

THE SOCIOPOLITICAL EFFECTS OF BRAND ACTIVISM:
PERSPECTIVES, CONTRIBUTIONS AND CHALLENGES
OF THE COMMUNICATIONAL APPROACH OF BRANDS
TO SOCIOPOLITICAL CAUSES

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1. INTRODUCTION

If, initially, the study of strategic communication addressed the intentional use of communication by organizations to fulfill their mission and improve their positioning (e.g., Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015), nowadays the concept has evolved to encompass a global and relational perspective that values a bidirectional impact between an organization and its stakeholders (e.g., van Ruler, 2018).

Likewise, in recent decades, the changes that have occurred in terms of technological developments, globalization and the creation and transmission of information, not only led to closer and mutually influential organizational-stakeholder relationships, but also to the exchange of meanings related to ethical and social matters (Buder & Kittinger-Rosanelli, 2021). Stakeholders have increasingly broad expectations on the responsibilities of organizations towards society, managing to affect

the social conduct of organizations and their legitimacy to operate, which contributed to organizations beginning to address social issues as part of their strategic communication, highlighted in corporate social responsibility (CSR) policies and, more recently, brand activism campaigns (e.g., Sarkar & Kotler, 2018).

However, the rise of brand activism as a social strategy through which companies or brands take a stand on politicized and often controversial sociopolitical issues raises questions about the legitimacy and effectiveness of private entities in promoting positive and lasting sociopolitical change. In this sense, if some empirical studies demonstrate the positive impacts of the communication and proactive action by companies/brands in relation to pressing sociopolitical causes (e.g., Miguel & Miranda, 2024; Negrão et al., 2018;), some scholars also denote the challenges and concerns about the ethical nature and effectiveness of these strategies, given the non-egalitarian and profit nature of markets and the possible transience and discrediting that some poorly implemented brand activism strategies give to these movements (e.g., So-bande, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Thus, it becomes crucial that companies become increasingly strategic in planning, implementing and communicating their activist strategies, understanding the factors they should consider when addressing sociopolitical causes, not only to avoid suffering corporate or financial damages, but also to effectively contribute to the promotion of sociopolitical changes (e.g., Korschun, 2021). This involves, for example, communicational aspects that reinforce the activist role of companies and the public's connection to the causes (Key et al., 2021)

Based on a literature review and concrete examples, this investigation seeks to explore and debate the theoretical perspectives on brand activism as a strand of strategic communication with sociopolitical purposes, addressing the positive impacts, as well of the challenges, of brand activism contributing to the promotion of sociopolitical changes. Likewise, the strategic factors that brands should consider to address activist causes more effectively will also be discussed, as well as the potential sociopolitical impacts promoted by brand activism campaigns that can still be studied by academia.

2. PURPOSE

2.1. THE MAIN PURPOSES OF THIS INVESTIGATION ARE:

- Frame the theoretical perspectives on brand activism as an emerging trend in the field of strategic communication studies with primary sociopolitical objectives;
- Discuss the positive impacts of brand activism in promoting sociopolitical change, as well as the challenges of brand communication on politicized topics, giving concrete examples of successful and unsuccessful activist brand campaigns;
- Explore the strategic factors that brands must consider to effectively address sociopolitical causes;
- Draw conclusions about the way in which brands can cause positive impacts with activist campaigns and give insights into what can still be explored at the level of the sociopolitical impacts of brand activism.

3. DISCUSSION

Strategic communication is an evolving area of study in the field of social sciences of communication and management, with several sub-branches and contiguous strategies emerging in recent decades. This is partly justified by the fact that strategic communication is a multidisciplinary field of knowledge, receiving inputs from management, marketing, politics, ethics, and socio-cultural areas of research (e.g., Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2015), which contribute not only to the global nature of the field, but also to the maturation of the holistic and bidirectional way in which organizations currently communicate with their multiple stakeholders (Kunsch, 2018).

