



Brands and activism: ecosystem and paradoxes

Klement Podnar¹ · Urša Golob¹

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Abstract

The relationship between brand activism and other forms of activism, as well as the potential paradoxes that may arise from practicing brand activism, has not been fully addressed in the burgeoning brand activism literature. However, these questions are valid, given the growing interest in brands and activism in both research and practice. This article presents an overview of the ecosystem of organisation-related activism surrounding brand activism and provides some insights into how brand activism can act as a bridge between them through different response processes within this ecosystem. Additionally, it discusses the relationship between corporate and brand activism, arguing that they are inextricably intertwined through the notion of organisational authenticity. Furthermore, the article uses the paradox wheel to illustrate some of the paradoxes of brand activism that should be considered in practice and as a basis for expanding research in the field. Finally, this article introduces a collection of articles in this special issue that has brought together a group of scholars researching brand activism from different perspectives, each of which offers grounds for a critical evaluation of what activism brings to brands, and what brand activism and branding bring to activism itself.

Keywords Brand activism · Corporate activism · Ecosystem · Paradoxes · Authenticity

Introduction

Traditionally, activism has been limited to the political and social spheres. However, the changing manner in which consumers interact with brands has led to a need to rethink existing perspectives on the role of brands in contemporary society (Swaminathan et al. 2020). In the present time of social and political polarisation, societies worldwide confront a variety of urgent issues, such as capitalism, consumerism, poverty, the climate crisis, LGBTQIA rights, racial discrimination and injustice, the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, the legal status of abortion, gun control, and religious matters. At the same time, in the hyperconnected world individuals have gained an instant and continuous access to networks, other people, political organisations, brands, and other entities anytime and anywhere. They can easily become involved in various issues and express their opinions. Doing nothing has become a form of complicity and this mindset seems to be entering the business world as

well (Moorman 2020). In this altered context, the notion of brand activism has become a prevalent topic in brand management literature and practice. Brand activism refers to the type of activism where companies and their brands play a significant role in social change processes by taking a stance on social and political issues (Moorman 2020).

Activism refers to participation in a social movement or collective action aimed at achieving a particular socio-political or environmental goal. It has been responsible for many positive social changes throughout history and remains central to pushing for continued progress. Definitions of activism vary. However, they have a common denominator: to bring about change, whether it is personal, social, political, economic, technological, and/or environmental (Alsop and Bencze 2010). According to Chon and Park (2020, p. 74), activism is defined as ‘collective action of like-minded people (i.e. polarised people) to change a society, a policy, or an organisation in relation to contentious issues’. For our purposes, activism is defined as *a process by which individuals, groups, or institutions exert pressure on other individuals, organisations, or institutions to change policies, practices, or conditions that they perceive as problematic or unacceptable, with the aim of bringing about change in society for the greater good.*

✉ Klement Podnar
klement.podnar@fdv.uni-lj.si

¹ Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Ljubljana, Slovenia



For decades, most companies and their brands have avoided socio-political issues, which are 'salient, unresolved social issues on which social and institutional opinion is divided and which can potentially lead to acrimonious debates between groups' (Nalick et al. 2016, p. 386). Instead, they relied on a strategy of neutrality on controversial issues. The companies focused heavily on their responsibility to generate profits and increase shareholder value and avoided any ideological and/or political issues that might upset consumers who might disagree with the company's stance or even attack the company or its brands with critical, negative, and even aggressive actions. From this perspective, companies often viewed activism as a potential nuisance, particularly in the context of corporate crises and disputes. Additionally, various stakeholders, including consumers, NGOs, and shareholders, have targeted companies and their brands with different forms of activism to pressure them into changing their policies and practices, sharing power, and addressing collective concerns (Jin and You 2023).

Some surveys show that not all consumers are interested in hearing the socio-political positions of brands, but younger generations in particular expect their favourite brands to address socio-political issues (Coffee 2023; Hoppner and Vadakkepatt 2019; Tynan 2018). Young individuals want companies and their CEOs to take a stand on social issues and other causes (Edelman 2018). In the future, it may become increasingly difficult for brands to remain silent on their political and social positions or avoid being targeted by different forms of activism, including anti-brand activism. Various social movements are increasing, and brands are compelled to confront them and react. Frequently, however, they must find allies in activist groups, support grassroots movements, advocate for political change, encourage activism among their employees, and even develop and manage their own brand activism.

As a result, brand activism has gained prominence among large companies who have realised that neglecting social issues can lead to a corporate crisis. This places activism at the centre of brand management and influences corporate communications and branding. However, entering the field of ideology, politics, and social division raises unanswered questions and dilemmas for companies, brands, and their managers. To gain a comprehensive understanding of brand activism, it is crucial to examine both consumer expectations and corporate motivations. A holistic management perspective and corporate brand orientation are essential when considering activism in relation to companies and brands.

Accordingly, the purpose of this article is to raise questions about companies and their brand activism and to offer our perspective on critical dilemmas that need to be addressed for the further development of the concept and brand activism management. While our exploratory

evaluation is designed to advance open questions in this area rather than to test them, the articles in this special issue each provide a basis for a critical evaluation of what activism brings to brands and what brand activism and branding bring to activism itself.

