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Inclusión y activismo digital: participación ciudadana y empoderamiento desde la diversidad

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PARTICIPACIÓN CIUDADANA
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ACTIVISMO Y PARTICIPACIÓN CIUDADANA

HOW SOCIAL NETWORKS PROMOTE BRAND ACTIVISM AND THE IMPORTANCE OF AUTHENTICITY IN ACHIEVING RESULTS

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1. INTRODUCTION

The World Wide Web, described by Tim Berners-Lee in 1995, made it possible for ordinary people to use the Internet, ending the restricted use of this resource by certain groups of power, such as military and academic groups. This achievement enabled millions of users to access the same information and to connect continuously and across borders (Cerf et ál., 2009).

The faster transmission of information and the greater ease of communication between people had impacts on the spread of broad social phenomena, namely in the creation, strengthening and proliferation of diverse activist movements (Seelig et al., 2019). Since the turn of the century, the Internet has started to be used for activist practices, with groups or virtual communities addressing various sociopolitical issues and demanding the support of public and private organizations to solve such problems, whether they are government agencies, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) or companies (Castells, 2004; Mazurek, 2009). The strength that activist movements gained in the online world led, years later, to companies realizing their duty to also take a more active role in society by participating and contributing to the social

debate on these causes (Kotler & Keller, 2012; Palonka & Porębska-Miąc, 2013).

Currently, there are several brands addressing and contributing to broad sociopolitical causes, either through online communication campaigns or through offline actions. This phenomenon gave rise to so-called Brand Activism (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Sarkar and Kotler (2018) consider that brand activism corresponds to a transformation in marketing, which has abandoned good intentions to take action, promoting issues unrelated to the company's value chain and expanding the company's range of values to include central socio-political issues.

However, if the participation of brands in activist movements is currently expected and demanded, the truth is that the companies' support for these social movements is still very unequal around the world, (Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 2002; Shah et al., 2013) and the public's response to brand activism actions is not always favorable (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Based on a bibliographic review and concrete examples, this investigation seeks to address and debate brand activism, discussing the fundamental role that social networks had for its emergence and proliferation. At the same time, the main challenges that brand activism faces today and the important role of perceived brand authenticity for the success of these strategies will be addressed.

2. PURPOSE

2.1. The main purposes of this investigation are:

– Research the role of technological developments, and particularly the role of the popularization of the use of social networks, in the proliferation of brand activism.

– Explore brand activism as a new trend in strategic communication between brands and consumers, giving real examples of activist campaigns carried out by brands.

– Analyze the factors that influence the adherence of brands to activism, namely the challenges brought by the Information Age.

– Investigate the role of authenticity for brands to achieve favorable results in their activism actions.

3. DISCUSSION

The use of the Web on a global scale and the successive technological developments brought profound economic, political, cultural and social changes. These changes marked the shift from an industrial society to an information society, in which information becomes one of the most important parts of contemporary life, cultural circulation is expanded and geographical boundaries are blurred (Webster, 2003). The Information Society - or the so-called Network Society - was thus constituted as a permanently connected and active society, characterized by co-production and feedback relationships, in which people organize themselves, using technological means, according to their specific values, affinities and interests (Castells, 2004).

At the same time, the arrival of Web 2.0 has contributed to a more active and equitable use and participation in the Web by ordinary citizens, mainly with the popularization of digital infrastructures, such as blogs, online chats, forums, Wikis, video platforms and social networks, that have enabled Web users to bidirectionally communicate on a large scale, in addition to several developments in the search engines field, which compiled and organized the information that circulated on the network (Aghaei et al., 2012). These platforms constituted an alternative to the mass and unidirectional communication characteristic of traditional media, starting to privilege peer-to-peer communication (either from one-to-one or from many-to-many), carried out globally and horizontally (without hierarchical barriers) (Livingstone, 2004). This allowed an increasingly closer and interactive relationship between audiences and various social organizations, such as companies (López et al., 2016, Mazurek, 2009).

