

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Student Theses and Dissertations

Baruch College

Spring 5-19-2022

Differences Between Brand Activism and Corporate Social Responsibility in Consumer Perception

Erika Marchiondo

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/bb_etds/132

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).
Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

Differences Between Brand Activism and Corporate Social Responsibility in Consumer Perception

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the
Weissman School of Arts and Science
Baruch College, The City University of New York
In partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In

CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

By

Erika Marchiondo

May 19, 2022

Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approved by all its members, this project has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Corporate Communication. This project also has been presented at colloquium to departmental colleagues and faculty.

Approved:

Professor Minna Logemann, Advisor

Date: May 16, 2022

Professor Caryn Medved, Reader

Date: May 16, 2022

Professor Caryn Medved, Program Director

Date: May 16, 2022

Copyright By:

Erika L. Marchiondo

Graduate Student's Name

5/19/22

Date

Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to determine if there is a perceived difference among consumers between brand activism and corporate social responsibility. Taking a stand in social and political causes has become an unspoken requirement for major brands. Consumers are selective about purchasing from brands that do not adhere to ethical practices. Consumers are also demanding increased brand transparency about the philanthropical causes brands support. I want to determine how aware consumers are of acts of corporate social responsibility and brand activism, and if consumers are able to identify a fundamental difference between behaviors associated with the two terms. I posed one research question and used three interview prompts to collect oral histories from six anonymous individuals about their exposure to and opinions on brand activism and corporate social responsibility. The data analysis in this paper is qualitative. The purpose of this qualitative design is so that the interviewees' responses are natural and unstructured, creating a broad, unstructured conversation around these two concepts. My research found that of these six anonymous participants, four were able to distinguish a difference in practice between brand activism and corporate social responsibility.

Introduction

My time at Baruch College began in August of 2020, six months after the coronavirus pandemic sent the world into a tailspin and four months after a wave of social justice protests dominated news headlines. During the six months between my application to the Master of Arts in Corporate Communication program and the start of my first semester, I lost my job as an Executive Assistant at an accounting firm. Armed with an abundance of free time and no income, my media exposure was more heightened than ever. It was during this time period I noticed a resounding theme in marketing, activism.

With gyms still closed at this point of the pandemic, my only option was to exercise outside. Thankfully, I live in the greatest city in the world so even exercising outside is an adventure. Running took me through different neighborhoods of the city, but no matter what part of the city I found myself in I noticed different methods of advertising. Posters plastered to scaffolding walls, bus ads, billboards, all boasting messaging regarding acts of activism tied to a brand. Being anti-racist is not enough; please buy these Nike shoes to let your peers know that you too are anti-racist because you are wearing Nike footwear. Activism in marketing is not a new concept, it has been peppered in my peripheral awareness since the (RED) campaigns and LIVESTRONG bracelets of the early and mid-2000s. What was new to me was the naming conventions used to refer to this particular subset of advertising.

Commodity activism, brand identity, corporate social responsibility; these are all presented as separate concepts in traditional business practices of large corporations, yet each has a common goal. That goal is to target a demographic with messaging that aligns with a chosen political or ideological belief in order to sell a product. The influence of brand activism in media and marketing has captivated me for the last two years. This is why I chose to research this topic for my thesis. I am personally not inclined to support a brand if they happen to support a social cause I am passionate about. Budget outweighs moral righteousness at this point in my life. Spending habits cannot always be virtuous. However, since acts of brand activism and corporate social responsibility initiatives are so common, I want to identify how consumers perceive these efforts and if consumers are able to notice a difference in the practice of each concept. Beyond my personal interest in the topic, there is a real opportunity here for brands to determine exactly what consumers expect from the brands they choose to purchase from; what drives deeper resonance. By researching consumer perception of brand activism and corporate social

responsibility, brands have the opportunity to develop trust, differentiate from competition and increase brand exposure while increasing brand loyalty. With a clear understanding from consumers, brands can better align social and environmental initiatives with their core company values. More importantly than developing stronger brand connection, the opportunity exists to effect social change. Several interchangeable terms exist in this field, which I will explore, including corporate activism, social activism, etc. to reference brand activism and corporate social responsibility. All terms encompass the same goal: selling to consumers. But can consumers tell the difference?