The remainder of this text provides, in the first section, a classification and detailed description of different forms of organisation-related activism, followed by an introduction to an ecosystem of organisation-related activism, which also describes some of the ways in which brands can respond to different forms of activism. The next section discusses the interconnectedness of corporate and brand activism. The fourth section highlights some paradoxes related to brand activism, proving that it is a complex issue that requires further research. Finally, we provide a preview of the papers contained in this special issue, along with some concluding remarks.

Different forms of organisation-related activism

When considering activism in the corporate environment, corporate communication and brand managers should be aware that there are various forms of activism and activists that can influence and engage with companies and their brands, depending on their relationship with the target organisations. Corporate stakeholders and their activism can be classified on a spectrum ranging from 'insider' (full members) to 'outsider' (non-members), as proposed by Briscoe and Gupta (2016) based on primary and secondary activism, as described by Vasi and King (2012). However, Jacobsson and Sörbom (2015) argue for a more nuanced perspective that bridges the gap between the 'inside' and 'outside' views of activism, highlighting its diverse forms and goals. In the context of organisation-related activism, brand activism can serve as a bridge between shareholder activism, CEO activism, customer activism, and NGO activism. These different manifestations of activism can also be understood as an 'ecosystem' of organisation-related activism.

Shareholder activism

Hedge funds, individual investors, governments, institutional investors, and significant stakeholders practice shareholder activism. It is defined as the act of seeking to bring about change within a company's management or operations without a change of control (Gillan and Starks 2007, p. 55). Shareholder activism occurs when disgruntled shareholders complain loudly that management is not acting in the best interests of shareholders or even other stakeholders, and threaten to do something about it (Guay et al. 2004,



p. 129). For example, in 2011, a shareholder activist Bill Ackman initiated a proxy campaign against Canadian Pacific Railway, campaigning to change the management of the company (CFI n.d.). Shareholder activism directly challenges boards and managers and draws attention to shareholder demands through various means (David et al. 2001, 2007). The primary goal of shareholder activism is to use various methods, means, and motivations to bring about change and align the company's actions with the interests of shareholders and other stakeholders. This is done to influence the decision-making and operations of the company in question, improve its financial performance, and increase shareholder value (Aslan 2020). The essence of this specific type of activism is therefore to bring about change in the organisation and to influence management decisions. It may also target external actors to exert pressure on the organisation and bring about change within the organisation.

CEO activism

Another form of activism, in which CEOs themselves (rather than the company they represent) are the actor, primarily focuses on issues outside the core business of the company. CEO activists take public positions on controversial topics or social and environmental issues not directly related to the company's core business (Chatterji and Toffell 2015, 2019). CEO activism is the public expression of a business leader's stance on a current social or political issue, with the aim of influencing opinions in the direction they support (e.g. CEO of Apple Tim Cook speaking out about the LGBTQ+ community concerns; Trapp 2023). This definition, provided by Hambrick and Wowak (2021), highlights the importance of visibility and influence in the expression of such opinions. CEO activism can be motivated by individual personal political ideology, ethics, personal characteristics, or a strategically thought-out action aligned with the company's business objectives to achieve a specific response or participation from various stakeholders (Bedendo and Siming 2021). Wowak et al. (2022) note that CEO activism can be a form of symbolic action, involving little expenditure of CEO effort or company resources. However, this is not always the case, as some CEO activists use their companies to achieve and manifest their activist mission. This is a form of social entrepreneurship activism. It refers to individuals who launch social ventures to tackle socioeconomic and environmental challenges through cause-based social ventures that broadly focus on communities across ethnic and socioeconomic categories (Abebe et al. 2020). CEO activism can have a significant impact on various stakeholders, such as customers, applicants, employees, suppliers, shareholders, investors, politicians, regulators, and the public (for a detailed literature review, refer to Rumstadt Kanbach (2022)). Stakeholders

automatically associate the CEO with the company and react accordingly. CEOs may use their activism to communicate messages to stakeholders about their attitudes and behaviours, including serving as a trigger that increases an employee's identification as an organisational member (Wowak et al. 2022). Thus, the CEO's actions, even if they occur outside the organisation and are not necessarily related to the core business, still have an impact on the organisation's perception and reputation (Love et al. 2017). In certain instances, however, CEO activism also centres on the company and its stakeholders, particularly those within the company who are then prompted to respond psychologically (Habrick and Wowak 2021). Those who were already inclined to support the CEO's public stance may feel a sense of pride in their association with the company, leading to increased identification with both the firm and the CEO's position. Those who were ex ante averse to the CEO's stance experience diminished identification with the firm, and their oppositional stance is further cemented (Love et al. 2017).

Employee activism

When considering organisation-related activism, it is important not to neglect employees, who are the most important internal stakeholder group of any organisation (Lee 2021). Employee activism refers to collective action taken by organisational members in response to specific social events or the organisation's policies and practices, with the aim of bringing about social change (Hirsch 2021). This recognition acknowledges that activist efforts can originate within the organisation and refer to employee initiatives for social change. Ninova-Solovykh (2023) suggests that it is important to distinguish worker activism from other worker-led initiatives and traditional concepts such as power-sharing through micro-emancipation, industrial democracy, and representative participation through trade unions. Worker activism is a form of proactive and direct worker participation (Wilkinson et al. 2012, 2020). It extends beyond labour rights and employment conditions that affect workers personally (e.g. in 2018, 20,000 Google employees walked off the job to protest the company's lenient sexual harassment policies; Briscoe and Gupta 2021). Worker activism primarily involves resistance to a company's policies and (non-)decisions regarding the rights of others and the overall societal impact of the company (Ninova-Solovykh 2023). Employee activists are individuals within a company who advocate for broader social, political, and environmental goals (Ramirez and Islam 2022). Their motivation stems from a perceived misalignment between their personal beliefs and values and the values and practices of their organisation. Employees traditionally have two ways to achieve change in the organisation by negotiating the position of an insider while



