

**Brand Activism as a Strategic Response to the
Evolving Role of Business in Contemporary
Society: The Case of Nike and Colin Kaepernick**

Prof. Francesca Vicentini

Alciator Blanca Aiko 305731

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Introduction

In recent years, the relationship between companies and society has become increasingly complex and central to the managerial debate. In particular, companies are no longer perceived only as economic actors focused on profit maximization, but also as social actors whose decisions can have an impact on communities, consumers and the broader public debate. As a result, corporate performance is increasingly evaluated not only in terms of economic results, but also in relation to the ability of companies to respond to social, political and environmental expectations. At the same time, expectations toward companies have also expanded, in line with the evolving needs and values of consumers. Consumers increasingly expect brands not only to offer quality products, but also to show awareness of their social, political and environmental impact. In this context, brand activism has emerged as a strategic response to the evolving role of companies in contemporary society. It can be defined as the explicit engagement of companies in relevant social issues, through which brands take an active position in public debate. From this perspective, brand activism can be understood as an evolution of Corporate Social Responsibility. CSR traditionally focuses on the company's responsibility for its impact on society, while brand activism is more explicit and directly connected to the values communicated by the brand. This has become even more relevant with the rise of more conscious and value-driven consumers, who evaluate companies not only for what they sell, but also for the values they represent and for the consistency between what they declare and what they actually do.

The objective of this thesis is to analyze brand activism as a strategic and managerial phenomenon, in order to understand its main characteristics, areas of application and implications for companies. The first chapter presents the theoretical foundations of brand activism, starting from its relationship with Corporate Social Responsibility and highlighting the differences between the two approaches. It also examines the main areas of application of brand activism, the distinction between progressive and regressive activism, and the role of authenticity, with particular attention to the risk of woke-washing. The second chapter focuses on the sportswear industry, explaining why this sector represents a relevant context for brand activism and analyzing its main opportunities and risks. The third chapter examines Nike's strategic positioning,

corporate purpose and stakeholder relationships, providing the basis for the case study. Finally, the fourth chapter analyzes the Colin Kaepernick campaign, focusing on the context of the campaign, Nike's strategic motivations, stakeholder reactions and the implications for the company's competitive positioning.

Within this framework, the thesis uses the case of Nike and the Colin Kaepernick campaign to provide a concrete example of how brand activism can be implemented in practice. Nike represents a particularly relevant case because the company has built its competitive positioning not only through product innovation and athletic performance, but also through a strong brand identity and a constant association with social and cultural values.

The Colin Kaepernick campaign is especially significant because it shows both the opportunities and the risks connected to brand activism. From a managerial perspective, it also shows how brand activism can become part of a broader positioning strategy, rather than being limited to a communication campaign.

By supporting Kaepernick, Nike associated its brand with a controversial social issue related to police brutality, racism and social justice. This decision generated strong public debate and divided stakeholder reactions, making the campaign a useful case for understanding how brand activism can influence brand perception, reputation and competitive positioning.

The analysis aims to understand how Nike integrated social and political issues into its brand strategy, how the Kaepernick campaign influenced stakeholder perceptions and brand reputation, and under what conditions brand activism can contribute to long-term competitive advantage.

To answer these objectives, the thesis adopts a qualitative approach based on the review of academic literature and the analysis of a case study. The literature review provides the theoretical framework for understanding brand activism, authenticity, stakeholder management and competitive positioning. The case study allows these concepts to be applied to a concrete managerial situation, showing how Nike's campaign with Colin Kaepernick affected public debate, stakeholder reactions and the company's brand positioning.

Overall, this thesis aims to contribute to the understanding of how companies can use brand activism as part of their broader corporate strategy. In particular, it highlights that brand activism can represent an opportunity for differentiation and long-term value creation when it is coherent with the company's identity, values and stakeholder expectations. At the same time, it shows that taking a public stance on controversial issues requires credibility, consistency and careful management of reputational risks.

1 CHAPTER 1 – BRAND ACTIVISM

1.1 Definition of Brand Activism

In recent years, there has been a profound change in the relationship between companies and society.

The traditional approach of companies has progressively changed: they are no longer considered exclusively tools aimed at generating and maximizing profit, but agents of change at a global level, playing a more active role in the management of social, political and environmental issues.

This change also involves the transition from a shareholder-oriented vision, where the company has as its main objective the maximization of profit for shareholders, to a stakeholder-oriented vision where the company should not create value exclusively for shareholders, but for all parties involved such as employees, customers, suppliers, institutions and local communities.

This key concept was introduced by Edward Freeman in his book *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach* 1984. According to Freeman, the firm should no longer be seen as a tool to generate profit for shareholders, but as a system of relationships that must create value for all stakeholders involved. (Freeman, 1984)

Among the main issues addressed by companies, as key points in their business strategies, in order to strengthen ethical and social responsibility, are the fight against income inequality, corruption, racism and all forms of discrimination, the improvement of working conditions and the fight against climate change.

The new generations of consumers, especially Millennials and Generation Z, have significantly contributed to redefining expectations towards companies.

Compared to previous generations, they have adopted a more critical and conscious approach, also considering the role of the company in contemporary society and its environmental, ethical and social impact. In this context, their purchasing choices are not limited to meeting functional needs but are oriented towards the products that best reflect their values. From this perspective, Bhattacharya and Sen argue that consumers tend to “react more favorably to socially responsible firms and actively support companies they identify with”(Bhattacharya and Sen, 2004).

Consumption is no longer just a purely economic act but becomes the means through which consumers can influence corporate behavior in terms of greater social responsibility.

As a result of these changes, the perception of the brand has also evolved, it is no longer evaluated only based on the quality of the product it offers, but also in relation to the values it incorporates and represents.

Moreover, the need for companies to implement ethical and social dimensions in their business strategies, and therefore in their business models, has been strengthened by the rise of "belief-driven buyers", that is a category of consumers oriented by their values who decide to support or boycott companies based on their social, ethical and political commitment. (Edelman, 2017, 2018).

As highlighted by the author, belief-driven buyers tend to abandon brands that do not take a stance on relevant issues and reward those aligned with their values, developing deeper relationships based on trust, advocacy and loyalty.

In this scenario, a critical issue arises when the gap between the company's practices and the expectations of its customers and stakeholders is very wide, as the company's reputation can be compromised and long-term development prospects jeopardized. As a result, companies are encouraged to align their business strategies with the social expectations of stakeholders, demonstrating a concrete and verifiable commitment to social issues.

In this context, influenced by direct pressure from consumers, the concept of brand activism is developed, understood as a model that emphasizes the commitment of companies, guided by their values, to intervene in situations of great social importance. This can also be applied by means of communication campaigns that can influence consumers.

In particular, Philip Kotler and Christian Sarkar in "Brand Activism: From Purpose to Action" define the concept of brand activism as "the business efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic and/or environmental reform with the desire to improve society" (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018).

The company must therefore not limit itself to passively reacting to external demands but must be proactive in the public debate.

Brand activism should not be seen as a means to achieve short-term competitive advantage, nor merely as a strategy to sell more, improve the brand image or increase profits.

On the contrary, it is something deeper, which arises from a strategic vision where ethical and social values are integrated into the business model of the company itself and affect its economic and financial performance.

As stated by the President and CEO of the multinational Novo Nordisk: "Corporate social responsibility is not just about maximizing one's value in the long run; In the long term, environmental and social issues become financial issues" ⁴

However, brand activism also involves significant risks, as taking a stance on social and political issues could generate mixed reactions among consumers that could lead to boycotts if the position taken is perceived as inauthentic (Vredenburg et al., 2020; Warren, 2021). In this regard, the risk of phenomena such as "woke washing" emerges, whereby companies adopt value-based positions opportunistically, without a real substantial commitment. When the company's commitment is not consistent with corporate behavior, there can be a loss of credibility and trust on the part of stakeholders with economic and financial consequences. (Dodd & Supa, 2014; Vredenburg et al., 2020) Therefore, it follows that consistency between the values declared and the adopted behavior is a fundamental condition for building trust and legitimacy of the company in the long term. (Porter & Kramer, 2011)

For this reason, brand activism is more exposed to criticism, as it is characterized by a more active approach, linked to controversial issues and oriented towards strategic positioning, which differentiates it from Corporate Social Responsibility practices.

1.2 From Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) to Brand Activism

Brand activism can be interpreted as the evolution of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), a concept, which emerged in the post-World War II period and progressively evolved over the following decades, becoming increasingly integrated into corporate

⁴The quote is taken from a statement by L. R. Sørensen, President and CEO of the multinational Novo Nordisk during an interview with the American magazine Harvard Business Review in 2015.

strategies from the early 2000s. Initially, the concept was referred to as "social responsibility", but later, driven by the change in social consciousness and the role of companies in society, it established itself as the main form of social commitment of companies, taking the name of Corporate Social Responsibility. (Carroll, 1991)

Corporate Social Responsibility has been the centerpiece of the socially conscious business movement, which has sought to combine economic growth with the creation of social value.