Over my two years in this graduate program, I have focused my research on distinguishing the actions related to these terms. I wrote papers and gave class presentations in the hopes of understanding the difference in each of these concepts. The topics I studied in this program and my research have thus far indicated that these terms are interchangeable and they boil down to the same conclusion - or at least very closely related activities around the same goal. My thesis explores themes and concepts associated with brand activism and corporate social responsibility and discovers how each of these terms is perceived by consumers. First, a literature review will explore existing definitions of brand activism and corporate social responsibility. This literature review includes a brief note on authenticity, a theme that emerged when analyzing data. It is important to provide context on the inclusion of this research, as the theme emerged organically during interviews with respondents. Then I detail why a narrative interview data collection approach best supports this research and how themes and concepts emerged naturally during data analysis. Next, I analyze data and identify emerging themes from interviews. Finally, I discuss my recommendations for new research in this field and opportunities for brand improvement, and conclude my thesis.

Literature Review

This literature review draws on peer reviewed, scholarly articles and books published about brand activism and corporate social responsibility. I conducted the review using keywords including ‘brand, activism, commodity, marketing, corporate social responsibility, cause related, CSR.’ This selection of terms blanketed the scope of this thesis research, since each of the terms encompasses a different aspect of the umbrella theme of marketing. These terms are also varied enough to identify outlier research adjacent to these topics. I reviewed 25 published works and found that brand activism is the term used most frequently in reference to this type of marketing. The second term used most frequently was corporate social responsibility. In the following, existing literature will be discussed according to my broad research question: Are brand activism and corporate social responsibility perceived as the same concept by consumers?

Brand Activism Definitions

Research provided several definitions of the term ‘brand activism.’ Many brands strive to position themselves as activists, that is, moral actors promoting social, legal, business, economic, political, and environmental reform through their communication and practice (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). Sarkar & Kotler define brand activism as “an act which consists of business efforts centered on a brand that aims to “promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to make improvements in society” (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018, p. 554). Similar to the previous definition, another study defined brand activism as representing a form of market-based activism that challenges conceptions of good in markets’ socio-technical arrangements (Sibai et. al, 2021). The authors also propose three markers that delineate an activist brand: an activist brand is (1) a moral subject (2) that reforms dominant moral judgments (3) to promote social benefits (Sibai et. al, 2021). Finally, brand activism,

defined as the act of taking a stand on controversial social or political issues for which society has yet to reach consensus, has an asymmetric effect on consumer attitudes, intentions, and behavior (Mukherjee and Althuzien, 2020). Mukherjee and Althuzien (2020) found that consumer-brand disagreement regarding the brand's stand led to a decrease in consumer attitude whereas there was no significant effect on brand attitude in the case of consumer-brand agreement. A one-line quip in this study highlights the “recent trend in marketing practice of brands taking a stand (p. 784)” which proves that when brands engage in controversial activism, they are taking a risk but aiming to resonate more with the consumer and market their product.

Bhagwat et. al. 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 socio-political issues, to create social change and marketing success (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Typically, authentic brand activism is perceived as a strategy in which brands have clear purpose- and values-driven communication around an activist stance on sociopolitical issues while also engaging in prosocial corporate practice.

Corporate Social Responsibility (as Brand Activism)

Firms that want to gain a differentiation advantage through their corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities need to match the practices of other firms, innovate and communicate their own CSR practices, and protect their CSR achievements from mimicry by other firms (Pollack, 2015). There are key activism initiatives, referred to here as CSR, that brands must highlight at the forefront of marketing efforts with the added pressure of presenting activism efforts as original, as well as creating innovative ways to communicate these efforts. Lately, social media has become more important for corporate social responsibility

communication (ElAlfy et. al, 2020). ElAlfy found that corporate social responsibility is typically presented as marketing and activism, though the strain on firms is to find a way to present these as separate concepts. Even though CSR efforts are social media, this still intersects with other marketing efforts on social sites and does not differentiate CSR from brand activism specifically.

