Brand Activism: What, when, where and how, translating theory into practice

Driven by an increasingly polarized society, controversial issues such as the climate crisis, Black Lives Matter, and the #MeToo movement are serving as catalysts for mainstream brands to engage with problems of social interest. With 64% of consumers identifying as "belief-driven buyers"—that is, they choose to purchase from or boycott a brand based on its stance on social issues (Edelman 2018), engagement with sociopolitical issues is now both being expected of brands and is arguably good for business when well-executed.

Historically brands have not engaged in sociopolitical conversations for fear of alienating customers. However in today's post-modern culture, corporate neutrality has been subject to criticism and even "call-out culture". Whereas taking a stand began as a point of differentiation among brands (e.g. Nike's ad featuring Colin Kaepernick in 2018 earned $6 billion for the company while also raising brand awareness among Nike's progressive target demographic), it has now evolved to an expectation, as noted in a Tweet by Netflix during the 2020 BLM movement following the death of George Floyd: "To be silent is to be complicit". Yet, just because Kaepernick, for example, is fighting racism doesn't mean that it's part of Nike's brand purpose and core values—a point also argued during the 2020 BLM movement, when Nike employees publicly criticised the company for its lack of internal racial representation. While consumers expect brands to take a stand, many also believe social issues are used too often as a marketing ploy.

Marketing academics (Kotler and Sarkar 2017; Moorman 2020) and practitioners (Unilever 2019) have highlighted the dangers of brands not "walking the talk". Therefore, achieving and communicating the authenticity of activist stances emerges as being critically important for marketing success as well as potential for social change. Drawing from the literature on CSR, branding, advertising, ethics, and marketing and extending Moorman's (2020) work on brand political activism, we formally define and examine authentic brand activism as a purpose- and values-driven strategy in which a brand adopts a nonneutral stance on institutionally contested sociopolitical issues, to create social change and marketing success.

We go on to advance a theoretical typology of authentic brand activism (Figure 1). Specifically, we argue the alignment of activist marketing messages with brand purpose, values, and prosocial corporate practice contribute to perceptions of authenticity, whereas misalignment can lead to perceptions of woke washing (Sobande 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2018).

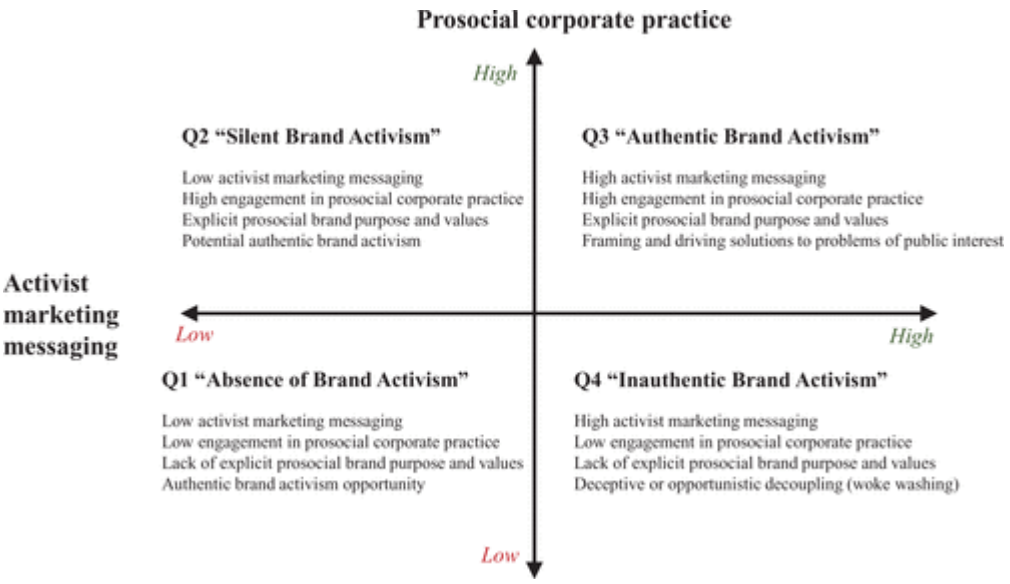

Figure 1. Brand activism typology.

The brand activism typology can serve as guidance for brands on how to best employ this strategy, capitalizing on benefits while not disregarding due process. We anticipate this typology to be beneficial to a wide-range of brands. Consumer-facing brands, due to their direct contact with the end-consumer were under fire in the first wave of brand activism. B2B brands and other stakeholders are also now considering their activist stances as well as those of endorsed products and personalities (Kapitan et al. 2020). Within these companies key decision makers will include brand managers and strategist as well as members of the advertising and communications teams. According to our research, these individuals should consider adopting specific, measurable language standards in marketing communications, engaging in public–private partnerships that add legitimacy to social change efforts, and even moving towards third-party certifications to ensure authentic brand activism is vetted and monitored.

References

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