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# Brands Driving Social Change: The Impact of Social Brand Activism on Consumers Pro-Social and Pro-Environmental Attitudes

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## ABSTRACT

Despite its newness, brand activism is an increasingly studied field, given the consecutive adoption of this strategy by large international brands. However, the concrete impacts of brand activism actions, particularly in terms of promoting social change (for example, by promoting attitudes in favor of society and the environment on the part of company stakeholders, such as consumers), have not yet been categorically determined. Moreover, there is also still little research on the possible factors affecting this relationship, namely regarding the emotional processes that can mediate it. In this way, this article investigates the impact of social brand activism on consumers' pro-social and pro-environmental attitudes, and the possible mediating effect of moral elevation, analyzing the brand activism of a Portuguese retail brand. The results showed that social brand activism can directly affect the pro-social and pro-environmental attitudes of consumers. Likewise, social brand activism has indirect impacts on the pro-social and pro-environmental attitudes of this group of stakeholders, through the mediating role of moral elevation. Thus, this study allows for a better understanding of the phenomenon of brand activism and the way this strategy can contribute to generating positive social and environmental changes.

## Introduction

In the current globalized, informed, and attentive world, the relationship and communication between organizations and stakeholders increasingly include the exchange of meanings related to ethical issues and the debate on social matters that previously fit only within the spectrum of the relationship between State and citizens (e.g., Eilert & Cherup, 2020). Stakeholders have increasingly broad expectations on organizations and brands, not only concerning the corporate or business perspective, but also regarding the responsibilities of organizations towards society. Younger generations of consumers, specifically, are more ethically driven and show strong concerns about the social policies of companies (e.g., Shetty et al., 2019). In today's markets, consumers want brands to also contribute and take a stand on social issues, expecting their values to be reflected in business actions (e.g., Moorman, 2020) and even trying to harm brands considered socially irresponsible or

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unethical, for example through backlashes or boycotts (e.g., Cammarota et al., 2021). At the same time, today's consumers are increasingly practicing conscious consumption, characterized as being socially responsible, environmentally friendly, and ethical, trying to minimize their social and environmental impact through the brands they buy (e.g., Roux & Nantel, 2009).

This dynamic led to the growing involvement of corporations in the response to global public issues, taking public positions on matters relevant to society, and acting to promote their improvement or resolution. This strategy is described by Sarkar and Kotler (2018) as brand activism, through which the company's mission is intrinsically linked to social change, addressing the biggest and most pressing issues facing society, by raising awareness and encouraging attitudinal and behavioral changes to improve the defended causes.

Given the nature of social change intrinsic to brand activism strategies, it is thus crucial to adapt the theory inherent to this concept to analysis models that assess whether socially responsible business practices can effectively generate positive changes in society and the environment. In fact, some studies have already concluded that perceptions about the responsible and proactive conduct of a company can generate positive social and environmental attitudinal and behavioral changes on brand consumers (e.g., Negrão et al., 2018; Romani & Grappi, 2014). Such impact, in addition to being direct, can also occur indirectly, when enhanced by an emotional response to companies' responsible social conduct, called moral elevation (Vianello et al., 2010). The study of the role of emotional factors, such as moral elevation, in this relationship becomes critical given that brand activism campaigns address topics that interact with individuals' moral emotions, often being described as a strategy that can generate strong emotions in consumers, which significantly contribute to explaining consumers' responses to brand activism (Wannow et al., 2024). When effective, brand activism can not only create a greater emotional connection between brands and consumers but also morally elevate consumers in a way that they feel more motivated to emulate the brand's altruistic behaviors (Romani & Grappi, 2014).

In this way, this article analyzes the possible impact of brand activism on raising positive social and environmental change, by promoting attitudes in favor of society and the environment on the part of brand consumers, using empirical data from a Portuguese high-consumption retail company. Specifically, this investigation analyzes the extent to which the social activist actions of a Portuguese retail company influenced not only its consumers' attitudes in favor of society, but also in an adjacent area (i.e., the environment), either directly or through the mediating role of moral elevation, generated through these campaigns. First, the concepts of brand activism and pro-social and pro-environmental attitudes are theoretically defined, as well as their direct and mediated impacts by moral elevation. Likewise, the direct and mediated effect of brand activism on consumers' pro-social and pro-environmental attitudes are empirically tested by carrying out a quantitative study with data from 828 consumers of a Portuguese retail company.

The results showed that the sample demonstrates a neutral assessment regarding the brand's social activist campaigns, while demonstrating high levels of attitudes in favor of society and the environment. Regarding the mediating variable, the sample does not demonstrate high levels of moral elevation. Apropos direct and mediated impacts, it was found that social brand activism positively impact the pro-social and pro-environmental attitudes of consumers, while moral elevation positively mediates the impact of social brand activism on consumers' pro-social and pro-environmental

attitudes. From the results, some conclusions are drawn about how companies can use activist strategies to generate positive social and environmental changes, especially in the Portuguese context, also offering insights into future research in a field as promising as brand activism.

## Theoretical underpinnings

### *The brand activism phenomenon*

Since the 1950s, organizations without direct social purposes, such as product or service companies/brands, began to realize the need to take social responsibility issues into account to manage a mutually beneficial relationship with its stakeholders (Carroll, 1999). Consequently, many companies began to include social aspects in their mission or in the values that govern their conduct. Scientific research and business application of communication strategies for social change in the context of economic markets, as well as the development of social marketing, cause-related marketing strategies and, above all, of corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies, has thus led to a greater discussion on business ethics and on the responsibilities that companies and brands should assume towards society (Kreitlon, 2004).