Brand activism can transform markets and society by “shaping what is considered right/wrong, good/bad, or worthy/unworthy in the industries in which [brands] operate” (Wieser et al., 2019, p. 153). Brands that position themselves as activists commonly engage in controversies with the aim of redefining which opinions and ideas are acceptable to express publicly (Bhagwat et al., 2020; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

A company including their intended corporate social responsibility initiatives in a marketing campaign featuring a beneficiary of those who will benefit from this campaign is a strategic move meant for an emotional appeal. Jahdi and Acikdilli noted: “One of the most powerful arguments for including ethics and social responsibility in the strategic market planning process is the increasing evidence of a link between social responsibility, ethics, and marketing performance (Jahdi and Acikdilli, 2009, p. 105).” An analysis of market trends confirms that increasing CSR in marketing is conducive to overall market performance, here referring to sales, social media mentions, general chatter about a company.

Ethical Corporate Citizen (as an Aspiration of Brand Activism)

Literature suggests that consumers’ perceptions of the motives behind a firm’s CSR activities influence their attitudes toward the firm and buying intentions of the products of a sponsoring firm (Becker-Olsen et al., 2006; Brown and Dacin, 1997). When consumers perceive

CSR motives truly to be altruistic for society, namely authentic, firms' CSR actions positively influence consumer attitudes toward the company and its products (Ellen et al., 2006).

Consumers have highlighted the importance of authenticity in brand activism and the dangers of brands not "walking the talk," with 56% of consumers indicating too many brands now use societal issues primarily as a marketing ploy to sell more of their product (Edelman Trust Barometer 2019). This indicates that the consumers are aware of the shift to activism as a marketing technique, and are finding the trend to be overabundant. A 2012 study conducted by Fulmer and Gelfand analyzed trust across organizations and found that "...a growing amount of research has focused on perceived corporate social responsibility (CSR) and found it increased stakeholders' trust in organizations, with participation in CSR initiatives producing a stronger effect."

Jeon and An (2019) explored a cause-related marketing campaign, called 'One for One' for TOMS. TOMS donates a pair of shoes to children without shoes in developing nations when a pair of its shoes is sold. Although cause-related marketing (CRM) is also supported by communication tools in increasing awareness and induce consumer participation, its main goal is to sell the products and support the cause in a simultaneous manner (Jeon and An, 2019). TOMS' initiative embraces an ethically responsible message by donating a pair of shoes to a child in need, but the bottom line is still to sell the TOMS product because in order to donate a pair of TOMS, you need to purchase a pair of TOMS. When consumers were polled about purchasing decisions, over half had bought a product or recommended a company on the basis of its ethical reputation (Carrigan, 2001). Additionally, this same study found that "customers are increasingly making purchases on the basis of a firm's role in society, and 85% of respondents had a more positive image of a company that supported something they cared about (Carrigan, 2001).

Nooshin Warren (2021) writes: “on average, brand activism aligned with consumers' political ideologies increased sales, and the positive effects were persistent over time” (p. 34). That same study found that while companies experienced some sales losses, when the activism did not align with the values of their customers, the sales gains in case of high alignment were substantial and affected not only quarterly, but also annual sales significantly (Warren, 2021). Consumers are making purchases based on activism efforts that align with their ideologies. From the same study, “Brand activism has the power to shape brand identity and to make customer connections stronger. Customers prefer relationships with brands that have a purpose similar to their own value system and identify with the demonstrated beliefs (Warren, 2021, p. 35).” Further developing the need for brand activism as a marketing tool to deepen the bond with consumers, brand activism goes beyond mere advocacy/messaging (i.e., Dodd and Supa 2014; Nalick et al. 2016; Wettstein and Baur 2016) and involves alignment with corporate practices that uphold brand purpose and values. Research found that although both cause promotion (CP) and cause related marketing (CRM) have an identical goal of supporting a cause, their executional tactics are different. CP campaigns emphasize stakeholder-driven motives, while CRM campaigns involve strategies that help reduce the perceptions of egoistic nature of the campaigns (Jeon and An, 2019, p.13). As far as consumer perceptions of CSR motives are concerned, CP seems to be more altruistic than CRM while CRM appears to be oriented more toward generating revenues through stimulating consumers' purchase behavior (Jeon and An, 2019). Consumers make purchasing decisions based on self-representation in the ideals of a brand. Previous research on this topic has found that consumers, particularly millennials, “prefer to buy a brand if it supports a cause or purpose and they stop buying if the brand behaves unethically (Shetty et. al, 2019, p. 163).”