The bidirectional and global communication provided by Web 2.0 also led to profound changes in the public's behavior. By beginning to

participate in communication exchanges, the public became both a producer and a consumer of content, giving rise to the so-called Prosumer - a new consumer that distinguishes itself from the others by benefiting from greater power of influence over its own purchasing decisions and over the decisions of others, being able to share their experiences with a large number of people, quickly and easily (Fine et al., 2017). Likewise, being able to access and share individual and collective experiences more easily, particularly in civic terms, the public began to demonstrate growing concerns about global sociopolitical issues. The new citizen-consumer requires the participation and shared responsibility of brands in resolving political and social issues, which translated into a greater consumer interest in what concerns corporate social responsibility policies (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019).

It is in this context of increasing use of the Web by a mass audience that the Internet is seen as an essential medium for communication between brands and consumers. Currently, some of the main platforms on which this relationship between brands and consumers is established are social networks. According to Berthon et al. (2012), social networks feature a transition of power from companies to the community, since everyone can create content and information, as well as to share it among network users. Thus, if companies' messages were previously transmitted using traditional tactics, such as public relations, advertising, marketing and sales promotion (Mangold & Fauld, 2009), and the possibility of feedback was very limited (López et al., 2016), the features of Web 2.0, and social networks in particular, have enabled companies to establish closer relationships with consumers, in which consumers have taken on a prominent role (López et al., 2016). This more effective role arises from the ability of consumers to start interfering in all marketing activities and public positions of companies, by having the ability to scrutinize business activities more easily and to transmit their opinions about brands in the online world, quickly, directly and with a wide reach (Mazurek, 2009).

As a consequence, social networks are formed not only as personalized information sources for the consumer (Ansari et al., 2000), capable of shaping their opinions and attitudes towards a brand, product or service

(Mangold & Faulds, 2009), but also constitute sources of information for brands, in the sense that consumers share information about themselves and their reality with companies (Kotler & Keller, 2012; Palonka & Porębska-Miąc, 2013) and, as such, organizations are also able to adapt their conduct more quickly to consumer expectations and demands. This interaction between companies and consumers, often carried out directly and individually (Palonka & Porębska-Miąc, 2013), is one of the characteristics that most distinguishes social networks as a digital communication platform, as it allows both parties to act on each other. Such process is, however, always dependent not only on the effectiveness of the messages transmitted, but also on the degree of influence to which both sides are synchronized (Liu & Shrum, 2002).

As personalized information sources and a stage conducive to closer, interactive and interdependent relationships between brands and consumers, social networks played a leading and driving role in making companies aware of the duty and need to adopt a more active role in society, namely to comment on relevant social and political issues (Moorman, 2020; Toit, 2016). This is because, in addition to consumers starting to show greater interest in corporate social responsibility policies and demanding that brands get involved in sociopolitical issues, addressing them on these social platforms, social networks themselves and microblogging have become a powerful force in terms of political and social emancipation (Milan, 2013).

In fact, the potential of the Internet and the fast and easy economic interactions made possible by Web 2.0, enabled cyberspace to become a place full of "virtual communities", characterized by the sharing of common interests and an intrinsic connection between members that involves rituals, norms and duties (Sicilia & Palazon, 2008), turning the Internet into a means of social transformation and of disclosure of discontent. According to Castells (2004), virtual communities have, more than any other, the ability to strengthen social movements around cultural values, as they find on the Internet a means of communication that allows these communities to share their ideas on a global scale and, thus, more easily achieve their goals.

As such, at the turn of the century, social networks began to be heavily used by groups of activists who had previously focused on using physical supports and locations to develop activism actions. Using social networks such as Facebook or Twitter, as well as other online resources, like blogs and websites, activism gained a new stage that allowed these social movements to share alternative information with a much wider audience and organize online and offline protests and boycotts on a larger scale. In addition, the use of these online resources for activism also facilitates the education of the public, allows for greater fundraising for the defended causes, eases the formation of coalitions without geographical borders and the distribution of petitions and action alerts, simplifies the planning and coordination of regional or international events and the mobilization and recruitment of new activists and supporters, and promotes the creation of more activist movements, given the few resources and investment needed (Campos et al., 2016; Dauvergne, 2017; Seelig et al., 2019; Shah et al., 2013).