However, over time it became increasingly evident for the need for these corporate social strategies to evolve towards others that are more proactive and meaningful in addressing certain sociopolitical issues. In fact, the study and application of CSR has fallen within a philanthropic-strategic framework, in which companies are able to simultaneously achieve social and corporate objectives (Godfrey & Hatch, 2006), but there is no extensive research on the effective sociopolitical effects that corporate social policies can assume.

As such, progress in understanding CSR is evolving towards other theoretical concepts, with a greater focus on the social, economic, and political changes that the implementation and effective communication of corporate social strategies can generate, as is the case of corporate social advocacy (e.g., Austin et al., 2019) and brand activism (e.g., Eilert & Cherup, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). In fact, these terms are sometimes used interchangeably in the literature given their subtle differences, although, while corporate social advocacy arises as a subset of CSR that involves corporate stances in support or opposition to public and often controversial issues (e.g., Austin et al., 2019), brand activism includes but goes beyond advocacy/messaging to involve tangible changes and actions within and outside the organization to facilitate sociopolitical change (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Brand activism thus occurs when a company promotes a social, economic, environmental, or cultural issue, aligning it with its core values and vision (Shetty et al., 2019). Likewise, the concept can be described as a company's willingness to take a stand on social, political, economic, and environmental issues to create societal change by influencing the attitudes and behaviors of actors in its institutional environment (Eilert & Cherup, 2020). This strategy can either be carried out through statements and/or actions, being a firm's public demonstration of support or opposition to a sociopolitical issue (Bhagwat et al., 2020). For their part, Sarkar and Kotler (2018, p. 570) bring the most cited definition of brand activism, defining it as the "business efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to promote or impede improvements in society." According to the authors (2018), the concept goes

beyond CSR, as it is not guided by marketing or corporate principles, but by society and its values.

In this way, companies/brands can engage in activist actions covering different types of causes, such as social, environmental, legal, economic, political, or even organizational issues, which many times have nothing to do with their lines of business or value chain and are issues on which society has not yet reached a consensus, including issues related to LGBTQIA+ rights, immigration, environment problems or racial equality (e.g., Moorman, 2020). In fact, given the increased awareness regarding social and environmental issues, social and environmental brand activism are widely endorsed by activist brands, trying to draw attention to relevant causes and promote a positive change in mindsets and attitudes on these topics (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). In addition to advocating about the causes, activist companies also act proactively to see these problems solved, for example by threatening to transfer business activities from places that pass controversial laws, by organizing demonstrations or strikes to claim certain issues or by creating their own projects to support the causes (e.g., Vredenburg et al., 2020). In this way, the construct of “authenticity” becomes crucial in brand activism and a necessary condition to achieve successful forms of activism. Authenticity can be a strategy to overcome skepticism, an almost natural reaction for brand activism, so addressing the defended issues in a genuine and complete way, with intangible (messages) stances that are aligned with the brand’s image, communication and tangible (practical actions) commitments with the defended sociopolitical causes, is essential for the public to consider the company’s motives to be altruistic/public service and sincere (Schmidt et al., 2022; Verlegh, 2024).

Thus, although the purposes of brand activism campaigns can include an economic dimension such as increased financial returns for brands and increased brand equity (Shetty et al., 2019), their primary goal is to guide the company towards the common good and associating it with ethical values and social purposes (Key et al., 2021; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018).

### **Social brand activism**

Social issues were among the first topics to be addressed by brands (diNorcia, 1989). As such, social brand activism is one of the most prone forms of brand activism, referring to issues such as gender equality, social justice, feminism, LGBTQIA+ rights, abortion, racism, immigration, age issues, human rights, same-sex marriage, human trafficking, and diversity. It also includes societal and community issues such as education, healthcare, social security, privacy, consumer protection, among others (Camarrota et al., 2021; Moorman, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018).

Significant examples of social brand activism arose with the global spread of the Black Lives Matter movement after the death of African-American George Floyd, in 2020, strangled by a police officer, which accelerated the public felling around the need for society and brands to face systemic racism (Gray, 2019). Brands like Nike and Procter & Gamble, previously publicly positioned as being against racism, responded proactively to what happened in the United States of America (USA). After Floyd’s death, Nike changed its slogan (Just Do It) for the first time to “Don’t Do It”, in a video shared on its social media appealing its consumers not to be indifferent to racism in the USA and to join the protests that were taking place in several states, a message shared on

X even by its biggest competitor, Adidas. At the same time, the brand committed to investing 40 million dollars during the next four years in support of the Black community in the United States, namely by supporting organizations that work with social justice, education and addressing racial inequality in America (Nike, 2020). Procter and Gamble (2020) also used its online platform to share materials with its consumers and the community (documents, films, articles, books, TedTalks, podcasts, Instagram profiles of Black activists, organizations and projects to support the Black community or even guides for teachers to acquire techniques to teach about tolerance), as a way to promote dialogue and people's action on this topic.

The ice cream brand Ben & Jerry's has also a history of using its ice cream to promote social justice, from racial and marriage equality to immigrant rights. For example, the flavor "Chubby Hubby" became "Hubby Hubby" in 2009 to celebrate same sex marriage in Vermont, and EmpowerMint was launched in 2016 to promote voting rights (Meyer, 2018). In Australia, Ben & Jerry's refused to serve customers two scoops of the same flavor of ice-cream until LGBTQIA+ marriage was legalized in the country (Pallazzo, 2017). Furthermore, in 2018 Ben & Jerry's launched a new limited-edition ice cream flavor "Pecan Resist", celebrating activists who defend social causes such as LGBTQIA+ rights, racial and gender equity, and refugee and immigrant fair policies (Ben & Jerry's, 2018a). To further this mission, the ice cream brand donated \$25,000 each to four organizations that support these goals and invited their consumers to act on these causes by signing up for emails from the partner organizations and supporting their work (Ben & Jerry's, 2018b). With this campaign, the brand managed to get more than 48,000 subscriptions from consumers who wanted to join the struggle of the supported organizations (Ben & Jerry's, 2018a).