challenging the status quo within the organisation (Ninova-Solovykh 2023, p. 144). First, their efforts or actions can remain within the organisation, or second, they can attract the attention of external publics as part of their activist work, capitalising on the emotional responses of different publics, stimulating public debate and challenging the company's reputation. From the organisation's perspective, employee activism can be framed as counterproductive, disruptive, and problematic behaviour, or it can be seen as an opportunity to turn activists into informants and even change agents from within (Ramirez and Islam 2022).

NGO activism

Employee activists are also valuable assets to non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as trade unions, advocacy and pressure groups, legal foundations, networks, humanitarian programs, religious, and other organisations. They often lead specific NGO-led campaigns within their respective organisations. In the contemporary business world, NGOs have become a crucial stakeholder in a company's policies and decisions. NGOs put pressure on companies to make certain changes and prevent harmful projects and practices for example when the Brest Cancer Fund accused Revlon of using carcinogenic chemicals in its cosmetics (Gunther 2015). According to the United Nations (2003), NGOs are non-profit, voluntary citizens' groups organized at the local, national, or international level. They are mission-oriented and driven by people with a common interest. They perform a range of services and humanitarian tasks, bringing citizens' concerns to the attention of governments, monitoring policies, promoting political participation at the community level, providing analysis and expertise, serving as early warning mechanisms, and assisting in monitoring and implementing international agreements (Guay et al. 2004). NGOs are typically defined as organisations with a non-profit motive, relying heavily on voluntary support from community members and public backing. NGO activism thus refers to the advocacy and struggle of civil society through organising that is independent of public authorities and special interests (Daubanes and Rochet 2019, p. 184). NGOs use various forms and tools, such as public announcements, media attention, direct negotiations with companies, and proxy contests, to influence the management, policies, and behaviour of companies and to put their reputation at risk. They collaborate with companies, providing advice and proposing codes of conduct. They mobilise their members and the public, using advertising and other promotional tools, media campaigns, public relations tactics, and lobbying to influence national or international policies, regulations, or laws opposed by corporations. NGO activism is highly

credible due to its ability to focus, attract attention, and act quickly. Additionally, it encourages networking of various organisational groups (Argenti 2004).

Community activism

NGO activism frequently collaborates with or organises community activism (Capizzo and Madden 2022). Community activism is a broad term that encompasses all forms of community participation, engagement, and commitment to effect change, motivated by the community itself. Community activism can be viewed through the prism of social categories and identities, based on voluntary, non-formal associations of individuals who initiate collective action to achieve self-determined goals that are in the interest of the community. It is defined by organising for collective action and includes various forms of activism, such as neighbourhood, health, gender, race, media, anti-brand community, and brand community activism (Christens and Speer 2015). It involves groups of individuals working together to achieve a common goal, usually through non-institutionalised means (Tindall 2002), such as the cyclists of New York City, who staged a 'die-in' to protest against the deaths of cyclists and to call for changes in infrastructure and policy (Aratani 2019). A community is a group of people who share a socially meaningful characteristic, such as a location, set of norms, culture, religion, values, customs, identity, brand, etc. Community activism aims to increase public awareness of specific issues through consciousness raising, networking, engagement in focused dialogue, critical reflection, and reflective action. Community activists usually work at the local level, but not necessarily. Hurst et al. (2020) emphasised the significance of local communities as crucial partners in granting organisations a social license to operate. For instance, as suggested by Briscoe and Gupta (2016), neighbourhood activists frequently mobilise to resist the placement of industrial facilities and urge businesses to provide more assistance to victims following local disasters. These opposition groups are typically composed of individuals who share a common cause. Therefore, groups of this nature are usually dynamic, with members joining and leaving for personal reasons. The ideology of opposing groups is diverse and constantly changing due to the varying composition of the group. These groups tend to have a limited existence, and when the reason for their opposition disappears, the community's activism dissipates (van Dijk and der Wulp 2010, p. 20). Community activism can mobilise around a single issue or grow into a long-term advocacy group that tackles multiple issues (Biddle and Mitra 2021 p. 338).



Consumer activism

Consumers can also act as activists and use activist strategies to influence companies and their decisions. This can be triggered by various factors such as company ownership, CEO activities, corporate decisions, behaviour, products and services, campaigns, and other forms of communication. Consumer activism is the practice of organised consumption or non-consumption that is collective, oriented towards the public sphere, grassroots democratic, and aware of the political implications of pressure and trade (Glickman 2009, p. 26). It is a form of activism exercised by consumers through their participation in the marketplace (Lightfoot 2019), with the aim of changing or rewarding corporate policies and practices. Consumer activism takes the form of organised off- or online movements that oppose corporate actions or promote consumer-based cultural change (Barès and Cova 2023). The two main types of consumer activism are boycotts and buycotts (Neilson 2010). Boycott is a concerted refusal to spend money on a product or service, or to persuade others not to spend money on a product or service, in the hope of changing certain conditions or practices of an institution. A boycott campaign is a coordinated effort by consumers to withdraw from business relationships with companies in order to punish undesirable behaviour (Neilson 2010; Pezzullo 2011), such as the successful boycott campaign against deforestation for palm oil in Nestle's supply chain (Roser-Renouf et al. 2016). In contrast, a buycott campaign is defined as a concerted effort to spend money and persuade others to spend money on a product or service in the hope of validating certain conditions or practices of an institution. These are organised attempts by consumers to reward companies for favourable behaviour through increased purchases (Neilson 2010). The aim of consumer activism is to affect an organisation's revenue or reputation, either positively or negatively, in order to bring about change (Friedman 2002).