These definitions were identified to help distinguish the practices involved in brand activism and corporate social responsibility. Determining the behaviors associated with both of these terms, as well as researching the intended ethical impact on consumers of each term, provided a background for empirically exploring the plausible differences. The background was used to develop the oral history process. While conducting research for my literature review, I felt that the research did not provide a consumer's way of defining these terms. Scholarly definitions are provided, but the gap in research here is to provide definitions of brand activism and corporate responsibility from the standpoint of a consumer. Developing a better understanding of consumer perception of these concepts allows brands to better understand their consumers and develop a stronger, lasting relationship. The literature review helped to define three more detailed research questions to guide the empirical data gathering in oral history interviews.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do consumers define brand activism?

RQ2: How do consumers define corporate social responsibility?

RQ3: How do consumers perceive the difference between these two terms?

Research Methods: Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection

While devising my research method, I started with what comes most natural to me - oral histories and narrative interviews which were analyzed qualitatively. I am a very social person and I find it easy to speak with people. If the conversation is too fluid and too long then analyzing that amount of transcribed data can be daunting. Scutt (2018) found that interviewing a participant for one hour can result in as many as twenty-five pages of text to analyze, therefore

limiting the length of each interview was necessary for my approach. I was most focused on those in my immediate social circle since we have similar levels of exposures to both brand activism and corporate social responsibility. I conducted six thirty-minute interviews. The interviews were conducted in person so that the conversation could have a more natural flow than if I had conducted the interviews over a video platform. Each interview was recorded on my phone. Afterwards, I used transcriptions of the interviews to identify themes from the respondent narratives. The transcriptions were auto-generated, so minimal data cleanup was necessary due to background noise or muffled speech.

I chose six participants because three hours of conversation focused on brand activism and corporate social responsibility would be a sufficient amount of data to analyze and arrive at a conclusion. For the sake of anonymity, I will refer to each interview participant as Respondents 1 - 6. Respondent 1 works as a financial analyst in banking and is 30 years old. Respondent 2 is an Executive Assistant at an international insurance firm and is 55 years old. Respondent 3 is an independent business owner, an immigrant to the US, and is 29 years old. Respondent 4 works as an operations Manager at a private hedge fund and is 30 years old. Respondent 5 works as an administrative role in consulting and is 29 years old. Respondent 6 works in billing for an automotive chain and is 40 years old. It was important to my research that all respondents were people I interact with regularly so that our conversations on these two themes were natural and our reference points were similar. To provide structure for my interviews, I noted that “the data for a qualitative study most often are notes jotted down in the field or during an interview—from which the original comments, observations, and feelings are reconstructed—or text transcribed from (Schutt, 2018, p. 326).” I, as the administrator of these interviews, included the following interview prompts: what do you think brand activism is, what do you think corporate social

responsibility is, and as a consumer, could you share how you see the difference between these two? I also included talking points of key terms throughout the interviews, including brand activism, corporate social responsibility, relationship to consumers, resonate, ethical, commodity.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, I applied a qualitative content analysis (Berelson 1952) approach and re-read transcriptions of the six interviews. Using original comments made by each of my respondents, I was able to identify recurring themes that emerged during conversation. Ryan and Bernard (2003) found that “discovering themes is the basis of much social science research. Without thematic categories, investigators have nothing to describe, nothing to compare, and nothing to explain.” In 1945, Opler determined that themes are only visible, and thus discoverable, through the manifestation of expressions in data and an unstructured conversation is the ideal setting for a respondent to express themselves. “Today, social scientists still talk about the linkage between themes and their expressions but use different terms to do so. Strauss and Corbin (1990) called them ‘concepts,’ and that is how I will be referring to these recurring themes as well.

I structured my findings as follows; first, I present responses to interview prompts as concepts in Table 1. Second, I provide quotes from respondents that offer rich insight into the three concepts. These quotes were chosen because of how substantial their content is. Third, I present four emerging themes identified in the data during the analysis; brands, authenticity, effects on brand relationship, and initiatives that resonated with consumers.