### ***The pro-social and pro-environmental attitudes of consumers***

The notion of attitude began to be widely studied in the 20th century in social sciences and social psychology (Lima, 2004), seeking to identify the individual's beliefs and convictions regarding a predetermined subject, considering the context in which the individual is inserted and his/her own current/past and direct/indirect experiences (Asch, 1960). In *The Psychology of Attitudes*, Eagly and Chaiken (1993, p. 1) provide an abstract definition of attitude as "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor." In addition to this positive or negative evaluation, the concept is also related to an organized, lasting, and coherent way of thinking, feeling, and reacting in relation to people, groups, social issues, or any event that occurs in the surrounding environment (Krech et al., 1975), as well as a psychological predisposition that influences decision making depending on a given situation (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). An attitude thus involves a cognitive, affective, and behavioral component, and can change at any time in life, as long as there are variations in its cognitive (e.g., new knowledge), affective (e.g., positive or negative affective experience in relation to a given object), and/or behavioral (e.g., new circumstances that create conditions for new behaviors) factor (Cazals-Ferré & Rossi, 2007). In this way, the study of attitudes also becomes relevant within the context of brand activism because attitudes involve active aspects that pre-establish the structuring of behaviors, preparing the individual to act according to their cognitions and affections (Akande, 2009).

Expanding from the notion of attitude, some authors have been developing other related concepts, namely concerning the assessment of individuals regarding social and environmental objects, such as society itself (e.g., S. Kim et al., 2012; Kroll & Vogel, 2013), and the environment (e.g., Bissing-Olson et al., 2013; Wu, 2012).

In this way, S. Kim et al. (2012) explore individuals' motivation for public service in different cultural and national contexts as the set of individual predispositions that are oriented towards the provision of services that benefit society and go beyond personal or organizational interests, relating the concept of pro-social attitudes to attitudes that involve altruistic and humanitarian concerns for others and an other-orientation, self-sacrifice, and empathy focus (S. Kim et al., 2012). For their part, Kroll and Vogel (2013) investigate pro-social attitudes among public and private sector employees in a longitudinal study, defining pro-social attitudes as encompassing social and political involvement, that is, a commitment to the public interest and the common good, and a predisposition to help/take care of others, related to the importance of social relationships and the compassion for others. These attitudes are relatively stable over time and are not significantly shaped by employment sector. In this way, pro-social attitudes encompass a positive assessment of social duties and active citizenship practices, such as helping to solve social issues, working to better the community, setting a good example or being tolerant of others, also involving a sense of obligation to help those in need, a positive opinion about acts of charity and volunteering or the feeling that individual welfare is linked to the well-being of others, with a greater predisposition to help, share, cooperate, care for, assist or comfort others (Caprara et al., 2005; Kroll & Vogel, 2013).

On the other hand, Bissing-Olson et al. (2013) investigate how individuals' pro-environmental attitudes influence their environmental behaviors, defining pro-environmental attitudes as an expressed psychological tendency to demonstrate a concern for the protection of natural environment, ecology, and environmental issues. Corraliza and Berenguer (2000, p. 833) defined pro-environmental attitudes as "people's predispositions, relatively durable and relatively organized, to pay attention to, be concerned about, and, ultimately, to act in the name of environmental protection". Individuals with pro-environmental attitudes thus recognize nature as fundamentally valuable and humans as an integral part of human-nature networks (Wu, 2012). Thus, they demonstrate a positive predisposition to engage in environmental issues, such as the Earth's load capacity, the balance of ecosystems, nature preservation, preservation of the diversity of natural species, and sustainable development (Dunlap et al., 2000; Milfont & Duckitt, 2010), and have positive assessments regarding environmentally friendly practices, such as recycling, saving energy, buying environmentally friendly products or choosing a more environmentally friendly means of transport (Bamberg, 2003).

Currently, it is known that the mechanisms of social influence that transmit and shape individual attitudes are not restricted to interpersonal relationships. Companies' actions can also influence individuals' attitudes both in situations related and unrelated to the brand context, namely in the field of pro-sociality (e.g., Negrão et al., 2018) and pro-environmentalism (e.g., Romani et al., 2016). This influence can occur especially when the consumer is driven by altruistic values (Basil & Weber, 2006), the social issues addressed by companies are relevant to the consumer (Golob et al., 2008), and the consumer perceives the company's motivations to engage in the cause as altruistic and authentic (Romani et al., 2016).

## ***The impact of brand activism on the pro-social and pro-environmental attitudes of consumers and the mediating role of moral elevation***

As a values-driven strategy, brand activism assumes stronger purposes than the pursuit of profit by seeking primarily to contribute to a broader public interest and sociopolitical objectives (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). In this sense, several researchers began to study companies' ability to influence consumers to adopt pro-social (e.g., Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Negrão et al., 2018; Romani & Grappi, 2014) and pro-environmental (Romani et al., 2016) postures, through brand activist actions and communications.

