

Chapter 8

Activist Brands: Exploring the Boundaries of Controversy

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ABSTRACT

Recent events triggered consumer outrage towards brands taking a stand on controversial matters. However, the response to low controversial topics marketing's definition of controversy requires an understanding of consumers' subjective perceptions shaped by cognitive processes, emotions, experiences, and cultural backgrounds. Subjectivity influences consumer behavior, while cognitive processing facilitates information comprehension. An experimental study using controversy level and brand presence as independent variables and consumer perceptions as dependent variables revealed that consumers associate branded content with irritation. A statistically significant interaction indicated that controversial topics are perceived as more disturbing with brand presence, while noncontroversial topics are more disturbing without a brand.

1. INTRODUCTION

The most recent definition of Marketing states that it's important for companies to consider “society at large” as a key stakeholder in their marketing efforts (AMA, 2022). Marketing should play a role in helping societies improve over time (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020; Sidibe, 2020). However, recent cases, such as Nike's Kaepernick campaign and Gillette's anti-toxic masculinity campaign, suggest that consumers may react negatively when a brand's values clash with their own (Kim et al., 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

We might expect that discussing less controversial issues, like environmental concerns, would generate less disagreement and impact compared to more controversial topics, such as gender identity or LGBTQIA+ (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). However, this difference isn't clearly addressed in the existing literature, which is what this study focuses on. The term “controversy” isn't well-defined in the literature, especially regarding its use in brand management (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).

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In this study, we start by briefly summarizing the main ideas behind brand activism and the varying levels of controversy. Then, we share the results of an experiment we conducted to see how different levels of controversy might affect how consumers perceive brands engaging in activism in the market. Our findings indicate that consumers often expect brands to take a stance on controversial issues. They view brands more positively when they actively participate in such topics. Additionally, a brand discussing non-controversial issues might influence consumers to ponder if the topic is indeed non-controversial. This study represents a partial exploration of the subject, acknowledging that there are numerous unexplored facets and diverse perspectives that merit further investigation and inclusion in this discourse.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Vredenburg et al. (2020) proposed a definition for brand activism that differentiates it from Cause Marketing, Corporate Social Marketing, and Advocacy Advertising - similar and earlier versions of classification for brands addressing societal issues – specifically because in Brand Activism, brands choose to take a stand and speak up their brand voices on controversial topics (such as racism, gender equality, LGBTQIA+, among others), generating a mix of different reactions amongst consumers (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). In the framework proposed by Vredenburg et al. (2020), consumers' responses may vary from delight to outrage, depending on how these values are intertwined.

Looking deeper into this definition, we see two points that need further exploration to be better understood in marketing literature. One is the definition of controversial and how scholars can address this concept when analyzing and discussing brand activism (Aaker et al. (2004). The second point to address is if there is a way to measure – or at least consider – different levels of controversy (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Topics may be too much or too little controversial, and these differences may lead to different outcomes for brands that take a stand related to these matters (Vredenburg et al, 2020).

2.1. The Definition of Controversy

Defining what is controversy is a complex task, as it entails different perspectives. One common perception of controversy is that it is defined by the hegemonic ideology (Camicia, 2008) as they would help define the norms in which consumers – and people – live. As we are discussing from a marketing perspective, it is important to include consumers' perception of controversy, as they are the ones we are interested in understanding if and how much one topic may be controversial. We are adopting, thus, a subjective understanding, interpretation, and evaluation perspective that individuals have regarding issues that elicit diverse and often conflicting perspectives, opinions, and emotions. It refers to how consumers perceive, process, and make sense of controversial subjects based on their beliefs, values, attitudes, experiences, and sociocultural context (Gupta & Gould, 1997; Jennings et al., 2015; Treise et al., 1994).

We first need to consider the **subjectivity** of consumers' perceptions, influenced by their unique cognitive processes, emotions, and personal experiences. It varies from person to person and may be shaped by their perspectives and biases (Hornik, 1984). One controversial topic is, thus, related to consumers' subjective beliefs and norms. One study that addressed how subjectivity influences consumer behavior was conducted by Alsaad (2021). The author found evidence to support the hypothesis that consumers act according to their subjective norms when there is a strong ethical identification. One example from the market that we can use to illustrate this hypothesis is the “Share a Coke” campaign, where Coca-

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