement, fostering a sense of shared purpose and corporate citizenship. Corporate support is instrumental in facilitating this initiative, offering tangible resources such as paid time off, personalized matching services to connect volunteers with relevant opportunities, and formal recognition for their philanthropic endeavors. It can regard community projects, health and safety-related topics, or environmental volunteering. Regardless of the theme, it is a great tool to foster involvement and satisfaction among employees as well as to improve the relationship with the local community.

### **Socially Responsible Business Practices**

Socially responsible business practices are discretionary initiatives undertaken by corporations to champion social causes, enhance community well-being, and safeguard the environment. It brings a change of perspective in which the company doesn't act anymore in response to laws or moral obligations but tries forward thinking to identify sustainable solutions to pressing social problems. This change can impact internal procedures or external reporting trying to anticipate trends and actively contribute to solving social problems. One extremism, if it can be called so, of this philosophy are the

social enterprises. One extremism, if you can call it that, of this philosophy is social entrepreneurship. In this case we are talking about the emergence of businesses whose ultimate goal is no longer the generation of profit, but rather the creation of value in its general concept. (Martin and Osberg, 2007) They are still for-profit organizations but the real aim of their actions is to create a positive impact on social issue. (Peak, 2020) In this case, therefore, the theme is no longer to introduce social initiatives, but social activity becomes the very soul of the enterprise. This model has been achieving widespread acceptance in recent years, finding increasing success with consumers.

Regardless of the strategy one chooses what is evident is how CSR practices are increasingly a useful tool in the hands of managers. It's no longer just a moral or ethical consideration; it's a strategic imperative for businesses looking to distinguish themselves and meet evolving consumer demands. This shift in consumer behavior has elevated CSR from a peripheral concern to a central aspect of brand identity and reputation. Companies that demonstrate a commitment to sustainability and social responsibility can attract and retain customers, thereby gaining a competitive advantage. Additionally, the growing influence of younger generations, such as millennials and Gen Z, has further propelled the adoption of CSR practices. These cohorts, known for their strong values and activism, prioritize sustainability and social responsibility when making purchasing decisions. As they become an increasingly dominant consumer demographic, companies that fail to embrace CSR risk alienating a significant portion of their customer base. This topic is transversal among all sectors and underscores the importance of CSR as a cross-cutting theme that touches every aspect of business operations. From supply chain management to product development and marketing, integrating sustainable practices has become imperative for businesses across the board.

To conclude indifference in the face of global challenges no longer rewards, and it is time for companies to take a clear and precise stance on how they want to address them.

## Chapter 2 Brand Activism

### 2.1 Activists in the Business Square

*“Business is in trouble because it is increasingly seen by more and more people as deeply at odds with the basic needs and core values of society and community.” (Drucker, 2017)*

In the bustling landscape of the business square, a dynamic arena where new brands emerge daily with fresh ideas and ideals, it's becoming increasingly challenging to stay abreast. What is striking is the profound specialization of communication, with burgeoning brands assuming the role of vanguards in social campaigns that resonate deeply with consumer values. At a time when the quality and price of services are increasingly standardized, it is precisely in the ability of these brands to become spokespeople for values that make the difference. For this reason, being a champion of a social struggle has become the only way for companies to empathize with their customers. People seek in brands an image of their own identity and to satisfy this need is becoming a point of strength for companies.

Surveys indicate a significant shift in consumer behavior, with a staggering 65 percent affirming that brands should take a stance on political and social matters. This sentiment increasingly shapes purchasing decisions, highlighting the pivotal role of brand activism. However, despite this consumer demand a substantial 83 percent of chief marketing officers exhibit reluctance to wade into political controversies. (The CMO Survey, 2018)

This is easily explained by looking at the results of Mukherjee and Althuizen's (2020) work and what they call an asymmetric effect of brand activism. This theory demonstrates a negatively influenced brand attitude in the case of consumer-brand disagreement, whereas there was no significant effect in the case of agreement. This phenomenon brings a negativity bias, whereby a brand is more likely to lose an existing misaligned customer due to CPA (Corporate Political Advocacy) than it is to gain a new aligned one. (Hydock et al., 2020)

All this data would make us think of a foolish choice on the part of companies embarking on these operations, yet the real world is showing us more and more successful companies

adopting these actions. Nike's impactful "For Once, Don't Do It" campaign, which lent support to the Black Lives Matter movement, stands as a powerful testament to the potential of brand activism (Schmidt et al., 2022). Similarly, Airbnb's poignant "We Accept" initiative boldly championed the cause of immigrants, refugees, and survivors of war or natural disasters. These are just a few examples of companies embracing this social revolution, shaping tomorrow's future, and advocating for social justice and inclusivity on a global scale.

The basis of a successful brand activism campaign is first and foremost an excellent understanding of one's target audience. Data show that young people are much more sensitive to social dynamics and therefore more open to embracing companies with social impact. For instance, 73% of millennials and 70% of Generation Z consumers claim they are willing to pay extra for brands that align with their values and engage with brands they feel make a difference. (Accenture, 2019)

Moreover, research indicates that this strategy is particularly advantageous for companies with a modest market share. Indeed, by risking a small fraction of their customer base, these small companies can attract a larger portion of the market by establishing a new identity. This phenomenon underscores how the negativity bias, when extrapolated to a global market context, can be advantageous for small and medium-sized enterprises endeavoring to carve out their niche. (Hydock et al., 2020)

Another point to be considered is the one regarding politicization. It has been seen before how two-thirds of consumers expect companies to take a position on controversial matters. By doing so they inevitably take sides toward a political orientation based on their chosen ideologies. This politicization of a firm can manifest in various directions, depending on its values and target audience. A company may choose to align itself with progressive or regressive ideologies, thus appealing to distinct market segments. This strategic choice allows firms to effectively engage with diverse consumer demographics and navigate complex socio-political landscapes. For a deeper comprehension of this concept, we can look at the insightful definition of brand activism proposed by Sarkar and Kotler (2020)

*“Brand activism consists of corporate efforts to promote, impede or influence social, political, economic and/or environmental reforms or states of inaction with the aim of promoting or preventing societal improvements.”*

Brand activism can indeed be viewed as a form of social positioning, wherein companies make strategic decisions that align with either regressive or progressive values. This decision encompasses principles and actions that benefit a significant portion of society and is generally defined as the common good. Depending on whether or not the company pursues this common good, it will favor inclusion or polarization of its brand image following its strategic goal.



Figure 6. Progressive vs. Regressive Marketing. (Sarkar and Kotler, 2020)

Using this criterion, it is possible to assess companies in each sector, distinguishing those leading the social transition from those lagging behind. In certain industries, such as the oil sector, embracing this transition may pose greater challenges. However, empirical evidence suggests that companies at the forefront of adopting new social values ultimately reap significant benefits. This commitment towards the common good is called the "strategy of justice" by the authors, who demonstrate that companies prioritizing ethical conduct, not only improve immediate consumer perceptions of the brand but also cultivate long-term brand equity. By aligning their actions with principles of social responsibility and advocating for causes that resonate with consumers, companies can effectively transform brand activism into a potent driver of brand equity. (Mullen, 1997) Thus being able to speak for the first time in the theory of social actions that bring real value to the company.



The topic of brand activism has emerged prominently in recent years, as evidenced by a sustained increase in scholarly studies devoted to the subject. (Cammarota et al, 2023)

Historically, companies often steered clear of taking public stances on contentious issues, wary of potential backlash and boycotts. However, a notable shift has occurred in recent times propelled by the growing influence of activist groups and their concerted efforts to hold corporations accountable. This societal evolution is marked by a departure from the traditional stance of ignoring dissenting voices toward a more inclusive approach, wherein companies actively engage with diverse perspectives to foster innovative solutions. This represents a further step from conventional corporate social responsibility paradigms, which often centered around the notion of giving back to communities. In this case, contemporary companies are embracing a proactive form of activism, where they not only support causes but also seek to instigate meaningful change. (Canberry et al., 2019)

They integrate this activist ethos into their marketing strategies and brand identities, positioning themselves as educators and arbiters of controversy. By leveraging their platforms, they aim to raise awareness, educate consumers, and mobilize stakeholders to join them in advocating for social change. This shift signifies a broader cultural movement, wherein companies are no longer content with passive support for causes but are actively committed to driving tangible societal progress. (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020).

Brand activism has a communicative nature, it is based precisely on taking a public position on controversial issues. This means that the position taken by the company must be easily recognizable by the entire public, composed not only of consumers but of all the company's stakeholders. This is so because brand activism consequences impact all the actors revolving around it drastically affecting the company's results.

Usually, brand activism communications are made through direct messages like public statements, but they can also go indirectly through donations, collaborations with specific partners, and product adaptations. The characteristic of publicity of this strategy makes the company want to reach the widest amount of people possible. The company can make use of several instruments to achieve this goal, its own media such as social media and

the website, or paid media like advertising. A few words can also be spent on the subject that implements the action, which does not have to be always the brand, but can also be in some ways unbundled by making use of endorsers and celebrities paid by the brand or can be personified in the figure of the CEO. (Cammarota et al, 2023)

All these ingredients are crucial to bringing life to a brand activism campaign that can have a real impact on both the world and the company itself by fostering change and generating a competitive advantage.

## 2.2 Angels and Demons: Business Morality

“Morality is a set of psychological adaptations that allow otherwise selfish individuals to reap the benefits of cooperation” (Greene, 2014)

As companies venture beyond purely economic pursuits to engage in social endeavors, they inherently embrace a new philosophical dimension: morality. This entails a profound capacity to discern between right and wrong, a trait historically associated with human consciousness, now extended to the corporate entity. Thus, corporations find themselves assuming the role of arbiters of justice in various social spheres.

The concept of morality, intricately intertwined with human evolution, warrants examination from diverse perspectives, with a nuanced understanding of its multifaceted nature. In this thesis, it is prioritized the psychological dimension, aiming to elucidate its connection to consumer behavior and its implications for the notion of brand morality. (Caruana, 2007)

Renowned U.S. sociopsychologist Wilson, a recipient of two Pulitzer Prizes for non-fiction, in his book “Sociobiology” (2000) defines morality as an emotional response that underpins intuitive judgments of right and wrong. Building upon this foundation, Haidt (2008) elaborates on the Social Intuitionist Model (SIM), which posits that moral judgments are primarily guided by rapid, intuitive processes. These evaluations are rooted in affective responses such as feelings of like or dislike, good or bad towards the character or actions of individuals, often occurring without conscious awareness.

In today's interconnected reality, where consumers interact with countless brands daily, this unconscious model suggests that similar dynamics may influence how they interact with companies. Scholars define this idea as brand morality, a multifaceted concept that can be broadly defined as consumers' perceptions of the ethicality of brands' actions. (van Prooijen & Bartels, 2019)

Consumers analyze brands through a combination of moral traits such as honesty, fairness, integrity, and social responsibility. (Kirmani et al., 2017)

This process of attributing human-like qualities to brands, termed brand anthropomorphizing is a phenomenon intrinsic to various facets of marketing, such as brand personality and brand identity. Through this lens, brands assume a powerful psychological construct, effectively becoming artificial entities infused with human values. By embodying traits like honesty and integrity, brands forge deeper connections with consumers and elicit emotional responses. This phenomenon underscores the intricate interplay between consumer psychology and brand perception, highlighting the profound impact of moral considerations on consumer behavior and brand loyalty. (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007)

Indeed, the concept of morality is deeply personal and inherently subjective, varying based on individuals' predispositions and sensitivities. This subjectivity renders morality a divisive element within the market, shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors in distinct ways.

However, this perspective is not the only one in the literature, Romani et al. (2015) offer an alternative view grounded in compliance with regulatory frameworks. In this model, consumers assess a company's morality based on its adherence to legal mandates and societal norms, thus aligning with public morality. This perspective underscores the importance of legal and ethical compliance as fundamental pillars of brand morality. Companies that operate within the bounds of the law and adhere to established social norms are perceived as morally upright by consumers. This adherence to regulatory standards not only engenders trust but also reinforces the brand's reputation as a responsible corporate citizen.

This concept is closely related to the last interpretation that Wei (2023) in his work calls the social responsibility perspective in this case the morality of the brand is evaluated by its commitment to the public good and its actions in the interest of the economy, the environment and society. From this perspective, consumers evaluate a brand's morality based on its demonstrated commitment to social and environmental causes, ethical business practices, and contributions to community welfare. Brands that actively engage in philanthropy, sustainability initiatives, and ethical sourcing are viewed favorably by consumers as they are contributing positively to the greater good.

It seems, therefore, reasonable that brand managers must possess a keen understanding of the diverse moral frameworks and values held by their target demographic. By comprehending the nuanced preferences and ethical considerations of consumers, brand managers can tailor messaging and initiatives to resonate authentically with their audience. In this global view, managers must therefore also be able to work on people's minds by managing moral reasoning by specifically highlighting the links between consumers' thoughts and actions. Mukherjee and Althuizen's research delves into the potential effects of moral reasoning on brand activism events, uncovering intriguing insights. One notable finding is the improbability of the moral rationalism mechanism being activated by consumers who hold dissenting views from the brand. In essence, individuals find it challenging to reinterpret a brand perceived as immoral as morally acceptable, largely due to two key factors elucidated by Tsang (2002).

Tsang's theory elucidates that the propensity to change one's opinion is contingent upon the moral relevance of the issue at hand and the cost-benefit analysis of acting in accordance with one's moral values. In the realm of brand activism, the issues at play are inherently hot-button topics, deeply resonating with public opinion and individual values. Furthermore, the proliferation of product options in the marketplace renders the cost of switching brands relatively low for consumers who disagree with a brand's stance. This underscores the critical importance for brands to carefully select the causes they champion, recognizing that once a segment of their customer base is lost due to moral disagreement, they are unlikely to regain their loyalty.

Another interesting phenomenon is moral coupling and decoupling, it presents an intriguing dynamic in consumer decision-making. In the context of moral coupling, consumers integrate their moral judgments of a brand into their evaluation of its qualitative characteristics. Conversely, moral decoupling involves separating moral considerations from the assessment of a brand's attributes. (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003)

In instances of consumer-brand disagreement, the brand typically seeks to promote decoupling, despite it not being the default decision-making process. A key determinant in favoring one approach over the other is the perceived distance between the brand and the source of the stand. When the brand and the endorsers seem distant to the customer's mind, it becomes easier to justify moral decoupling activities. This suggests that brands may strategically employ decoupling tactics to mitigate the impact of moral disagreements with consumers.