Several studies have been confirming that the social actions of companies can contribute to generating favorable consumer attitudes towards society (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Negrão et al., 2018; Romani & Grappi, 2014). As a result of companies' social initiatives, consumers start to show greater support for social causes supported by the company and other related causes (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Du et al., 2008) and increase their intentions to make donations to support social causes or do volunteer work (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Negrão et al., 2018; Romani & Grappi, 2014). Romani and Grappi (2014), for example, found that CSR actions generate a desire in consumers to become better people and to contribute to the community, namely by increasing their intentions and actual behavior to make donations to social causes closely associated with the cause defended by the brand and to do volunteer work. Likewise, Negrão et al. (2018) found that consumers who are exposed to pro-social communications from brands are more likely to adopt pro-social behaviors, both in issues associated with the defended cause and in situations unrelated to the cause supported by the company. In the environmental domain, Romani et al. (2016) studied a real corporate initiative to encourage ecologically correct and conscious consumption, verifying that the support of brands to environmental causes promotes consumer readiness to support the environmental cause promoted by the company and other causes of environmental protection, namely through the support for the choice of ecological products. Likewise, Mahmud (2024) concluded that consumers that have a better knowledge of companies' CSR – a practice that often involves social actions – and that rely more on their CSR knowledge significantly demonstrate higher environmentally friendly attitudes and green purchasing behaviors, indicating that sharing social responsible initiatives with consumers can encourage pro-environmental attitudes and practices.

In addition to the study of the direct impact of the brand activist actions on the promotion of consumers' pro-social and pro-environmental attitudes, current research has also focused on factors that may interfere in this relationship, particularly on the mediating role of emotional factors, such as moral elevation (e.g., Vianello et al., 2010).

Moral elevation is described as a moral emotion belonging to the group of other-praising emotions – a group of moral emotions that arise from the virtuous actions of others, including organizations or brands (Haidt, 2003; Wannow et al., 2024). Moral elevation is thus a positive emotional response to witnessing acts of altruism or virtue (Diessner et al., 2013) and can lead to short-term personal motivation to be a better person, demonstrate moral growth, or emulate the observed virtuous attitudes/behaviors (Vianello et al., 2010).

Given its ability to arouse altruistic motivations, a growing body of evidence has been demonstrating the mediating role of moral elevation in the impact of brand activism in promoting consumers' attitudes in favor of society and the environment. In fact, several authors have already pointed out that moral and ethical organizations can be morally

uplifting, moving their stakeholders to higher stages of moral development (Bass, 1998), especially when stakeholders consider the corporate involvement with sociopolitical causes as authentic, altruistic, and disinterested (Romani et al., 2016). As such, the ethical actions of companies are perceived by consumers as morally virtuous acts, provoking positive moral responses, such as moral elevation (Romani & Grappi, 2014; Romani et al., 2016). For its part, the elicitation of moral elevation by the activist actions of companies can motivate consumers to adopt more altruistic postures by creating a generalized desire to become a better person and emulate the corporate moral example (J. E. Kim & Johnson, 2013). In this way, moral elevation becomes a very suitable emotion to mediate the effect of brand activism campaigns in promoting attitudes in favor of society and the environment, since it is incited by acts of benevolence and, on the other hand, motivates individuals to adopt ethical and moral postures/attitudes.

The study by Romani and Grappi (2014), for instance, focused on the role of moral elevation as a mediating variable between the social activities of companies and the intentions and pro-social behaviors of consumers, concluding that when consumers are exposed to such initiatives, their donation and volunteering intentions and behaviors are enhanced through the mediation of moral elevation. Likewise, Romani et al. (2016) found that the moral elevation elicited by corporate activist initiatives fully mediates the relationship between consumers' perceptions of brand activism actions and their pro-environmental behavioral responses to the supported causes and to broader environmental issues. Finally, the results of the research by Zheng et al. (2019) revealed that enhanced moral elevation mediates the effect of cause-related marketing campaigns and consumers' positive attitudes towards purchasing social-cause-related products.

Bearing in mind the positive empirical impacts of brand activism on consumers' pro-social and pro-environmental attitudes, as well as the verified mediating role of moral elevation in this relationship, the following research hypotheses were defined:

**H1:** Social brand activism has a positive impact on consumers' pro-social attitudes.

**H2:** Social brand activism has a positive impact on consumers' pro-environmental attitudes.

**H3:** Moral elevation positively mediates the impact of social brand activism on consumers' pro-social attitudes.

**H4:** Moral elevation positively mediates the impact of social brand activism on consumers' pro-environmental attitudes.

## Method

The study of the effect of the brand activism actions of a major Portuguese retail company on the pro-social and pro-environmental attitudes of its consumers was carried out through a quantitative correlational analysis (Tashakkori & Newman, 2010). The choice of the retail company under study is related to the fact that it is one of the most recognized Portuguese companies for carrying out actions that fall

within brand activism, in addition to being one of the retail companies from which the Portuguese buy the most. Examples of social brand activism by the company under analysis include initiatives to support social inclusion, including campaigns focused on gender equality, mental health, or racism, not only through communication campaigns but through concrete actions, for example at an educational level. The assessment of social brand activism was based on the scales of Glavas and Kelley (2014), Sen et al. (2006), and Turker (2009), measuring dimensions such as perception of activism (e.g., perception of the brand's social responsibility), perception of congruence (e.g., internal and external support of the brand for social causes), perception of authenticity (e.g., perception of the brand's genuine support for social causes), and decision making (e.g., inclusion of social issues in the overall brand strategy). The choice to study social brand activism is related to the fact that the brand under analysis has a very strong history in terms of social activism.