At this point, blogs also began to be used by activists as a low risk and low investment tool to reach more people and establish relationships between members who share the same ideas (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006). The use of blogs emerged because that these platforms provide deeper and lasting reflection, unlike social networks that favor the development of "viral" episodes and instant indignation to the detriment of a sustained debate, but which, in turn, reach a higher and faster mobilization than blogs (Campos et al., 2016).

Thus, and although these online movements were popularized in the first decade of the 2000s, with movements against the Iraq war and alterglobalization (Juris, 2008), it quickly extended to "anti-brand movements" or even to "anti-brand communities", with an increasing number of consumers and activists to impose that organizations, especially multinationals, begin to demonstrate more responsibility for the environmental and social consequences of the activities developed throughout their value chain (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006; Kozinets, 2014; Stolle & Micheletti, 2015). The Web - and social media in particular - have enabled anti-brand communities to proliferate online at an unprecedented level, by providing faster, more convenient and anonymous

methods of communication, autonomous of geographic spaces and time zones, as well as new forms of protest, organization, cooperation and coalition creation (Dauvergne, 2017; Shah et al., 2013), with the majority of anti-brand communities being created and communicating only in the cyberspace (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006).

Online actions to pressure brands to support local communities (Shah et al., 2013), invest in effective environmental policies (Dauvergne, 2017) or take responsibility in the fight against racial inequality (Wright, 2020), sometimes accompanied by public protests, started to become frequent and to have a huge reach, with activists and consumers opposing brands considered irresponsible towards society and praising or creating partnerships with brands considered to be pioneers in supporting the defended movements (Dauvergne, 2017). For example, generation Y - the so-called Millennials- currently having a major impact on the markets and a constant presence on digital platforms, requires a greater contribution from companies in promoting social dialogue. In fact, two thirds of these consumers use social networks to get involved or approach companies about their social responsibility actions (Cone Communications, 2015).

In addition to requiring brands to support social movements, consumers even see brands as a symbol of power vis-à-vis the government and a large part believe that brands are a more powerful force for societal change than the means of governance themselves. According to a study conducted in 2018 by Edelman, an American public relations and marketing consultancy, 53% of consumers surveyed believe that brands can take more effective action in solving social problems than the government and 54% believe it is easier for people to get brands to address social problems than to get government to act. At the same time, 64% of consumers choose to support or boycott a brand based solely on its position on social and political issues (Edelman, 2018).

In this way, even though the Web conceives greater power to these anti-brand groups by allowing greater concentration and unification of members with a common negative stance towards one or more brands and giving them the ability to damage the name of the companies (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006), online anti-brand communities also

contributed to companies renewing not only its activities but also its positions and purposes as brands (Holt, 2002). Thus, brands started to use the Internet as an "open forum" to gain insights and transform a possible negative impact on the brand into opportunities to improve its conduct and communication (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006; Shah et al., 2013).

In this sense, brand activism arises from the growing expectation of consumers that companies take public positions on relevant social issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020), by promoting, impeding, or directing social, political, economic and/or environmental reform or stasis, with the goal of promoting or preventing social changes (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). Christian Toit (2016) also argues that companies are increasingly taking an active position on social issues, which reflects their values as brands, even risking displeasing some segments of their customers. Brand activism aims, therefore, to influence the citizen-consumer through campaigns and actions created and sustained by political values, appropriating social movements to contribute to the social production of the citizen-consumer identity (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). However, brands embrace activist causes not aspiring to constitute themselves as a regulated political identity, but aiming at a connection with the community, based on specific values, through constant involvement with progressive movements and communities (Carroll & Hackett, 2006).