Another concept related to this sphere that influences consumer brand attitude is that related to moral identity, that is, the cognitive framework or schema that an individual possesses regarding the virtuosity or moral excellence of their character. (Aquino et al. 2009). In particular, Choi and Winterich (2013) show how this has a direct impact on improving consumers' brand attitude toward out-group brands by reducing psychological distance. We will return to this concept related to the in-group and out-group distinction later in the thesis. What is relevant in this section is to note how companies by taking public positions, according to the dynamics of brand activism, actually equip themselves with a moral component. This new aspect then becomes part of the evaluation system followed by consumers in their purchasing dynamics and can influence drastically their final decision. Consequently, mastering this dimension is therefore essential not only to mitigate possible negative effects but also to maximize the reach of an operation. With brand activism, the company bears the moral burden of deciding what is right or wrong; it will then be the market that assesses the correctness of this position.

## 2.3 Polarization at the commercial center: The political role of companies

*“A public speech or actions focused on partisan issues made by or on behalf of a company using its corporate or individual brand name” – Moorman, 2020*

Beyond mere considerations of right and wrong, every time a company takes a public stance, it inherently embraces a political orientation. Delving into social issues inevitably traverses into the realm of politics, expanding the influence of this discipline into the domain of consumerism. Corporate political activism defined by the Moorman quote above represents one of the most divisive declensions of corporate activism. Although firms have a rich tradition of involvement in political activities, which encompass campaign contributions, lobbying efforts, and donations to political action committees. The feature of making this support public marks a sharp departure from the past, meeting a new market dynamic. (Bhagwat et al., 2020)

In today's landscape, the political component has evolved into a defining element of individual identity, capable of permeating everyday choices. (Jung & Mittal, 2020)

Indeed, the salience of political beliefs prompts individuals to strive for consistency between their political orientation and their actions in all facets of life, including purchasing decisions. However, the increasing polarization in recent years raises the risks associated with activism practices for marketing managers. Disagreements on political issues can exacerbate societal divisions, potentially leading to boycott activities and intensifying polarization. (Weber et al., 2023)

Political ideology thus emerges as a pivotal determinant in shaping the success or failure of a brand activism campaign. It can be defined as a set of beliefs, opinions, and values on the proper order of society. (Jost, 2006)

In broad terms, two fundamental ideologies can be discerned within the political spectrum. The liberal orientation is characterized by a predilection for social change, a rejection of inequality, and a focus on values such as fairness and tolerance. On the opposite end of the spectrum lies a more conservative orientation, which places emphasis on tradition, the importance of authority, and economic well-being. (Pecot et al., 2021)

Garg and Saluja (2022) showed how this factor plays a key role in the interaction with brand activism dynamics. Specifically shows how consumers exhibit better brand

attitudes and thus greater willingness to pay for companies that support causes in line with their political orientation. However, the moderating role of political ideology is not limited to this in fact research shows inherent differences in how these orientations relate to the dynamics of brand activism.

Statistics show that 78% of self-identified liberals express a desire for brands to take a stand on social issues, a considerably higher proportion compared to the 52% of conservatives who share this sentiment. Similarly, there's a notable disparity in perceptions of brand credibility when taking stands, with 82% of liberals viewing brands as credible in such instances, contrasted with only 46% of conservatives. (Sprout Social, 2017)

This makes liberal consumers more likely to interact with the phenomenon of political consumerism, choosing to buy or avoid products for political reasons. (Copeland and Boulianne, 2022)

Indeed, the predominance of liberal-leaning events in the literature on brand activism is not coincidental, companies seem to prefer undertaking activities in line with the liberal wing over the conservative wing. This discrepancy in political preference is influenced by several factors. One such factor is the tendency for conservatives to adhere to more rigid decision-making processes, often prioritizing utilitarian values. As a result, they may be less swayed by business practices that carry strong symbolic or moral significance. (Klostermann et al., 2021)

Furthermore, conservative consumers may perceive brand activism initiatives primarily as commercial endeavors rather than genuine expressions of social responsibility. Consequently, they may assign less weight to the message being communicated by these actions.

This discrepancy in reception is corroborated by the findings of Ketron et al. (2022), which indicate that liberal consumers tend to exhibit stronger responses to brand activism compared to their conservative counterparts. This suggests that the effectiveness of brand activism initiatives may vary based on the political orientation of the target audience. The following studies by Haut et al. (2023) confirmed this theory by demonstrating that

liberals exhibit a stronger negative response when they disagree with a brand compared to conservatives. Additionally, the study reveals that for both liberals and conservatives, there is no significant positive effect on brand attitude when aligned with the brand's activism. This phenomenon underscores the asymmetric nature of consumer responses to brand activism, where disagreement tends to elicit more pronounced reactions than agreement.

We have therefore seen how companies also meddle in the political landscape with actions that are referred to as CSA (Corporate Social Activism) and are crucial in taking a position that reflects the company's identity. Authenticity and consistency are indeed always the underlying values of these marketing activities that brand managers must keep in mind during their work.

## 2.4 Journey in search of one's identity: consumer-brand identification

In the preceding sections, we've explored the profound impact of brand activism on shaping brand identity, particularly through the lens of moral and political values. These facets are integral components of what literature terms as brand personality. This phenomenon encompasses the collection of human characteristics attributed to a brand. It emerges from consumers' innate tendency to anthropomorphize objects they frequently encounter entrusting them with human dimensions such as sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and roughness. (Aaker, 1997)

Brand personality is used for multiple objectives, indeed by imbuing a brand with qualities akin to those of a person, marketers can set their company apart from competitors. Moreover, consumers find it easier to relate to such brands, fulfilling their need for self-identification. This is where the significance of Brand Personality (BP) lies. It serves as a tool for both marketers and consumers, enabling differentiation in a crowded market and fostering a deeper, more meaningful relationship between the brand and its audience. (Ghorbani et al., 2022)



Studies reveal that customers gravitate towards brands with personalities that mirror their own or align with the qualities they aspire to embody. This alignment serves as a significant driver in their purchasing decisions, influencing consumer preferences and brand perceptions. As such, understanding and strategically leveraging brand personality is essential for brands aiming to forge meaningful connections and cultivate enduring relationships with consumers. (Fournier, 1998).

Brand activism also plays a fundamental role in defining these personality traits and as demonstrated by Bruder & Lübeck (2019), it is able to substantially influence the perception of values such as competence, innovation, and ruggedness. For example, a brand that takes a stand on environmental issues may be seen as innovative and forward-thinking, as it demonstrates a commitment to sustainability and progress. Similarly, a brand that advocates for social justice causes may be perceived as competent and caring, as it shows a dedication to making a positive impact on society. By taking a stand, the company somehow decides who to be, and then it will be up to the consumer to choose how to relate to it.

As previously mentioned, consumers seek brands and products that resonate with their own identity, a concept known as consumer brand identification. It explains how consumers utilize brands as a means of defining and expressing their identities to others. (Stokburger-Sauer, 2012)

Brand identification, in fact, measures the degree to which consumers feel both cognitive and emotional bonds with the brand. (Escalas & Bettman, 2003)

Brand activism plays a crucial role also in this dynamic by allowing consumers to evaluate the alignment between their values and those espoused by the brand. Essentially, it provides a platform for consumers to gauge the degree of similarity between themselves and the brand in terms of moral beliefs and judgments. (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020)

Furthermore, brand identification's influence can be even more pronounced when a brand becomes closely linked with a specific issue. In such instances, a social process unfolds, wherein the brand serves as a signaling mechanism for a particular social identity and signifies one's membership within a specific group. (Verlegh, 2024)

This strategy of presenting identity cues aligns with consumers' utilization of the self-verification mechanism to demonstrate their belongingness to a social group. Indeed, individuals leverage brands not only as external markers but also as integral components in shaping their personal identity. As consumers integrate brands into their self-concept, they not only signal their association with particular groups but also actively construct and express facets of their own identity, because now more than ever: “we are, what we have”. (Belk, 1988)

The identity-expressive function of brands tends to be particularly significant for high-involvement issues, especially those that are closely tied to the identity of minority groups. In such cases, individuals often rely on brands as a means of expressing and affirming their unique identity within society. The symbolic value of these brands becomes heightened. For this reason, choosing a brand active in social and controversial campaigns can serve as a potent tool for individuals to assert their belongingness to a specific group and to project their distinct identity onto the broader social landscape. (Tuškej et al, 2019)

Research supports this notion, demonstrating that brand activism serves as a mechanism for consumers to compare their values with those of the brand. Additionally, it has been found to have a buffering effect, mitigating negative responses from consumers even in cases where there may be disagreement between their own beliefs and the actions taken by the brand. This buffering effect shows that brand activism can help maintain positive consumer perceptions and attitudes toward the brand, even in the face of potential controversies or disagreements, proving to be an excellent tool for brand managers. (Haupt et al. 2023)

Thus, this interdependence between brand identity and brand activism has been analyzed, showing how the latter can have a substantial effect on the customer's perception of the brand. It will therefore be necessary to understand how to maximize its positive effect to derive the greatest gain for the company.

## 2.5 In the spin cycle between authenticity and woke washing

*“Authenticity is the alignment of a brand’s explicit purpose and values with its activist marketing messaging and prosocial corporate practice” – Vredenburg et al., 2020*

In an era where many companies are pivoting towards social responsibility, there lurks a latent risk that threatens the efficacy of such strategies. While consumers are increasingly advocating for this societal shift and expect active participation from businesses, a significant 56 percent express skepticism, perceiving these endeavors as mere marketing tactics aimed at boosting sales. (Edelman 2019)

This erosion of trust, as previously discussed, may yield outcomes opposite to those intended by managers. Hence, mastering clear and transparent communication about one's business becomes imperative for ensuring sustained success. Authenticity in branding hinges on the harmonious alignment of four critical elements of brand activism: message, values, practices, and purpose. Crafting a campaign that maintains unwavering consistency across these elements isn't merely advisable; it's an essential prerequisite for earning credibility and influence among consumers. (Vredenburg et al., 2020)

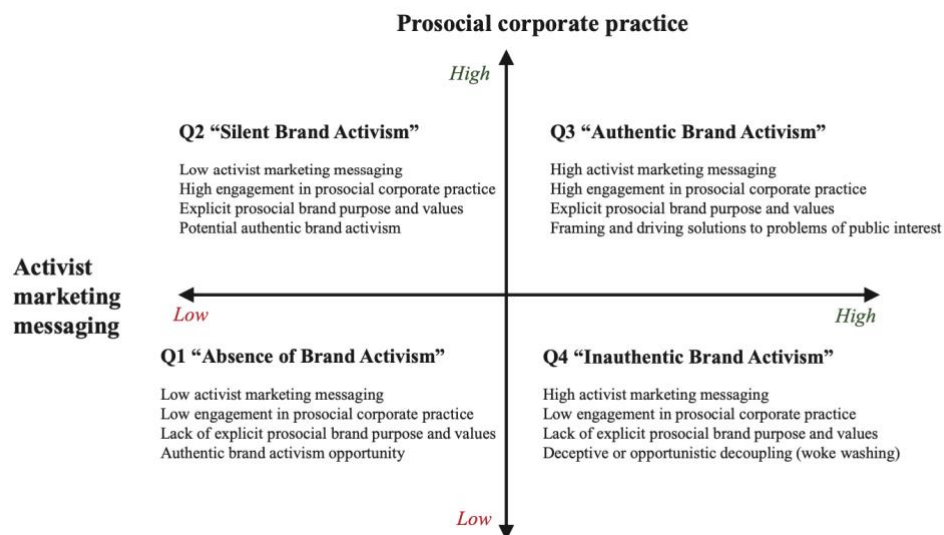


Figure 7. Typology of Brand Activism (Vredenburg et al., 2020)

The misalignment of even a single element within these pillars can trigger the collapse of the entire system, eroding not just the credibility of the company but also undermining

broader perceptions of brand activism. Vredenburg et al., 2020, in their research, delineate various shades of brand activism contingent upon an entity's social orientation and marketing methodologies. They identify four distinct operating realms for companies:

1. **Absence of Brand Activism:** Here both the messaging and the practices related to brand activism are low. In this quadrant, we find firms entrenched within traditional industries, often insulated from the imperative for social change. Their focus remains steadfast on conventional practices and operational norms, seemingly oblivious to the shifting tides of societal expectations. However, despite their inertia, these companies possess latent potential for evolution. The very structures that anchor them to tradition also offer fertile ground for transformation. By recognizing the winds of change and embracing innovation, these firms can harness their resources and expertise to adapt to the demands of a rapidly evolving landscape.
2. **Silent brand activism:** characterized by a strong alignment between values and practices yet hesitant to vocalize their activism. These entities stand to reap significant benefits from such endeavors without deviating from their core values.
3. **Authentic brand activism:** it emerges as the pinnacle, offering dual advantages. Firstly, aligning all facets it heightens the prospect of effecting tangible social change. Secondly, it serves as a powerful tool for enhancing brand equity. A company adept at orchestrating this synergy can position itself as an ethical beacon, attuned to societal dynamics, ingraining itself as a symbol of conscientiousness in the minds of consumers. This heightened awareness seamlessly translates into tangible equity, fostering favorable responses and sustainable growth. (Keller, 1998)
4. **Inauthentic Brand Activism:** It concerns companies that claim to be social when there is no alignment either with the values or practices carried out. It is what is called in the jargon woke washing, or the appropriation of social values for advertising purposes. This dissonance not only fails to yield positive effects but also risks eroding brand activism over time, ultimately diminishing brand credibility. (Kapitan et al., 2019)

There are some drivers that the company can use to be more authentic in the eyes of consumers. The first is to ensure maximum transparency starting with internal policy. Brands should use clear and easily comparable claims, avoiding instead generic phrases that are liable to different interpretations and capable of misleading the customers. A second level of security can be given by third-party certifications, which offer an additional layer of assurance. Implementing accountable mechanisms to verify the accuracy of the systems established by the company can effectively reassure customers regarding the alignment between claims and operational practices. Moreover, strategic partnerships, especially with public entities like municipalities or NGOs, can significantly bolster the perception of authenticity in consumers' minds. These partnerships act as guarantors for the charitable activities or positions adopted by the company, lending credibility and trustworthiness to its endeavors. (Vredenburg et al., 2020)

As consumers become increasingly attentive and conscientious about these guaranty dynamics, such practices gain even more significance. Woke consumers, in particular, exhibit a heightened skepticism toward brands that merely pay lip service to social causes without genuine commitment. They expect brands to walk the talk, and any inconsistency between professed values and actual behavior can provoke a backlash in terms of purchasing decisions. In this landscape, authenticity and consistency are paramount for building and maintaining trust with consumers.

Mirzaei et al. (2021) present a woke activism authenticity framework (WAAF) to talk about the factors that can boost authenticity perception. One of them is the *social context independence* is a crucial aspect of authenticity in woke campaigns. It pertains to the degree to which a campaign remains steadfast in its commitment to social issues, irrespective of transient trends or topical events. Demonstrating a historical commitment to an issue rather than opportunistically capitalizing on current trends significantly impacts the perception of authenticity. It underscores genuine dedication to the cause, resonating more deeply with audiences and fostering trust over time.