Pro-social attitudes were measured using items from the scales developed by Caprara et al. (2005) and Morselli and Passini (2015), while pro-environmental attitudes were assessed based on the scales of Dunlap et al. (2000) and Milfont and Duckitt (2010). Items related to moral elevation were measured from the Aquino et al. (2011) and Schnall et al. (2010) scales. The internal consistency reliability of all scales was tested through Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability analysis (Hair et al., 2017), with all variables presenting Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values above 0.89, demonstrating high internal consistency and the lack of need to remove items from the scales.

Sample responses were collected by sending a questionnaire survey by email and shared on social networks, with 37 closed-ended questions. To ensure that respondents were consumers of the brand under analysis, consumers would have to purchase from the brand at least every two months to be able to respond to the questionnaire survey. In this sense, a screening question was included at the beginning of the questionnaire, asking about the average purchase frequency of respondents in the stores of the brand under study. Response options are based on a five-point agreement scale, where 1 corresponds to completely disagree and 5 to completely agree. Responses were collected from April 13th and July 31st, 2023. Ethical criteria were considered during the questionnaire management, including the application of informed consent and the assurance of data confidentiality.

The sample consists of 828 consumers of a Portuguese retail brand. Of the 828 individuals that make up the sample, the vast majority (69.7%) are female, with the remaining participants being male (29.5%) or other gender (0.8%). Regarding age distribution, 23.6% of the sample are between 38 and 47 years old, 21.0% are between 28 to 37 years old, 20.4% are between 18 to 27 years old, and 19.8% are between 48 to 57 years old, yet individuals between 58 and 67 years old correspond to 12.1% of the sample. The age group least represented in the sample refers to individuals aged 68 or over (3.1%). In terms of educational background, most of the sample has higher education (76.2%), 22.0% have secondary or postsecondary education, and only 1.8% has basic education.

The analysis of the collected data was carried out using the SmartPLS software, version 4.0.9.9 for Windows, proceeding to analysis of frequencies per item and means per variable, and structural equation modeling (SEM) analysis based on partial least squares (PLS) (Lee et al., 2011).

## Results

### *Social brand activism*

In general, consumers have a neutral assessment of the social brand activism of the retail company under analysis, with a mean of 3.0 and a standard deviation of 1.0.

Specifically, consumers positively evaluate the brand as a socially responsible brand ( $M = 3.3$ ;  $SD = 1.0$ ) and believe that the brand supports social solidarity institutions and organizes campaigns and projects with a view to promoting social well-being ( $M = 3.2$ ;  $SD = 1.0$ ).

However, consumers are less certain about the fact that contributing to the well-being of society is a major priority for the brand, and that the brand's genuine desire to promote improvements in society is what motivates the brand's support for social causes ( $M = 2.8$ ;  $SD = 1.1$ , each).

### *Pro-social attitudes*

Regarding the analysis and evaluation of pro-social attitudes, it is possible to conclude that, on average, consumers demonstrate a high standard of this type of attitudes ( $M = 4.2$ ), without a large dispersion of data ( $SD = 0.9$ ).

By analyzing Table 2, most consumers agree that is important of help other people ( $M = 4.6$ ;  $SD = 0.7$ ), and consider they put themselves in other people's shoes ( $M = 4.5$ ;  $SD = 0.8$ ).

**Table 1.** Descriptive analysis: social brand activism.

	Mean	SD
I consider this brand a socially responsible brand.	3.3	1.0
The brand supports social solidarity institutions that work on problematic social issues and organizes campaigns and projects with a view to promoting social well-being.	3.2	1.0
The brand is attentive and concerned with responding to society's needs and problems.	3.1	1.0
The brand encourages its public to participate in its actions in favor of society.	3.0	1.0
The brand promotes actions to improve the lives of current and future generations.	2.9	1.0
Social issues are an integral part of the brand' strategy.	2.9	1.1
Contributing to the well-being of society is a major priority for this brand.	2.8	1.1
I believe that the brand's genuine desire to promote improvements in society was what motivated the brand's decision to support social causes.	2.8	1.1
<b>Social Brand Activism</b>	<b>3.0</b>	<b>1.0</b>

**Table 2.** Descriptive analysis: pro-social attitudes.

	Mean	SD
I consider it is important to help other people.	4.6	0.7
I think it is important to try to put myself in other people's shoes.	4.5	0.8
I feel a responsibility to contribute to the well-being of society, helping to minimize or solve social problems.	4.2	0.9
I feel that I should share what I have with those in need.	4.1	0.9
I feel that I must comfort and care for those in need.	4.1	0.9
I feel responsible for improving the community in which I live.	4.1	0.9
I consider myself willing to make material, monetary or intellectual resources available to help others (for example, through donations).	3.9	1.1
I feel available to carry out volunteer or charitable activities.	3.7	1.2
<b>Pro-social Attitudes</b>	<b>4.2</b>	<b>0.9</b>

**Table 3.** Descriptive analysis: pro-environmental attitudes.

	Mean	SD
I consider it important to protect the environment.	4.7	0.6
I feel responsible for contributing to the minimization or resolution of environmental problems, considering it important to recycle, save water and energy or reduce pollution.	4.6	0.7
I think it is important to adopt more sustainable consumption practices.	4.5	0.8
I find it important to stay informed about current environmental problems and issues.	4.4	0.8
I think it is important to find more environmentally friendly modes of transport.	4.3	0.9
I am willing to change my way of life to protect the environment.	4.2	0.9
I believe that human beings are not more important in nature than other living beings, such as animals and plants.	3.9	1.2
I feel available to carry out volunteer activities or financially support an environmental organization.	3.7	1.1
<b>Pro-environmental Attitudes</b>	<b>4.3</b>	<b>0.9</b>

On the other hand, the availability to make material, monetary or intellectual resources available to help others ( $M = 3.9$ ;  $SD = 1.1$ ), and to carry out volunteer or charitable activities ( $M = 3.7$ ;  $SD = 1.2$ ), are the factors least considered by consumers, despite being quite satisfactorily rated.