The concepts below are constructed based on responses to literature-driven interview prompts. These concepts were repeated in all of the oral history accounts I conducted. These

concepts were of particular relevance when reviewing transcriptions because they were already at the forefront of my mind due to my literature review and existing research. I am utilizing both the raw data from interview transcription as well as existing literature, which is called latent coding (Shapiro and Markoff 1997). Using the interviews as a data set, I was able to identify concepts from the interview transcriptions into three key areas.

Table 1. Concepts

| |
|---|
| <p>1. Brand activism is most commonly thought of by consumers as when a company furthers a political or social agenda.</p> <p>Respondents frequently referred to companies ‘pushing’ beliefs by taking a public stance on current political and social topics. This concept includes social media posting, sponsorship and retail.</p> |
| <p>2. Corporate social responsibility is most commonly thought of by consumers as shareholder focused communication pertaining to ESG and philanthropic initiatives.</p> <p>Respondents most commonly referred to initiatives that would be shareholder focused, such as what you would see on a company’s annual report, ESG, diversity and inclusion, etc. This concept was clearly linked to actions that were focused on long-term improvement efforts.</p> |
| <p>3. Brand activism and corporate social responsibility are separate concepts but are perceived by consumers to have overlap in execution.</p> <p>While each concept had unique actions associated with the term in the mind of a consumer, there was considered to be overlap since each concept is focusing on the efforts of a company. The actions might look different but both have an end goal of marketing a company’s efforts to consumers.</p> |

Data Analysis: Literature-driven Interview Prompts

Interviews included the following prompts to ensure each topic was addressed by respondents: "what do you think brand activism is, what do you think corporate social responsibility is, and as a consumer, could you share how you see the difference between these two?" According to the nature of oral histories, there were no interview protocols like in (semi-)structured interviews but rather, talking points of key terms were added throughout the interviews, including brand

activism, corporate social responsibility, relationship to consumers, resonate, ethical, commodity. To define the scope of this research, when analyzing the data I focused on definitions, examples and explanations provided by respondents. I noted that all respondents had strong opinions on what they felt each of these concepts entailed, no respondent struggled with expressing examples of any concept. Below are how the prompts were presented to respondents. The quotes provide right insight into the data produced.

1. What is brand activism?

“Another kind of marketing technique, how you market the company, what is the company culture and what the company stands for.”

“A lot of it is just lip service, meaning (defined as express approval of or support for (something) without taking any significant action).”

“When a company takes a stance on what would typically be more like progressive issues and having an opinion associated with their brand name.”

“Promoting current social issues to remain relevant and at the forefront in the minds of consumers”

“Brand activism reminds me specifically of clothing brands adding political messaging to their garments, statement graphic tees with a slogan on it for example. Loud, performative messaging. I think of brand activism as topical, meaning the trends are not around for long.”

“Brand activism to me is any of those large corporations or brands out there who may push some of their beliefs, whether it be political or anything else but basically pushing their thoughts and beliefs onto their either customers or in some places employees.”

2. What is corporate social responsibility?

“For corporate social responsibility initiatives, I think of companies having their best interests when they are representing themselves and their employees. Economic and ecologic initiatives come to mind, anything about going green or being sustainable are keywords I think of when I hear CSR. This is more philanthropic, more environmental sustainability initiatives, community development, anything that looks good to investors on the outside.”

“Corporate social responsibility - an annual report with sustainability initiatives and diversity metrics. An exceptionally large information packet distributed at shareholder

meetings that highlights all of the positive things the company did for that fiscal year. This includes environmental impact, increasing diversity, and ways that companies give back to and support their employees but that seems to fall to the bottom of the list. I think of this as a far more business-oriented action than brand activism.”

“Corporate social responsibility makes me think of progressive activities from a company focused on inclusion and enhancing the rights of marginalized groups.”

“Corporate social responsibility is what the company initiatives are to give back to the community. What the company is doing for the good of others, not for the good of itself.”

3. What is the difference between these two terms?

“Brand activism has a more public perception aspect to it than corporate social responsibility. It is more consumer focused and corporate social responsibility is more for internal purposes, meaning shareholders etc.”

“A lot of the corporate social responsibility initiatives are ‘How do we look as a company, are we using the right buzzwords? Are we saying and doing things the way the customers have demanded we do them?’”