*Fit* is another essential element highlighted in the study. It evaluates how well a woke topic aligns with a brand's core business, values, image, positioning, and culture, all of which contribute to the overall coherence of the campaign. Achieving alignment among

these elements as well as putting into practice what is said is crucial for the campaign's effectiveness and authenticity. (Schaefer et al., 2019)

Moreover, "*inclusion*" is vital, focusing on empowering individuals who may feel vulnerable. Communications must remain neutral, avoiding exacerbating polarization while genuinely supporting the cause. The *motivation* behind the action is fundamental, distinguishing between authentic and profit-seeking endeavors. (Alhouti et al., 2016)

*Sacrifice* and context independency serve as mediators, indicating the sincerity and commitment of the brand to the cause, beyond mere profit motives.

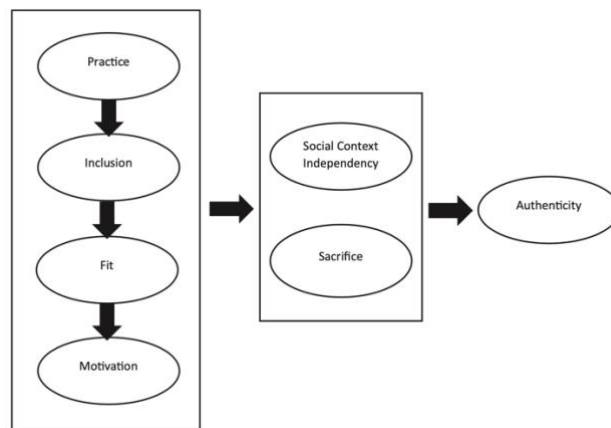


Figure 8. Woke Activism Authenticity Framework (WAAF). (Mirzaei et al., 2021)

To conclude, authenticity emerges as paramount in brand activism endeavors, serving as a safeguard against consumer backlash and accusations of "woke-washing." By authentically aligning their actions with their values and demonstrating genuine commitment to social causes, companies can cultivate trust and credibility with consumers. This authenticity extends beyond mere rhetoric to encompass tangible actions and transparent communication, ensuring that brands are perceived as genuine agents of change rather than opportunistic exploiters of social issues. By prioritizing authenticity, companies can not only mitigate the risk of consumer boycotts but also foster deeper connections with their audience, ultimately enhancing brand loyalty and reputation in an increasingly discerning marketplace.

## 2.6 Boycott or Buycott: The Aftermath of Corporate Activism

In 2019 Burger King launched a campaign to increase attention on mental health, but its employees cannot afford mental health care because of their poor salary. In 2017 Audi used its space at the Superbowl to remind people about the importance of gender equity, but only 2 out of 14 executives on their board were women. Then there was Gillette with its toxic masculinity and Pepsi and Kendall Jenner with the Black Lives Matter protest. All of these are just a few of the numerous cases in which words didn't match actions. (Jones, 2019)

This mismatch in literature takes the name of woke washing, it is an incongruence between a brand's sociopolitical stance and its corporate practices, purpose, and values. (Warren, 2022)

This phenomenon occurs when companies attempt to capitalize on social or political issues for marketing purposes without genuinely aligning their actions with their stated values. It involves the exploitation of social causes or movements to enhance brand image or profitability, often resulting in accusations of insincerity or hypocrisy. (Ahamad et al, 2024)

People have a natural inclination to respond to unjust treatment or threats, whether directed toward themselves or others. When consumers experience dissatisfaction with a company, whether due to poor service or objectionable corporate practices, they may express their discontent through various means, these actions can include brand avoidance, spreading negative sentiments about the brand, or even participating in organized anti-brand communities. (Joputra et al, 2018)

This happens because in the marketplace unethical practices can evoke strong reactions from consumers, leading to movements aimed at boycotting companies. These reactions manifest in various forms, such as switching to other products, public protests, or social media campaigns aimed at holding companies accountable for their actions. (Romani et al., 2015)

Anti-brand activism movements can have significant consequences for companies, including damage to their reputation, loss of consumer trust, and ultimately, financial repercussions. In their research on the topic, Romani et al. (2015), offer valuable insights into the dynamics and sentiments underlying these anti-brand actions. By delving into the motivations, behaviors, and sentiments of individuals involved in such movements, their study sheds light on the factors driving consumer activism and the impact it can have on brands. They found that feelings of hate, including disgust, anger/fear, and contempt, are often triggered in response to perceived violations by a brand's parent company. These negative emotions serve as powerful motivators for activism, driving individuals to take action against the offending brand.

Interestingly, the study also reveals that the intensity of these negative feelings is influenced by the level of empathy felt by individuals. Those with higher levels of empathy tend to experience stronger negative emotions in response to perceived moral violations by brand parent companies. This suggests that empathy plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' emotional responses to corporate wrongdoing, amplifying feelings of outrage and indignation.

Consumer behavior increasingly reflects a trend where individuals align their purchasing decisions with their values and beliefs. As previously discussed, politics stands out as one of the most contentious topics, encompassing a vast spectrum of beliefs, ideologies, and values. These discussions often incentivize heated debates, disagreements, and polarization among individuals. Indeed, with political affiliations tangled deeply with personal identities and worldviews, conversations on politics become especially sensitive and contentious. (Chatterji & Toffel, 2018)

This phenomenon brings to two main ways: boycotts and buycotts. Boycotts occur when consumers actively avoid purchasing products or supporting brands that engage in practices or hold beliefs, they find objectionable. Conversely, buycotts involve consumers deliberately choosing to support brands that demonstrate a commitment to social responsibility or align with their values. These actions serve as a form of reward, incentivizing companies to maintain or adopt ethical practices and signaling to the market the demand for socially conscious products or services. (Klein, 2004)



Indeed, businesses can no longer afford to lag behind in the ongoing social discourse. Sarkar & Kotler (2020) illustrate how companies that resist change risk facing brand shaming, a phenomenon where consumers revolt against a company with the aim of discrediting it. A prime example cited in their book is the National Rifle Association (NRA), the organization that advocates for gun sales in the U.S., but increasingly clashes with the progressive ideals of Generation Z. What is interesting is to see how these contrasts between business and people are affecting other stakeholders as well. Indeed, many companies have decided to distance themselves from NRA, shutting down business relationships. Moreover, competitors have begun to leverage the recriminations made by consumers to make them their strengths. Brand shaming thus goes to the detriment of business in a total perspective and can be the cause of product shifts or behavior changes for the customer. So, these are the inherent risks of taking sides in controversial issues. But after all, those who do not risk do not gain.

## 2.7 Leading actors in the activism movie: Results from real world

The activism of a brand can be considered a crucial aspect of its public relations function, as it extends beyond the brand itself to impact a multitude of stakeholders associated with it. (Young, 2016)

Cammarota et al. (2023) identify four principal targets of brand activism: consumers, employees, investors, and policymakers. Each of these stakeholders responds differently to the activism of a brand, and their reactions can have significant implications for the brand's reputation, performance, and long-term success.

This section highlights the reactions and outcomes observed among these various stakeholders in response to brand activism, helping to understand the effectiveness and impact of this practice on different segments of society.

The analysis can start from one of the main targets of any marketing activities, namely customers. It is generally assumed that consumers who share the brand's values are more likely to react positively to brand activism, while those who hold opposing views

may respond more negatively. This shared opinion is demonstrated by several studies, but a lot of them also show several nuances that it is important to take into account. (Verlegh, 2024)

As seen before, in fact, there is an asymmetric effect in brand activism due by the negativity bias. This bias results in a smaller positive effect for individuals who align with the company's vision, compared to the negative effect experienced by those who disagree. (Hydock, Paharia, and Blair, 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020)

Another interesting effect demonstrated by Hajdas and Kłeczek (2021) is the so-called consumer empowerment. Indeed, brand activism gives consumers a sense of empowerment, letting them support organizations or causes. It can have positive or negative consequences, in fact, if on the one hand, it can trigger a chain of responsibility pushing customers to keep consistency in their daily life, on the other hand, it can also look like a relief from further moral obligations. (Kristofferson et al., 2014)

In general, when we talk about consumer impact there is always this up and down related to the alignment of ideas with the brand. The chart below summarizes this dualistic effect of brand activism, showing that having a good understanding of your target audience is essential to the success of the strategy.

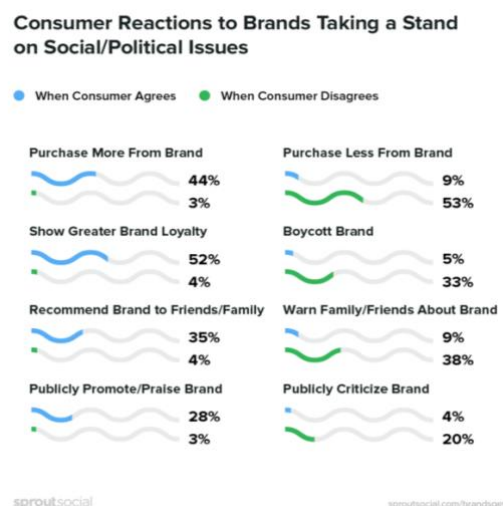


Figure 9. Consumer reactions to brand activism (SproutSocial, 2017)

As can be observed, brand activism remains an excellent tool not only for driving consumers to purchase but also for increasing consumer loyalty and advocacy.

Another critical segment where brand activism plays a pivotal role is among employees. Surveys indicate that employees are no longer solely motivated by higher wages but are increasingly drawn to the values supported by their employers. Demonstrating alignment with these values can serve as a significant asset for brands, fostering employee satisfaction and engagement while also enhancing the brand's reputation. Moreover being social, environmental, and application value, turn out to be the top three drivers considered by job seekers. (Hickleton, 2021)

Thus, it's unsurprising that alignment between the organization's stance and the job seeker's opinion yields positive outcomes. This alignment positively influences applicants' perceptions of the organization, enhancing their liking for it and the inclination to envision themselves enjoying working for it. (Appeals, 2022)

Social positions also significantly impact current employees. For instance, corporate social responsibility (CSR) communications regarding social and environmental issues exert a notable influence on job satisfaction and organizational pride. Moreover, when examining brand activism, research demonstrates that employee engagement is significantly influenced by alignment with the company's social stances. (Brown et al., 2020)

This field of study also shows how employees themselves can play a crucial role in pushing companies to take a stand on social issues. This is shown, for example, by the study of Maks-Solomon and Drewry (2020) in which the pressure carried out by groups within the company regarding awareness of LGBTQ+ issues play an essential role in influencing management decisions on the issue.

A third actor involved in this mechanism is investors, albeit not directly involved in corporate operations, they are profoundly affected by brand activism decisions. Investors suffer brand activism choices on the part of the company and generally respond negatively to these by seeing them as a risk to corporate integrity.

Baghawat et al. (2020) did widespread research on the topic by exploring 39 different industries and found how activist actions brought on average a 0.4 percent drop for shareholders. This effect is even more amplified in case there is a divergence in social activity and brand image or the values of its stakeholders. Another element that influences investor reaction is the way this position-taking is done. Generally, investors tend to favor less extreme positions characterized by verbal declarations rather than concrete actions. They also prefer positions that are supported by multiple companies, often forming coalitions. This approach provides investors with a sense of reassurance and reduces the perceived risk associated with brand activism decisions. Baghawat et al. thus present a negative view of the topic from a purely economic point of view. However, things have changed rapidly in recent years making this phenomenon of activism increasingly common and investors seem adapting to this evolving landscape. In a larger research, based on 1402 events, Mkrtchyan et al. (2023), found a positive market response to activism of 0.12-0.17%. Such insights provide valuable implications for companies considering or engaging in activist initiatives, highlighting the potential financial benefits associated with aligning corporate actions with social or environmental causes.

Regarding policymakers, the relationship with brands is multifaceted. Brands often find themselves in a unique position to address societal issues that policymakers may not prioritize or have the capacity to fully address. This dynamic creates a potential synergy where brands can step in to fill gaps in social responsibility and advocacy efforts. But brands can play a crucial role also in shaping public discourse and influencing policy decisions. Through their marketing campaigns, they can raise awareness, mobilize public support, and pressure policymakers to take action on important issues. (Gulbrandsen et al., 2022)

At the same time, also policymakers play an important role in this relationship. They have the authority to enact regulations and create incentives that can facilitate or hinder brands' efforts to advance social causes. Collaboration between brands and policymakers can lead to more effective and sustainable solutions to complex societal challenges.

Regardless of the specific subject being addressed, the overarching objective of brand activism remains constant: to bring a change in the world. This fundamental aim underscores the importance of brands leveraging their influence and resources to make a positive impact on society. Eilert & Nappier Cherup (2020) outline three key pathways through which brand activism can contribute to this goal.

Firstly, brands can raise awareness about important social, environmental, or humanitarian issues. By utilizing their platforms and marketing channels, brands can reach wide audiences and educate them about pressing issues that require attention and action.

Secondly, brand activism involves shaping attitudes and perceptions towards these issues. Through its messages and efforts, brands can influence public opinion, fostering empathy and understanding. Lastly, brand activism aims to bridge the gap between intention and action. While raising awareness and shaping attitudes are crucial initial steps, meaningful change ultimately requires tangible actions. Brands can facilitate this process by providing opportunities for individuals to get involved in supporting relevant initiatives and causes.

Through strategic and purpose-driven initiatives, companies can demonstrate their dedication to making a positive impact while simultaneously fulfilling their business goals.

## Chapter 3: From Advocacy to Adversity: Successes and Failures Cases

### 3.1 Brands in the crossfire: the six themes of brand activism

In the previous chapter, it was shown that understanding the landscape of brand activism involves recognizing both its advantages and drawbacks. In this phase, the objective is to delve deeper into the analysis and identify actionable strategies for the company to enhance its market performance. To do this, it's imperative to discern the key areas where the company can intervene to optimize its outcomes and define some key measures to evaluate its results.

In their book, “Brand Activism: from purpose to action”, Kotler and Sarkar try to respond to this question and propose a key measure that is placing the consumer at the forefront. They argue that companies should address issues that are most relevant to their customers. This consumer-centric approach is rooted in the recognition that perceived relevance drives engagement. When companies address issues that directly impact their customers, they are more likely to be seen as authentic and trustworthy agents of change. Moreover, consumers are more inclined to view brand intervention as meaningful and beneficial when it addresses issues they care about deeply. (Sheth et al., 2000)

While this principle holds in general, Kotler and Sarkar identify recurring challenges that consistently confront companies. These challenges, termed the 'evil seven' represent persistent issues that warrant attention and action. These encompass climate change, social inequality, rising extremism, and pervasive corruption. Additionally, they factor in the significant disparity between population and resources, the crucial role of education, and the issue of migration from economically disadvantaged nations.