Ecosystem of organisation-related activism

The above-described examples of activism represent an ecosystem surrounding brand activism (see Fig. 1) and illustrate how opposing forces of different activism can put pressure on an organisation. The ecosystem also shows that the goals of different activism can either be contradictory or symbiotic. These dynamics influence brand activism, which can be either regressive or progressive depending on the organisation's stance and values and the pressure from activist groups (Sarkar and Kotler 2020). To prevent conflicts that may arise when activists with different values and goals clash, the

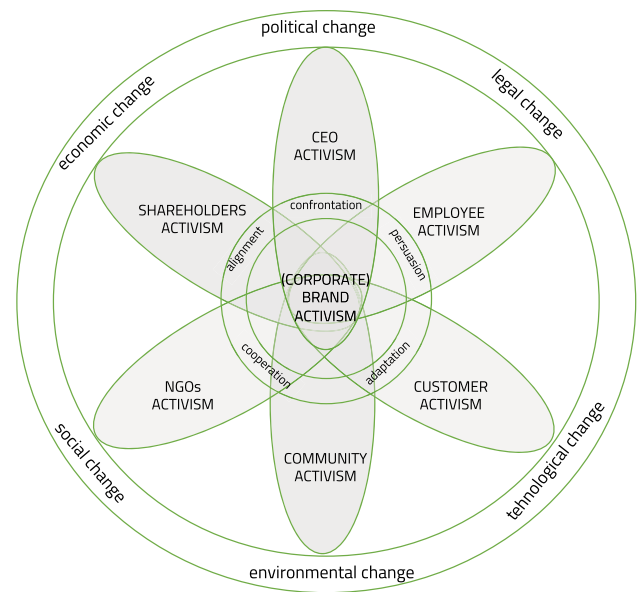


Fig. 1 Ecosystem of organisation-related activism

organisation must reconcile and balance the interests and goals of different activist groups and decide on its stance.

Brand activism can be viewed as a bridge connecting various activists and internal and external stakeholders, as well as a catalyst for opposing activist groups. Wu and Liu (2023) suggest that firms should pay attention to activism cues, interpret them objectively, and take action to address activist challenges accordingly. Firms can respond to social activists' demands with a range of behavioural adaptations, from ignoring activism campaigns and resisting change to conceding to activists' demands and collaborating with them (Wu and Liu 2023, p. 2). When considering the various activism associated with the organisation, we encounter different response processes, including strategic ignorance, confrontation, persuasion, adaptation, cooperation, and, in some cases, alignment.

(Strategic) ignorance refers to issues and activist groups that are deliberately or unintentionally not addressed, ignored, or pushed aside because exploring or responding to them could be dangerous or unpleasant to the organisation's interests and status quo (McGoey 2012). It is a deliberate effort to preclude, obfuscate, or deflect specific issues and activist groups' efforts from emerging. This strategy can be used to avoid responsibility and liability, command resources, and assert expertise in the face of unpredictable outcomes. However, it is important to note that ignorance can be a double-edged sword for the organisation, as pressure from activist groups and their anger at being ignored can lead to an organisational crisis.

The process of confrontation begins with a disagreement or misunderstanding that arises from actual or perceived



differences in needs, beliefs, resources, and relationships between the organisation and its stakeholders, including activists. Conflict and disagreement between the organisation and its stakeholders, particularly on specific issues, may seem inevitable in the context of internal or external activism. During confrontation the company defends its position or may even engage in counter-activism.

The process of persuasion is an organisation's attempt to influence others to alter their attitudes, beliefs, values, or actions, or to think or act in a certain way. These promotional activities may be directed at other activist groups, but in most cases, they are aimed at the public to gain legitimacy and public support for the organisation's position on a particular issue. During this phase, the organisation employs various forms of corporate and brand communication to persuade its stakeholders to take action or support its ideas.

Adaptation is the process of a corporation adjusting to actual or anticipated conditions, positions, or goals, as presented by another group of activists. Adaptation is the conscious decision-making process by organisational members that results in observable actions aimed at reducing the distance between an organisation and different activist groups and their demands and viewpoints (adapted from Sarta et al. 2021, p. 44), mostly to avoid crises and circumvent obstacles to organisational goals. Organisations can exhibit four types of adaptive behaviour: pre-emptive, reactive, continuous, and deferred adaptation (Gasbarro and Pinkse 2016).

The process of cooperation refers to an organisation's decision to work with other activist groups to solve issues and problems that cannot be solved by the organisation alone, or to jointly promote and carry out actions for a common goal. This can lead to a collaborative advantage, which is the desired synergistic outcome of collaborative activity or the collaborative inertia that results from obstacles that prevent partners from achieving their collaborative goals (Savage et al. 2010).