“Corporate social responsibility to me is incredibly similar to brand activism. I do not think of corporate social responsibility as separate from brand activism, there is a lot of overlap there.”

“I think of corporate social responsibility as far more business-oriented actions, whereas I think of brand activism to be social media marketing focused. I also regard brand activism as something skewed to a much younger audience. Corporate social responsibility is aimed at investors and stakeholders in a company which in my mind represents an older demographic.”

Data Analysis: Emergent Themes

Below I discuss four additional themes that emerged during data analysis. As previously discussed, interviews were unstructured to provide respondents ample opportunity to speak freely and openly. These themes presented themselves organically during interviews. The respondents were not prompted with the below. This means that these four themes are directly tied with brand activism and corporate social responsibility in the mind of a consumer. The quotes selected below provide rich insight into the data.

Brands

Each respondent provided an example of a brand that stands out in regard to positive or negative practices of corporate social responsibility and brand activism. While not included in my research questions, in each interview this topic also presented itself naturally. Respondents wanted to discuss examples. The results were varied and each respondent had a different company in mind, as well as differing reasons for resonating with the consumer.

“Nike is a brand that stands out to me as a brand activist company that someone steps in and joins national conversations when it is not really necessary. You are a shoe company, stick to selling me workout gear and sneakers. I do not really need your opinion on anything other than your products. Some the brand messaging is overreaching and tends to be too one sided.”

“Subaru is a great company that I think of when I hear CSR. They keep their people happy and they give back. Anheuser-Busch comes to mind as well.”

“Bain Consulting gets it right when it comes to CSR initiatives. Bain went into small Black-owned businesses and consulted on how to increase profit margins of staff pro bono. That is a company directly putting their money where their mouth is.”

“I think of IBM, the company gave employees Juneteenth and MLK Day off, but employees were required to use that day to volunteer. So more than just flying a pride flag for the month of June, this company was actually requiring employees to actively participate in the social causes the company promotes.”

“Disney comes to mind as a bad recent example of brand activism. They knew something happening in society and their response was just not perceived well. By taking a public stance on Florida’s ‘Don’t Say Gay’ bill they opened an entire can of worms across the board and it just went over very poorly on all levels of the company.”

Authenticity

A theme I discovered while analyzing data is the concept of brand activism and corporate social responsibility efforts being perceived as genuine by consumers. Four out of six respondents

raised concerns over the actions of a company being perceived as genuine, or the respondents felt like company actions were performative rather than an initiative the company was truly passionate about. I was surprised to discover that respondents are concerned with the authenticity of initiatives pushed by large companies, because as noted below in these interviews respondents specifically stated that their purchasing habits are not impacted by brand activism efforts. I did not prompt respondents with this question, this is a theme that occurred naturally.

“The flip flop of a company’s public opinion looks worse than anything because that’s when the activism comes across to the public as performative and not genuine.”

“I do think there is an opportunity there for a company that is visibly authentic rather than a company that is being performative because they know they have to.”

“It is more important to see a company actually make a change by actions, like divesting in industries that do not align with environmental initiatives, rather than come out and say they support X organization and will be donating a certain amount of money to a charity or philanthropy.”

“Starbucks does an excellent job with their corporate social responsibility. Their company response to profiling a Black customer was very impressive and authentic. Shutting down the store showed they were sincere in their effort to remedy a situation and actively take steps to prevent something like that from happening again. Starbucks was not chasing clout or promoting a social cause because the topic is trendy, this response was as genuine as a corporation can get.”

“It was noticeably clear that some companies and brands felt this was necessary. You could tell that the company was not sincere, but it seemed like if they remained silent, that would reflect poorly. Hey look, we support XYZ cause, so you can still buy our product!”

Effect on Brand Relationship

While analyzing data, I discovered that the question of whether the influence of brand activism and corporate social responsibility initiatives impact a consumer's decision to purchase a brand emerged in all six interviews. If efforts were perceived as inauthentic by consumers, would that

make the consumer more or less likely to purchase from a brand. All six of the respondents felt that it was unlikely for them to stop purchasing from a company if the views of a company or brand did not align with that of the consumers. This was a surprising find because all respondents had already aligned with a brand or established a relationship with a product and were not likely to redefine that relationship by choosing a new product.