These are the pressing issues facing humanity, representing the foremost challenges of our era. As highlighted earlier, companies can no longer afford to be apathetic towards these challenges, but they need to be drivers of this social change. Based on the problems the companies decide to address, again Kotler and Sarkar identify six types of

brand activism, which will be quickly presented in the paragraph, and which are going to be explored more fully later through the case studies.



Figure 10. Brand Activism areas. (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018)

1. **Social Activism:** Encompassing issues such as gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, racial equity, and age discrimination, as well as broader societal concerns like education, healthcare access, social security, privacy protection, and consumer rights.
2. **Workplace Activism:** Focused on corporate governance, including organizational structure, executive compensation, employee benefits and compensation, labor relations, supply chain management, and overall corporate governance practices.
3. **Political Activism:** Involving efforts related to influencing government policies and decisions, including lobbying, advocacy for or against privatization, ensuring voting rights and fair elections, and addressing policy issues such as gerrymandering and campaign finance regulations.
4. **Environmental Activism:** Concerned with protecting the natural world and addressing environmental issues such as conservation, preventing ecocide,

managing land use, combating air and water pollution, enforcing emission controls, and advocating for environmental laws and policies.

5. **Economic Activism:** Focusing on economic policies and practices that impact income distribution and wealth redistribution, including advocacy for fair wage policies, equitable tax structures, and measures to address income inequality.
6. **Legal Activism:** Involving efforts to influence laws and regulations that affect businesses, including tax laws, corporate citizenship requirements, employment laws, and other legal frameworks that govern business conduct and operations.

These categories, although distinct, are highly interconnected, both in terms of consequentiality and semantic proximity. For example, the relationship between the economic component and the workplace component is evident. Economic decisions, such as wage policies and tax structures, directly shape how companies compensate their employees and manage their workforce. Moreover, economic considerations extend beyond employee compensation to encompass broader workplace issues such as supply chain management, where decisions about sourcing and labor practices can have significant economic ramifications.

For these reasons, within this thesis, it was decided to combine these two variables in order to further the understanding of the phenomenon. In fact, grouping economic activism with workplace activism means recognizing the symbiotic relationship between economic factors and workplace dynamics, facilitating a more nuanced analysis.

A similar discussion can be made regarding the legal and political components. Indeed, legal and political activism are inherently intertwined, as laws and regulations are products of political processes and governance structures. The decisions made within political arenas often directly influence the legal frameworks that govern businesses and society. For example, lobbying efforts to advocate for changes in tax laws or environmental regulations involve engaging with political actors to influence legislative outcomes. Both legal and political activism involve advocacy for specific policy changes or legal reforms and although the tools used may differ the sharing of a



common goal makes the two types of activism very close to each other. Thus, one can combine the two types of activism highlighting the intersection between legal and political activism in shaping governance structures and policy outcomes.

Therefore, by the end of this section, we have delineated four key areas of focus: the environmental, social, political/legal, and economic/labor. For each of these topics, a case study will be proposed to offer practical insights into how companies navigate these arenas, observing both their market strategies and the resulting social and economic outcomes.

### 3.1 Starbucks' Fair Wage Policy – Avant-garde (Business/Economics Activism)

The first case to be examined is that of Starbucks, serving as an exemplary illustration of economic and workplace activism. As the world's largest and most renowned coffeehouse chain, Starbucks stands out as a remarkable entrepreneurial success and a paragon of social responsibility and engagement. Throughout its history, the company has been praised for its inclusive practices, such as hiring over 10,000 refugees, fostering compassionate relationships with its suppliers, and significantly reducing its environmental footprint. However, the focal point of analysis in this paragraph is a pivotal announcement made in 2018. Starbucks publicly proclaimed that it had achieved 100 percent pay equity across all genders and racial demographics. This milestone underscores the company's commitment to fostering equality and fairness in the workplace. But first, let's try to understand why this can be considered a case of brand activism. (Tarr, 2018)

The employment landscape in 2018 in the United States revealed stark disparities in pay between genders, particularly in the retail sector where women earned on average 20 percent less than men. This gap widened even further when comes to other races, with women earning less than 70 cents for every dollar earned by men. (AAUW, 2022)

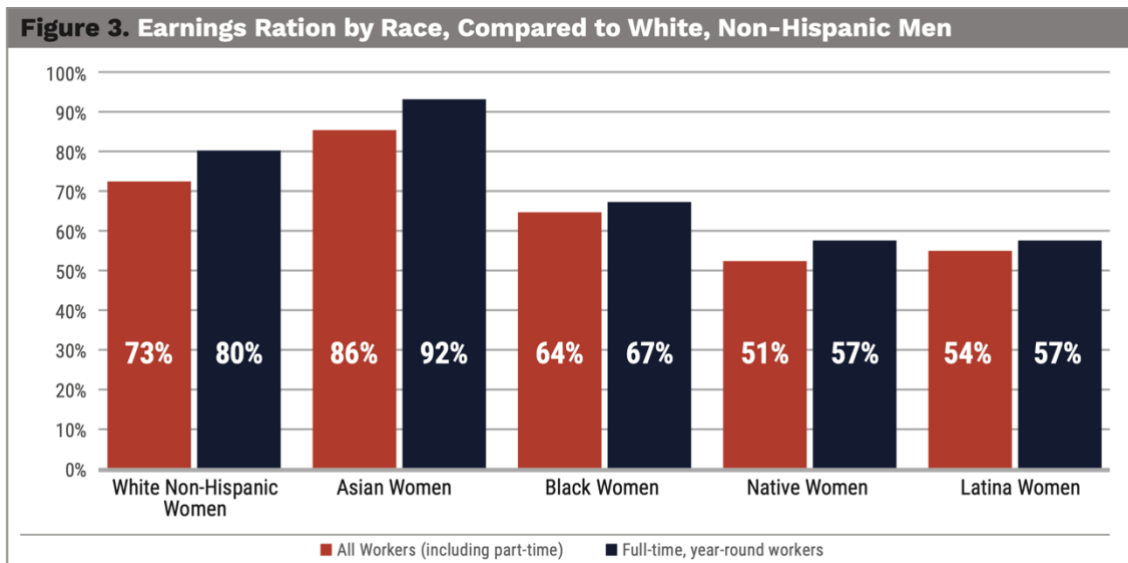


Figure 11. Median Annual Earning by race and gender. (AAUW, 2022)

The 2022 chart provided by the AAUW organization, dedicated to civil rights advocacy, offers a clearer perspective on the issue by illustrating both the gender pay gap and the disparity related to ethnicity. It highlights the significant challenges faced by individuals from South America and people of color in attaining wage parity comparable to that of white Americans. This visual representation underscores the intersectionality of gender and race in determining earning potential, shedding light on the compounded barriers faced by marginalized communities in the workforce. (American Association of University Women, 2024)

Looking at this data, what is surprising is the widespread lack of awareness surrounding this issue. Despite the objective numbers reflecting a significant gender pay gap, a survey conducted by SurveyMonkey (2019) revealed that 50 percent of men believed that women were paid equally, and 60 percent perceived that all barriers to gender equality had been dismantled. Moreover, a notable portion of the population viewed the gender pay gap as either a politically motivated construct or an exaggerated problem. With such perceptions prevailing, it's understandable why there might be resistance to change. However, it's crucial to recognize that globally, women and minorities continue

to be paid less than predominantly men, perpetuating an unjust status quo.

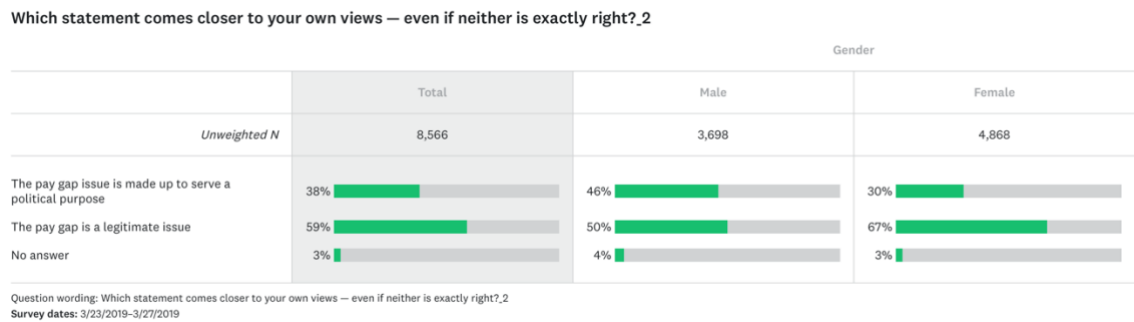


Figure 12. The pay gap issue. (Gebhardt, 2019)

In this context, Starbucks' decision to take autonomous action against this systemic inequality is noteworthy. By committing to achieving gender and racial pay equity, Starbucks is not only challenging the prevailing norms but also prioritizing social change over immediate economic interests. This demonstrates the company's willingness to be a trailblazer in promoting fairness and inclusivity in the workplace, even if it means going against the grain of conventional business practices.

Investors appeared to remain relatively neutral in response to the news. However, in hindsight, it is evident that Starbucks' consistent demonstration of social responsibility has been rewarded in the long run. Since 2018, the company's shares have doubled in value, reflecting the market's recognition of the positive impact. In the years the company has also received several certifications because of its policy by ranking 12th on Diversity First's 2023 Top 50 and was awarded 4.5 out of 5 stars on Newsweek's 2023 ranking of America's Best Workplaces for Diversity. (Trull, 2023)

Indeed, brand activism, as initially conceptualized at the theoretical level, often elicits a positive response from external stakeholders in the long run, despite potentially lacking immediate tangible results and being perceived as a cost by businesses. However, the ability to look beyond is often rewarded and leads to long-term business success. (Starbucks, 2020)

### 3.2 Nike's Colin Kaepernick Campaign – Consistency (Social Activism)

Nike is an emblem of social struggles; its entire history is based on the struggle for freedom and equality of individuals. Taking a quick look at its advertising campaigns, it is evident a strong consistency in the messages that accompany the entire organization over the years. Throughout its existence, Nike has been at the forefront of advocating for various social causes, including ageism, disability rights, women's empowerment, and racial equality. Some famous campaigns are:

- **"If You Let Me Play" (1995):** This ad focused on the benefits of sports for young girls, pushing for gender equality in athletics.
- **"Find Your Greatness" (2012):** This campaign highlighted athletes of all ages and abilities, celebrating personal achievement and perseverance.
- **"Equality" (2017):** This campaign featured prominent athletes, including LeBron James and Serena Williams, advocating for equality both on and off the field.

This unwavering dedication has elevated Nike to a global symbol of social progress and inclusivity, inspiring millions of people around the world. As seen above, consistency over time is one of the key criteria when it comes to authenticity in brand activism. Consistency is therefore somewhat of a legitimizing factor, and the commitment Nike demonstrated in the battle for racial rights with campaigns such as "if we can be equal in sports, we can be equal anywhere" at least theoretically authorized the company to take a stand alongside Colin Kaepernick. (Eyada, 2020)



Figure 13. Colin Kaepernick ad. (Nike, 2018)

The American football player Colin Kaepernick has gone down in history for his courageous protests against police violence targeting Black people. He is a former quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, who began kneeling during the national anthem in 2016 to protest police brutality and racial injustice. His actions sparked a nationwide debate, with some viewing his protest as a powerful stand against systemic racism, while others saw it as disrespectful to the flag and the military. (Donaldson, 2022)

His actions made him a symbol of resistance within the sport and beyond attracting compliments, but also much criticism. Indeed, this ideological stance not only inspired many of his colleagues to follow his example but also sparked a strong reaction from influential figures, including U.S. President Donald Trump, and a significant portion of the American electorate who demanded punitive measures against him.

NFL responded to all these pressures by excluding Kaepernick from the tournament, effectively ending his career. In this great rift involving institutions, people, and organizations even Nike decided to take part, demonstrating once again the role of companies in driving these social controversies. Nike, in line with its commitment to social activism, featured Kaepernick as the face of its 30th anniversary "Just Do It" campaign creating one of the most famous brand activism cases.

The decision was undoubtedly bold, given the data available on Colin Kaepernick, with only 34% of the American population holding a positive opinion of the player. Additionally, the vehement opposition from an influential figure like the President of the United States posed a significant threat to the company. The stage was set for a formidable clash, and indeed, it unfolded as anticipated. (Avery & Koen, 2018)

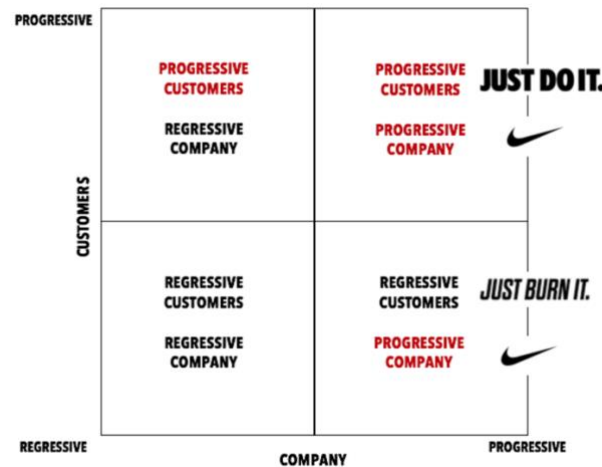


Figure 14. Positioning Map Nike. (Sarker & Kotler, 2018)

Following the release of the campaign, a strong protest sprang up online initiating a brand boycott that quickly went viral. By September 6, the volume of Nike mentions had surged to a staggering two million, largely fueled by a wave of negative reactions. The hashtags #nikeboycott and #boycottnike reverberated across social media platforms, amassing over a billion impressions combined. These hashtags ranked third and fourth respectively in the discourse surrounding Nike, following only #justdoit and #nike. In protest, users flooded social media with videos and images showing the destruction of Nike products with the famous pay-off turned in Just Burn It.

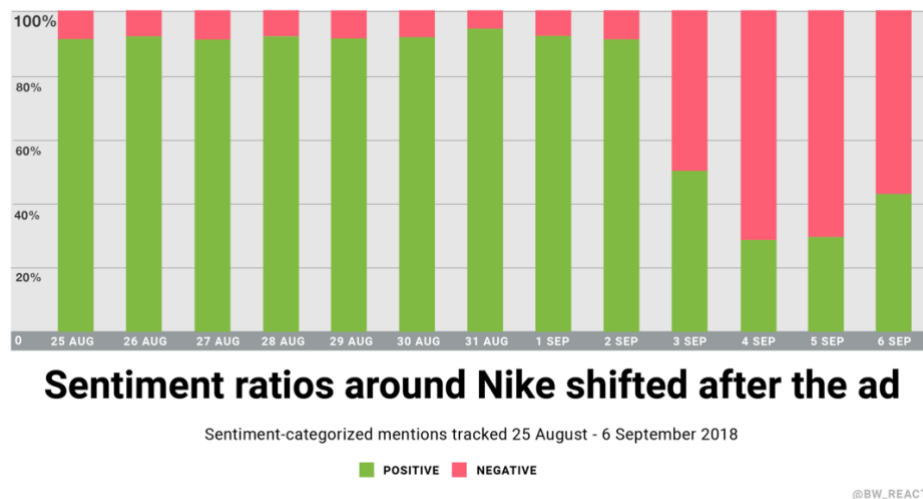


Figure 15. Sentiment Analysis. (Brandwatch, 2018)

Despite the initial backlash, which led to a wave of negativity surrounding the brand after the first days of the launch, the company then regained value and reached one of the highest points in its history. This up-and-down effect can be explained through the Warren (2021) theory, for which boycotts tend to end early compared to the relationships built through brand activism that tend to last longer.