Archie B. Carroll defined Corporate Social Responsibility as the process that "encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary (philanthropic) expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time" (Carroll 1979; 1991).

This definition highlights the four responsibilities that make up the structure of CSR and that companies must have towards the society in which they operate.

These responsibilities include:

- **Economic responsibilities**, which consist of the company's ability to be profitable and sustainable over time, creating value for stakeholders. (Freeman, 1984)
- **Legal responsibilities**, which represent the set of laws and regulations that companies must comply with to operate in the social context.
- **Ethical responsibilities** represent the set of rules, values and principles that companies must apply even if they are not codified in laws, to operate in a fair, correct and responsible way.
- **Philanthropic responsibilities** concern corporate charitable activities through which companies contribute to the well-being of society, such as through donations, social initiatives and volunteering.

Corporate Social Responsibility practices have focused on initiatives that are well accepted by consumers, with the aim of improving the company's reputation and strengthening the relationship with stakeholders. (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004)

In contemporary society, however, this approach is no longer sufficient to meet consumer demands.

Therefore, from this need for change and evolution emerged the concept of brand activism, which requires a more explicit and proactive approach to social issues by companies.

Brand activism can in fact be seen as an evolution of CSR practices towards approaches that are more oriented towards value-based positioning and direct intervention in public debate. (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018)

Unlike Corporate Social Responsibility, which is mainly oriented towards reducing the negative impact of corporate activities without showing active involvement in social issues, brand activism entails direct involvement and taking a position on relevant issues. (Moorman, 2020)

One of the main differences between CSR and brand activism concerns the nature of the issues addressed. On the one hand, CSR supports non-controversial issues, such as environmental sustainability or community well-being. On the other hand, brand activism develops around more controversial issues with a strong social impact, such as discrimination, immigration and civil rights, which are closely linked to the identity of the company. (Korschun et al., 2020)

Furthermore, CSR is integrated into operational activities related to business dynamics, requiring a greater economic commitment, in terms of resources, to support the cause; while brand activism does not necessarily integrate into production processes, requiring fewer human and economic resources.

Finally, consumer perception is also a differentiator between the two approaches, as Corporate Social Responsibility initiatives are generally received positively, while brand activism can arouse opposition and mixed reactions among consumers. (Vredenburg et al., 2020)

1.3 Areas of application of Brand Activism

Brand activism is guided by social values that encourage companies to take a stand on issues of significant social relevance, with the aim of contributing to the improvement of social conditions and the promotion of equity and inclusion.

As stated by Porter and Kramer, "companies can create economic value while creating value for society". (Porter & Kramer, 2011)

The areas of intervention of brand activism are broad, as they reflect the main problems and needs of society.

In this regard, Philip Kotler and Christian Sarkar (2018) have identified six areas in which brand activism can operate: social, workplace, political, environmental, economic and legal.



Figure 1: Six areas of application of Brand Activism (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018)

Social activism refers to companies taking a stance on issues concerning social and equality problems. In fact, brands are increasingly called upon to "take a stand on sociopolitical issues relevant to their stakeholders" (Moorman, 2020). In this area of brand activism, companies intervene in matters such as gender equality, ethnic inclusion and rights related to sexual orientation, as in the case of the LGBTQ+ community. Furthermore, social activism also addresses social and community issues such as education, safety, healthcare, and consumer privacy protection. An example is represented by the Nike brand, which, through the campaign with Colin Kaepernick, supported the movement against racial discrimination by taking an explicit stance on the issue (Avery & Pauwels, 2019). **Workplace activism** concerns companies' internal management practices and working conditions. The focus of this area of brand activism is placed on corporate governance and related practices, such as corporate organization, remuneration

of directors and employees, trade union relations and coordination of the company's commercial and operational activities. In this context, companies aim to ensure fair working conditions, thereby contributing to the improvement of the economic and social system. An example of workplace activism is Starbucks, which has implemented initiatives aimed at fostering inclusion, supporting employee development and promoting workforce diversity within the organization (Starbucks, 2024). **Political activism** concerns the involvement of companies in political dynamics and public policies. In this area of application of brand activism, companies support or oppose legislative initiatives through lobbying activities and demonstrate a strong commitment to promoting democratic participation, for example through initiatives in support of voting rights. In addition, companies take an active role in their institutional environment, putting pressure on institutions to contribute to social change and influence public decisions. A symbolic case is Patagonia, which has advocated for environmental policies and taken legal action against government decisions deemed harmful. This approach highlights a direct involvement in the political debate, consistent with the values declared by the brand (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018). **Environmental activism** concerns the set of practices aimed at the preservation of the ecosystem and the protection of the environment. In this area, companies intervene on issues such as climate change, the management of natural resources, including land use, environmental pollution and emission control. Moreover, companies must operate in compliance with environmental laws and policies, implementing internal practices aimed at promoting sustainable development. A significant example is the brand Stella McCartney, which has built its business model around sustainability principles, to minimize environmental impact by using alternative and cruelty-free materials (Stella McCartney, n.d.). **Economic activism** concerns the role of companies in promoting equity and economic sustainability. The aim is to influence the redistribution of wealth and income inequality, intervening on issues such as wage and tax policies. This demonstrates the overcoming of the traditional vision of companies oriented exclusively to the creation of profit. The reference to the concept of shared value is evident. In fact, as Porter and Kramer argue, "the competitiveness of a company and the health of the communities in which it operates are closely interdependent" (Porter & Kramer, 2011). An example is Unilever, which, through its sustainability and livelihoods program, has promoted initiatives aimed at improving economic conditions along the

supply chain, reflecting a vision of the company oriented not only toward profit, but also toward social impact (Unilever, n.d.). Finally, **legal activism** is about companies' commitment to take a stand and promote changes at the legislative and regulatory level to foster social change. In this regard, it places a strong focus on laws and policies that affect society, such as citizenship, tax regulations and employment laws. A significant example is Apple, which has taken a strong stance on issues related to privacy and data protection, emphasizing privacy governance and strict control over data access. Furthermore, the company has resisted government pressures to access user data, reinforcing its commitment to strict data protection practices (BBC, 2025).

Type of activism	Main focus	Example
Social activism	Social and equality issues, gender equality, ethnic inclusion, LGBTQ+ rights, education, healthcare, safety and consumer privacy.	Nike - Colin Kaepernick campaign
Workplace activism	Internal management practices, working conditions, corporate governance, remuneration, employee rights, inclusion and workforce.	Starbucks
Political activism	Political dynamics, public policies, lobbying activities, democratic participation, voting rights and pressure on institutions.	Patagonia
Environmental activism	Preservation of the environment, climate change, natural resources, pollution, emission reduction and sustainable development.	Stella McCartney
Economic activism	Economic equity and sustainability, income inequality, wage and tax policies and improvement of supply chain conditions.	Unilever
Legal activism	Legislative and regulatory change, citizenship, tax regulations, employment laws, privacy and data protection.	Apple

Table 1: Summary of the six areas of application of brand activism.

1.4 Progressive vs Regressive

According to Kotler and Sarkar, companies can develop brand activism strategies that are distinguished in progressive or regressive forms, depending on their social impact and their ability to promote or hinder the common good and social progress. The main

evaluation criterion, applied by Kotler and Sarkar, to distinguish the two strategies is represented by the concept of common good, defined as "those facilities that the members of a community provide to all members in order to fulfill a relational obligation they all have to care for certain interests that they have in common" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2018).

Progressive activism is used by companies as a way to differentiate themselves from competitors around the world. It manifests itself when companies actively adopt policies oriented towards the promotion of the common good, addressing relevant social issues with the aim of promoting social change and equity, overcoming the purpose of pure profit increase. Companies that adopt this strategy are perceived as leaders of positive change, placing the values of their identity at the center of their strategy.

A significant example of a brand that has implemented a progressive strategy is Patagonia, which has based its business model on environmental commitment. The company promotes initiatives aimed at protecting the environment, including the allocation of 1% of its proceeds to projects intended to preserve and restore natural environments.

Furthermore, Patagonia has developed Patagonia Action Works to foster active consumer engagement by connecting individuals with local organizations engaged in environmental issues. Through this platform, the brand encourages participation in these initiatives related to climate and environmental justice. (Patagonia, n.d.)

"The President Stole Your Land", is considered one of the brand's most progressive and significant political actions. Through this campaign, Patagonia expressed its opposition to President Donald Trump's decision to reduce the size of two national monuments in Utah, highlighting its commitment to social and environmental justice (Cumplings, 2017).

Conversely, regressive activism occurs when companies adopt corporate policies that harm the common good. These actions include defending traditional values or unequal systems, unethical exploitation of resources, and opposing progressive movements, which hinder social progress.

This type of brand activism can lead to negative consequences in terms of corporate reputation, due to negative consumer perceptions, which may trigger reactions such as boycotts and social protests.