And finally, the alignment process involves an organisation collaborating with other activist groups to achieve shared goals and vision, rather than engaging in conflict, competition, or opposition. It represents the final stage of the cooperation process. Strategic alliances between companies or their brands and activist groups can take various forms, such as agreements, coalitions, joint programs, consortia, committees, action packages, or other contractual relationships. These alliances pool, coordinate, and manage collective resources to achieve common activism goals.

In brand activism management, companies must consider various processes that characterise their relationships with activist groups and respond to the demands they confront. Additionally, they must decide which of the four roles of activism they wish to adopt to effectively contribute

to the desired change: citizen, rebel, change agent, or reformer (Moyer et al. 2001). However, assuming that activism is necessarily conflictual and not deviating from its principles or compromising in response to external pressures, the ecosystem described above allows brand managers to anticipate potential threats and opportunities in implementing their brand activism and pursuing political, economic, social, technological, legal, or environmental change.

Corporate and brand activism: inseparable phenomena

To delve deeper into the dimensions of brand activism management within the ecosystem of activism, it is necessary to explore the relationship between corporate and brand activism. The literature provides various definitions of both types of activism, making it difficult to distinguish between them or establish a clear relationship (Cammarota et al. 2023). The terms are often used interchangeably or are mutually inclusive (Jantunen and Hirsto 2021). The distinction between the two is not so much in the content or direction of activist pursuits, but rather in the agency or entity that carries out the activism. Both the company as a brand and its components (the products/services as brands) are social entities that can be associated with activism. However, it can be argued that the interconnectedness of companies and brands makes it difficult to develop brand activism without the support of corporate activism. This is particularly relevant for brand management and can affect brand managers' decisions on whether and how a brand should engage in activism.

Various definitions of corporate activism revolve around corporations taking a stand on social, political, environmental, or economic issues with the aim of bringing about social change and exerting influence on the attitudes and behaviours of other actors (Eilert and Nappier Cherup 2020, p. 461). They also attempt to mobilise public support for their stance (Li and Soule 2022). Vestergaard and Uldam (2022) argue that influencing occurs in social arenas, such as the media, rather than in parliamentary institutions. In the context of corporate activism, Nalick et al. (2016) suggest that a non-neutral stance is taken on controversial, politically sensitive, divisive, and emotionally charged issues. In essence, it refers to a company's public display of support or opposition to one side of a partisan socio-political issue (Bhagwat et al. 2020, p. 2). In summary, Villagra et al. (2021, p. 320) describe corporate activism as an emerging concept where brands take sides on controversial social and political issues. The said authors tend to use the terms 'corporate' and 'brand' interchangeably. Companies become agents of development, driving social change while



creating a positive impact on the company and its brand equity. Corporate activism addresses social demands, and it is driven by a set of socio-political values that stakeholders are interested in. This type of activism helps to bridge the gap between what stakeholders know or do not know about the company's values (Villagra et al. 2021).

Brand activism definitions are rather similar to those of corporate activism. Brand activism is defined as a form of market-based activism (Sibai et al. 2021) that exists at the intersection of politics and marketing (Jung and Mittal 2020). It involves brands intervening and engaging in delicate and controversial issues (Klostermann et al. 2022). This has become a popular corporate strategy through which brands take a public stance on what they believe is good for society (Cian et al 2018). Sarkar and Kotler (2020, p. 54) define brand activism as business efforts aimed at promoting, impeding, or directing social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to promote or impede improvements in society. Brand activism is inherently public action that plays out in advertising, social media, public relations, and other visible ways (Korschun 2021). Similarly, Moorman (2020, p. 388–89) defines brand political activism as 'public speech or actions focused on partisan issues made by or on behalf of a company using its corporate or individual brand name'. Shetty et al. (2019) note that brand activism assumes a public endorsement of a specific issue that aligns with the brand's core values and vision. In accordance with the aforementioned characteristics, Sibai et al. (2021) define an activist brand as a moral agent that challenges prevailing moral norms to advance social welfare. According to Sibai et al. (2021), activist brands are perceived by their stakeholders as purpose- and value-oriented entities that can influence the morality of others. They reform moral judgments, challenge existing ones, and promote alternative judgments, fulfilling an ideological function. Activist brands explicitly seek to promote certain benefits and changes in society. Following Vredenburg et al. (2020), corporate brands can promote social benefits either symbolically or tangibly. Implementing tangible changes tends to visibly affect the ways in which the company operates.

Further examination of the literature shows that corporate and brand activism are linked. Jantunen and Hirsto (2021) use the term corporate activism instead of brand activism, as they believe it broadens the scope of activism to include corporations that are not heavily brand-driven. This highlights corporations as institutional actors and frames activism as a strategic organisational activity that relies on the commitment of corporate management. Although this is a valid reason, companies that engage or want to engage in activism often build strong brands at the corporate or product level. This can complicate matters and further the

view that corporate and brand activism may be inextricably intertwined.

The literature on activism suggests that activism can only be efficient and properly accepted by stakeholders if it is perceived as authentic (Vredenburg et al. 2020). For brand-driven corporations, authenticity in brand activism (whether at the corporate or other levels) can only be achieved through organisational authenticity (Li and Soule 2022). Stakeholders are very good at discerning the difference between authentic activism and performative allyship, which is perceived as wokewashing and therefore illegitimate (Vredenburg et al. 2020). According to organisational authenticity theory, corporate activism may have the potential to backfire if companies lack moral authenticity (Li and Soule 2022). The absence of perceived authenticity can result in risks such as consumer boycotts, backlash, and a decrease in brand value (Mirzaei et al. 2022). Schmidt et al. (2021) see authenticity as crucial in determining whether a brand's activism is perceived as genuine or deceptive.