Since the mid-2000s, brands have realized the importance not only of committing themselves to the demands of activists and consumers, but also being involved with these causes, namely by adjusting certain practices used in its production, distribution and sales activities, entering into partnerships with NGOs and exposing a public position in relation to relevant and current social issues (Dauvergne, 2017). While the Internet was a strong driver for these companies' conducts, it also became one of the most important means for their actions, with brands becoming increasingly aware and interested in the use of digital technologies to get involved in the struggle for positive sociopolitical changes (Shah et al., 2013).

Then, brand movements and campaigns began to emerge in digital media promoting the company's values and including central sociopolitical issues (even when these are controversial) (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019), such as environmental problems, racism, public health, immigration or even minority rights (Moorman, 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). To put these brand activism strategies into practice, an important distribution channel is precisely social networks, since, from these channels, brands can reach a wide audience, in addition to social networks being a space where users can interact directly with brands and other network members on these issues, allowing the brand to perceive, almost in real time, how campaigns are being perceived through the community's reaction to activism campaigns (Gray, 2019).

A significant and current example of these brand activism movements was Airbnb's stance on Donald Trump’s anti-immigration measures, implemented in January 2017. These measures severely restricted the possibility of travel and immigration to the United States of America (USA) of citizens from various largely Muslim countries in the Middle East and Northern Africa and suspended the Refugee Admissions Program in the USA for 120 days. Airbnb used its digital platforms and social networks to initiate the "We accept" campaign, a movement in defense of acceptance between people, promoting dialogue and inviting the public to react to the new measure. The company encouraged its consumers to make their homes available to people who were unable to travel to the United States and to make donations to refugee aid organizations and led by example by hosting refugees and citizens barred from entering the USA at the time (Airbnb, 2017a). In addition, the brand pledged to offer short-term accommodation to 100,000 people in need over the next five years and to donate $4 million over the next four years to the International Rescue Committee, which supports the most urgent needs of displaced people worldwide (Airbnb, 2017a). With this activist movement, Airbnb achieved a huge reach on social networks, with the hashtag #weaccept being the most used on Twitter during the Super Bowl (event in which the campaign was publicized), with about 33 thousand tweets during the first half the game. The campaign's content, published by the brand on Facebook and Instagram, also received

over 500 thousand likes and was shared more than 100 thousand times, including by users belonging to a more conservative audience (Airbnb, 2017b). Based on an internal monitoring by Airbnb, it was possible to perceive that the public's reaction to the campaign was 85% favorable. Likewise, the public responded strongly to the brand's call to accommodate displaced populations, with more than 15,400 enrollments by volunteers willing to welcome these people into their homes (Airbnb, 2017b).

Several other examples of brand activism arose with the global spread of the Black Lives Matter movement after the death of George Floyd, in May 2020. Floyd's tragic death, strangled by a police officer who knelt on his neck for more than 8 minutes after approaching Floyd for allegedly trying to use a fake twenty-dollar banknote in a supermarket, accelerated public feeling around the need for society and brands to face the systemic racism (Gray, 2019). Previously, brands like Nike and Procter & Gamble publicly positioned themselves against racism, responded proactively to what happened in the 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 Twitter 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 USA, namely by supporting organizations that work in social justice, education and addressing racial inequality in America (Nike, 2020). Procter & Gamble (2020) also started a campaign on its social networks and used its online platform to share materials with its consumers and the community (documents, films, articles, books, TedTalks, podcasts, and 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.

Still on the subject of racism, months before the controversial death of George Floyd in the USA, Malian football player Moussa Marega was the victim of racist insults during a football game in Portugal, leading

the player to abandon the game. In response, Portuguese beer brands Sagres and Super Bock, official sponsors of several national football teams, leagues and cups, joined the anti-racist protests by uniting in a viral publication on social networks in which the two competing beers appear together, passing the same message: “Against racism, there are no rivals”, a movement that led to thousands of reactions and hundreds of shares and comments on social networks (Marcela, 2020).