A significant example of regressive brand activism is the tobacco industry, whose companies continue to knowingly promote products that are harmful to health, and hinder the introduction of regulations aimed at protecting consumer well-being. In this context, these companies have been criticized as their actions harm the common good, contributing to the maintenance of negative social conditions.

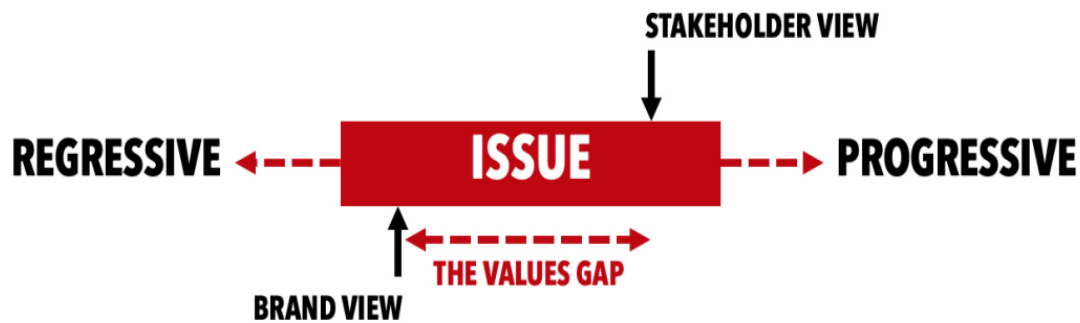


Figure 2: Representation of the *values gap* between brand and stakeholder view (Kotler & Sarkar, 2018)

A fundamental element to understand the distinction between the two forms of brand activism is represented by the *values gap*, that is, the distance between the values expressed by the company, therefore of the stakeholders, and the actions of the brand, indicating the degree of alignment or misalignment of values.

Consequently, determining whether a company implements a progressive or regressive brand activism strategy cannot be based solely on the benefit or harm to the common good, but must also take into account consumers' interpretation.

Finally, it can be deduced that brand activism is no longer a marginal approach, but a fundamental element of corporate strategy, capable of determining the competitive advantage of the company and generating an impact on society.

1.5 Authenticity vs. Woke-Washing

In the context of brand activism, the growing attention toward social and political issues has made it increasingly important how companies communicate their commitment to society.

However, corporate initiatives are perceived differently by consumers: some are considered authentic and consistent, while others are seen as opportunistic and lacking credibility. In this context, the distinction between authentic brand activism and woke-washing has emerged, with the aim of analyzing the consistency between brand values and their concrete practices.

Authenticity represents a key factor in the success of brand activism strategies, as it helps to strengthen the credibility of the brand and its value in the market. In particular, it emerges when companies align their messages, objectives, and activist values with prosocial corporate practices.

According to Vredenburg et al. (2020), the authenticity of brand activism is based on the alignment of four elements: corporate purpose, values, messages and concrete practices implemented by the company. In this context, authenticity has been defined as "the alignment of a brand's purpose and values with its activist marketing messaging and prosocial corporate practice" (Vredenburg et al., 2020), emphasizing the importance of authenticity, not limiting it to marketing communication, but considering whether the entire corporate strategy is consistent with the stated values.

When these four elements are aligned, consumers tend to perceive the company's position on a given sociopolitical issue as sincere and trustworthy.

The authenticity of brand activism is considered superior to other forms of activism for two reasons. First, it implies a real alignment between communication and prosocial corporate practices, thereby providing the basis for real social change.

Secondly, it contributes to strengthening firm value, as it increases the credibility of the initiatives undertaken, reducing the risk perceived by consumers and enhancing the overall value.

Conversely, when an action is not aligned with the four elements of: corporate purpose, values, messages and concrete practices, it is perceived as inauthentic. Among the manifestations of inauthentic brand activism is the concept of woke washing, a practice in which companies communicate their commitment to relevant sociopolitical issues but fail to implement consistent and concrete actions. In this context, the concept of woke

washing is often used to denounce the discrepancy of companies between their sociopolitical statements, values, purpose or actions. (Warren, 2022).

Vredenburg et al. (2020) define woke washing as: "mismatch between a brand's sociopolitical stance and its corporate practices, purpose, and values", highlighting the discrepancy between the company's statements and its actions. Similarly, Sobande (2020) describes woke washing as: "brands' failure to uphold their commitments regarding sociopolitical matters".

In addition, a distinction can be made between companies that play an active role and honestly engage in sociopolitical issues defined as "honest woke brands" and those in which active engagement in these issues is lacking, thus falling back into woke washing, limiting themselves to communication and lacking concreteness in what they claim to support.

The phenomenon of woke washing can occur in various areas, including the environmental field, where it refers to the commitment that companies promise to undertake towards sustainability, but which is lacking in concrete actions. This practice is referred to as greenwashing.

The term "greenwashing", coined by Jay Westerveld (Seele et al., 2017), refers to the discrepancy between symbolic and tangible actions, or more specifically, between initiatives that are consistent with sustainability approaches but have no discernible impact and those that instead provide a clear and tangible benefit.

A significant example is the 2013 H&M case, described by Wren (2022), in which the company declared its commitment to sustainability through several initiatives, including the launch of the "H&M Conscious" line. Through this line, the company claimed to have created "eco-friendly" products; however, subsequent analyses have raised concerns regarding the accuracy of these claims and their actual contribution to improving the company's sustainability.

This case represents a clear example of greenwashing, highlighting the discrepancy between brand communication and its concrete practices, which leads to a loss of brand credibility and reinforces the importance of authenticity in brand activism strategies.

1.6 Managerial implications of Brand Activism

Brand activism represents a significant shift in the role of companies in society, requiring managers to reassess traditional approaches to strategy, stakeholder management, and value creation. The company is no longer seen as a purely economic actor, but as a social subject called upon to take a position on relevant issues.

As a structural business strategy, brand activism has taken on a central role in management, as it involves implications on multiple dimensions: strategic integration, stakeholder management, risk assessment, authenticity, brand equity and communication management.

The first managerial implication concerns the strategic integration of brand activism within the organization. Since it can no longer be considered as an abstract initiative, it must be concretely embedded into corporate strategy, aligned with the company's mission and values, and supported by consistency between communication and actions. (Luna-Amador et al., 2025).

A second managerial implication concerns stakeholder management, as brand activism can be interpreted through stakeholder theory. According to this approach, companies must consider all groups that can influence or be influenced by their activities, including customers, employees, suppliers and communities. Relationships with stakeholders must be managed and integrated by management, to ensure the long-term success of the company. (Freeman & McVea, 2001)

From this perspective, management should base stakeholder management on listening, dialogue and involvement, while the company must respond to stakeholder expectations by taking an active role in promoting important values and causes. In fact, the most recent literature highlights how brand activism represents a strategic response to the growing social expectations of companies, and how stakeholder involvement, combined with the perception of authenticity, contributes to strengthening corporate legitimacy and reputation (Lim & Zhang, 2025).

Contemporary consumers tend to reward companies that demonstrate commitment to ethical and social issues, while employees are more motivated and engaged when they perceive consistency between corporate values and organizational practices.

Recent studies also show that brand activism can positively influence consumer attitudes, trust and loyalty, directly affecting brand performance (Shukla et al., 2025).

From this perspective, brand activism also contributes to the strengthening of brand equity, by positively influencing consumer perceptions and associations towards the brand (Keller, 1993).

However, adopting brand activism is not always easy, because different stakeholders can have different opinions and values. For this reason, management must be able to balance these different expectations, trying to avoid conflicts while maintaining consistency in strategic business choices. (Vredenburg et al., 2020)

In summary, through the lens of stakeholder theory, brand activism is configured as a strategic lever that allows the company to create sustainable value, strengthening relationships with its stakeholders and consolidating its position in the competitive and social contexts.

At the same time, brand activism can represent a risk in the relationship between business and stakeholders, as taking public stances on controversial social issues can generate dissenting reactions among the latter.

In this regard, strategic management does not consist only in maximizing a single objective, such as profit, but in the ability to manage multiple and often conflicting interests. Managers must therefore develop more sophisticated analytical and risk management capabilities, balancing opportunities and potential negative impacts.

Linked to this concept is the issue of risk management, according to which brand activism exposes companies to reputational and market risks. Therefore, on the one hand it can serve to strengthen the identity and positioning of the brand, but on the other hand it can represent an increase in the negative perception of the company by consumers, in a given sociopolitical context. Therefore, a crucial aspect is the evaluation of the sociopolitical context and the development of strategies to manage potential negative reactions.

A further implication concerns the role of authenticity, which is considered one of the main success factors of brand activism strategies. Authenticity refers to the perception of consistency between the values declared by the company and the concrete actions it implements.

In this regard, activism must be supported by concrete actions and be able to ensure internal consistency within the organization, as any discrepancies between business

practices and communication can compromise the credibility of the company and undermine consumer trust.