Authenticity as a necessary condition for activism thus leads to the awareness that brand activism requires a specific and distinctive corporate identity. The latter is based on clear values and distinctive characteristics, consistent decisions, symbolism, communication, and behaviour of the organisation. Engaging in activism modifies not only the way companies see the world but also the way they perceive themselves. Following this, product or service brand activism that is not supported and backed by a similar stance at the organisational level may well appear inauthentic. Therefore, to appear authentic in brand activism, the company itself must always pursue an 'activist identity' as an actor, even if it only communicates, expresses, and lives its activism through a specific product or service brand. This supports the argument made by Jantunen and Hirsto (2021) that activism should always be viewed as a strategic organisational activity, regardless of whether it is manifested at the corporate level, only at the level of a product or service brand, or both. To be perceived as authentic, an activist brand aims to challenge and reform moral judgments and social norms, and therefore requires complete consistency at all levels of the organisation and its parts.

Although activism can be visible at different levels, such as corporate, strategic unit, or product/service, and companies and brands can use various tools to demonstrate their activism, pursuing activism may not be suitable for all brands (Korschun 2021). It not only raises questions about how to tackle important or controversial societal issues but also requires organisational change. If a company is not willing to change its corporate identity and prioritise the cause over profit, engaging in activism becomes pointless. In today's understanding of capitalism, businesses are primarily viewed as profit and growth generators. Therefore, brand



activism may conflict with stakeholder expectations and other forms of activism in the ecosystem.

Corporate and brand activism paradox wheel

Corporate and brand activism is a growing trend that is likely to continue (Korschun 2021). However, this trend is often accompanied by contradictions and paradoxes. Paradoxes refer to underlying tensions that arise when seemingly logical elements are juxtaposed and appear inconsistent or even absurd (Lewis 2000). These paradoxes provide fertile ground for further research into brand activism and its development as a field of study. When examining different types of organisational activism and attitudes to them, a number of paradoxes have already emerged. One of these is the conflicting and cooperative nature of brand activism. In the realm of corporate and brand activism, organisations are faced with the paradoxical situation and decision of either cooperating with or choosing conflict with various activist groups. When discussing the significance of corporate identity in brand activism, we highlighted the paradox between authenticity and credibility on the one hand, and illegitimacy and wokewashing on the other. Additionally, we can reference the paradox between a cause-oriented and profit-oriented organisation in this context.

Although there is consumer and public pressure for companies to take a stance on pressing and controversial issues due to their power and influence, corporate and brand activism may not necessarily provide a clear competitive advantage or help to pay dividends. Empirical research shows that corporate activism practices can influence a company's financial results, but not always positively, and not in all types of activism (Sanchez et al. 2022). This presents a paradox. Activism is based on supporting controversial issues that can lead to polarisation. Taking a position on such issues can cause favourable or unfavourable reactions from consumers and other stakeholders, depending on their values. While some studies suggest that corporate and brand activism can have a positive impact on consumer behaviour, such as increasing identification, loyalty, willingness to pay more, positive word of mouth, and publicity, other studies indicate that disagreement between the consumer and the brand regarding the brand's point of view can lead to a decrease in brand attitude. However, in general, when there is agreement between the consumer and the brand, no significant effect on brand attitude is observed (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020).

Corporate and brand activism can attract and gain the support of stakeholders, but it can also alienate those who disagree with the cause. Another paradox of corporate and brand activism arises from the fact that profit-driven

companies may strategically alienate a part of their market that does not agree with the company, without any guarantee that this will be compensated by an increase in the part of the market that supports the company's activist efforts. For some, brand activism may seem irrational as it contradicts the idea of a company as a profit-generating instrument. However, companies that aim to legitimise and monetise their activism are forced to do so. The question is where the balance lies between pragmatism and idealism. This also relates to the corporate dilemma of what is more valuable in terms of maximising corporate value: conformity or activism? One may consider whether corporate activism is a form of corporate conformity, rather than a result of it.

Another paradox associated with corporate and brand activism is that activists are increasingly putting companies in the spotlight and making demands on them by recognising them as important social subjects outside the corporate sphere. Their aim is not only to influence the policies and practices of specific companies and persuade them to support their causes, but also to collaborate with companies in various ways to achieve greater reach and impact, resources and improved operations for their organisations through their brand activism and to strain their own competitive advantage. This can have various positive consequences, such as promotion and popularisation of social movements. However, it can also have negative consequences, such as corporatisation, marketisation and commodification of activism, compassion, and social movements (Hayhurst and Szto 2016; Golob and Verk 2023). This can lead to a reduction in the legitimacy and effectiveness of activism itself, as it becomes part of a system that seeks to scrutinise and dismantle it.