However, the dissemination of activist movements by organizations is not the same across the world, in part because the dissemination and use of the Internet assumes many discrepancies around the globe. The so-called "digital divide" refers to the existing gap between individuals (and societies) that have the resources to participate in the Information Age and those who do not (Chen & Wellman, 2004). This gap is characterized by two crucial factors: on the one hand, the possibility and quality of access to the Internet and, on the other hand, digital literacy, which is very unequal between communities with abundant or scarce economic resources (Chetty et. al, 2018). Although the Internet Penetration Rate is increasing, reaching the global average of 59% in January 2020, which represents an increase of 35% compared to 2013 (Statista, 2020), the fact is that the number of Internet users are mainly concentrated in developed countries. According to data from Statista (2020), a German company specialized in market data, while the online penetration rate reaches 95% in Northern Europe, 92% in Western Europe and 88% in North America, being well above the global average, regions such as South Asia, East Africa and Central Africa have an online penetration rate of just 48%, 23% and 22%, respectively.

If, among developed countries, the digital divide between pioneering countries in the use of the Internet, such as the USA, and countries that have followed the example, has been decreasing, with countries such as Sweden, the United Kingdom or Japan reaching or exceeding the degree of Internet usage of the United States (Chen & Wellman, 2004; Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 2002), in the developing world the digital divide is not only increasing, but also deepening. Increasing, in the sense that few people actively use the Internet and deepening as there is a strong contrast between individuals living in major urban centers,

with better education, higher incomes and closer connections with developed countries (both culturally and economically), and those on the periphery (Chen & Wellman, 2004; Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 2002). As argued by Chen and Wellman (2004), digital exclusion ends up reflecting the context of international social and economic relations, following a center-periphery logic, characterized by the dominance of northern developed countries. Thus, there are wide disparities in Internet access between affluent nations at the center of the global Internet network and poor countries on the periphery, which lack the skills, resources, and infrastructure to connect in the Information Age.

The Network Society itself, formed through the popularization of the use of the Internet, favors this disparity, in the sense that it created a trend towards a homogenization of the characteristics of Internet users: as the number and percentage of Internet users increase, the "digital divide" also increases, as newcomers to the Internet are demographically similar to those who are already online (Chen & Wellman, 2004). Thus, even in developed countries, there is a large percentage of marginalized members in the community, whether because of their income, gender, race, etc., who are not connected to the Internet, do not know how to use it, have no interest in using it, do not have access to the Internet at affordable prices or have no infrastructures to use it (Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 2002).

In these networks based on networking, that is, a network of people who exchange information and knowledge with each other, connections are not made randomly (not all people, or "nodes", are equally likely to create connections), existing "connector nodes", which somehow gather many more links than other nodes (Barabasi, 2003), causing digitally excluded people, social groups or even nations to continue to be increasingly excluded in societies and economies based on knowledge (Chen & Wellman, 2004). This distribution of connectivity is even more likely to be reinforced, since, as Barabasi (2003) argues, new nodes that enter on these networks will have the tendency to link to existing nodes that already have more links than to other nodes, enhancing hegemony. This can be seen, for example, in the fact that the rate of Internet use in Portugal, in 2019, is significantly higher in the young

population (16-34 years), with higher levels of education (complete higher or secondary education), student or employee (Instituto Nacional de Estatística, 2019). And, although those who do not use the Internet may benefit from this platform indirectly, through the retransmission of messages by members of their physical network, they will never have the same benefits as those who use this resource independently (Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 2002).

Thus, the digital separation that accompany the expansion of the Internet are characterized by international differences and within the countries themselves, namely by technological, political, socioeconomic (Chen & Wellman, 2004; Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 2002) or even linguistic factors (given the dominance of the English language on the Internet, with about three quarters of the websites in English) (Chen & Wellman, 2004), which also affect the creation and spread of online activist movements (Campos et al., 2016; Seelig et al., 2019; Shah et al., 2013). If telecommunication policies, infrastructures or even education are prerequisites for communities to be more or less participatory in the Information Age, digital activism also depends on the available technology (infrastructure and devices, combination of networks, codes and applications), as well as the economic, social and political context in which the use of this technology occurs (Shah et al., 2013).