Consequently, when activism is perceived as authentic, it can have positive effects on brand equity, helping to strengthen the reputation, trust and loyalty of consumers, especially in the long term, and represent a tool for differentiation in contemporary markets.

In particular, brand activism can positively influence several dimensions of brand equity: it increases brand awareness through the visibility generated by taking a stance; strengthens brand associations by linking the brand to ethical and social values; and consolidates the perceived quality, insofar as responsible commitment is interpreted as an index of reliability and integrity.

A consistent and authentic commitment can therefore represent a significant factor of competitive differentiation, especially in saturated markets, where products and services are increasingly similar to each other. In this sense, brand activism allows the company to stand out not only for the functional characteristics of the offer, but also for its value-based positioning.

Finally, the management of communication plays a crucial role, which must be clear, consistent and continuous. It is not only about conveying messages, but about building a credible narrative supported by concrete actions, avoiding misalignments between what the company declares and what it actually accomplishes.

In conclusion, brand activism represents a complex strategic and managerial phenomenon that requires alignment between values, strategies, and stakeholder management. As emphasized by stakeholder theory, the long-term success of the company depends on its ability to balance these different aspects, to create value, treating brand activism as an authentic, coherent and integrated managerial strategy.

2 CHAPTER 2 – BRAND ACTIVISM IN THE SPORTSWEAR INDUSTRY

In the sportswear industry, brand activism has gained increasing relevance, as companies are no longer limited to the production and sale of sports-related products. Over time, sportswear brands have become increasingly connected to lifestyle, identity, culture, and personal values. Consumers purchase sportswear products not only for their functional attributes, such as comfort, quality or technical performance, but also for their symbolic value and their ability to reflect individual identity and aspirations. Through the choice of a specific sportswear brand, consumers are able to communicate their values and express a sense of belonging to a community.

This close connection between sport and personal identity reinforces the association between sportswear brands and broader social values, including discipline, commitment, inclusion, empowerment, and competition.

Consequently, companies operating in the sportswear industry increasingly act not only as commercial entities, but also as cultural and social actors capable of influencing consumer perceptions and behaviors. In particular, these brands contribute to shaping the way individuals interpret issues related to identity, representation, and social participation.

Furthermore, sport represents not only an economic activity, but also a social context that facilitates interaction among individuals and communities while generating shared meanings and values. According to Aaron C. T. Smith and Hans Westerbeek (2007), sport provides an effective platform for communication and social engagement.

This characteristic makes the sportswear industry particularly suitable for the analysis of brand activism, as companies can use social and political positioning as a strategic tool to strengthen brand image, foster consumer engagement, and build stronger relationships with their target audience.

2.1 The sportswear industry as a value-based and cultural market

In recent decades, the sportswear market has undergone significant changes, influencing the way companies compete. In a context where many products appear increasingly similar in terms of quality, design, and performance, differentiation depends more and

more on the meaning communicated by the brand. In this perspective, brand identity represents a key strategic asset, as it reflects the associations developed in consumers' minds and expresses what the brand stands for (Aaker, 1996).

Within the sportswear industry, products are perceived not only as functional goods, but also as instruments of personal expression. Through the choice of a specific brand, consumers communicate belonging, aspirations, and personal values. As a consequence, companies compete not only through product performance and technical innovation, but also through their ability to build a coherent and credible brand identity. A strong identity enables brands to strengthen their competitive positioning and develop emotional connections with consumers.

Through social media platforms, fitness applications, sporting events, and online interactions, sportswear brands create environments in which consumers can interact both with the brand and with other individuals sharing similar interests and values. These communities strengthen brand loyalty and stakeholder engagement because they are based not only on consumption, but also on shared experiences and symbolic meanings. In this sense, brands contribute to the creation of a relational and cultural environment in which consumers can identify themselves and feel part of a wider community. This dynamic also increases expectations regarding the consistency between communicated values and corporate behavior.

Another important element concerns the role of athletes. In the sportswear industry, athletes are not merely commercial endorsers, but public figures whose personal values and actions contribute to shaping brand meaning and perception. When athletes are associated with themes such as equality, inclusion, or empowerment, they reinforce the symbolic dimension of the brand. The presence of Serena Williams in the *Dream Crazy* campaign, for example, demonstrates how an athlete can represent not only sporting excellence, but also broader social and cultural values (Avery & Pauwels, 2019).

Overall, the sportswear industry can be defined as a value-based and cultural market. Product quality and performance remain essential elements, but they are no longer sufficient to fully explain consumers' attachment to brands. Sportswear companies increasingly use communication strategies to engage with broader social issues and participate in public debate. Campaigns such as "If You *Let Me Play*", which addressed

discussions related to gender equality in sport, “*Equality*”, which promoted values such as fairness and respect both inside and outside the sports context, and “*What Will They Say About You?*”, focused on the representation of Muslim women in sport, illustrate how the language of sport can be used to communicate social values and strengthen brand positioning (Avery & Pauwels, 2019). These campaigns demonstrate how sportswear brands strategically use social and cultural themes to reinforce brand identity and strengthen consumer engagement.

In addition to social and cultural issues, sustainability has become another central dimension of brand positioning within the sportswear industry. Due to the environmental impact associated with global production and supply chains, brands increasingly communicate commitments related to recycled materials, ethical sourcing, and responsible production practices. However, these initiatives must be supported by concrete actions in order to maintain credibility and avoid accusations of inconsistency. Brand activism in the sportswear industry can therefore be interpreted as a form of symbolic positioning. Social causes are used not only to communicate responsibility, but also to define brand identity and strengthen relationships with specific consumer groups. Because these messages are highly visible, consistency between declared values and corporate practices becomes essential. In this sector, the relationship between marketing communication, corporate values, and social positioning has become increasingly interconnected and strategically relevant.

2.2 Opportunities and risks of brand activism in the sportswear market

In the sportswear industry, brand activism represents both a strategic opportunity and a potential risk. It enables companies to strengthen brand identity and enhance differentiation in a market where symbolic and cultural meanings play an increasingly important role. Sport contributes significantly to this dynamic, as it connects individuals, communities, and shared values (Smith and Westerbeek, 2007).

In this context, brand activism can enhance consumer relationships and increase brand equity by associating the brand with meanings that extend beyond product functionality. Consumers tend to develop stronger attachments to brands that reflect their values and lifestyles, which can also foster higher levels of loyalty and consumer advocacy.

However, this closeness between brands and consumers also increases expectations of consistency. Stakeholders evaluate not only products, but also the alignment between communicated values and corporate behavior. When such alignment is perceived, brand activism can strengthen trust and loyalty; when it is absent, it may generate criticism and reputational damage. This is particularly relevant in the sportswear industry, where athletes and digital media amplify both engagement and visibility of corporate actions (Williams & Chinn, 2010).

Brand activism can therefore generate important advantages in terms of trust, loyalty and competitive differentiation. When consumers perceive that the brand's position is consistent with its values and concrete actions, they can develop greater trust in the company and feel closer to the brand. This can lead not only to greater loyalty, but also to forms of consumer advocacy, where consumers actively support the brand and share its values. In this sense, brand activism can become a strategic tool to strengthen the company's competitive positioning, especially among younger consumers who are more sensitive to social and environmental issues.

However, significant risks remain. Taking a stance on controversial social or political issues can generate approval from some groups of consumers, but at the same time it can provoke criticism and boycotts from others. Consumer reactions are not always homogeneous, because they depend on how consumers interpret the relationship between the company, the issue addressed and the values communicated by the brand (Korschun et al., 2020). In this regard, brands may face accusations of opportunism or “woke-washing”, when there is a lack of consistency between their communication and their concrete practices.

The case of Nike illustrates this tension. While campaigns such as *Dream Crazier* emphasized female empowerment in sport, some sponsored athletes, including Alysia Montaña and Allyson Felix, criticized the company for insufficient contractual protections during pregnancy and postpartum periods. This inconsistency between communication and internal practices was perceived as a form of woke-washing. Following public criticism, Nike introduced changes to its maternity-related policies (CBS News, 2019). More broadly, global supply chains further increase these risks, as issues related to labor conditions, sustainability, and diversity can affect brand credibility.

Overall, brand activism in the sportswear industry offers both strategic opportunities and significant challenges. While it can enhance differentiation, trust, and consumer loyalty, it simultaneously increases exposure to reputational risk. For this reason, maintaining consistency between corporate values, communication, and operational practices is essential. The sportswear industry therefore represents a particularly relevant context for the study of brand activism, with Nike constituting a key example due to its strong cultural identity and global visibility.

3 CHAPTER 3 – STRATEGIC ANALYSIS OF NIKE

3.1 Nike's strategic positioning in the sportswear market

Nike, Inc. is a leading multinational corporation operating in the global sportswear market, engaged in the design, development and commercialization of athletic footwear, apparel and equipment. The global sportswear market is characterized by intense competition, rapid technological innovation and a strong emphasis on brand differentiation and consumer engagement. Leading companies in the market, such as Nike, Adidas and Puma, compete not only on product performance, but also on brand identity and their ability to build strong relationships with consumers. In this context, maintaining a clear and recognizable position in the market is essential for sustaining long-term competitiveness.