“Ultimately I still purchase Nike products though, their messaging might annoy me but they make a great shoe.”

“It depends on the level of severity. A company would have to promote something I am vehemently against and morally opposed to for me to decide to use my spending power elsewhere.”

“If I dislike a company’s social efforts, I am not less inclined to buy the product. A company would have to do something incredibly inappropriate and irresponsible for me to actively choose not to purchase from a brand.”

Initiatives that Resonated with Consumers

Another theme I discovered during the data analysis stage was that consumers felt particularly that COVID and Black Lives Matter protests were overdone on a sweeping scale. Again, this realization occurred naturally during interviews, I did not prompt any respondents with questioning focused on COVID response or BLM. Four out of six respondents mentioned one of these two topics as instances where companies overstepped what was expected of them. Additionally, the recurring theme of authenticity is addressed briefly in the below responses. Consumers found that after initial company responses, public statements became overkill and appeared disingenuous.

“COVID was a popular topic. Every company issued a formal statement pushing togetherness and health and safety protocols, but by the end it was too much and just enough already. It became stale to see billion-dollar companies spending thousands on

commercials to say ‘we’ll be ok’ when that money could have been better spent on employee aid, PPEs for first responders etc.”

“Public company responses to COVID. Companies issued public cries for help, mass government bailouts and begged customers to return. Now that things have stabilized, companies are back to treating customers terribly.”

“During the Black Lives Matter protests of June 2020, it felt like every company came out of the woodwork with statements of support for BLM. That came across as very performative activism. Like companies felt they had to say something or else they would face consequences for not issuing a statement. The same with COVID responses.”

“Absolutely saw an influx of brand activism around June 2020 when the Black Lives Matter movement took off. All companies were ready to jump on board with a message and be part of the conversation without really needing to be.”

Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the overarching research question: are brand activism and corporate social responsibility perceived as the same concept by consumers? This research study reveals consumer perception about current brand activism and corporate social responsibility practices. This study provides an analysis of themes consumers associate with brand activism and corporate social responsibility. Utilizing this data to better understand consumer perception presents an opportunity for brands to sharpen their actions related to brand activism and corporate social responsibility.

The research results were not what I expected. I predicted that respondents would not perceive any differences between the two concepts, when in fact four out of six respondents had clearly defined examples of brand activism and corporate social responsibility in their mind. The definitions provided by respondents for both corporate social responsibility and brand activism closely matched the research provided in the literature review segment.

Analysis of the data yielded that brand activism is viewed less favorably than corporate social responsibility by consumers. Brand activism is perceived as a marketing approach to remain at the forefront of discussion in the minds of a consumer, while corporate social responsibility is regarded positively. These findings support what was discussed in the literature review section.

The theme of authenticity echoes the research discussed in the literature review. Consumers are concerned with how genuine corporate social responsibility and brand activism actions are, and respondents in this study highlighted the importance of authenticity. Although respondents noted their purchasing habits will not change if a brand is perceived as inauthentic, respondents did still state that perceived authenticity is important.

The outcome of this research brings attention to a gap in the consumer perception field. That gap is speaking directly to consumers about their perception. By developing a better understanding of consumer perception of corporate social responsibility and brand activism, brands will strengthen consumer connection, develop trust and differentiate from competition. Brands will better align social and environmental initiatives with their core company values and effect social change.

Limitations noted in this study include the small number of respondents who participated in interviews and interview length. Had the respondent number been higher and the interview times longer, there would have been sufficiently more data available for analysis. Data coding hundreds of pages of interview transcriptions can be overwhelming and difficult for one researcher to handle alone. These two factors were my strongest limitations.