In academic terms, strategic communication can be defined as the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its overall mission towards different internal and external stakeholders (e.g., Hallahan et al., 2007). The concept underwent some refinements, in the sense of bringing it closer to a global and relational perspective that

assumes and values a bidirectional impact between an organization and its stakeholders (van Ruler, 2018).

In this way, strategic communication research aims to examine how organizations create and exchange meanings with the most diverse groups of stakeholders (e.g., consumers, employees, investors, governments, media, or society), aiming to achieve alignment both between the organization's internal constituents and a common purpose, identity and behavior, as well as between the organization and the multifaceted and changing expectations, beliefs and demands of external stakeholders (Volk & Zerfass, 2018). This greater focus on aligning the organization's conduct and mission with the expectations, needs and demands of all stakeholder groups, including society, has also led strategic communication to increasingly deal with various social aspects and the way organizations can intervene in the discussion of public issues (Fredriksson & Pallas, 2014).

In fact, nowadays, one of the areas in which stakeholders show strong demands on companies is regarding sociopolitical issues (e.g., Korschun, 2021; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). The spread of globalization, the rapid pace of technological advances, and the quick and easy access to a greater volume of information about sociopolitical topics, lead stakeholders to have broader expectations on organizations regarding their responsibilities towards society (Buder & Kittinger-Rosanelli, 2021). Nowadays, stakeholders expect and demand that an organization's ethical values are reflected in its conduct and that organizations take a stand on relevant sociopolitical issues, being more easily able and predisposed to affect an organization positively or negatively based primarily on ethical and moral factors (e.g., Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Today's consumers, for example, expect that business reflect their values in their communications and actions (Schmidt et al., 2022), valuing companies that show concerns and take a stand on sociopolitical issues (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). According to the 2021 Edelman Trust Barometer, 86% of consumers expect brands to take one or more actions beyond their product and business, including addressing societal and political issues, being 4.5 times more likely to buy if a brand addresses human rights, 4 times more likely if it speaks

out on systemic racism and 3.5 times more likely if it takes on economic inequality (Edelman, 2021).

This greater demand from stakeholders regarding the responsible conduct and sociopolitical contributions of companies, promoted mainly by consumers from generations Y and Z, brought the reconceptualization of the social role of business, giving it a more political role (Wright, 2020). Thus, if the concept of CSR contributed to a broader debate on the responsibilities of companies, which includes not only the expectations of the economic sector, but also the way how companies deal with public policies and contribute to social issues (Yapar, 2017), the maturation of CSR efforts over the years, combined with the greater economic power of companies, has led to the expansion of corporate rights, power and duties and the vision of corporations as moral and socially conscious entities (Pimentel & Didonet, 2021).

It is in this vision of corporations as a citizen-entity, with a markedly political character and with the power and duty to address society's problems and needs, that CSR begins to evolve towards the concept of brand activism (e.g., Eilert & Cherup, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). In this view, the company's mission is intrinsically linked to social change (Moorman, 2020), since the company has the power and resources that allow it to contribute to breaking down barriers that prevent or limit a social, political, economic and/or environmental issue from moving towards a solution (Eyada, 2020). Such barriers may be associated, for example, with lack of awareness on the subject (e.g., new social problem, lack of information, subjects considered taboo, etc.), negative attitudes towards the social issue, polarization, established social norms, lack of motivation, among others (Eilert & Cherup, 2020). As such, several authors have started to argue that engagement in CSR practices is no longer enough to make significant progress in solving social issues, being necessary to take a stronger position to overcome these barriers, which are often deeply rooted (Eyada, 2020). As argued by Heding et al. (2009), brands are currently part of the dominant culture, so they can reinforce stereotypes, patterns and concepts or can help to break them, participating in the construction of new ones.