In terms of technological infrastructure, it is clear that these movements need to use a digital network and an interconnected group of devices that use digital code to transmit information and coordinate actions. However, it is necessary for this information to be transmitted beyond the center, to the periphery of the networks, which is influenced not only by the digital means to which the activist movements have access, but also by the technologies that the Internet users have access to (Shah et al., 2013). This is particularly important when approaching info-excluded audiences that, in this way, become difficult to reach, convince and mobilize through digital media, as often the disseminated information does not reach these people (Campos et al., 2016).

Political factors also contribute to this point, since in many developing countries state-owned companies have monopolized Internet services, leading to higher prices and, thus, making brands and activists in

developed countries more able to do digital activism (Shah et al., 2013). In addition, it is also more feasible for these movements to emerge in democratic societies than in repressive governments, in which digital activism is often not contemplated under the terms of the law. According to Campos et al. (2016), there is an ambivalence of digital media: despite its emancipatory, democratic and empowering character, it is difficult to use digital platforms outside the control and surveillance systems of the State, especially in repressive regimes.

For their part, socioeconomic factors also affect digital brand activism. Economic power and the very norms or expectations of the society in which brands operate limit or enhance their ability to exercise digital activism (Shah et al., 2013).

Given the constraints that exist on the network and the potential of digital technologies to alter the distribution of power, there started to emerge more positive, negative or even neutral views regarding the value and effectiveness of digital activism. If, on the one hand, and in a more optimistic view, Bates (2007) and Kirkpatrick (2008) believe that digital activism can change traditional power hierarchies and empower citizens through the transmission of alternative content and changing the distribution of a top-bottom power for an authority defined by peer-to-peer relationships, other authors, such as Morozov (2010), believe that digital ecosystems provide new methods of anti-democratic control, surveillance and persecution, giving governments the ability to block citizens' access to certain content and monitor their online actions, which undermines activist movements. In addition to these two views, there are still authors who believe that technology will not change existing power structures, nor lead to different activism, but only to potentially improved versions by combining online and offline practices (Shah et al., 2013).

In fact, and regardless of the adopted view, some authors suggest that the success of brand activism actions depends, in large part, on the combination of a coherent stance between online and offline actions. Already in 1998, Kolko and Reid (1998) emphasized the importance of Internet users adopting a coherent and reasonably faithful self-representation over time in online communities, at the expense of not being

considered reliable members and jeopardizing relationships with other members of the community. This can also be adapted to the interactions between companies and consumers, namely regarding the attitude that brands adopt in relation to sociopolitical issues, maintaining coherence in the different digital platforms used to communicate with their customers, but also between the actions that the brand carries out online and its purpose, values and activist offline practices in relation to the same subjects (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

This aspect is extremely important to the extent that, since brands are currently forming as symbols with meanings, values and purposes, brands increasingly represent points of reference in consumers' self-identities (Palazzo & Basu, 2007). As Goffman (2002) argues, in social relationships individuals play, consciously or unconsciously, various social roles in different contexts and under different circumstances, according to a previous definition of the hierarchies, roles and expectations involved in each interaction, using symbolic elements to corroborate these roles. In this way, consumers started to base their purchase decisions on identity factors (for example, the way in which brands affect the way consumers are perceived and how they intend to be perceived), thus demanding from companies a coherent behavior and conduct, even in sociopolitical values and issues, as this also interferes with the social and self-representational performance of the consumer (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019).