The sportswear segment represents one of the fastest-growing categories within the global fashion industry, driven by increasing consumer demand for active lifestyles. In particular, the athletic wear segment has experienced significantly higher growth rates compared to traditional apparel segments, reflecting a shift in consumer preferences (Alghani & Kal, 2020). This growth has intensified competition within the market, prompting leading firms to continuously adapt their strategies in order to respond to changing consumer needs and market dynamics.

From a strategic perspective, Nike's evolution represents a successful example of how a company can build a strong brand and create long-term value through consistent strategic choices. The company was founded in 1964 by Phil Knight and his former track-and-field coach, Bill Bowerman, under the name Blue Ribbon Sports. Initially, the company operated as a distributor through a partnership with the Japanese brand Onitsuka Tiger, with the objective of commercializing sports footwear in the United States.

In 1971, the company terminated its partnership with the Japanese company and launched its own brand, officially changing its name from Blue Ribbon Sports to Nike. This transition was marked by the creation of the "Swoosh" logo, which is now considered one of the most recognizable symbols of brand equity in the global sportswear market. From a strategic perspective, Nike's brand equity can be considered an important intangible

asset, as the company has transformed its products into symbols that strengthen its relationship with consumers (Bhaskaran, 2023).

A key element of Nike's strategic positioning is its use of partnerships with internationally renowned athletes. These collaborations play a fundamental role in Nike's strategy, as they enhance brand visibility and credibility among consumers, while strengthening the association between the brand and athletic performance (Onyebuenyi, 2025).

Over time, these partnerships also helped Nike move beyond the simple promotion of products and build a broader narrative around performance, ambition and sporting excellence. An example of this strategy can be traced back to the late 1970s, when Nike established partnerships with high-profile athletes such as the tennis player John McEnroe. These initiatives contributed to the company's rapid growth and international expansion. By 1980, Nike's revenue had exceeded \$150 million, and the company was subsequently listed on the stock exchange, further strengthening its financial position. This expansion provided Nike with the resources needed to consolidate its presence in the sportswear industry and compete more effectively against established rivals. Over time, Nike evolved from a footwear company into a diversified multinational corporation offering a wide range of sports apparel, equipment, accessories and services. A defining moment in Nike's global expansion was its partnership with NBA athlete Michael Jordan, which led to the creation of the Air Jordan brand. This case shows how Nike was able to transform athlete endorsements into a powerful brand extension, creating value not only through the athlete's performance, but also through the cultural meaning associated with his image.

Nike's leading position in the sportswear market can also be interpreted through Porter's Five Forces analysis, particularly in relation to the low threat of new entrants. This low threat reflects the high barriers to entry that Nike has created through its strong market position and brand equity. One of Nike's key strengths lies in the strong brand equity it has built over time, which has created a high level of brand recognition that is difficult for new competitors to replicate. In addition, potential entrants would require substantial capital investments in product design, marketing and distribution channels. Furthermore, Nike benefits from economies of scale, which allow the company to optimize production costs and reinforce its bargaining power within its supply chain (Li, 2023).

Nike's ability to maintain its leadership position in the global sportswear market can also be interpreted through the concept of competitive advantage. According to Porter (1985), firms achieve competitive advantage through either cost leadership or differentiation. Nike clearly follows a differentiation strategy, as it focuses on creating unique value through brand identity, innovation and emotional engagement with consumers.

This differentiation is not limited to technical characteristics of its products, but also involves the symbolic meaning associated with the brand. Nike has successfully positioned itself as a brand that represents values such as performance, ambition and determination. As a result, consumers do not merely purchase a product, but also the values and identity associated with the brand. This allows Nike to justify its premium pricing strategy and maintain high levels of customer loyalty, reinforcing its competitive advantage in the global sportswear market. However, sustaining differentiation over time requires continuous innovation, strong brand management and the ability to respond to changes in consumer expectations.

Nike's strategic positioning is also reinforced by its continuous investment in innovation and technology. The company develops products that enhance athletic performance while responding to evolving consumer needs. This innovation-driven approach strengthens Nike's competitive advantage by making it more difficult for competitors to replicate its product offering and brand positioning.

Another key element of Nike's strategy is its ability to adapt to changes in the external environment. The shift toward digitalization and the adoption of a direct-to-consumer model demonstrate the company's responsiveness to evolving market dynamics and enable Nike to reduce its reliance on intermediaries and strengthen direct relationships with consumers. As a result, the company gains greater control over the brand experience, enhances the customer experience and reinforces brand loyalty.

The success of this strategy is reflected in the fact that, in 2023, digital sales accounted for 40% of total revenue (Onyebuenyi, 2025).

This digital transformation is further strengthened by Nike's omnichannel strategy, which combines digital platforms and physical retail stores into a unified system (Verhoef et al., 2015). According to Verhoef et al. (2015), omnichannel retailing refers to the synergistic management of multiple customer touchpoints in order to optimize both customer

experience and firm performance across channels. In this sense, channels are not managed in isolation, but as an integrated system aimed at delivering a seamless and consistent customer experience. For Nike, this approach is important because it allows the company to maintain continuity between digital platforms, mobile applications, and physical stores, reinforcing the overall strength of the brand experience.

These strategic choices are complemented by Nike's broad differentiation strategy, which allows the company to target multiple consumer segments through a wide range of products, including sports shoes, apparel, equipment, accessories and services. The premium pricing strategy positions Nike's products as exclusive and high-quality, supporting long-term customer loyalty and high profit margins. At the same time, innovation remains a central element of the company's development, enabling Nike to design products that improve athletic performance, maximize comfort and reflect evolving consumer needs.

Moreover, the company expands its presence in complementary sectors of the market through licensing agreements with sports organizations and institutions.

A relevant example is the partnership between Nike and UCLA, through which Nike supplies products such as athletic footwear, apparel and equipment to the university's sports teams. As a result of this partnership, Nike obtains the rights to use UCLA's logo and athletes in its advertising campaigns, thereby increasing its visibility among consumers. Additionally, Nike can produce and sell the university's official merchandise, further reinforcing its strategic positioning in the market (Nike, n.d.).

Nevertheless, Nike must continue to address several challenges in order to sustain its competitive advantage. The company operates in a highly competitive and increasingly fragmented market, where rivals such as Adidas, Puma, Under Armour and emerging digital-native brands continue to challenge its market share. In addition, changes in consumer preferences, sustainability concerns and supply chain pressures require Nike to continuously adapt its strategy.

Overall, Nike's position in the sportswear market is the result of several connected choices: a strong brand identity, continuous innovation, athlete partnerships, digital transformation and a direct relationship with consumers. Together, these elements allow Nike to maintain its leadership and provide the strategic foundation for its later engagement with brand activism.

3.2 Nike's corporate purpose and value system

Nike's corporate purpose and value system play a fundamental role in defining the company's identity and its long-term strategic choices, as they express the values and principles that underlie its decision-making process. While Nike's corporate purpose expresses what the company aims to achieve beyond financial performance, its value system translates this purpose into concrete principles that influence both strategic and operational decisions. Nike's corporate purpose is reflected in its mission statement: *"to bring inspiration and innovation to every athlete in the world"*, which defines the strategic positioning choices of the company and, consequently, the potential market in which it can compete (Nike, n.d.).

This mission also reflects Nike's broader vision of making sport accessible, inclusive and meaningful for all individuals, not only for professional athletes. Nike expands the concept of athlete by addressing not only elite professional athletes, but all individuals regardless of their level of athletic performance. This inclusive vision is reflected in the phrase *"If you have a body, you are an athlete"*, which contributes to strengthening the meaning of the company's mission. Through this message, Nike can be perceived as a brand that aims to inspire a broad range of consumers, regardless of their level of athletic performance. In this way, the company strengthens the sense of identification with the brand among consumers who feel represented by its values (Nike, n.d.).

Nike's value proposition is therefore not limited to the functional attributes of its products, such as quality, comfort and performance. Rather, it also includes the emotional and symbolic value associated with the brand, as Nike offers consumers a sense of identity, motivation and belonging. In this sense, Nike does not simply sell sportswear products, but promotes a broader lifestyle based on inspiration, innovation, athletic performance and personal empowerment.

In Nike's case, this purpose is not merely symbolic but is translated into concrete strategic initiatives, particularly in the areas of diversity, equity and inclusion, youth sport development, and environmental sustainability. With regard to diversity, equity and inclusion, Nike is committed to creating a workforce made up of individuals with different cultural backgrounds, life experiences and perspectives. The company also

collaborates with diverse suppliers and small businesses, promoting economic and community development while strengthening its ability to generate value (Nike, n.d.).