Brand activism has thus emerged as a new strategy by which companies take a clear stand on the most varied issues and problems affecting current societies (Camarota et al., 2021). The concept was first defined by Sarkar and Kotler (2018, p. 570) 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”. In the same line, Eilert and Cherup (2020) state that brand activism refers to 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. Moorman (2020) highlight that brand activism can either be carried out through statements and/or actions, defining it as a firm’s public demonstration of support or opposition to a sociopolitical issue.

From an organizational perspective, Sarkar and Kotler (2018) see the new phenomenon of brand activism as a natural evolution of CSR, although the concepts differ in several aspects. First, while CSR focuses on what it means to be a good corporate citizen, being guided by marketing requirements and the corporation's own needs, brand activism focuses on the biggest and most pressing issues facing society, being related to the common good (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). In addition, brand activism raises awareness and encourages behavioral and sociopolitical change, involving advocacy and internal and external actions, while CSR activities require internal practices, only involving the fulfillment of the company's responsibilities towards society (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Finally, the concept of brand activism is closer to sociopolitical change processes, being further distinguished from CSR by its controversial nature (Camarota et al., 2021; Moorman, 2020). While CSR is primarily concerned with well-accepted pro-social issues, such as support for education (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020), brand activism deals with topics that are often controversial or polarized, such as racism or sexism, obtaining more unpredictable responses from stakeholders and, thus, being considered a riskier strategy (Pimentel & Didonet, 2021).

As a social and values-driven strategy, the objectives of brand activism are sociopolitical in nature, assuming stronger purposes than the pursuit of profit by seeking primarily to contribute to a broader public interest

and sociopolitical change, rather than directly increasing product/service sales (e.g., Sarkar & Kotler, 2018; Vredenburg et al., 2020). In this way, companies can promote issues both related and unrelated to their value chain, expanding the company's range of values. On the edge, the brand's own mission/purpose becomes sociopolitical, as is the case of the outdoor clothing brand Patagonia, which assumes as part of its founding mission to fight the climate crisis (Moorman, 2020).

In this sense, brand activism is also related to organizations' strategic communication since the nature and level of corporate activities associated with social change can be understood as an expression of the organization's value system (Bundy et al., 2013) and of what a company believes to be its social responsibilities (Den Hond & de Bakker, 2007). In addition, brand activism strategies provide an insight into the organization's stakeholder culture, its concern for reputation, the importance it attaches to stakeholder relationships, and the organization's overall strategy (Carroll & Brown, 2018).

Despite the recent great attention from academia regarding brand activism, research in this field is still scarce, especially with regard to the role and capacity of companies to contribute to generating sociopolitical changes through activism, for example through attitudinal and behavioral changes of stakeholders in relation to the defended cause (Eilert & Cherup, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Nevertheless, previous research has recognized that brand activism can deepen the impact of traditional activism, by taking advantage of the communication resources, political influence, and operational experience of companies to expand and diversify the reach of the defended causes, improve the operationalization of activist movements, and obtain a more effective impact on society and decision makers, like politics or the State (Kuo & Means, 2018; Waymer & Logan, 2021). Chatterji and Toffel (2019) also discovered that the effects of brand activism on public opinion are similar to the effects of messages from politicians or unattributed remarks, helping to change it in some cases.

Likewise, in addition to their corporate/economic impact, corporate social initiatives can also generate other results, namely related to stakeholders' support for partner organizations (for example, Non-

Governmental Organizations), for the main causes addressed by companies and for related or non-related causes through, for example, donations, word-of-mouth and volunteer work (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Lichtenstein et al., 2004; Negrão et al., 2018; Romani & Grappi, 2014). Specially, Romani and Grappi (2014), found that companies' social 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 unrelated situations. Furthermore, Romani et al. (2016) found that by encouraging ecological and conscious consumption, brands can promote consumer readiness not only to support the environmental cause addressed but also other causes of environmental protection, namely through the choice of ecological products. Brand activism can also motivate citizens to engage in politics, although this mobilization depends on the political context (Hou & Poliquin, 2024).