Partnerships with activist groups can provide companies with significant business and competitive advantages. They can help companies gain consumer trust, open up new markets, and contribute to marketing communications, ultimately increasing the value of the brand and corporate reputation (Dauvergne and LeBaron 2014, p. 154). However, using activism for marketing purposes can also be detrimental to the cause. Activism marketisation can lead to oversimplification and the appearance of manageability, as well as 'cherry-picking' of issues that generate more publicity and are more brandable by companies (Richey and Ponte 2014; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Thus, the corporatisation of activism further empowers corporations, and its marketisation merges the eternal tension between social activism and capitalism.

According to some authors, other consequences may include moral licencing (Blanken et al. 2015) and passive citizen—consumers seeing packaged and promoted social issues addressed through brand activism as worth their money (Golob and Verk 2023). This may result in consumers giving less thought to the potential consequences of future



actions resulting from corporate and brand activism. They focus on identifying with a brand, buying goods and supporting a company, which they see as a positive and moral action. The passivisation of individuals in social movements can weaken the movement or even turn it into a fad, reducing its disruptive potential and people's commitment to real social change.

Further research is needed to explore these issues, as well as issues related to the branding and corporatisation of activist groups and social movements—an area of research that has been largely neglected and where empirical studies are lacking.

The alienation of stakeholders who disagree with the company may result in anti-corporate activism. This can involve individuals taking critical, negative, or even aggressive actions against the brand. According to Romani et al. (2015), anti-brand activism involves various forms of active resistance, such as boycotting, culture jamming, and online activism. It arises from individuals' disapproval of brands that may symbolise negative perceptions, including hate, associated with corporations. Dubuisson-Quellier (2021) notes that companies often use a range of tactics to respond to disruptive interventions by activists. These tactics include communication campaigns, advertising, PR activities, and other tools to protect and enhance the company's reputation while discrediting the activists' claims and accusations. Impression management is a crucial aspect of this process. Companies are not only caught between the proponents and opponents of brand activism, but also face increased opportunity costs to mitigate threats to their reputation. While brand activism may bring some competitive advantage in the form of positive publicity, it is important to consider the potential drawbacks.

Finally, it should be noted that brand activism can be either progressive, neutral, or regressive, as Sarkar and Kotler (2020) emphasise, which is another paradox of brand activism that relates to its 'content'. However, most research on brand activism in the literature focuses on progressive activism, while regressive activism is often overlooked. In identifying important issues and defining the corporate position, companies and their brands must deal with the contradictions of being on the progressive side of some issues and on the regressive side of others. This is particularly important when they are under pressure from activists in relation to their core business. In such cases, they can quickly 'forget' their progressive stance and resort to tactics and positions of regressive activism that require action away from the public eye. As Lin (2018) notes, activism has been a part of corporate activity for decades. However, most activism remains in the background and out of the public eye. Future research should investigate regressive practices to broaden the field of brand activism research.

In conclusion, brand activism as an organisational strategy is full of paradoxes and managers should be aware of these paradoxes before deciding to engage in corporate and brand activism. It is crucial to carefully observe paradoxes that may arise in certain situations and environments and react cautiously to prevent new problems and crises. Figure 2 illustrates the significant role of paradoxes in brand activism. Paradoxes are arranged in a circular formation, similar to Aristotle's paradox wheel. The list of identified paradoxes is not exhaustive, as different paradoxes occur in various contexts, for different reasons, and on different organisation-related issues at any given time. This list serves primarily as a reminder and a tool for brand managers to become aware of the role of paradoxes and to recognise them.

Articles in the special issue

This special issue includes eight articles that examine several paradoxes highlighted in the section above. The articles provide interesting insights that allow for a critical appraisal and reflection on brand activism via some of these paradoxes.

The article by Muraro et al. (2023), which appears in Vol. 30 of the *Journal of Brand Management*, examines an online consumer activism campaign by developing a typology of microframes that reflects the distinction between cause-oriented and brand-oriented microframes within the consumer activism episode. The paper raises an interesting point about how polarisation motivates action and how authenticity affects the perception of brand activism, thus addressing the paradox of authenticity.

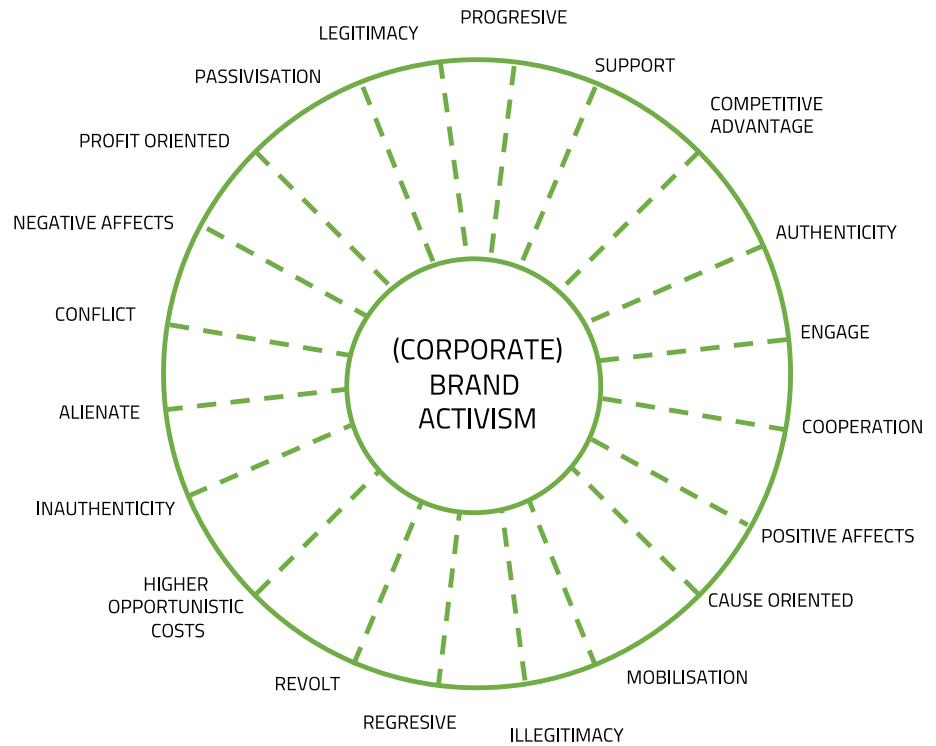
Aboelenien and Nguyen (2024) examine brand activism in the entertainment industry, with a focus on how brands coped with threats to their legitimacy from passive exclusion and representation offences. The authors' work addresses the paradox of illegitimacy and explores how brands responded to stakeholder pressures that threatened their legitimacy. It also examines the strategies employed during the process of identity transformation, specifically the challenge of retaining the identity of a for-profit company while embarking on an activist agenda.