To properly understand Nike's move it is essential to look at its customer base. The company reports \$35 billion in revenue, with \$15 billion coming from domestic sales and \$20 billion from international markets. Two-thirds of Nike's customers are under 35 years old. This younger demographic, who can afford \$150 Flyknit racers, likely has substantial disposable income and resides in urban areas. This cohort can be described as "progressive." Given that Nike's international customer base constitutes \$20 billion, it's reasonable to speculate that none of these consumers view the U.S. as a "beacon on a hill" or believe it is effectively addressing race issues. By taking bold stances, Nike has potentially risked \$1-3 billion in revenue to strengthen its connection with a consumer segment responsible for \$32-34 billions of their total sales. In essence, Nike's strategic move aligns with its focus on engaging a forward-thinking, progressive audience. (Galloway, 2020)

The campaign's overwhelming success becomes evident when considering the aftermath. Bloomberg reported that a mere ten days post-launch, Nike soared to its all-time high on the stock market, reaping a profit of six billion dollars. Additionally, Nike's attention score skyrocketed from 28% to an impressive 52%, indicating a significant boost in public awareness. Similarly, its Word-of-Mouth Exposure score surged from 22% to 41%, signifying increased discussions about the brand among consumers.

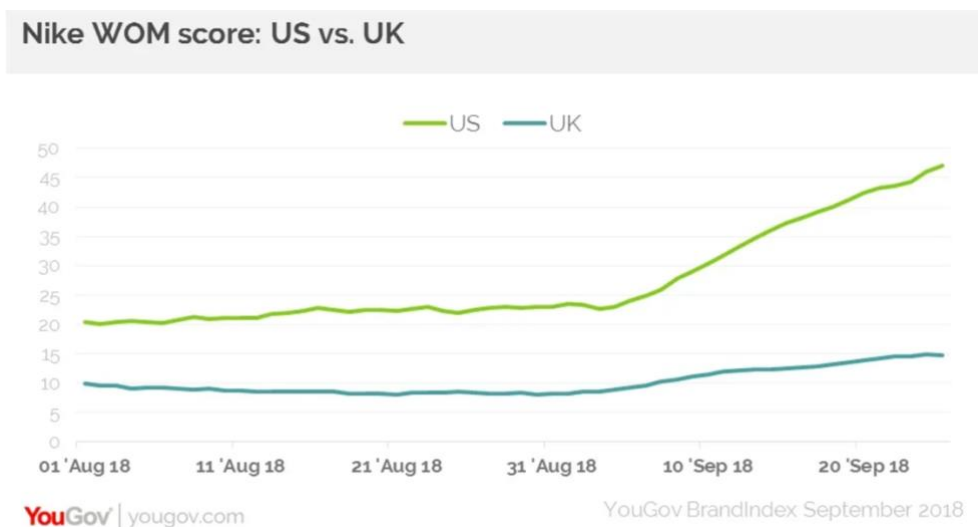


Figure 16. Nike WOM. (Yougov, 2018)

The campaign's impact extended further, with the company claiming \$163 million in earned media, a remarkable \$6 billion surge in brand value, and a substantial 31% spike in sales. These figures underscore the campaign's resounding success, demonstrating the power of brand activism strategies to yield tangible and substantial results.

The reasons behind this achievement are many, as we have seen Nike's consistency in fighting social battles put it in a princely role to address the issue. Consumers are more likely to support brands that are authentic and consistent in their values. Nike's long-standing commitment to social justice allowed it to navigate the backlash and ultimately emerge stronger. Moreover, its deep knowledge of the target audience allowed it to move with relative peace of mind. The company's core consumers, who are younger and



more diverse, tend to support social messages and align with Nike's values. Even studies show that Nike's consumers are generally very supportive of social messages, and the large ethnicity of its community made this a valid battle to be waged. (Brophy, 2018)

Thus, Nike's Colin Kaepernick campaign was a bold move that paid off both financially and socially. By aligning itself with a controversial figure and a divisive issue, Nike demonstrated the power of brand activism to drive change and generate tangible results. The campaign not only elevated Nike's brand value but also contributed to the larger conversation about racial equality and corporate social responsibility. As the landscape of brand activism continues to evolve, Nike's campaign serves as a powerful example of how companies can use their platforms to advocate for social change and inspire millions around the world.

### 3.3 Patagonia's Environmental Initiatives – Identity (Environmental Activism)

Patagonia is an outdoor sporting goods company known worldwide for its focus on environmental issues. Through powerful campaigns and tangible actions, the company has become a symbol of commitment to preserving nature, earning the respect of outdoor enthusiasts and environmentally conscious consumers worldwide. Patagonia's focus on sustainability is evident in everything it does, from using recycled materials in its products to actively supporting grassroots environmental initiatives. In a world where corporate responsibility is often overlooked, Patagonia stands out as a shining example of how businesses can thrive while prioritizing the protection of our planet.

This is even more valuable in a complex sector such as the garment industry where the globality of the supply chain involves many actors such as farmers, chemical

manufacturers, dye houses, fabric mills, sewing factories, trucking companies, and shipping brokers contributing to global pollution. (Dickinson et al., 2012)

To cope with this, Patagonia has always been committed to scrupulously selecting its supply chain and products in order to reduce their impact. To cover the inevitable impact on the environment, the company has been committed for years to the '1% for the planet' program, a global network with thousands of businesses working together to support people and the planet by donating 1% of each sale. (1% for the planet, 2024)

These activities represent only a fraction of the sustainability efforts undertaken by the company. However, the true strength of Patagonia, and the most intriguing aspect of this case study, lies in its capacity to reorient its entire organization around its core mission. This alignment enables Patagonia to consistently integrate its purpose into every facet of its operations. (D'innocenzio, 2021)

The company has an entire page dedicated to brand activism efforts that headlines: "We are in business to save our home planet". On the same page, there is a series of concrete actions that the company takes to achieve this goal. In this case, it is the concreteness of the words that makes the company different from competitors in the market.

Patagonia's strong social commitment has earned it the prestigious title of a B Corp, signifying that the company meets rigorous standards of verified performance, accountability, and transparency across various criteria, including employee benefits, charitable giving, supply chain practices, and input materials. This certification, coupled with its high ESG scores, which reflect its dedication to environmental, social, and governance principles, set Patagonia as one of the most recognized and respected organizations on the global stage. (B Lab, 2024)

To describe the company its Chief Executive Ryan Gellert said: "*what we really are is a for-profit business, and we use the business to try to influence larger, more systemic issues.*" In this statement lies the pure essence of brand activism changing oneself to influence the system. (Chang, 2021)

Patagonia has made environmental activism its main driver through donations, actions, and manifestations. Arriving in 2022 at a true internal revolution by proposing a new governance model that definitively puts its purpose before profit. The company has made the earth its sole shareholder by giving 100% of the company's voting stock transfers to the Patagonia Purpose Trust, created to protect the company's values; and 100% of the nonvoting stock had been given to the Holdfast Collective, a nonprofit dedicated to fighting the environmental crisis and defending nature. (Chouinard, 2022)

Indeed, Patagonia does not limit itself to brand activism but wants to involve all its stakeholders in taking concrete actions in favor of the environment. A clear example of this dedication is the way the company relates to its community.

Patagonia's customers are motivated by strong idealism, and the company leverages this by offering a network of possible actions such as petitions, donations, and causes in which customers can engage. Through these efforts, activism transcends the brand and directly involves consumers, making them active participants in the company's initiatives. This approach strengthens the bond between the brand and its customers as they work together towards common goals, creating positive externalities for society and fostering a win-win situation. (Patagonia, 2024)

Patagonia's activism is so extreme that it has led it to be sabotaged by consumers, then to sabotage other companies, and finally to sabotage itself with its own hands. The company's progressive positions frequently place it at the forefront of trends for which the market is often not yet ready, drawing significant attention and controversy. To understand this point let's give an overview for each of the previous points.

In 1990, Patagonia made a donation to Planned Parenthood, a non-profit organization involved in sex education. This decision sparked controversy among some customers, leading to one of the first politically motivated boycotts of a US company. Undeterred, Patagonia continued to stand by its values, stating that he would increase the donation by five dollars for every protest call received. More recently, Patagonia took a position against Facebook. After the US federal department investigation on the ethical practices of the social media giant, Patagonia decided to halt all paid advertisements on the platform. This move was echoed by many of its associated non-profit organizations,

demonstrating Patagonia's commitment to challenging powerful entities like Meta, despite the potential risks. (Gellert, 2021)

An incredible example of Patagonia's self-sabotage is its famous "Don't Buy This Jacket" campaign. On Black Friday, the company took out a full-page ad in the New York Times, urging people not to purchase their jackets. This bold move was intended to highlight the environmental impact of consumerism and promote sustainable practices, even at the cost of potential sales. (Patagonia, 2011)



Figure 16. Don't buy this Jacket Campaign. (Patagonia, 2011)

All these Patagonia's actions reflect a company that not only pursues causes but also leads by example. By highlighting controversial issues and standing firm in its principles, Patagonia demonstrates its dedication to making a positive impact, regardless of the financial consequences. This approach reveals a deeper truth: the essence of true activism lies in taking action without the expectation of reward, simply because it is the right thing to do. This should be the spirit behind every activist endeavor, and this is the reason behind the company's success.

### 3.5 Ben & Jerry's – Being Different (Political Activism)

When one thinks of ice cream, social problems are certainly not the first thing that comes to mind. Yet one American ice cream brand thinks otherwise and has made social activism a central part of its identity and it states on its website:

*"We believe ice cream can change the world. We have a progressive, nonpartisan social mission that seeks to meet human needs and eliminate injustice in our local, national, and international communities by integrating these concerns into our daily operations."*

This is Ben & Jerry's, founded in 1978 in Vermont by two childhood friends, it became world-famous following its acquisition by Unilever in 2000. The history of Ben & Jerry's is steeped in brand activism; the company's comprehensive social commitment has distinguished it in the market and contributed significantly to its success. As reported by Tenyse Williams on Forbes: "It serves up a scoop of activism with every cone; connecting with their audience on a profoundly deeper level than mere consumption". (Segal, 2024)

The focus of this case study is on the tools available to a company for conducting brand activism. It is fascinating to see how a company, seemingly so conceptually distant from social issues, has instead taken them on, making the fight against social issues an integral part of its brand.

Ben & Jerry's was the first ice cream company to obtain the Fair-Trade certification in 2005, demonstrating a special commitment to its suppliers. However, what is truly extraordinary is the company's ability over the years to address issues such as Black rights and LGBTQ+ or refugee rights going outside its competence area and distinguishing itself from every other on the market.

The first strategy used by Ben & Jerry's is product adaptation, which specifically consists of creating ad-hoc flavors to support various causes. These flavors often accompanied by broader campaigns are one of the most obvious symbols of this

company's brand activism and are a strong means of conveying a message. Below are some examples where the company has been involved.



Figure 17. Product Activism Ben & Jerry's. (Ben & Jerry's, 2022)

As mentioned, these strategies often fit within larger movements. For example, the Save Our Swirled campaign was accompanied by a petition against climate change that garnered over 300,000 signatures. The media power of companies like Ben & Jerry's makes them perfect disseminators of these messages. Similarly, they have celebrated egalitarian marriages and the achievements of empowerment and equal rights.

The last two examples are about supporting the most vulnerable segments of the population, specifically refugees and the poor. Sales from these special flavors have resulted in substantial donations to these groups, demonstrating the company's commitment to social causes through tangible actions. (Harmon, 2019)

Another strategy the company has used to carry out various forms of activism is forming partnerships. By collaborating with charitable or social organizations, Ben & Jerry's can delegate these activities to more competent entities while still demonstrating their support and commitment to these causes. Ben & Jerry's has worked with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) on campaigns to promote racial justice and equality. They also partnered with organizations like the Human Rights Campaign and GLAAD to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights and inclusivity. (Murray, 2021)

In short, Ben & Jerry's is an activist company that fights its political campaigns and does so with all the channels at its disposal. Its latest campaign launched almost a decade after the previous one and entitled 'Make Some Motherchunkin' Change!' is

emblematic in this sense. This campaign announced with a teaser video will be conducted online and in out-of-home initiatives to try to involve as many people as possible in the message. It is a true activism campaign that invites its consumers to bring about change by doing what they love most. The campaign fits perfectly within the company's philosophy, and the launch in the run-up to the upcoming US presidential election is once again a strong political message from the organization. (Perera, 2023)

Ben & Jerry's preferred channel for activism communication is social media. Leveraging social media platforms offers significant advantages in retaining customers by promoting a brand value identity. By actively engaging with social and environmental causes, Ben & Jerry's can connect with customers who identify with and support these values. This approach fosters a sense of community and loyalty among customers who share similar beliefs.

Social media enables Ben & Jerry's to reach a targeted audience interested in these values, creating a deeper emotional connection with their brand. This engagement helps retain a segment of their customer base that is passionate about social activism. Meanwhile, customers who are more focused on the product's functional benefits can still appreciate and enjoy the brand's offerings without necessarily engaging with its activism. By maintaining a presence on social media, Ben & Jerry's can effectively communicate its commitment to various causes, enhancing its brand identity and fostering customer loyalty based on shared values. This dual approach ensures that the company appeals to both socially conscious consumers and those who prioritize the quality and taste of the product. (Diaconu, 2022)

Given this strong social presence, it is interesting to report the work done by Cammarota et al. (2024) on brand customer perceptions. The researchers analyzed about 58k comments written by users under the company's posts between 2020 and 2022 by conducting a sentiment analysis to assess the customer's reactions. The researchers identified four clusters for each year based on the most recurring words and then constructed the linkage map shown below.