In the same way, empirical research has been proven that the involvement of companies with social causes leads to the generation of more positive employee attitudes towards society, such as motivation to contribute to a better society, a greater sense of social justice (Tao et al., 2018), and even a desire to do work that has a substantial influence on society and the lives of others (John et al., 2019). Glavas and Kelley (2014) also found that companies' support for certain social causes and companies' social actions can favorably improve stakeholders' attitudes towards society and their support for the cause, for example through voluntary intentions. Likewise, the environmental actions of companies also favor the pro-environmental attitudes and behaviors of their employees, namely by raising employee's awareness regarding environmental issues and reinforcing its environmental commitment (e.g., Afsar & Umrani, 2019; Ahmed et al., 2020; Miguel & Miranda, 2024; Raineri & Paillé, 2016).

At this level, brands like Adidas, Airbnb, Ben & Jerry's, Nike, Patagonia, Starbucks, or Unilever deepened the defense of brands for activist causes, having already managed to generate several positive sociopolitical impacts (e.g., Cammarota et al., 2021; Korschun, 2021). An openly political brand since its formation, in the early 1970s, is the outdoor gear retailer Patagonia. Patagonia has been able to create brand activism campaigns that use political levers and collective action to drive progress. In 2018, Patagonia launched the online platform Patagonia Action Works, which links individuals with environmental groups or organizations in their local area, enabling them to take specific actions, from signing a petition and donating money to volunteering time or attending an organized event, in order to solve some of the most pressing environmental threats facing the world today (Patagonia Action Works, 2025). Just in the first six months, the platform already had more than 1.000 environmental groups and 340.000 registered individuals, resulted in more than 121.000 meaningful advocacy actions, such as volunteering, event attendance, petition signatures, and direct donations, generating more than \$1.9 million in value created (Patagonia, 2018).

However, when it comes to promoting social change through brand activism campaigns, there are also several challenges and concerns raised, particularly related to the ethical and authentic nature of these strategies, and the effectiveness of these actions (e.g., Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Sobande, 2020). First, since brand activism is not so much related to the company's global strategy but is driven by sociopolitical events, which often concerns sporadic or accidental actions, the definition of actions and respective outcomes are difficult to establish and measure in activism initiatives (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Pimentel and Didonet (2021), for example, established that the sociopolitical impacts of brand activism strategies could be measured by changes in legislation and policy-making, improvements in social and environmental well-being, or changes in culture and/or public opinion. However, these results are often unpredictable, long-term developed and difficult to measure and demonstrate, which can decrease the public motivation to get involved in the causes or the credibility of the campaigns (Valdés, 2017).

Furthermore, concerns are also raised regarding the capitalist nature of the business world leading to the moral causes addressed by brands being often determined by what has economic value (Cottom, 2019). In this perspective, brand activism can marginalize certain important issues, such as minority, low-key or highly controversial/unpopular causes (e.g., religious or conservative causes), as corporate decision-makers choose which causes to put on the social change agenda, often opting for issues that circumvent the controversy and the negative consequences for business (Fishkin & Forbath, 2014). Some authors even argue that brand activism can lead to a corrosion of fundamental democratic and moral values, by weakening public institutions and processes in favor of private and commercial interests (Chatterji & Toffel, 2019). In this sense, most brands end up addressing the same causes – those that are most talked about, viral or that are most attractive to the markets –, and the excessive repetition of the same or similar issues by different brands can lead to the campaigns' impact being weakened, resulting in less engagement and even fatigue and skepticism on the part of the public (Santaella et al., 2021).