Rohmanue and Jacobi's (2024) article further investigates authenticity in the development of a brand's moral competency, framing the issue of authenticity in the client–agency relationship. The authors argue that brand activism must be authenticated through effective marketing communications and continuous improvement of corporate practices. As stated in the article, this can be achieved through a dynamic process that utilises interactional expertise in inter-organisational collaborations.

The article by Esmann Andersen and Johansen (2024) also raises the question of activist brand identity



Fig. 2 Brand activism paradox wheel



transformation. The authors employ a narrative approach to explore the micro side of such a transformation. Their research shows that an activist brand can be understood as a result of a complex network of antenarratives and counternarratives that must be closely monitored and reflected upon by brand managers.

Guha and Korschun (2024) take a marketing-oriented approach to studying brand activism. Employing a quantitative study with a logistic regression model, their article investigates how peer brands' activism affects a brand's decision to engage in activism on social media. The article focuses on the need to take into account both peer brand activism and consumer reactions to such activism when embarking on the activist agenda. With exploring how brands can use peer brand activism and consumer responses as a source of information for their own market behaviour, this article also raises the questions about the potential marketisation of brand activism.

Wannow et al. (2024) investigate consumer reactions to brand activism, both positive and negative. The emotional nature of these reactions is confirmed through three scenario-based experiments. The article explores the role of positive and negative emotions in consumer reactions and addresses the paradox of these emotional reactions. This has important implications for brand managers, particularly regarding potential drawbacks that may arise from opponents of the brand's stance.

Lee et al. (2024) explore the effects of non-profit brand activism on brand equity. This study is unique in

its examination of brand activism beyond the commercial sector. The findings have important implications for non-profit brand activities. However, the article also opens up a potentially more critical perspective on the paradoxes of corporatising brand activism in the non-profit sector, where the non-profit brand uses brand activism as a means to enhance its brand equity and potentially becomes a tradable asset itself (Ibert et al. 2019).

Finally, the article by Pimentel et al. (2024) conducts a systematic literature review on brand activism and presents an integrative framework that synthesises the existing knowledge of brand activism. The framework combines brand activism antecedents, decisions, and outcomes. The article takes a perspective on brand activism as a marketing strategy. It positions brand activism as a set of marketing activities, which may raise issues related to corporatisation and marketisation paradoxes of brand activism.

The articles in the special issue do much to illuminate the various aspects and paradoxes of brand activism and further enhance our understanding of this phenomenon and its implications for brand management theory and practice.

Conclusion

Brand activism has become a widely practiced phenomenon in the business world, and research on the topic has penetrated the brand management literature. It is arguable that brand activism is here to stay due to increased consumer



and stakeholder awareness of societal issues and their expectations of active corporate involvement in addressing them. As demonstrated in this special issue, brands can and should play an important role in addressing societal controversies. However, as stated in our article and reiterated by other articles in this special issue, brand activism presents several issues that brand management must be aware of, explore, reflect on, and consider in research and practice.

As part of the special issue on brands and activism, the aim of this article was to highlight some areas that we believe are particularly important for understanding brand activism and how it can be managed. This article, along with the other articles accepted for this special issue, may serve as a source of inspiration for further research or as an introduction to the topic. It may also stimulate thinking about various outstanding dilemmas in this area that are worthy of further exploration. We hope that this special issue will inspire other scholars to develop future theoretical and empirical advances that will contribute to a rich body of literature that will expand our understanding of brand activism in new and important ways. We also hope that it will provide brand managers with some valuable and helpful insights.

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Klement Podnar is Professor of Marketing Communication and former vice-dean of student affairs and development at Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana. His research interests lie in corporate communication, corporate marketing, CSR, and sustainability communication. His work has been published in journals such as the *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, *European Journal of Marketing*, *Journal of Public Policy & Marketing*, *Corporate Communications*, and *Journal of Brand Management*.

Urša Golob is Professor and Head of the Department of Marketing Communication and Public Relations at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. Her research focuses on corporate social responsibility and sustainability. She publishes her work in renowned international peer-reviewed journals. She is also one of the editors-in-chief of the *Journal of Brand Management* and has been involved in editing several Special Issues related to CSR communication, sustainability, and branding.