### **Pro-environmental attitudes**

Apropos pro-environmental attitudes, the sample of consumers also demonstrates a high level of this type of attitudes ( $M = 4.3$ ), without a large dispersion of data ( $SD = 0.9$ ).

Most consumers consider important to protect the environment ( $M = 4.7$ ;  $SD = 0.6$ ), feel responsible for contributing to the minimization or resolution of environmental problems ( $M = 4.6$ ;  $SD = 0.7$ ), and think it is important to adopt more sustainable consumption practices ( $M = 4.5$ ;  $sSD = 0.8$ ).

The belief that human beings are not more important in nature than other living beings ( $M = 3.9$ ;  $SD = 1.2$ ), and the availability to carry out volunteer activities or financially support an environmental organization ( $M = 3.7$ ;  $SD = 1.1$ ) are slightly less positively evaluated by consumers, despite continuing to present very high means.

### **Moral elevation**

As can be seen in Table 4, moral elevation is, on average, negatively evaluated by the sample of consumers ( $M = 2.3$ ), without a relevant dispersion of data ( $SD = 1.2$ ).

**Table 4.** Descriptive analysis: moral elevation.

	Mean	SD
I am in awe of the social activism actions of this brand.	2.4	1.2
I feel like following this brand's example of conduct at a social level.	2.4	1.2
I feel inspired by the social activism actions of this brand.	2.3	1.2
When I think of this brand and its social activism actions, I feel that there is still kindness and generosity in the world.	2.3	1.2
When I think about this brand and its social activism actions, I feel that humanity has admirable actions.	2.3	1.1
This brand's social activism makes me want to be a better person.	2.3	1.2
This brand's social activism makes me want to practice more virtuous acts towards others and the environment.	2.3	1.2
I am moved by the social activism actions of this brand.	2.2	1.2
When I witness, see, or hear about the social activism actions of this brand, I often experience physical sensations such as warmth in my chest, chills, tingling, tears in my eyes, muscle relaxation or a "lump" in my throat.	1.8	1.0
<b>Moral Elevation</b>	<b>2.3</b>	<b>1.2</b>

Although the mean values of each item are always below the central point of the scale, the factors with which respondents least disagreed are related to their awe regarding the brand's social activism actions, and their will to follow the brand's example of conduct at a social level ( $M = 2.4$ ;  $SD = 1.2$ , each).

The least pronounced value ( $M = 1.8$ ;  $SD = 1.0$ ), revealing respondent disagreement, pertains to the item "When I witness, see, or hear about the social activism actions of this brand, I often experience physical sensations such as warmth in my chest, chills, tingling, tears in my eyes, muscle relaxation or a "lump" in my throat."

### **Direct and mediated impacts**

To investigate the direct and indirect impacts between the variables under study, the consistent PLS-SEM was chosen, since all factors are reflective (Dijkstra & Henseler, 2015), with weighting scheme – path settings. The analysis of the significance of the paths between the constructs was carried out using consistent PLS-SEM bootstrapping, with minimum subsamples of 5,000, bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrap, and a significance level of 5% (two tailed test).

By executing the PLS-SEM consistent algorithm it was verified that any indicator<sup>1</sup> should be removed from the model, based on the analysis of the respective weight of outer loadings (Hair et al., 2017). In this sense, the final model is composed of one exogenous reflective construct<sup>2</sup> (social brand activism) and three endogenous reflective constructs (moral elevation, pro-social attitudes, and pro-environmental attitudes).

The validity of the reflective measurement model is measured through internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability values), convergent validity, and discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2017). All latent variables presented values of Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability above 0.89, demonstrating high internal consistency. Likewise, all variables present a satisfactory level of convergent validity, with values greater than 0.50, meaning that all constructs explain more than half of the variance of its indicators. Finally, the cross loadings values obtained for each indicator are higher for the construct to which they belong in relation to the other constructs, demonstrating that each construct represents a diverse and unique issue and validating the discriminant validity criterion.

The analysis of the structural model is carried out through the assessment of Pearson's coefficient of determination ( $R^2$ ), effect size ( $f^2$ ), predictive relevance ( $Q^2$ ), and the size and statistical significance of the structural path coefficients (direct and indirect impacts). The results regarding  $R^2$  show that moral elevation is explained in 56% by the effects of its predictors, with a moderate predictive accuracy. For their part, pro-social and pro-environmental attitudes present much lower predictive values ( $R^2 = 0.15$  and  $0.04$ , respectively), already considered reasonably weak (Hair et al., 2017). Regarding  $f^2$  values, all the relationships in the model have small effects (Cohen, 1988), since the maximum  $f^2$  value found is 0.07, representing the relationship between social brand activism and moral elevation. The remaining effects are considered weak or statistically insignificant, with  $f^2$  value varying between 0.04 and 0.01. The results of  $Q^2$  conclude that all endogenous

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<sup>1</sup>An indicator is a variable that can be effectively measured (Hair et al., 2017).

<sup>2</sup>A construct is a variable that cannot be observed and is estimated through indicators (Hair et al., 2017).