The rise of brand activism can also politicize the market and polarize an already balkanized society, given the great power and impact of companies, which can provoke adverse reactions regarding the sociopolitical causes addressed (Ng, 2017). In fact, as brand activism involves the defense of values, it becomes a highly scrutinized strategy, potentially alienating some stakeholders if they don't agree or accept the brands' activist message, or if they identify that the activist campaigns do not stem from authentic motives but are a marketing move to generate profits (Eyada, 2020). Sobande (2020) introduces the concept of *woke washing*, defined as brands that have an obscure or indeterminate conduct with respect to social practices, but adopt a strong communication regarding sociopolitical issues, declaring its support for specific actions and movements. This opportunistic involvement not only harms the brand itself, for example at a reputational level, but also weakens the effectiveness of activism strategies, as it results in the perception of brand activism as false, inauthentic, or even misleading (Vredenburg et al., 2020), often leading to perceptions of hypocrisy

among stakeholders and hateful feelings towards the brand (Romani et al., 2014). This can not only give rise to backlashes or brand boycotts¹³, but also weaken the ability of brand activism campaigns to generate sociopolitical changes by generating distrust and discrediting of these movements (Cammarota et al., 2021).

For instance, the 2019 ad for Procter & Gamble razor brand Gillette “We believe: The Best a Man Can Be”, challenging the brand's famous tagline “The Best a Man Can Get” by addressing toxic masculinity, suffered a backlash from consumers who recognized the activist campaign as inauthentic and forced (Jones, 2019). The ad shows negative behaviors associated with toxic masculinity, including bullying or sexism, acknowledging social movements such as #MeToo¹⁴, and encouraging men to achieve their personal best and end harmful behaviors. The campaign was backed by \$3 million in charitable donations over three years to non-profit organizations with programs related to gender equality, such as the Boys and Girls Clubs of America (Gillette, 2019). Although the campaign was also praised, the fact that the brand has always been associated with the ideal of male beauty, without previous concerns regarding toxic masculinity, led to several criticisms and attempts of boycotts (Jones, 2019). Criticism has also centered on the seemingly trivial amount to be donated, compared with Gillette’s annual profits, in addition to Gillette’s gender-based price discrimination, calling out the brand for seemingly appropriating the #MeToo cause while charging more for women’s products, demonstrating inconsistencies with corporate practices (Vredenburg et al., 2019).

In this way, Moorman (2020) and Korschun (2021) stress that companies should not be political unless they are able to do so consistently and strategically, in order to avoid corporate or financial damages and to have an effective sociopolitical impact. This implies, on the one hand, maintaining a continuous alignment between declared intentions

¹³ A brand boycott is a mean of resistance in which one or more stakeholders refuse to buy/use the products/services of certain brands to achieve certain objectives, usually sociopolitical, for a short or long term (Cammarota et al., 2021).

¹⁴ The #MeToo movement is a social movement against sexual abuse and harassment, initiated in 2006 by activist Tarana Burke (Garcia, 2017).

and implemented actions, realizing how brands can address the socio-political issue in an authentic and complete way, before claiming the issue as part of their positioning strategy (Champlin et al., 2019). The authenticity of brand activism is then determined by the alignment between its core purpose and values; the type of message and brand activist content conveyed through branded vehicles, traditional media and digital channels; and corporate practices and how key stakeholders interpret these practices in the marketplace (Vredenburg et al., 2020). In fact, several studies had suggested that the effects of corporate social activities are moderated by the reasons stakeholders attribute to the involvement of companies with the causes (e.g., Bhattacharya & Sen, 2004; Lichtenstein et al., 2004), with authenticity being an effective strategy to overcome the skepticism often associated to brand activism, encouraging stakeholders' positive responses and support for brand activism campaigns (Schmidt et al., 2022).

On the other hand, brands should maintain a certain degree of congruence/adequacy of their identity, values, business practices and purpose with the defended cause – the so-called brand-cause fit (Camarota et al., 2021; Champlin et al., 2019) –, as a clear relationship between the company/brand and the cause is expected by stakeholders, increasing brand credibility and authenticity perceptions among stakeholders (Koschate-Fischer et al., 2012) that, in turn, lead to better responses to social campaigns (Shetty et al., 2019).