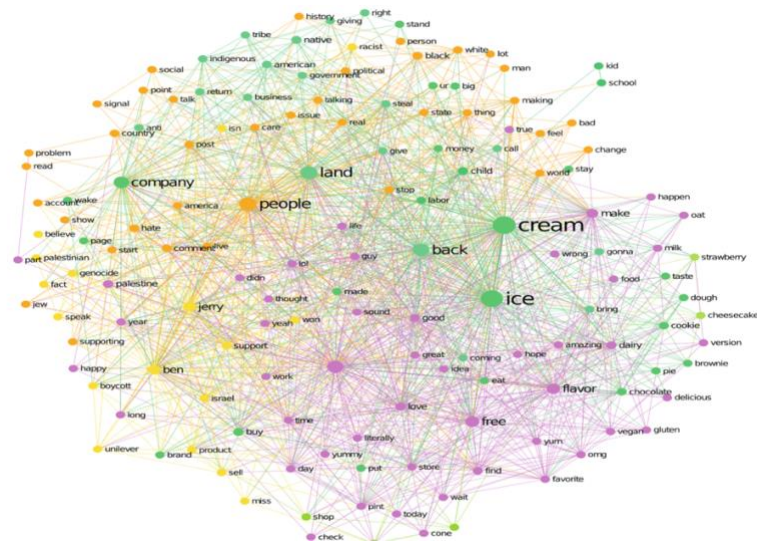


Figure 18. Infranodus topic modelling results Ben & Jerry's social medias. (Cammarota et al., 2024)

The work is interesting because it shows the topicality of the content with the themes evolving based on the context taken into consideration. Thus, 2020 focuses on the right to vote with the names of the two presidential candidates among the most recurrent in 2021 there is a focus on the war in Palestine and in 2022 on corporate abuse. Ben & Jerry's social media posts function as a kind of mini-blog, providing a place where users engage with the company and interact with one another. This space fosters the exchange of ideas and feelings on pressing contemporary issues, creating a dynamic community dialogue. The work also presents a sentiment analysis that shows a generally positive attitude towards the company's activism, which is perceived as authentic and committed to its values.

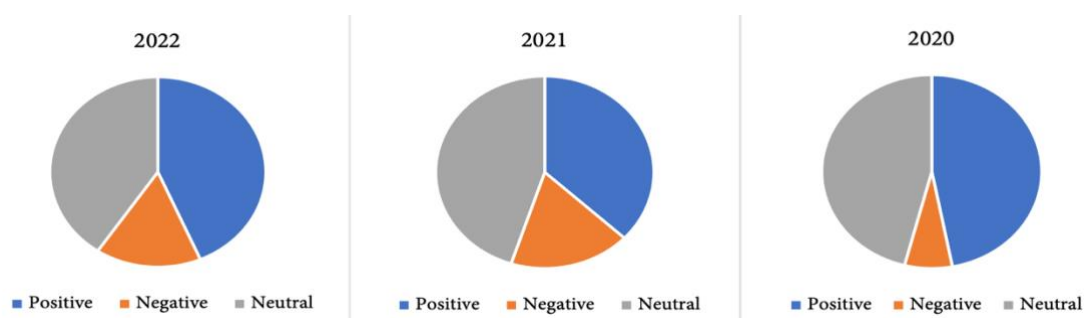


Figure 19. Sentiment Analysis Ben & Jerry's through the years. (Ben & Jerry's, 2022)



The success of Ben & Jerry's communication strategy primarily lies in the company's consistent activism on issues closely aligned with the values of its target audience. The brand's strength and global recognition are rooted in the closeness, relevance, and transparency of its content. What is particularly compelling about this case is the apparent disconnect between the product itself and the social issues the company addresses. Yet, this very disconnect has become a defining characteristic, setting Ben & Jerry's apart from its competitors in the market.

### 3.5 Doing bad by doing good: Cases of Brand Activism Failures

Taking action does not always equate to doing good, especially when those actions fail to align with the values of a company's customers or its corporate image. In such cases, the risk of becoming the target of boycotts is significantly heightened. The intense media scrutiny on large corporations and a series of scandals involving companies in social issues have increased attention to brand activism. If even one element—such as credibility, authenticity, or transparency—is compromised, the entire system risks collapsing, potentially leading to adverse effects for the companies involved. (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022)

This section will examine two cases of brand activism failures, each arising from different circumstances but ultimately leading to the same outcome. The first iconic case concerns Pepsi and its 'Live for Now' campaign, while the second concerns McDonald's and the recent boycott linked to the war between Israel and Palestine in the South East.

We start with Pepsi, the famous American beverage brand that has always used elements such as pop culture, modernity, and youth in its communication. In April 2017 Pepsi launched its campaign "Live for Now", an emblematic advertisement whose declared message aimed at conveying the values of equality and peace, turned out to be extremely divisive. Specifically, the ad featuring Kendall Jenner, depicted the wealthy and well-known white celebrity, leaving a photoshoot to join a protest. The protest in the ad is ambiguous and devoid of any specific cause, yet it alludes to contemporary

social justice movements, particularly the Black Lives Matter movement. (Schechter, 2023)

In the ad, Jenner hands a can of Pepsi to a police officer, who then smiles, and the crowd erupts in cheers as if the beverage had magically resolved the tension between the protesters and the police. This imagery was widely criticized for being tone-deaf and trivializing the real struggles and dangers faced by those involved in social justice movements. The ad was accused of co-opting the imagery and spirit of activism for commercial gain, reducing complex issues to a simplistic, feel-good moment where a product becomes the solution to societal problems. (D’addario, 2017)

The campaign immediately took a heavy toll on the company's image with a wave of criticism that quickly spread on social media, leading Pepsi to withdraw its ad within 48 hours and issue an apology. In order to understand the negative effects caused by the campaign, it is interesting to look at the data provided by YouGov showing the collapse in consumer perception and purchase consideration as a result of the campaign. Brand perception reached its lowest point in nine years and purchase consideration plummeted by almost seven percentage points. (Marzilli, 2018)



Figure 20. Sentiment & Purchase Consideration of Pepsi. (Marzilli, 2018)

The reasons behind this failure are several, there is a general trivialization of the social justice movement that left many viewers feeling insulted. By framing the protest in a festive, carefree manner while ignoring the deep struggles and marginalization that such events typically represent, the advertisement became a mockery of the people who risk their lives to follow their values. A particularly telling response came from Martin

Luther King Jr.'s daughter, who tweeted, "If only Daddy would have known about the power of #Pepsi." Her comment underscores how poorly the commercial captured the true essence of protest and the values at stake. (Tillman, 2017)

The timing further exacerbated the backlash; in an already polarized atmosphere during a contentious election season, using a divisive theme like protest and police conflict only intensified public outrage. The choice of spokesperson was also misguided. Although Kendall Jenner is popular, casting a white, wealthy, and privileged figure to represent a protest that nods to the Black Lives Matter movement creates striking inconsistencies. These contradictions immediately became apparent to the audience, undermining the ad's credibility and message. Ultimately, Pepsi's commercial was a failure, but it leaves us with a valuable lesson in terms of marketing, that doing something does not always mean doing good. (Schechter, 2023)

The reasons for the second case are quite different, which concerns another American giant and is much more recent. McDonald's the world-renowned fast-food chain has found itself at the center of a media scandal related to the activities of its Israeli franchiser in the war in Palestine.

All began in October 2023, when the conflict between Israel and Palestine intensified significantly, leading to a surge in violence and casualties on both sides. This escalation drew widespread international attention, with many people expressing solidarity with either the Israeli or Palestinian cause. McDonald's became a target of a boycott due to reports and perceptions that the company's Israeli franchise was providing support to the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Specifically, there were claims that McDonald's Israel offered IDF soldiers free meals during the conflict. These reports sparked outrage among pro-Palestinian activists and supporters, who viewed this as taking a side in the conflict, particularly in light of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the West Bank. (Rajvanshi & Serhan, 2024)

The boycott was fueled by calls on social media and by activist groups who urged consumers, particularly in the Arab and Muslim world, to stop purchasing from McDonald's as a form of protest against what they saw as the company's indirect support for the Israeli military actions against Palestinians. The boycott quickly gained

traction in various countries, particularly in the Middle East, North Africa, and parts of Asia, where pro-Palestinian sentiments are strong. In some countries, McDonald's franchises experienced significant drops in sales, and there were reports of protests outside McDonald's locations. Some activists also encouraged people to support local or alternative businesses instead. The results of this protest were so strong that the company failed a key sales target for the first time in four years, resulting in a 4% drop in the share price. Growth in the Middle East came to a sudden halt with growth reduced by 0.7%, negatively affecting the rest of the business. (Gruet, 2024)

In response to this collapse, the company acted in a major way by announcing its willingness to buy back all 225 stores on Israeli territory so that it could regain control. (Al Jazeera, 2024)

Despite the significant investment and the company's losses, what will truly endure from this situation is the reputational damage to the brand across Muslim-majority regions, where trust in the company with the golden arches will be difficult to regain.

This case presents several points for reflection, the first being the relationship between global and local operations. Judging by the events, the Israeli franchise acted independently and without the knowledge of the corporate headquarters, yet still managed to inflict damage on the entire company.

Furthermore, it is crucial to understand the sentiment driving the majority of the population. In this instance, the company aligned itself with the wrong side of the narrative, unlike in Russia, where it decided to close all outlets following the outbreak of war. Carefully assessing public opinion is critical when a large corporation decides to take a social stance.

In this paragraph, we have observed that brand activism is a double-edged sword, with the potential to profoundly influence consumer perception and carry serious repercussions for the company.

Companies need to conduct in-depth research and analysis before embarking on any activism campaign to mitigate risks. This involves understanding the local and global

context and the specific sentiments and cultural nuances of the target audience. Moreover, transparency and credibility are crucial once an activism campaign is launched. Consumers today are highly informed and quick to scrutinize a brand's actions and motives. Missteps in this regard can significantly damage the brand's reputation, as seen in various instances where well-intentioned campaigns alienate key consumer segments.

## Chapter 4: The value of concreteness

Navigating a social environment can be challenging for profit-oriented companies. There is a significant risk of making mistakes and facing consumer backlash. Therefore, it is crucial to have the right tools when operating in this area. While there is an abundance of theoretical articles on brand activism, few offer experimental insights that can genuinely guide managers in their daily activities. This section addresses the uncertainties that may arise in this context through exploratory research to broaden practical knowledge in the area.

When it comes to brand activism there are two aspects one can focus on, the content of the message or the way it is conveyed. As has been previously seen in the literature review, there is no one-size-fits-all answer content for brand activism. The right content depends on various factors such as the company, the sector, the values it upholds, the social context, and more. Given this complexity, it becomes crucial for this thesis to understand not the content of the message, but mainly how it should be conveyed.

This approach will yield a cross-sectional result that transcends sectoral boundaries, avoiding limitations that could diminish the overall value of the findings. To achieve this objective, an experimental study was conducted, involving an online survey administered to a sample of 207 participants. This survey provided data from which the following insights can be drawn.

### 4.1 The picture: Abstractness vs. Concreteness

One of the distinguishing factors of a brand activism campaign is the level of abstractness or concreteness used in the messaging. To understand this concept, we can refer to the construal-level theory of Gilbert et al. 1998 whereby an event can be constructed as abstract or concrete. In their work, Trope & Liberman (2011) propose a shift from concrete to an abstract representation of an object. This change of perspective involves focusing on its essential characteristics while omitting details considered unnecessary in the process of abstraction. Abstract representations select one of many possible interpretations by streamlining complexity by omitting or harmonizing

irrelevant or inconsistent information. As a result, these representations are typically simpler, more straightforward, schematic, and prototypical compared to their concrete counterparts. (Fiske & Taylor, 1991)

In a broader sense, the formation and understanding of abstract concepts allow people to mentally go beyond the immediate object in time and space, incorporating various social perspectives and exploring new and hypothetical scenarios. In this way, different construal levels help broaden or narrow one's mental horizons, enabling the mind to navigate psychological distances. If this high perspective can help the imagination, the use of concrete messages focused on specific details, makes it easier for recipients to grasp the meaning with less cognitive effort. (Trope & Liberman, 2011)

The following table was constructed through a literature review comparing the distinguishing characteristics of the two variables: abstract and concrete. These factors then summarize the characteristics used to manipulate the independent variable in the research.

Characteristic	Abstract Message	Concrete Message
<b>Focus</b>	General ideas, concepts, or principles (Trope & Liberman, 2010)	Specific details, examples, or instances
<b>Clarity</b>	Straightforward, coherent, schematic representation (Fiske & Taylor, 1991)	Detailed, complex, elaborate representation.
<b>Cognitive Effort</b>	Requires more cognitive processing and interpretation	Requires less cognitive effort to understand (Bülbül & Menon, 2010)
<b>Examples</b>	Rarely includes specific examples	Often includes specific, tangible examples
<b>Language</b>	Uses broad, high-level terms (Trope & Liberman, 2010)	Uses precise, descriptive language
<b>Imagery</b>	Tends to be less vivid, more conceptual	Creates vivid, easily visualized images (Sadoski, 1997)
<b>Use Cases</b>	Effective for conveying overarching themes or ideas	Effective for providing instructions, explanations, or facts (Paivio, 1986)
<b>Audience Engagement</b>	Can stimulate deeper thinking and reflection	Engages by making the message relatable and easy to grasp
<b>Applicability</b>	Broad applicability across various contexts	More applicable to specific, concrete situations

<b>Memory Retention</b>	Less memorable without clear examples	More likely to be remembered due to specific details (Schwanenflugel et al, 1992)
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Tab. 1 Abstractness vs. Concreteness

As seen above, abstract messages focus on high-level ideals and values, such as justice, equality, or sustainability. The strength of abstract messaging lies in its ability to evoke strong emotional responses and connect with a wide audience. Because these messages appeal to universal human values, they can resonate deeply, making them memorable and inspiring. Abstract messages also provide flexibility, allowing individuals to interpret the message in a way that aligns with their personal beliefs and experiences. This can foster a sense of inclusivity and collective identity. (Ahmad et al., 2024)

However, the downside of abstract messaging is that it can sometimes lack specificity, which may lead to perceptions of insincerity or superficiality. If a brand's message feels too vague or detached from concrete actions, it might be seen as "empty talk" or a mere marketing tactic rather than a genuine commitment to a cause. (Sadoski, 1997)

In contrast, concrete messaging is centered on specific actions, initiatives, or measurable outcomes. This approach can enhance credibility, showing the company's tangible contributions to a cause. For example, a brand might highlight its commitment to reducing carbon emissions by a specific percentage or showcase a successful project that directly impacted a community. Concrete messages can build trust with consumers by demonstrating that the brand is vocal about its values and actively working to make a difference.

The potential drawback of concrete messaging is that it can sometimes be too narrow in focus, limiting its emotional appeal or making it harder to engage a broader audience.

The research aimed to investigate the impact of abstract versus concrete language on consumer behavior, specifically in the context of brand activism communication. The goal was to understand how variations in the language used by brands when engaging in activism can influence consumer perceptions and actions, exploring the underlying reasons for these effects.