Furthermore, Nike places a strong emphasis on culture, inclusion and belonging with the aim of generating innovative ideas that can strengthen its value chain.

Nike also demonstrates a strong commitment to the future of youth sport, aiming to make sport more accessible and inclusive for children with limited economic opportunities.

The company supports the development of athletic activities among children of all ages, also through initiatives and partnerships with organizations that provide products and resources to those in need. These initiatives show how Nike's value system is not only communicated externally but also translated into organizational practices that support social impact and brand differentiation.

Sustainability represents another key pillar of Nike's corporate purpose. Since climate change increasingly affects athletes through poor air quality, extreme heat and unpredictable weather conditions, Nike plays its part in protecting the environment by integrating sustainability practices into its business strategy. These include reducing carbon footprint, eliminating waste and chemicals, and conserving water. Such efforts are reflected in concrete environmental results, such as a 69% reduction in Scope 1 and 2 greenhouse gas emissions from operations, a 36% reduction in Scope 3 greenhouse gas emissions from manufacturing and transportation, the use of 96% electricity consumption from renewable electricity in its operations, and 100% diversion of operational waste, with 60% being reused (Nike, 2024).

A notable example is the Move to Zero sustainability strategy, which aims to reduce carbon emissions and waste through the integration of circular practices and the use of sustainable materials. Nike uses recycled materials to create new products, such as the Tempo shorts, which are made from 75% recycled polyester (Nike, n.d.).

Beyond environmental initiatives, Nike has demonstrated its commitment to engaging with social issues, including racial inequality and discrimination, positioning itself as a purpose-driven organization. In support of this commitment, Nike has donated \$140 million over ten years to support organizations promoting economic empowerment, education and social justice for Black communities (Nike, n.d.).

From a strategic perspective, Nike's corporate purpose and value system can be interpreted as fundamental elements for the creation of long-term value, as they contribute to strengthening the company's intangible assets and guide its decision-making processes. In particular, brand equity represents a critical intangible asset that allows the company to achieve competitive advantage and differentiate itself from its competitors (Keller, 1993). Nike's commitment to inclusion, sustainability and social responsibility therefore strengthens not only its reputation, but also its strategic positioning and stakeholder relationship.

This perspective is consistent with Freeman's stakeholder theory (1984), according to which companies create value by addressing the interests of multiple stakeholders, not only shareholders. Nike's values not only represent ethical principles but also act as strategic drivers that influence the company's strategic and organizational decisions. Nike's strategy reflects an alignment between its mission, market strategies and operational practices, supporting Porter's (1996) view that a company's strategy is based on a set of activities aligned with its positioning.

Furthermore, Nike's approach can be interpreted through the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility, which highlights the role of companies in responding to societal expectations as well as economic objectives (Carroll, 1991). However, Nike's strategy goes beyond a traditional perspective of Corporate Social Responsibility by adopting an integrated approach in which social and environmental initiatives contribute directly to value creation and competitive advantage. This is consistent with the perspective of Porter and Kramer (2006), according to which firms can generate economic value by addressing societal challenges, integrating social and environmental considerations into their core business strategies.

From a managerial perspective, Nike's corporate purpose and value system can also be interpreted as a strategic tool for differentiation. In increasingly competitive markets, companies are required to move beyond competing solely on products and focus on building strong relationships with consumers based on shared values. In this context, Nike's focus on inclusivity, sustainability and social responsibility allows the company to strengthen its emotional connection with consumers, particularly with younger

generations, who increasingly evaluate companies according to their environmental and social impact (Deloitte, 2024).

At the same time, the integration of social and environmental values into corporate strategy exposes the company to higher expectations from stakeholders. A fundamental aspect that consumers increasingly consider is the consistency between what companies communicate and what they actually implement in their strategies.

Therefore, Nike's ability to maintain alignment between its values, strategies and practices becomes a critical factor in sustaining its credibility and long-term success. If the company fails to align its communication with concrete actions, its purpose-driven strategy may be perceived as inconsistent or opportunistic, exposing Nike to the risk of woke-washing or inauthentic brand activism. This occurs when there is a mismatch between sociopolitical messaging and corporate practices (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Overall, Nike's corporate purpose and value system represent an important foundation of its strategic positioning. By combining mission, vision and value proposition with concrete initiatives in innovation, inclusion, sustainability and social responsibility, Nike strengthens its brand identity and reinforces its relationship with stakeholders.

This alignment between corporate purpose and strategic actions represents the foundation for the development of brand activism initiatives and reinforces Nike's position as a purpose-driven leader in the global sportswear industry.

3.3 Stakeholder management and strategic relationships

Stakeholder management represents a key managerial capability for Nike, as the company's long-term competitiveness depends not only on its strategic positioning and corporate purpose, but also on its ability to manage relationships with the stakeholders that shape its business environment. This perspective is grounded in stakeholder theory, which emphasizes the importance of considering the interests of all groups that influence, or are influenced by, the firm's activities, rather than focusing solely on shareholders (Freeman, 1984). Accordingly, stakeholder management is not simply a corporate social responsibility activity, but a strategic management process aimed at managing and integrating the interests of different stakeholder groups in order to ensure the long-term success of the company (Freeman and McVea, 2001).

In the global sportswear industry, this is particularly relevant because Nike operates in a highly competitive environment characterized by strong pressure from multiple stakeholder groups. The company must coordinate the expectations of consumers, employees, suppliers, investors and other relevant actors. Managing these relationships effectively allows Nike to protect its reputation, strengthen trust and sustain its competitive advantage in the long run.

This stakeholder-oriented perspective is reflected in Nike's corporate governance framework. According to Nike's Corporate Governance Guidelines, the Board of Directors is responsible not only for creating long-term shareholder value, but also for considering the concerns of a broader range of stakeholders, including employees, consumers, customers, suppliers, governments, local communities and the general public (Nike, 2026a). This approach is further supported by the Corporate Responsibility, Sustainability and Governance Committee, a Board-level committee responsible for overseeing issues related to corporate responsibility, compliance, sustainability, corporate culture, strategy and risk management. The Committee's Charter formalizes these responsibilities by stating that the Committee provides guidance on Nike's corporate responsibility approach, including sustainability, human rights, community impact and corporate reputation. It also provides guidance to management regarding the company's interactions with various stakeholders, including employees, consumers, customers, suppliers, shareholders, governments, non-governmental organizations, local communities and the general public (Nike, 2026b). Nike also provides a clear classification of its stakeholders distinguishing between direct and indirect stakeholders. In its Corporate Responsibility Report, direct stakeholders include consumers, employees, investors, governments, retailers, athletes and athletic associations, suppliers and workers in the supply chain, while indirect stakeholders include academics, media, trade unions and non-governmental organizations (Nike, 2004). This distinction shows that Nike interacts not only with stakeholders directly involved in its business operations, but also with external groups that can influence its legitimacy and public perception. Moreover, Nike adopts a portfolio approach to stakeholder engagement, using different methods depending on the nature of the relationship and the level of involvement required. These methods include reporting and informing stakeholders about corporate

progress, consulting and involving external actors to seek input, supporting initiatives through endorsements or philanthropic activities, and participating in multi-stakeholder partnerships to access knowledge, resources and experience needed to address corporate responsibility issues (Nike, 2004). This is relevant from a managerial perspective because it shows that Nike does not manage all stakeholders in the same way, but adapts its engagement approach according to the role, influence and contribution of each stakeholder group.

Consumers represent one of Nike's most important stakeholder groups, as their perceptions directly influence brand loyalty, reputation and market performance. They should therefore be considered not only as purchasers of Nike products, but also as stakeholders whose trust is fundamental to Nike's reputation and long-term competitiveness. Nike's Code of Conduct emphasizes that company decisions can affect reputation and trust among consumers, teammates, investors and broader stakeholder groups (Nike, 2025). This shows that consumer relationships depend not only on product performance, but also on the company's credibility and responsible behavior.

Within Nike's stakeholder system, employees play a central role in translating the company's strategy, values and ethical standards into concrete practices. The company's Code of Conduct emphasizes that employees and Board members are expected to act in accordance with the company's ethical principles and standards of behavior, while business partners are also expected to share and observe the same values (Nike, 2025).

This internal alignment strengthens the credibility of Nike's external commitments and supports stakeholder trust. By encouraging employees to consider how business decisions may affect different stakeholder groups, Nike integrates stakeholder awareness into its internal decision-making process (Nike, 2025).

Suppliers and workers in the supply chain represent a critical stakeholder group, as Nike relies on a global network of external manufacturing partners. These relationships influence product quality, cost efficiency and production flexibility, while also exposing Nike to reputational risks connected to labor standards and human rights. Supplier management is therefore not only an operational activity, but also a strategic one. In the apparel and sportswear industry, companies are increasingly evaluated on the behavior of their supply chains. In Nike's case, stakeholder pressure has influenced the company's

response to labor conditions and supplier practices, particularly due to increased visibility from media and activist groups (Lucchini and Moisello, 2019). This shows that supplier management is not only related to efficiency and production performance, but also to accountability, transparency and reputational risk in supply chain governance.