**Table 5.** PLS-SEM bootstrapping: direct and indirect impacts.

Path	Direct Impacts		Indirect Impacts	
	Coefficient ( $\beta$ )	P-value	Coefficient ( $\beta$ )	P-value
SBA $\rightarrow$ PSA	0.46	0.00	–	–
SBA $\rightarrow$ PEA	0.26	0.00	–	–
SBA $\rightarrow$ ME	0.43	0.00	–	–
ME $\rightarrow$ PSA	0.38	0.00	–	–
ME $\rightarrow$ PEA	0.17	0.00	–	–
SBA $\rightarrow$ ME $\rightarrow$ PSA	–	–	0.17	0.00
SBA $\rightarrow$ ME $\rightarrow$ PEA	–	–	0.07	0.00

constructs have predictive relevance, since the  $Q^2$  values are greater than 0. Moral elevation is the endogenous construct with the greatest predictive relevance ( $Q^2 = 0.52$ ), followed by pro-social ( $Q^2 = 0.05$ ) and pro-environmental ( $Q^2 = 0.01$ ) attitudes.

After analyzing the predictive power of the structural model, estimates of the relationships between constructs are obtained, using PLS-SEM bootstrapping. Beta coefficients ( $\beta$ ) or path coefficients and the level of significance ( $p$ -value) of each effect are analyzed, estimating the strength and statistical significance of the relationship between the independent, mediating, and dependent variables (Table 5).

The results indicate a positive impact of social brand activism on the pro-social ( $\beta = 0.46$ ), and pro-environmental ( $\beta = 0.26$ ) attitudes of consumers, both being a significant relationship ( $p = .00$ ). Social brand activism also directly impacts consumers' moral elevation ( $\beta = 0.43$ ;  $p = .00$ ). For its part, moral elevation positively impacts both the promotion of consumers' pro-social ( $\beta = 0.38$ ;  $p = .00$ ) and pro-environmental ( $\beta = 0.17$ ;  $p = .00$ ) attitudes. The model also identifies an indirect effect of social brand activism on the pro-social ( $\beta = 0.17$ ;  $p = .00$ ) and pro-environmental ( $\beta = 0.07$ ;  $p = .00$ ) attitudes of consumers, mediated by moral elevation. It should be noted that all the impacts found (whether direct or mediated) proved to be stronger in relation to consumers' pro-social attitudes than in relation to their attitudes towards the environment.

## Discussion

The results obtained suggest that surveyed consumers demonstrate a neutral assessment in relation to the social brand activism of the Portuguese retail company under study, yet considering the brand as socially responsible, supportive for social solidarity institutions and proactive in organizing campaigns and projects to promote social well-being. Nonetheless, consumers do not have a very positive evaluation regarding the belief that contributing to the well-being of society is a major priority for the brand, and that the brand's genuine desire to improve society is what motivates the brand's support for social causes, highlighting an essential area for the effective management of brand activism actions. In fact, as discussed in the literature by Vredenburg et al. (2020) or Schmidt et al. (2022), the perceptions about the authenticity or inauthenticity of a brand's activist actions and its core motivations influence the way consumers assess and react to brand activism. Therefore, this is a factor with potential improvement for the brand under analysis, which should ensure an active involvement with the defended causes and an effective communication of its stances to be well perceived by its consumers (Key et al., 2021). It is also important to note that the company under analysis is operating in the Portuguese market,

where brand activism is not yet as explicitly communicated as, for example, in the American market (Chatterji & Toffel, 2018), so this more restrained activist communication can also contribute to a neutral assessment by consumers regarding the brand's activism strategies.

On the other hand, the results of this study indicate that surveyed consumers demonstrate a high degree of positive attitudes towards society and the environment, namely agreeing on the importance of helping other people and protecting the environment, believing that it is important to put themselves in other people's shoes and feeling responsible for contributing to the minimization or resolution of environmental problems. However, the sample revealed less predisposition to activities that involve greater effort of time and resources, such as carry out volunteer activities or financially support a social or environmental organization.

Regarding moral elevation, in general the sample of consumers does not feel morally elevated by the activism actions of the brand under study, not experiencing physical sensations such as warmth in the chest, chills or tingling when they witness, see, or hear about the social activism actions of the brand, nor feeling moved by the brand's social activism actions. The fact is that consumers demonstrated neutrality regarding the social activism of the brand under analysis, especially on key topics such as the belief that social actions are a priority for the brand and the authenticity of the brand's involvement with the defended causes, preventing them from feeling more positive emotions through the brand's activist actions because emotions such as moral elevation are triggered by actions considered genuine (Romani et al., 2016).

The PLS-SEM bootstrapping results, relating to the direct and mediated impacts of social brand activism on consumers' pro-social and pro-environmental attitudes, denote a stronger direct effect of social brand activism on consumers' pro-social attitudes, but also impacting their pro-environmental attitudes, thus confirming H1 and H2. This suggests that brand activism significantly promotes the adoption of attitudes in favor of society and the environment, even when its assessment is neutral, making consumers more likely to engage on social duties and active citizenship practices, and to demonstrate concerns for environmental issues and the adoption of environmentally friendly practices, thus contributing to social change. These findings are in line with those obtained by Bhattacharya and Sen (2004), Romani et al. (2016), and Negrão et al. (2018), who found that brand activism actions could be recognized as significant predictor of consumers' concerns relating to society and the environmental, adopting pro-social and pro-environmental attitudes more easily.