As such, the "authenticity" factor becomes crucial in brand activism, which must involve intangible (messages) and tangible (practical actions) commitments with a sociopolitical cause (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Moorman (2020) stresses that companies should not be political unless they are able to do so consistently, connecting with target markets in an authentic way, since consumers only trust brands that remain loyal to a given position. Thus, Authentic Brand Activism is defined by Vredenburg et al. (2020) as the alignment of a brand's activist messages in the traditional and digital media with the brand's purpose, values and actions, in addition to the congruence between the brand's purpose, values, messages and practices with the defended sociopolitical cause. Sarkar and Kotler (2018) consider this alignment as a change in the

management and marketing of organizations, in which companies abandon good intentions to, in fact, start to act. As stated by Vredenburg et al. (2020) and Wright (2020), with regard to brand activism, consumers demand more from organizations than just publications on social networks, wishing that brands complement these online actions with other proactive strategies and practical solutions, such as establishing partnerships with NGOs whose purposes facilitate social change, include racial and ethnic diversity in advertising campaigns, promote the recruitment and training of minorities or develop programs to combat inequalities.

In fact, only when consumers perceive brand activism strategies as an authentic way to drive social change do these movements become effective (Vredenburg et al., 2020). For example, in the aforementioned Airbnb movement, the 2017 #weaccept campaign was successful because the brand has been maintaining an online and offline stance against discrimination. In November 2016, Airbnb had already publicly recognized the existence of a widespread discrimination on the part of guests on its platform, demanding its elimination with the disclosure of the "Community Commitment" which required Airbnb users to agree to "treat everyone in the Airbnb community - regardless of their race, religion, national origin, ethnicity, disability, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, or age - with respect, and without judgment or bias" or, otherwise, these users would be removed from the platform, an initiative that received a lot of positive but also negative feedback (Airbnb, 2017b). Nike is also a brand that has gradually built up an anti-racist position, intensified over time with its efforts and measures of responsibility in the areas of Diversity and Inclusion to promote an inclusive environment and attract a more diversified workforce, reporting its annual progress on the so-called "Nike Impact Report" (Nike, 2020). In addition, in 2018, the brand had already launched a controversial campaign with the slogan "Believe in something. Even if it means sacrificing everything" with the American footballer Colin Kaepernick, who became a civil rights activist in the USA. In this case, there was also an enormous positive, but also negative feedback, with Republican supporters starting the "Burn Your Nikes" movement to protest the

campaign (BBC, 2018). However, both brands remained true to their positions. Thus, brands like Nike or Airbnb achieve an image of authenticity when starting activist movements related to these issues, or other related sociopolitical issues, since these brands have maintained coherence over the years, in online communication and practical actions (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019), which improves the achieved results and reinforces the brand's reputation (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

In contrast, when there is no coherence between brand activist messages in the media and their offline actions, when brands do not carry out substantive pro-social corporate practices or when they actively hide the absence of these practices, one can say that brands incur in an inauthentic form of brand activism, the so-called woke washing (Sobande, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). The term "woke" is of African American origin and a synonym for social awareness, so woke washing can be defined as brands that have an obscure or indeterminate conduct with respect to social practices (Vredenburg et al., 2020), but that adopt communication strategies focused on sociopolitical issues (Sobande, 2019), thus showing inconsistencies between messages and practical actions. Often, these brands only engage in sociopolitical movements due to the pressure or urgency in responding to market expectations, ending up disconnecting their communications from their true purpose, values and corporate practices (Campbell, 2007), which gives rise to an opportunistic involvement which can result in the perception of brand activism as false, inauthentic or even misleading (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

For example, in 2017, and in an attempt to reach young audiences, Pepsi created an ad with the celebrity Kendall Jenner, known for the famous reality show Keeping Up with the Kardashians, addressing activist movements like the Black Lives Matter. In the ad, Kendall Jenner uses a Pepsi drink to ease tension between civil rights activists and police forces, transforming a protest into a party environment. The ad, transmitted through the brand's social media, led to a backlash with numerous criticisms, not only for the use of a white model in the ad, but also for the lack of sensitivity about the reason for these protests and the countless violent clashes that had already occurred between activists and police over the years, with the brand becoming a trend on Twitter

for the worst reasons (The Guardian, 2017). In addition, Pepsi was not a brand with an assumed commitment to support racial non-discrimination, nor did it have a history of actions or communications related to this or other social causes. This ad can then be considered woke washing since the message conveyed was not substantially supported by prosocial values and actions. This not only damages the value and reputation of the brand in the market, but also undermines the potential of these movements to generate social changes (Vredenburg et al., 2020) and can also foster the creation of anti-brand online communities (Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2006).