References

- Becker-Olsen, K. L., Cudmore, B. A., & Hill, R. P. (2006). The impact of perceived corporate social responsibility on consumer behavior. *Journal of Business Research*, 59(1), 46-53.
- Bhagwat, Y., Warren, N. L., Beck, J. T., & Watson IV, G. F. (2020). Corporate socio-political activism and firm value. *Journal of Marketing*, 84(5), 1-21.
- Brown, T. J., & Dacin, P. A. (1997). The company and the product: Corporate associations and consumer product responses. *Journal of Marketing*, 61(1), 68-84.
- Carrigan, M., & Attalla, A. (2001). The myth of the ethical consumer—do ethics matter in purchase behaviour?. *Journal of consumer marketing (issue and pages to be added)*.
- Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative sociology*, 13(1), 3-21.
- Dodd, Melissa D. and Dustin W. Supa (2014), “Conceptualizing and Measuring ‘Corporate Social Advocacy’ Communication: Examining the Impact on Corporate Financial Performance,” *Public Relations Journal*, 8 (3), 1–23.
- Edelman (2019), “2019 Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report: In Brands We Trust?” Research Report, Edelman Trust Barometer Annual Global Study.
- ElAlfy, Darwish, K. M., & Weber, O. (2020). Corporations and sustainable development goals communication on social media: Corporate social responsibility or just another buzzword? *Sustainable Development*, 28(5), 1418–1430. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.2095>
- Ellen, Webb, D. J., & Mohr, L. A. (2006). Building corporate associations: Consumer attributions for corporate socially responsible programs. *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, 34(2), 147–157. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0092070305284976>
- Fulmer, C. A., & Gelfand, M. J. (2012). At what level (and in whom) we trust: Trust across multiple organizational levels. *Journal of management*, 38(4), 1167-1230.

Jahdi, Khosro S., and Gaye Acikdilli (2009). Marketing communications and corporate social responsibility (CSR): marriage of convenience or shotgun wedding?. *Journal of Business Ethics* 88.1 103-113.

Jeon, M. A., & An, D. (2019). A study on the relationship between perceived CSR motives, authenticity and company attitudes: a comparative analysis of cause promotion and cause-related marketing. *Asian Journal of Sustainability & Social Responsibility*, 4(1), N.PAG. <https://doi-org.remote.baruch.cuny.edu/10.1186/s41180-019-0028-4>

Mukherjee, S., & Althuizen, N. (2020). Brand activism: Does courting controversy help or hurt a brand? *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 37(4), 772–788. <https://doi-org.remote.baruch.cuny.edu/10.1016/j.ijresmar.2020.02.008>

Nalick, Michael, Matthew Josefy, Asghar Zardkoohi, and Leonard Bierman (2016). Corporate Sociopolitical Involvement: A Reflection of Whose Preferences?, *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 30 (4), 384–403.

Pollach, I. (2015). Strategic corporate social responsibility: the struggle for legitimacy and reputation. *International Journal of Business Governance and Ethics*, 10(1), 57-75.

Ryan, G. W., & Bernard, H. R. (2003). Techniques to identify themes. *Field methods*, 15(1), 85-109.

Sarker, C., & Kotler, P. (2018). *Brand activism: From purpose to action*. IDEA BITE PRESS.

Schutt, R. K. (2018). *Investigating the social world: The process and practice of research*. Sage publications.

Sibai, Mimoun, L., & Boukis, A. (2021). Authenticating brand activism: Negotiating the boundaries of free speech to make a change. *Psychology & Marketing*, 38(10), 1651–1669. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.21477>

Shapiro, G., & Markoff, J. (1997). A matter of definition. *Text analysis for the social sciences: Methods for drawing statistical inferences from texts and transcripts*, 1, 9-34.

Shetty, A. S., Venkataramaiah, N. B., & Anand, K. (2019). Brand activism and millennials: an empirical investigation into the perception of millennials towards brand activism. *Problems and perspectives in management*, 17(4), 163.

Strauss, A., and J. Corbin. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Warren, N. L. (2021). Boycott or Buycott: The Aftermath of Corporate Activism. *NIM Marketing Intelligence Review*, 13(2), 32–37. <https://doi-org.remote.baruch.cuny.edu/10.2478/nimmir-2021-0014>

Wieser, V. E., Hemetsberger, A., & Luedicke, M. K. (2019). Protest rhetoric's appeal: how brands as moral entrepreneurs recruit the media into moral struggles. In M. Lounsbury (ed.) *The contested moralities of markets (Research in the Sociology of Organizations)* (63, 151-166), Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited.

Wettstein, Florian and Dorothea Baur (2016), ““Why Should We Care About Marriage Equality?”: Political Advocacy as a Part of Corporate Responsibility,” *Journal of Business Ethics*, 138 (2), 199–213.