Shareholders and investors are primarily focused on profitability, growth and long-term value creation. However, investor confidence also depends on transparent governance and responsible business conduct. Nike's Corporate Governance Guidelines state that the Board aims to promote long-term shareholder value while also addressing the concerns of other stakeholders (Nike, 2026a). This indicates that investors are part of a wider stakeholder system in which financial performance is connected to responsible and credible business practices (Freeman and McVea, 2001).

External actors, such as local communities, non-governmental organizations and the media, also play an important role in shaping how Nike's actions are perceived. Although they are not directly involved in business operations, they influence the company's legitimacy and public image, particularly in relation to social and environmental issues. The media, in particular, act as an intermediary between companies and the public, influencing how corporate behavior is interpreted and evaluated. At the same time, non-governmental organizations and activist groups monitor corporate practices and can exert pressure on firms to improve their social and environmental performance (Lucchini and Moisello, 2019). Media visibility and activist pressure therefore amplify corporate actions and contribute to public debate, making these stakeholders particularly relevant in the context of brand activism. For a company like Nike, whose communication is highly visible, external stakeholders can strongly influence whether its social commitments are perceived as authentic, credible or opportunistic. Athletes and athletic organizations represent a distinctive component of Nike's stakeholder system. Although these relationships are often associated with marketing and brand positioning, they also have broader strategic relevance. Nike's Corporate Responsibility Report identifies athletes and athletic associations among the company's direct stakeholders, confirming their role within Nike's stakeholder network (Nike, 2004). These actors strengthen Nike's brand identity, enhance credibility and reinforce its position in the sportswear industry. In this sense, athletes also function as symbolic stakeholders, because their image, values

and public positions can shape how the brand is perceived by consumers and society. Increasing consumer expectations, media attention and activist pressure make stakeholder relationships especially relevant for Nike's legitimacy and corporate reputation.

For this reason, stakeholder management is an important foundation for understanding Nike's involvement in brand activism. The company's ability to manage relationships with consumers, athletes, employees, suppliers, investors and external actors helps explain why the collaboration with Colin Kaepernick became not only a communication decision, but also a strategic issue connected to reputation, legitimacy and stakeholder expectations.

4 CHAPTER 4 - THE COLIN KAEPERNICK CAMPAIGN AS A CASE OF BRAND ACTIVISM



Figure 3: Nike's 2018 Dream Crazy advertisement featuring Colin Kaepernick (Nike Inc., 2018)

In 2018, Nike launched one of the most controversial and widely discussed advertising campaigns in recent history by featuring former NFL quarterback Colin Kaepernick as one of the central faces of the 30th anniversary of its *Just Do It* campaign. Nike's decision to associate its brand with Kaepernick, a highly controversial and politically exposed figure, transformed a traditional advertising campaign into a clear case of brand activism. The campaign generated strongly divided reactions among consumers and raised important questions about the role of companies in addressing social issues, as well as the balance between ethical positioning and market objectives (Avery and Pauwels, 2019). The analysis of this case makes it possible to understand how brand activism can be implemented in practice and what its implications are in terms of brand perception, consumer behavior and business performance. The campaign was embedded within Nike's long-standing *Just Do It* platform, historically associated with themes such as determination, resilience and overcoming adversity, which provided a coherent narrative framework for its activist stance.

4.1 Context and overview of the Kaepernick campaign

To understand the significance of Nike's decision, it is necessary to consider the context in which Kaepernick became a symbolic figure. In 2016, while playing as quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, Kaepernick began protesting during the U.S. national anthem before NFL games. Instead of standing, he first sat and later kneeled as a silent protest against police brutality, racial injustice in the United States.



Figure 4: Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the national anthem as a protest (ABC News, 2016)

In post-game remarks, Kaepernick explained his position by stating: “I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses Black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way. There are bodies in the street and people getting paid leave and getting away with murder” (NFL, 2016). This statement intensified public debate and placed him at the center of discussions on race, patriotism and freedom of expression. Although he had not played in the NFL since 2016, his activism turned him into a global symbol of social justice and civil rights advocacy. The protest developed within a broader socio-political context marked by increasing social and political tensions in the United States and by the growing visibility of movements such as Black Lives Matter. The movement was founded in 2013 following the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the killing of Trayvon Martin

and gained further momentum after the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson in 2014. Its core principles emphasize justice, dignity and the recognition of Black lives, with particular attention to groups that have historically been marginalized within social and political movements. The movement also denounces systemic violence and institutional inequalities that disproportionately affect Black communities, including issues related to policing and incarceration systems (Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, n.d.). Within this context, Kaepernick's protest became more than an individual athletic gesture: it became part of a wider cultural and political discussion on racial inequality and social justice.

The protest was widely debated on social media and in public discourse. While some perceived Kaepernick as a symbol of social justice, others criticized his actions as unpatriotic and disrespectful toward the military and national symbols. The debate was further amplified by political reactions. In 2016, President Barack Obama adopted a more nuanced position, stating that Kaepernick was exercising his constitutional right to protest, while also acknowledging that the gesture could be perceived as controversial. Obama also emphasized that the protest had opened a broader conversation on racial inequality and issues that needed to be discussed (Sports Illustrated, 2016; Time, 2016). One year later, President Donald Trump strongly condemned the protest, describing it as disrespectful toward the flag and publicly suggesting that NFL team owners should fire players who kneeled during the national anthem (Baker, 2017; Time, 2017).

This context made any association with Kaepernick particularly sensitive from a managerial perspective. By 2018, he had become not only a former athlete, but also a symbolic figure associated with social justice, freedom of expression and political activism. For this reason, Nike's decision to feature him represented a strategic and highly visible choice, exposing the company to both significant opportunities and reputational risks.

In September 2018 the campaign was launched through an Instagram post featuring Kaepernick's face and the message: "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything. #JustDoIt" (Avery and Pauwels, 2019). Within a few hours, the post went viral and, in less than 24 hours, more than 2.7 million social media posts were referencing the Nike brand, demonstrating the immediate visibility and impact of the campaign. As a

result, this visibility exposed Nike to strong and contrasting reactions: while some consumers praised the company for supporting Kaepernick and taking a clear stance on a social issue, others criticized the decision and accused Nike of politicizing sport, placing the company at the center of a broad public debate.

The campaign was subsequently expanded through the *Dream Crazy* video advertisement, narrated by Kaepernick and featuring several Nike-sponsored athletes, including Serena Williams and LeBron James, together with other athletes overcoming personal, physical and social challenges. Rather than focusing only on Kaepernick, Dream Crazy connected his personal experience to a broader message based on ambition, sacrifice and the courage to pursue dreams that others may consider impossible. The narrative extended beyond individual achievement, focusing on perseverance, ambition, and social barriers. In this way, Nike reinforced and reinterpreted the meaning of its *Just Do It* platform in a socially relevant context (Avery and Pauwels, 2019).

4.2 Strategic motivation

Nike's decision to feature Colin Kaepernick can be interpreted as a strategic choice that goes beyond simple communication, involving corporate positioning, stakeholder expectations, and long-term value creation. Rather than representing a purely promotional initiative, the campaign reflected a broader strategic intent to reinforce Nike's identity as a purpose-driven organization.

From a strategic management perspective, the campaign shows a clear alignment between Nike's identity and the expectations of consumers who increasingly evaluate companies not only for their products, but also for the values they represent.

In particular, Nike focused on younger and globally connected audiences who are more sensitive to social and ethical issues. This is consistent with Stakeholder Theory, according to which firms create value not only for shareholders but also for a broader network of stakeholders (Freeman, 1984).

By taking a visible stance on a controversial issue, Nike strengthened its legitimacy among those stakeholders who expect companies to take part in relevant social debates (Donaldson and Preston, 1995). As highlighted by Avery and Pauwels (2019), the campaign was developed with the awareness that it would generate mixed reactions.

This reinforced the idea that Nike was focused on aligning with stakeholders that share its values and long-term vision, rather than seeking universal consensus.

The choice of Colin Kaepernick was also consistent with Nike's long-term brand positioning. The *Just Do It* platform has historically communicated determination, resilience, and overcoming limits. By integrating Kaepernick's story, Nike extended this narrative from athletic performance to personal conviction and social commitment, reinforcing rather than redefining its identity. This consistency was crucial to maintain authenticity, as consumers tend to react negatively when perceived discrepancies arise between brand communication and corporate behavior. In this case, Kaepernick's personal sacrifice for a social cause was perceived as coherent with Nike's values of courage and perseverance.

From a resource-based view perspective, companies can achieve long-term competitive advantage when they have resources that are valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable (Barney, 1991). In Nike's case, intangible assets such as brand reputation, identity and cultural relevance are key strategic resources built over time and difficult for competitors to replicate. The Kaepernick campaign helped strengthen these assets by reinforcing associations such as courage, authenticity and social relevance, supporting Nike's long-term position in the market.