In this way, if the widespread use of the Web has allowed the creation of a closer relationship between brands and consumers, leading to the emergence of activist movements as a powerful strategy to change corporate and social policies (Dauvergne, 2017), the fact is that the greatest scrutiny that online campaigns have brought regarding the conduct of organizations, as well as the demands arising from the creation of an interactive relationship between brands and consumers in digital platforms (e.g. Liu & Shrum, 2002; Palonka & Porębska-Miąc, 2013), have also led to a greater vulnerability of brands in the face of criticism regarding insufficient practices of social responsibility and activism (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). The Web then creates a dualism in which, while online encouraged and led to the proliferation of brand activism strategies, it also led several companies to choose not to defend any sociopolitical cause, for fear of the negative effects that this may have on the company's ability to attract and retain customers or partners (Moorman, 2020), given the ease with which brands are currently systematically examined and criticized (Kozinets, 2014).

In view of these concerns, it is possible that in the future, there may be a tendency to a decrease in brand activism actions instead of its proliferation. However, authors such as Kotler and Sarkar (2017) and Moorman (2000) argue that the indifference of brands to these social movements is no longer an option and that authenticity in brand activism may be the key so that the reputation of brands is not adversely affected when engaging in these types of actions. In fact, it is only by gaining a perception of authenticity on the part of all stakeholders that companies

are able to acquire legitimacy in their activism efforts, which can be achieved, for example, through the creation of public-private partnerships that relate to the attempt to establish positive social changes, or even by ensuring that brand activism practices are verified and attested by third-party certifications, adopting specific marketing metrics to monitor the results of these actions (Vredenburg et al., 2020). In addition, brands can also take advantage of the potential of digital to test various approaches to activism, assessing how the market responds to each of these actions and adapting their conduct to the obtained results (Moorman, 2000).

4. CONCLUSIONS

The bidirectional communication and the reciprocal relationships between brands and consumers established on social networks played a major role in the emergence and promotion of brand activism (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019). In addition, social networks became one of the most important spaces for brands to expose their support to sociopolitical causes (Gray, 2019). Social platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are currently used by a wide variety of mainstream brands to address controversial issues such as the climate crisis or the Black Lives Matter movement, to define problems of social interest and to focus on doing social good (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

However, challenges such as the differences in the possibility and quality of Internet access (Chen & Wellman, 2004), different levels of digital literacy between communities (Chetty et. al, 2018) and different economic, social and political contexts affect the possibility of companies to join activism movements (Haythornthwaite & Wellman, 2002, Shah et al., 2013). Added to these challenges is the fact that consumers do not always perceive brand activism campaigns as authentic, giving rise to negative feedback or backlashes, which increases the concerns of brands in commenting on sensitive topics (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

In this way, and to maximize the reach and effectiveness of brand activism, new technologies should always be seen and used by brands as an extra tool to address important sociopolitical issues and to promote

positive social changes. Brands should always bear in mind that the Web facilitates and innovates some of the operations of activism strategies, but makes others more challenging, so these approaches should always be complemented with actions beyond digital (Shah et al., 2013). In addition to being able to reach certain info-excluded groups, combining digital and offline actions also allows brands to reinforce their support for activist causes and, in this way, be effectively seen as authentic by all stakeholders (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Nevertheless, it is also clear that, in a world where citizens-consumers demand from brands a shared responsibility in addressing current political and social issues, the potential of the Web cannot be ignored as a way of reaching a wider audience, informing and educating the public on topics that require the involvement of everyone - including companies - for its resolution (Campos et al., 2016).

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