Finally, brands must also ensure they effectively communicate the defended causes, in order to generate the greatest impact on improving or resolving the addressed issue (Key et al., 2021). Brand activist communications should always be made in a transmedia logic (Yoo et al., 2021) and based on dialogic communication, through the constant promotion of interactions and the provision of relevant information to the target audience (Key et al., 2021). In particular, companies must take into account the holistic process of how their audience receives and understands their storyline, creating campaigns that do not significantly deviate from the target audience's expectations and experiences and their understanding of a sociopolitical issue, once stakeholders' positive or negative response to a brand activism campaign often depends

on how much the brand defends or violates social norms accepted by them (Eyada, 2020; Korschun, 2021). Likewise, the brand's point of view needs to be conveyed consistently in all its communications, with companies being intentional in communicating their position as a way to minimize the risk of alienation and maximize their ability to create and nurture effective sociopolitical changes (Key et al., 2021).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The evolution of the concept and practice of strategic communication over the years, allied to global and market developments, implied a union of the organizational perspective, related to organizational effectiveness, culture, management and governance, with a social perspective, related to ethical principles within social dynamics (e.g., Kunsch, 2018), in which strategic communication is unified to communicative social areas such as CSR (Yapar, 2017), and now, brand activism (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018).

In fact, several companies have been recently taking CSR a step further, supporting sociopolitical issues and causes unrelated to their core businesses through activist actions whose objectives are primarily related to the promotion of sociopolitical impacts (e.g., Eilert & Cherup, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). In this sense, several studies started to analyze the possible contribution of brands to generate sociopolitical changes through activism, with positive results regarding the ability of this strategy to effectively support activist movements (e.g., Kuo & Means, 2018), generate changes in public opinion (e.g., Chatterji & Toffel, 2019), or promote stakeholders' attitudinal and behavioral changes in relation to the defended cause and related or non-related issues (e.g., Miguel & Miranda, 2024; Negrão et al., 2018).

Despite these results, the study of the sociopolitical impacts of brand activism is still largely unexplored (Eilert & Cherup, 2020), and there are several concerns about the application of activist strategies used by social movements to the economic world of private business (e.g., Sobande, 2020). For instance, issues are raised about the adequacy of companies' sociopolitical stances and actions according to what is economically viable (Cottom, 2019), often leading to opportunistic

involvements that reduces the possibility of brands generating effective sociopolitical changes (Sobande, 2020).

Likewise, although there is already a group of communicational aspects that have been studied as enhancers of the sociopolitical impacts of brand activism, such as authenticity in the approach to causes (e.g., Vredenburg et al., 2020), the brand-cause fit (e.g., Champlin et al., 2019), or a dialogic and engaging activist communication, aligned with the values of stakeholders (e.g., Key et al., 2021), more research is needed with regard to what impacts stakeholder responses to this strategy in sociopolitical terms (Cammarota et al., 2021).

The effective study of the sociopolitical impacts of brand activism thus becomes crucial not only to understand the possibilities of this strategy in promoting social change, but also the mechanisms that contribute to its effectiveness (Eilert & Cherup, 2020). Under this prism, there are still many open research avenues, namely the study of the impact of brand activism on promoting ethical and conscious consumption (e.g., Romani et al., 2016), on promoting changes in established social values (e.g., Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020), awareness of sociopolitical causes (e.g., Vredenburg et al., 2020), the reconfiguration of social and/or advertising representations (e.g., Korschun, 2021), the acceptance and advocacy of progressive ideas and values (e.g., Hoppner & Vadakkepatt, 2019), or the visibility of marginalized issues and breaking stigmas/stereotypes (e.g., Heding et al., 2009). Furthermore, the impact of brand activism on supporting activist or sociopolitical movements and active participation in protests or demonstrations (e.g., Kuo & Means, 2018), as well as on political lobbying or the creation of progressive corporate or government policies or regulations (e.g., Waymer & Logan, 2021) can also be tested.

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