The research question can be formulated as:

**"How does the use of abstract versus concrete cues in brand activism communications influence consumer behavior? And what are the underlying mechanisms driving this effect?"**

## 4.2 The colors: Setting & Independent Variables

To address this research question, a study was designed around a fictitious case of an environmental activism campaign. Through various manipulations of the campaign, an investigation was carried out to understand how consumer behavior varies when exposed to concrete or abstract messaging. Responses were collected by a survey to have a large and varied number of respondents who could create a sample approximating the overall population.

The experiment focused on a brand activism case centered around the critical issue of deforestation in the Amazon rainforest. It is a significant topic of global concern due to its direct link to climate change and global warming.

The Amazon rainforest, spanning approximately 6.7 million square kilometers, is the largest rainforest on Earth and plays a vital role in maintaining the planet's ecological balance. Often referred to as the "lungs of the Earth," the Amazon is home to approximately 80 percent of the world's trees, which are crucial in absorbing carbon dioxide and producing oxygen. It is also home to 400 tribes that have lived here for centuries and today feel threatened by the numerous arson attacks and man's land-grabbing activities. In recent years, Amazonia has been the subject of massive deforestation averaging 12,000 square kilometers per year, and the creation of hydroelectric power stations and the search for minerals have increasingly damaged this delicate ecosystem. All of these elements contribute to making it one of the most globally apprehensive issues, with 89% of the population considering it even more of a serious global problem than unemployment or the wage gap. (Stewart, 2021)

### Seriousness of Global Problems

"Very Serious" and "Somewhat Serious," Average of 31 Markets, 2021

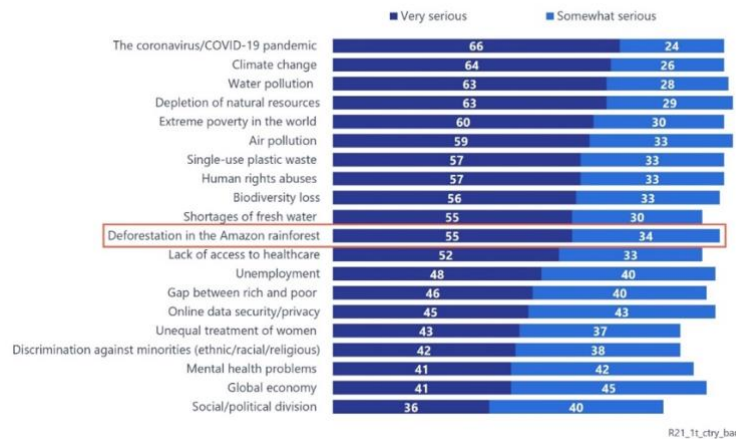


Figure 21. The Seriousness of Global Problems (Stewart, 2021)

Despite being a highly concerning issue, there are several conflicting viewpoints on the subject. Many countries see the exploitation of the Amazon rainforest as a means of driving economic growth. In countries like Brazil, where the rainforest covers 60% of the territory, the need for new agricultural land and the demand for resources from abroad have often driven this uncontrolled deforestation. Beyond this trade-off between environmental preservation and economic gain, another issue in public opinion is related to the role of corporations. Many people believe that companies are the primary cause of the problem and think that addressing it is the sole responsibility of the government. All these elements set the conditions for the experiment to be relevant as a case of brand activism.

For the study, two campaigns were created, both addressing the environmental issue of deforestation in the Amazon, but each with a different approach. The first campaign uses a clear image depicting a concrete action, accompanied by specific language that includes numerical and a well-defined goal. The second campaign, instead, uses more generic language, referring to a commitment to combat the problem without stating it in precise, factual terms.

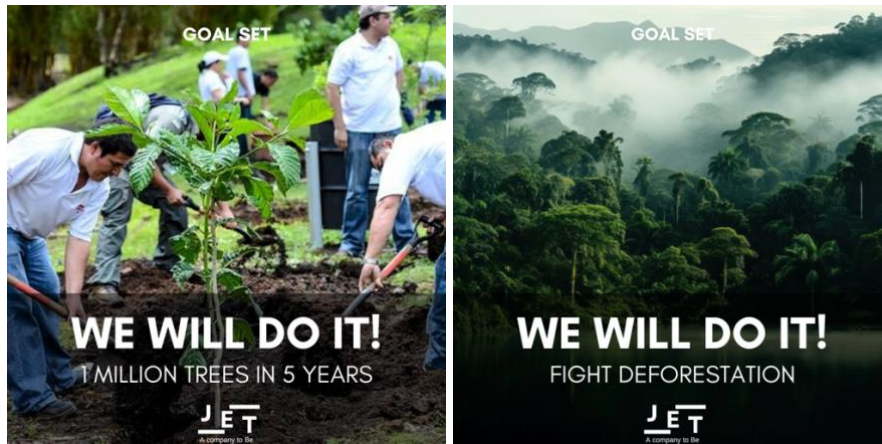


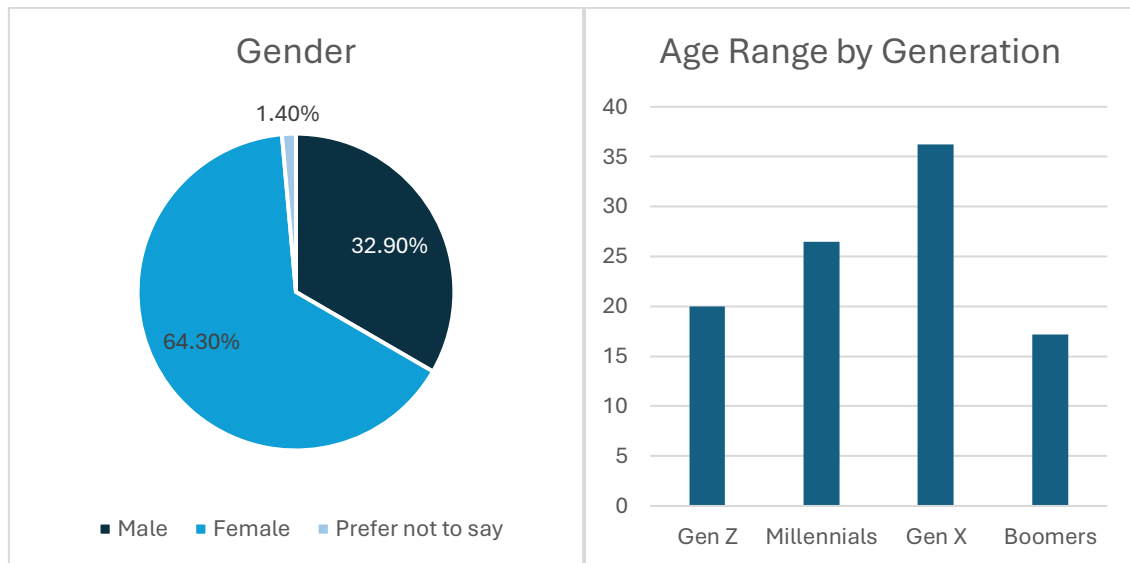
Figure 22. Independent Variables: Concreteness vs. Abstraction

As can be seen from the images, both campaigns set objectives, but they approach this task in distinctly different ways. The first campaign provides a more detailed and concrete image to make the action tangible and specific. In contrast, the second one appeals to broader and more general values. To ensure impartiality, both campaigns refer to a fictional company, "JET," which was introduced in the questionnaire as an established Australian company with years of market experience.

These two manipulations of the campaign represent the independent variable, abstract vs. concreteness, whose effects and motivations have been investigated with the research and will be set out later in this chapter.

### 4.3 The frame: Research Method

To investigate this variable, a quantitative online survey was conducted involving a mixed sample of 207 subjects of various genders, nationalities, and ages.



Graph 1. Gender and Age statistics

The survey was divided into three sections. The first one served as an introduction, presenting the case study, the company, and the theme. The second section, which is the most relevant for this thesis, focused on gathering primary data related to the research question. It comprised 9 questions with a total of 20 items evaluated on a Likert Scale designed to explore the effects of the campaign on the respondents. The final section included a demographic analysis with seven questions, aiming to study factors such as age, level of education, and political orientation; useful to examine how these variables may influence the results. The data was collected in August through a survey disseminated online via various channels such as research platforms and social media. To avoid inaccurate responses, time counters were included within the case presentation questions. Where the time spent was less than 5 seconds, the respondent was excluded.

#### 4.4 The instruments: Multi-item Scales and Reliability

To conduct the analysis efficiently, other variables were computed as the average of several items in order to summarize the results in single indicators.

##### **Brand Trust**

The study's first multi-item scale measures brand trust, which is calculated as the average of three key dimensions: reputation, credibility, and the positive perception of

the company as shaped by the campaign. A reliability analysis of this scale produced a Cronbach's alpha of 0.916 ( $\alpha = .916$ ), signifying a strong internal consistency. This high coefficient indicates that the items are closely related and effectively reflect the core construct of brand trust.

(Brand Trust: Mean = 5,18; SD=1,48)

Items rated on a Likert scale from 1 to 7:

1. The campaign has positively influenced my perception of JET's overall image.
2. The campaign has increased the credibility of JET
3. The campaign has increased the reputation of JET

### **Brand Sincerity**

Brand sincerity was assessed using the Aaker scale (1997), which includes dimensions such as wholesomeness, cheerfulness, honesty, and being down-to-earth. The scale demonstrated a high level of internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.919 ( $\alpha = .919$ ), indicating strong reliability, similar to the previous scale. This suggests that the elements effectively capture a cohesive concept of brand sincerity.

(Brand Sincerity: Mean = 4,51; SD = 1,45)

Items rated on a Likert scale from 1 to 7:

1. JET is down-to-earth
2. JET is honest
3. JET is wholesome
4. JET is cheerful

### **Perceived Campaign Real Impact**

The variable "Perceived Campaign Real Impact" was measured using four key components: specificity of action, tangible results, transparency of information, and perceived authenticity. These elements collectively demonstrated a strong internal consistency, as indicated by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.930 ( $\alpha = .930$ ). This high

reliability suggests that the four items contribute to a unified concept and can be combined into a single indicator. The scale captures how individuals perceive the campaign's actual impact on the environment, emphasizing the campaign's concrete outcomes, openness, and genuine commitment.

(Perceived Campaign Real Impact: Mean = 4,57; ST = 1,66)

Items rated on a Likert scale from 1 to 7:

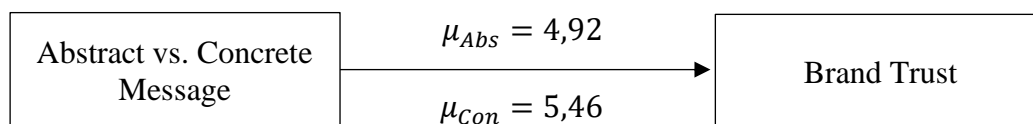
1. It highlights specific actions that the company is taking
2. It shares tangible results
3. It provides transparent information
4. It feels authentic

These three variables and the independent variable (abstract vs. concrete message) are the elements around which the thesis is structured.

## 4.5 The drawing: Exploratory Research and Results

### Direct Effect

The main effect to be analyzed is that caused by the variation of the abstract vs. concrete message on consumer brand trust. Therefore, the objective is to understand which of the two messages is more effective in a brand activism strategy.



Graph 2. Main Effect Model

To examine this effect, an independent t-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in average brand trust between subjects exposed to the campaign with an abstract message and those exposed to the campaign with a concrete message.

The two groups examined are independent, and the dependent variable, brand trust, is measured on a Likert scale ranging from 1 (I do not trust the brand at all) to 7 (I totally trust the brand).

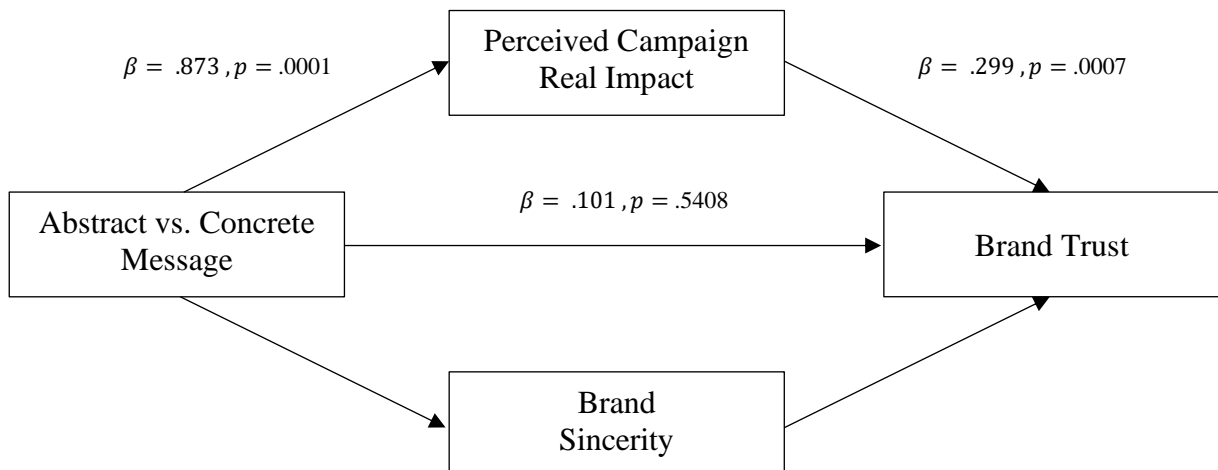
Levene's test for equality of variances yielded an F value of 0.474 and a significance level (Sig.) of 0.492. Since the p-value is greater than 0.05, it is possible to assume that the variances between the two groups are equal. The following table shows the data for the two groups.

Brand Trust	Message	Number	Mean	Std. Dev.
	Abstract	100	4,916	1,417
	Concrete	107	5,457	1,493

Tab.2 Independent T-test; Brand Trust

The data in the table indicates that participants exposed to a more concrete brand activism campaign reported higher levels of brand trust ( $M = 5.457$ ,  $SD = 1.493$ ) compared to those exposed to the abstract campaign ( $M = 4.916$ ,  $SD = 1.417$ ). This difference is statistically significant,  $t(205) = -2.674$ ,  $p = 0.008$ , suggesting that a concrete message is more effective than an abstract message in enhancing brand trust within the context of a brand activism campaign.

### Parallel Mediation Model



$$\beta = .423, p = .0376$$

$$\beta = .353, p = .0003$$

Graph 3. Parallel Mediation Model

In this phase of the research, an effort was made to explain the underlying reasons for the main effect observed earlier. That is the variation of brand trust as language changes from abstract to concrete. For this scope, a parallel mediation model was developed, incorporating two mediators: brand sincerity and perceived campaign real impact.

The first mediator, perceived campaign real impact, assessed the belief that the brand's activism campaign has a real effect on the targeted issue, also measured on a Likert scale from 1 (no impact) to 7 (total impact).

Brand sincerity, the second mediator, was measured by consumers' perception of the brand's sincerity using a Likert scale from 1 (not at all sincere) to 7 (totally sincere).