The campaign can also be interpreted from a risk–return perspective. Nike accepted short-term backlash in exchange for potential long-term benefits. This risk was part of a broader strategy aimed at reinforcing the coherence and distinctiveness of its brand positioning. In addition, the campaign allowed Nike to move beyond product-focused communication and participate in a wider cultural discussion. In this sense, the brand reinforced its role not only as a sportswear company, but also as a corporate actor able to engage with social issues. This is particularly relevant in contemporary markets, where companies are increasingly expected to demonstrate cultural awareness and social responsibility beyond their commercial activities.

Overall, the Kaepernick campaign shows that brand activism can be effective when it is consistent with a brand's history and identity. In Nike's case, the strength of the campaign did not come only from the visibility of the message, but from its connection with values such as courage, determination and willingness to challenge limits, which Nike has

already communicated over time. This helped strengthen Nike's image as a brand able to take a clear position on social issues, while simultaneously supporting its long-term relevance in the sportswear market (Avery and Pauwels, 2019).

4.3 Stakeholder reactions and associated risks

Following the campaign launch, reactions were immediate and highly polarized, involving consumers, media, political actors, investors, athletes, and sports organizations. This reflects a key characteristic of brand activism: messages are interpreted differently depending on stakeholder values and expectations.

Consumer reactions were particularly visible on social media, where both expressions of support and boycott attempts emerged. Alongside expressions of support, some users shared negative content, used boycott-related hashtags and published images or videos showing the destruction of Nike products. Nike's association with Colin Kaepernick immediately positioned the brand at the center of a polarized debate, with both supporters and critics actively engaging on social media (Avery and Pauwels, 2019).



Figure 5: Social media reactions to Nike's Colin Kaepernick campaign, illustrating boycott-related consumer responses (Rich, J. and Clancy, S., 2018)

Reactions were not homogeneous, as different groups interpreted the campaign according to their own values, political views and expectations toward the brand. Some consumers perceived the initiative as consistent with Nike's identity and the values of the *Just Do It* platform, while others perceived it as too political or opportunistic.

Media coverage and political commentary further amplified the debate, transforming the campaign into a broader social-political event. As a result, Nike's communication was interpreted not only as advertising, but also as a public statement on social issues.

From a financial perspective, Nike's stock initially declined by approximately 3%, reflecting short-term market uncertainty. However, this effect was temporary, as the stock recovered in the following weeks and online sales increased significantly (Avery and Pauwels, 2019). According to Edison Trends data, online sales rose by approximately 31% during the Labor Day weekend compared to the previous year (Marketing Dive, 2018). Athletes and sports organizations also represented a sensitive stakeholder group particularly because of Nike's commercial relationship with the NFL. Despite potential tension, Nike framed the campaign within its broader support for athletes' freedom of expression, while maintaining coherence with its brand identity (Avery and Pauwels, 2019).

Overall, the campaign illustrates the complexity of brand activism: while it strengthens relationships with aligned stakeholders, it simultaneously increases exposure to reputational risk and conflicting interpretations. The case therefore shows that taking a public stance on social issues can support brand positioning and cultural relevance but also requires companies to manage increasingly complex and sometimes conflicting stakeholder expectations.

4.4 Implications for Nike's competitive positioning

The Kaepernick campaign had important implications for Nike's competitive positioning. After considering the different reactions generated by the campaign, it is necessary to understand how this initiative affected Nike's position in the sportswear market and its long-term brand strategy. In a highly competitive sportswear industry, where firms compete on performance, innovation, and endorsements, Nike strengthened the symbolic dimension of its brand. Rather than focusing on products, the campaign emphasized values such as courage, sacrifice, and social commitment, positioning Nike not only as a

sportswear company, but also as a brand capable of taking part in cultural and social conversations.

This strategic choice was coherent with Nike's historical identity. The *Just Do It* slogan has always been associated with determination, resilience, and the ability to overcome limits. By linking Kaepernick's story to this platform, Nike extended its meaning from athletic performance to personal conviction and social engagement. In this sense, the campaign did not represent a break with Nike's previous communication, but rather an evolution that reinforced the existing brand narrative (Avery and Pauwels, 2019).

The campaign also enhanced Nike's cultural relevance. In contemporary markets, especially within the sportswear industry, consumers increasingly evaluate brands not only on product attributes, but also on the values they represent. By supporting Kaepernick, Nike became actively involved in public discussions on racial justice, freedom of expression, and the role of athletes in society, thereby strengthening its relevance in a context where cultural positioning plays a key competitive role.

From a brand equity perspective, the campaign reinforced key associations linked to Nike's image, such as courage, authenticity, determination, and social awareness. These associations contribute to strengthening the emotional meaning of the brand and to building stronger consumer-brand relationships (Keller, 1993).

The campaign was also particularly relevant for Nike's relationship with younger consumers. Millennials and Generation Z tend to place greater emphasis on social and ethical issues and are more likely to support brands that reflect their values. While the campaign may have alienated some consumer segments, it strengthened Nike's connection with strategically important audiences for its long-term positioning.

Overall, these elements highlight how the campaign contributed to a broader positioning shift, reinforcing Nike's transition towards a more value-based and culturally engaged brand. In this sense, the Kaepernick initiative not only strengthened brand differentiation, but also increased the emotional and symbolic depth of Nike's positioning.

However, brand activism can also create risks for competitive positioning. When a company takes a stance on controversial issues, it becomes more exposed to public scrutiny, particularly regarding the consistency between communicated values and corporate practices. This aspect was particularly relevant for Nike, given previous

criticism related to labor practices and internal policies. A lack of alignment between communication and operational behavior can weaken brand credibility and undermine the long-term effectiveness of brand activism strategies (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Despite these risks, the campaign ultimately reinforced Nike's positioning as a culturally relevant and socially engaged brand within the sportswear industry. The initial backlash did not significantly affect the brand's long-term performance, suggesting that brand activism can support competitive positioning when it is coherent with brand identity and aligned with the expectations of key target audiences.

Overall, the Kaepernick campaign illustrates how taking a stance on controversial social issues can become an integral part of a broader positioning strategy, strengthening the connection between brand identity, cultural relevance, and consumer engagement, while highlighting the importance of consistency, authenticity, and strategic coherence in brand activism.

Conclusion

This thesis has analyzed brand activism as a strategic and managerial phenomenon, showing that it cannot be considered only as a communication tool, but as a broader strategic choice that can influence brand identity, stakeholder relationships and competitive positioning. The analysis first examined the theoretical foundations of brand activism and its relationship with Corporate Social Responsibility, focusing on its main areas of application, authenticity, woke-washing and managerial implications. It then considered the sportswear industry as a relevant context for this phenomenon, before focusing on Nike's strategic positioning, value system and stakeholder relationships. This framework made it possible to analyze the Colin Kaepernick campaign not as an isolated advertising initiative, but as a strategic case of brand activism.

The analysis of Nike and the Colin Kaepernick campaign demonstrates that brand activism can create value when the values communicated by the brand are consistent with its actions and with the expectations of key stakeholders. In Nike's case, the campaign was effective because it was not perceived as completely disconnected from the company's previous identity. Nike had already built its communication around ideas such as determination, courage and the willingness to challenge limits. For this reason, Colin Kaepernick appeared as a figure capable of making those values more visible in a social and political context. This helped Nike strengthen its cultural relevance and reinforce its relationship with consumers who identified with the values expressed by the campaign. At the same time, the case also demonstrates that brand activism involves significant risks. Taking a public stance on controversial issues can generate visibility and engagement, but it can also expose the company to criticism, boycott attempts and reputational pressure. This means that companies cannot focus only on the potential benefits of activist campaigns but must also consider how different stakeholder groups may interpret the position taken. When the message is perceived as opportunistic or inconsistent with corporate behavior, brand activism can damage credibility and trust.

From a managerial perspective, the main implication is that brand activism can contribute to long-term competitive advantage only under specific conditions. Managers should evaluate not only the potential visibility of a campaign, but also its fit with the brand's

history, stakeholder expectations and internal practices. In this sense, brand activism requires strategic planning, awareness of reputational risks and the ability to support public statements with concrete actions over time.

The Colin Kaepernick case therefore suggests that the impact of brand activism depends less on the visibility of the campaign itself and more on the credibility that stakeholders attribute to the brand's position.

Overall, the strategic value of brand activism does not lie only in taking a public stance, but in sustaining that stance over time. It can support competitive positioning when it is integrated into the company's identity and managed with awareness of both the opportunities and the risks connected to public engagement. For this reason, brand activism should not be treated as a temporary marketing action, but as a managerial choice that requires coherence between communication, corporate values and concrete practices.

Its long-term effectiveness therefore depends on the company's ability to transform public messages into credible and consistent actions.

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