The results of this study also confirm the mediating effect of moral elevation in the impact of social brand activism on consumers' pro-social (H3) and pro-environmental attitudes (H4), as suggested by Romani and Grappi (2014) or Romani et al. (2016). It is interesting to note that this mediating impact occurs even when there are low to neutral levels of moral elevation, although the large sample size may influence/inflated these results. Nevertheless, the significant positive impact of social brand activism on consumer's moral elevation, and the considerable direct impact of moral elevation on the promotion of consumer's pro-social and pro-environmental attitudes also affect the occurrence of the mediating impact. Because the activist actions of the brand under analysis elicit moral elevation in its their consumers, as also studied by Romani and Grappi (2014), and that experiencing moral elevation awakens motivational tendencies to adopt more altruistic postures that can be associated with the adoption of pro-social

and pro-environmental attitudes (e.g., Romani et al., 2016), the mediating effect of moral elevation can be expected. In fact, the item of moral elevation related to the willingness to follow the brand's example of conduct at a social level, although its low value, was one of the most valued by the sample of consumers. Although the mediated effect of moral elevation is stronger in relation to attitudes in favor of society than in favor of the environment, both relationships are statistically relevant, thus proving that a brand being socially responsible awakens positive emotions in its consumers, motivating them to moral growth, which in turn can make consumers to adopt positive attitudes towards society and the environment.

## Conclusions

The present study focuses on the sociopolitical impacts of brand activism, such as the adoption of attitudes in favor of society and the environment by consumers, an area of research that is still little explored, especially in the Portuguese context, but with a possible major impact on brand activism research and on contributing to the adoption of this strategy by companies. Answering the research questions, it is concluded that social brand activism has a positive direct effect on consumers' pro-social and pro-environmental attitudes, accepting H1 and H2. Regarding the mediating power of the moral elevation, it is verified this variable exerts a positive mediating influence on the impact of social brand activism on consumers' pro-social and pro-environmental attitudes, also confirming H3 and H4.

At an academic level, this study contributes to the advancement of research in the brand activism field, proving brand activism can directly and indirectly impact the pro-social and pro-environmental attitudes of a group of stakeholders as relevant as consumers, highlighting the importance and the social and environmental benefits of companies investing in brand activism strategies as a way of promoting consumers' attitudes in favor of society and the environment through example and education, and by awakening positive emotions. This study is also relevant to the Portuguese context, as it is the first to study the comprehensive impacts of brand activism, namely at the level of attitudes, as well as its mediation by emotional factors.

Knowing that attitudes can be a precursor to behaviors, this study paves the way to understanding how the activism of Portuguese brands can also impact the behaviors of their consumers or other groups of stakeholders in relation to society and the environment. Furthermore, it is also important to note that both the direct impacts of brand activism on consumer attitudes and its mediated impacts by moral elevation were always positively stronger in relation to attitudes in favor of society than of the environment, which may be related to the fact that social activism actions were being studied. Indeed, it is legitimate that these actions can have a greater impact on promoting attitudes within the same scope, but it is also crucial to highlight the fact that it was found that brand activist actions can also promote positive attitudes in relation to topics unrelated to the cause addressed. This study thus delves further into the sociopolitical impacts of brand activism, by demonstrating that a brands' social activism actions can promote attitudes in another spectrum of issues, such as the environment, either directly or through the mediating effect of moral elevation. In this way, these results also contribute to advancing the study of moral elevation,

reinforcing the ability of this emotion not only to encourage altruistic attitudes but also to mediate the impact of social actions in promoting pro-social and pro-social attitudes, namely in the business field.

Furthermore, the results obtained bring also useful insights to corporations at a practical level. First, the results of this study indicate that social brand activism strategies can positively influence the pro-social and pro-environmental attitudes of consumers, reinforcing the role of brands as a contributor to positive social and environmental change. Likewise, companies can leverage emotional factors in their social brand activism campaigns to enhance pro-social and pro-environmental attitudes on the part of their consumers, through concrete actions and well-communicated activist campaigns that involve the audience with the brand's virtuous or praiseworthy acts towards society. In relation to this subject, the results of this study are also stimulating to the Portuguese context, in which most brands have not yet adopted active and explicit communication of their activist actions, encouraging the dissemination of these activities to promote social change and to connect emotionally with their consumers. Finally, the fact that it has been proven that investing in a domain of brand activism can enhance attitudes in favor of issues related and unrelated to the topic addressed gives companies the opportunity to contribute to social change in a broader way without wasting resources on constantly addressing all kinds of sociopolitical issues.

The results of this study also encourage further research on the impacts of other types of brand activism, such as environmental, political or legal activism, the study of other mediating variables (e.g., identification with the organization or brand trust), as well as the study of other sociopolitical impacts of brand activism, such as changes in legal matters or the promotion of community movements. Furthermore, the fact that there is still no specific scale that covers all dimensions of brand activism can be a starting point for other investigations that enable the creation and testing of a brand activism scale.

## **Study limitations**

Some difficulties were faced in both the definition and operationalization of concepts, given the novelty of brand activism research topic, and the subjectivity of emotional and attitudinal factors, leading to multiple definitions of the same concept and conceptual interconnections between them. At an operational level, this led to some difficulties in creating the scales and choosing the items that best suited the theoretical definitions of the constructs, extending the size of the questionnaire, which may have affected the sample's responses.

Likewise, the size of and some bias in the sample, which mostly portrays the opinions of educated female adults, may have had some repercussions on the empirical work and the results obtained.

Finally, although the relationships studied between the independent, dependent and mediating variables is theoretically supported by the literature, there may be other factors having mediating effects, such as the brand's reputation as an activist brand and consumers' familiarity with the brand's activism actions, whose study allowed a better understanding of the conceptual model.

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