This model allows for an examination of how these two variables impact the primary relationship and whether they effectively explain the causal link previously established. The analysis was conducted using Hayes' Process extension (2022), which provides a robust framework for testing mediation and moderation effects.

The analysis begins by examining the relationship between the independent variable (Concrete versus Abstract message) and the mediator, perceived campaign real impact.

Outcome Variable: Perceived Campaign Real Impact				
Input Variable	Coeff.	Se	t	p
Concrete	0,8728	0,2236	3,904	0,0001

Table 3. Outcome variable: Perceived Campaign Real Impact

The table indicates that the effect of the concrete message on mediator 1 is both significant (p-value = .0001) and positive ( $\beta = .8728$ ). This suggests that using concrete language in a brand activism campaign positively influences the perception of its effectiveness in addressing the issue. Since the independent variable is a dummy, this



will mean that the use of an abstract language will instead have a negative impact on mediator 1.

In the second phase, the focus shifts to examining the effect of message concreteness on the other mediator, brand sincerity.

Outcome Variable: Brand Sincerity				
Input Variable	Coeff.	Se	t	p
Concrete	0,4224	0,2018	2,093	0,0376

Table 4. Outcome variable: Brand Sincerity

The table reveals that the use of concrete language also has a positive ( $\beta = .4224$ ) and significant (p-value= .0376) effect on the perceived sincerity of the brand.

In contrast, employing abstract goals and messages leads to the brand being perceived as less sincere.

Outcome Variable: Brand Trust				
Input Variable	Coeff.	Se	t	p
Concrete	0,1005	0,1641	0,6126	0,5408
Perceived Campaign Real Impact	0,2992	0,0870	3,441	0,0007
Brand Sincerity	0,3533	0,0963	3,667	0,0003

Table 5. Outcome Variable: Brand Trust

Next, the analysis shifts to the effect on the dependent variable, brand trust, while considering the role of the mediators. It can be observed that the direct effect of abstract versus concrete messaging is no longer significant (p-value = .5408). However, both mediator 1 (perceived campaign real impact) and mediator 2 (brand sincerity) exhibit positive and significant effects on brand trust. (Med.1:  $\beta = .2992$ ,  $p - value = .0007$ ; Med.2:  $\beta = .3533$ ,  $p - value = .0003$ ) This means that the two mediators account for the direct effect between the independent variable (message concreteness) and the dependent variable (brand trust).

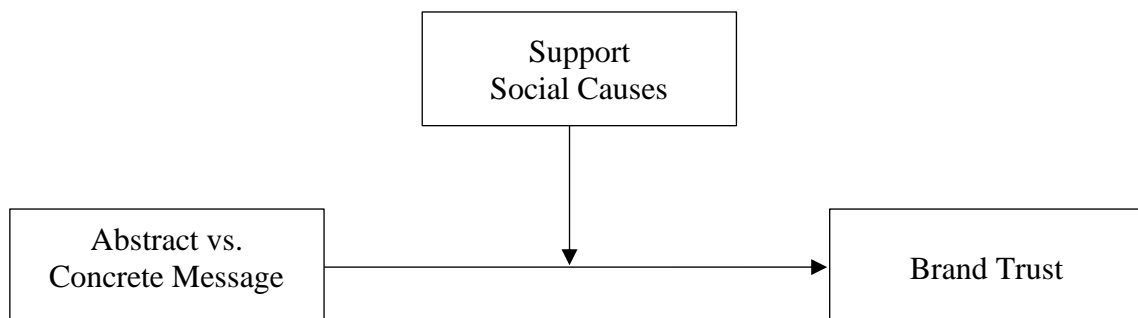
Indirect Effect of X on Y				
Input Variable	Effect	BootSe	BootLLCI	BootULCI
Perceived Campaign Real Impact	0,2612	0,1045	0,0799	0,4918
Brand Sincerity	0,1492	0,0834	0,0090	0,3396

Table 6. Indirect Effect of X on Y

The final table of indirect effects confirms the significant mediating roles of perceived campaign real impact and brand sincerity. The indirect effect of the independent variable (message concreteness) on brand trust through perceived campaign real impact is significant, as the confidence interval does not include zero. A similar conclusion applies to brand sincerity, where the absence of zero in the confidence interval also indicates a significant indirect effect.

At the conclusion of this analysis, it is evident that this is a case of total mediation, where the two mediators fully account for the effect of the independent variable (X) on the dependent variable (Y), rendering the initial direct effect insignificant.

### Moderation Model



Graph 4. Moderation Model

At this stage of the analysis, it is time to introduce a new model along with a new variable. While the previous analysis explained why the concreteness or abstractness of a message affects brand trust, the current objective is to determine whether other factors can influence this effect. To explore this, a new variable is introduced as a moderator in

the model, named 'Support Social Causes.' This dichotomous variable, expressed as either "yes" or "no," indicates whether individuals believe that companies should engage in social activities.

<b>Do you think companies should support Social Causes?</b>		
<b>Answer</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Yes	188	92,2%
No	16	7,8%

Table 7. Social Support Causes Results

The results of this question are already quite surprising. More than 90% of the respondents think that companies should support social causes. This figure certifies all that has been said in literature reviews that social commitment on the part of companies is increasingly seen as an essential requirement that consumers expect when dealing with companies. The results to this question are quite striking, with over 90% of respondents believing that companies should support social causes. This finding reinforces the conclusions drawn in the literature, confirming that social responsibility is increasingly viewed as a critical expectation for consumers when engaging with companies. It underscores the growing importance of corporate social commitment as a key factor in shaping consumer perceptions and behaviors.

A moderation model can be constructed and analyzed to assess whether this expectation impacts the relationship between concreteness and brand trust. This approach will help determine if the expectation of corporate social responsibility influences how the concreteness of a company's actions affects consumer trust in the brand.

<b>Moderation Model: Support Social Causes</b>				
<b>Input Variable</b>	<b>Coeff.</b>	<b>Se</b>	<b>t</b>	<b>p</b>
Concrete	0,5745	0,2085	2,7559	0,0064
Support Social Causes	- 0.1856	0.5995	-0.3095	0.7573
Interaction	-0.7857	0.7655	-1.0263	0.3060

Table 8. Moderation Model: Support Social Causes

Although support for corporate involvement in social causes is a strongly held belief, with the vast majority of respondents expressing a favorable opinion, the data,

specifically the non-significant interaction between the independent variable and the moderator ( $p\text{-value} = .306$ ), suggests that this belief does not influence the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. In other words, consumers' opinions on corporate social responsibility do not affect the impact of concrete language in brand activism campaigns. The use of concrete language positively influences consumers, regardless of whether they support or oppose corporate involvement in social issues.

This finding strengthens the observed relationship by demonstrating its consistency across two distinct consumer groups: pro-activists and skeptics. The result can be understood through Construal Level Theory, specifically the work of Becker-Olsen et al. (2006), who argue that social initiative messages demand a higher level of cognitive processing, encouraging a lower-level construal mindset. This is further supported by Hansen and Wanke (2010), who found that skeptical consumers are more receptive to messages emphasizing concrete rather than abstract information. This result aligns with previous research, demonstrating that concrete language in brand messaging positively impacts brand trust, regardless of whether the consumer is supportive of brand activism. This moderation model reinforces that concrete communication enhances trust, independent of consumers' attitudes towards a brand's social involvement.

## 4.6 The Masterpiece: Managerial Implication

Now that the analysis is over, it is time to draw conclusions and understand how these results can find applicability in real life. The first piece of evidence is that the time has come for managers to recognize brand activism as a powerful shaper of consumers' perceptions of the company. Customers expect and support social engagement from companies, becoming a necessity for companies to cover.

The other crucial concept is how this social commitment is communicated. The findings of the thesis highlight the importance of choosing the appropriate type of messaging. Concrete messages, which focus on specific actions and measurable outcomes, tend to build higher levels of brand trust compared to abstract messages. Therefore, managers should prioritize concrete messaging in brand activism campaigns, especially when

aiming to demonstrate the brand's tangible contributions to social causes. Looking at the two types of languages, we can conclude that:

- **Concrete Messaging:** Managers should emphasize concrete actions, such as specifying quantifiable goals (e.g., a company reducing its carbon footprint by 20%) and showcasing clear, actionable commitments. This approach can strengthen consumer trust and enhance the brand's credibility.
- **Abstract Messaging:** While abstract messages appeal to broader ideals like justice or sustainability, they can appear vague or insincere if not backed by tangible actions. Managers should use abstract messages cautiously, ensuring they are supplemented with concrete examples to avoid consumer skepticism.

The concreteness, therefore, gives solidity to the message, allowing consumers to increase their trust in the brand. This relationship was then explained by introducing the two mediators that allow for two other aspects to be taken into account when dealing with brand activism. The research shows that consumer perception of brand sincerity is a critical mediator in brand trust. Managers should focus on authenticity when crafting brand activism campaigns. This involves being transparent, honest, and consistent in messaging and actions. In the society of social media and the globalization of news, consumers are quick to detect insincerity, which can erode trust and damage the brand's reputation.

Another key finding is that consumers respond positively when they perceive a brand's activism as having a real, measurable impact. Managers should design campaigns that clearly communicate the tangible benefits of the brand's activism efforts, such as specific community projects or environmental outcomes. The example was seen in the case of 1 million trees in 5 years, but this result can be generalized to all the cases. Thus, highlighting these concrete results can enhance consumer trust and foster long-term brand loyalty. Through the analysis, it was observed that these two mediators completely explain the initial phenomenon, which makes it possible to say that in the case of finding an independent variable other than the concrete or abstract type of language that is

nevertheless able to trigger these two mediators, the result on the dependent will still be positive.

Moreover, the research suggests that even consumers who are skeptical about corporate social responsibility are more receptive to concrete messaging. Therefore, managers should tailor their communication strategies to appeal to both pro-activists and skeptics by emphasizing specific actions and measurable outcomes rather than relying on broad, idealistic statements. And since the research didn't specify the sector, it is possible to conclude that this result is true across various industries. Managers in different sectors can adopt concrete messaging strategies for their brand activism efforts, adapting the specific content to their sector while maintaining a focus on clear, measurable commitments. All these elements add important pieces to the scientific research, helping to fill some of the gaps in the application of brand activism.

#### 4.7 Future Outlook: New tools and techniques in Brand Activism

Since brand activism is already an established reality, what may be interesting for managers is to consider the results found in this thesis to anticipate the future. This concluding section will explore the tools and practices that are likely to become increasingly prominent as businesses deepen their commitment to social causes.

The first concerns the adoption of risk management techniques by managers. Today, the tools available enable companies to minimize the risk of backlash because of brand activism practices. For example, conducting detailed stakeholder mapping can help to anticipate possible backlash or unintended consequences. To conclude, the study of the scenario with an understanding of both the social context and consumer sentiment will be increasingly important in the next years.

Another important theme concerns the factor of concreteness in communication. The need for clearer, more tangible messaging will naturally drive a shift toward greater transparency across all operational stages. This will require companies to produce more objective and detailed sustainability reports, establish well-defined KPIs, and regularly update customers on their progress toward key targets. As consumers increasingly demand accountability, brands will also need to leverage data-driven approaches to

demonstrate their commitments. One powerful tool in this regard is blockchain technology, which can provide real-time transparency in supply chains, adding a new dimension of trustworthiness and reinforcing consumer confidence in a brand's ethical practices.

This marks a significant shift in the way companies approach storytelling. It's no longer enough to simply claim, "We're doing good." Instead, brands must now rely on quantifiable social metrics to demonstrate how they are making a difference and how effective those efforts are. On the flip side, true brand authenticity hinges on aligning and integrating these initiatives within the company's broader practices. For a brand to be perceived as sincere, its efforts must not only be consistent over time but also reflected in its internal operations. Increasingly, the way a company handles internal dynamics, ranging from communication to personnel management, will play a critical role in validating the authenticity of the external marketing actions it undertakes.

In conclusion, the future will see companies increasingly involved in social issues, as this is what customers are demanding. The difference will lie in how companies engage with these issues. To navigate this evolving landscape, clear and concrete communication appears to be the most effective way to earn and maintain consumer trust.

## Conclusion

In this thesis, we have explored the evolution of the business concept, tracing its shift from being solely profit-driven to a model that now encompasses social responsibility. This transformation has been largely driven by changing consumer demands. While price and quality once guided purchasing decisions, modern consumers now also factor in a company's social commitment and environmental practices. Businesses have thus taken on responsibilities traditionally associated with the state, in response to a growing public trust crisis. Political corruption, financial scandals, and greenwashing have left many without clear reference points, pushing companies to step in and rebuild consumer confidence.

In this landscape, stakeholders have moved to the forefront of corporate strategy, developing the "triple bottom line" approach: people, planet, and profit. This new perspective has given rise to marketing strategies such as cause-related and social marketing, which capitalize on the need for businesses to address social and environmental concerns in order to engage customers.

Brand activism emerges as the culmination of this shift, with companies now taking public stances on divisive social issues. While this approach carries the risk of backlash or boycotts, it also strengthens connections with target consumers by aligning with their values.

After analyzing the broader context and identifying the core issues, this thesis turned to the practical side, offering managers actionable insights. Real-world case studies were examined to extract valuable lessons, and original research was conducted to explore how companies can enhance brand trust through brand activism campaigns. The findings demonstrated that using concrete rather than abstract messaging significantly boosts brand trust, and this holds true across different consumer segments, regardless of their support for the company's social stance.

The positive impact of concrete communication on brand trust was further explained through the mediating effects of brand sincerity and perceived campaign impact.



These two variables fully account for the effectiveness of abstract communication in enhancing consumer trust in a brand.

This thesis aims to provide managers and entrepreneurs with a tool to navigate an alternative approach to business. It highlights that social engagement is no longer just an added value but a necessity and doing it effectively can serve as a competitive advantage. It was demonstrated that doing good can be profitable and that companies will always move more in this direction.

This thesis sought to present an alternative in a world that is increasingly written off as doomed, where wars are once again part of the conversation, and pollution remains an undeniable issue. In this context, there is a clear need for change, and brand activism combined with corporate social engagement represents more than just an idea.

## Acknowledgments

The conclusion of this thesis marks the end of my journey at Luiss Guido Carli. The university where I am about to get my master's degree in marketing, but before that was the one where I got my bachelor's degree. Over the past five years, I have not only gained knowledge but also grown into the person I am today. I vividly recall the emotion of my first day, sitting in the church hall during the plenary session, filled with the spirit of those eager to change the world. I have witnessed this university evolve, and in parallel, I have matured alongside it.

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## Introduction

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## Chapter 1: From Profit to Purpose: Corporate Social Responsibility

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## **Chapter 3: From Advocacy to Adversity: Successes and Failures Cases**

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## Chapter 4: From idea to reality: Exploratory Analysis

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