

# **“Take a stand or stay seated”: A Framework of Essential Prerequisites for companies considering whether or not to implement a Brand Activism strategy**

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## **Abstract**

**Purpose:** Brand Activism is a phenomenon that only recently became an area of greater interest. The aim of this paper is to follow a call for research and develop a framework that aids brand managers and other decision makers to identify essential prerequisites that their brand should have in place to increase the likelihood for successful Brand Activism.

**Design/ Methodology approach:** The paper employs a multi-case study with a comparative design incorporating an extensive review of existing literature and in-depth comparative analysis of real-life cases to conclude essential prerequisites in the form of a framework for managers.

**Findings:** The research highlights six „must-have“ dimensions that are essential for a company's Brand Activism, along with five “good-to-have” elements which should be taken into consideration but are not of the same necessity. Interestingly, the age, size and prior experience of brands do not significantly impact Brand Activism success. Even when following the framework a well-conducted implementation is crucial for favorable outcomes in this practice.

**Originality/ value:** This paper contributes to the evolving field of Brand Activism by offering new perspectives and practical insights on brands' prerequisites for successful Brand Activism for brand managers and scholars alike. It provides a first of its kind framework for practical use to assess the company's readiness for Brand Activism.

**Keywords:** Brand Activism, Brand Management, Corporate Social Responsibility

## **Introduction**

In response to being asked by a CMO of a leading German coffee brand on whether they should adopt a Brand Activism strategy the immediate response of one of the authors was a resolute “definitely not”. Yet, that instinctive reaction was followed by a stark realization - the lack of immediate clarity on the underlying reasons behind this advice. And while subsequent articulation of them were feasible in this individual case, the complexity of the decision-making became apparent and it dawned on them that

this particular CMO and consultant were just one among several decision-makers and advisors facing this question. The aim of this paper is therefore to develop a framework to help decision makers identify whether they fulfill the relevant basic requirements to implement a successful Brand Activism strategy.

In times characterized by major socio-political challenges, on which governments seem to be slow to make progress, consumer expectations of brands to solve those problems are increasing: two-thirds of

society already expects companies to address the problems that governments leave unsolved (Edelman, 2021). This leads to more brands publicly taking a stand on controversial issues like Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ rights, abortion, or gun laws as well as environmental issues, to name some examples. The labels on Patagonia apparel boldly displayed the message "Vote the Assholes out" in the lead-up to the last U.S. presidential election. Furthermore, the company took legal action against Donald Trump in opposition to his proposal to reduce the size of national parks and ran Facebook ads addressing the rapid increase of fake news and propaganda on the platform (Chang, 2021).

The phenomenon of Brand Activism is not solely driven by evolving times; the pursuit of a competitive advantage also serves as a (partial) motivator. This is because adopting an activist role can function as a beneficial differentiator in the market (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020), potentially leading to positive coverage, extended reach and an increased brand equity (Herzberg & Rudeloff, 2022) as consequential side effect.

While this change in brand managers attitude regarding controversy might feel like a trend or even a fad of this time, Korschun (2021) expects Brand Activism to persist and calls brand managers to educate themselves on whether their brand should engage in it as well.

However, even though there is an increasing demand from stakeholders for companies to engage and clearly articulate their stance on challenging and occasionally controversial issues, it's important to note that embracing Brand Activism is not a quick path to success, but rather comes with great risks given that brand activism inherently tends to polarize and might easily be perceived as inauthentic (Mirzari et al. 2022; Vredenburg et al. 2020).

This paper is intended to contribute to the existing literature in several ways. First, the research regarding Brand Activism will be expanded, which, with few exceptions, has

been focused on single-case or single-industry analysis, examining isolated dependent variables (like brand loyalty), or were vastly focused on consumer responses to Brand Activism. Second, we follow a call for research about "how brand activism strategies might be successfully implemented by firms" (Thürridl & Thompson, 2023, n.p.) and contribute to the appeal of Korschun (2021) for brand managers to educate themselves about the feasibility of Brand Activism for their brand. We do this by conducting the first study focused on a holistic view of prerequisites for companies that improve the likelihood of a successful Brand Activism strategy. To the authors knowledge there has been no study with this aim yet. Third, we aim to derive practical implications. As Brand Activism offers a lot of potential but bears at least as many risks it's critical for decision makers to have a framework to check whether or not their company should consider implementing a Brand Activism strategy.

## Literature review

The term Brand Activism only recently started to become a more serious research interest after the first publication of Sarkar's and Kotler's "Brand Activism: From Purpose to Action" in 2018. Since then, numerous articles have been published to further understand the emergence of brands acting as activists (Camarota et al., 2023). However, as Brand Activism is still a young field of research there is no universally accepted but rather overlapping definitions and different terms for expressing the same phenomenon (Camarota et al., 2023). This contributes to the challenge of differentiating it from other related fields of research such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and further value-based concepts (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018).

The following literature review comprises findings of relevant definitions as well as risks and opportunities of Brand Activism developed by prior research. Subsequently,

in regard to the research question of this paper, contributions of research suggesting prerequisites for companies to successfully implement Brand Activism are reviewed.

### *Brand Activism*

The phenomenon of brands taking a stand has been conceptualized in existing literature using the terms Brand Activism, Brand Political Activism, Brandjacking, Brand Advocacy, Corporate Activism, Corporate Sociopolitical Activism, Corporate Social Advocacy, Corporate Political Advocacy and CEO Activism (Cammarota et al. 2023).

Generally, Brand Activism encompasses non-neutral public statements and/or actions by a brand (or an individual associated with it) to support or oppose partisan socio-political issues (Bagwhat et al. 2020; Moorman, 2020; Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Vredenburg et al. (2020) broaden the understanding by framing it as a purpose and value-driven strategy of a brand. While the brand's primary objective is to foster structural changes within society as a whole (Biehn, 2019) through public advocacy in current debates, it is argued that marketing success can be a minor incentive as well (Vredenburg et al. 2020). The overruling motivation though must be intrinsic, for the common good and rather related to the brand's values than to it is the business itself to be recognized as authentic Brand Activism (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020; Wettstein & Baur, 2016). The value-driven approach is decisive for Brand Activism (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020; Schoeneck & White, 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020) and the concept can therefore be viewed as an evolution of other concepts such as Cause Related Marketing (CRM) and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) whose drivers are the market or the organization (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). Moreover, Brand Activism distinguishes itself from CSR as it is not linked to the core business, focuses rather on external stakeholders, is directed towards partisan rather than widely supported issues and

often emerges as a spontaneous reaction to societal events or developments instead of being a continuously ongoing practice (Hydock et al. 2020; Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Sarkar & Kotler, 2020; Wettstein & Baur, 2016).

The partisan themes tackled by Brand Activism can be classified into six categories: social, political, economic, environmental, workplace or legal (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). Sarkar and Kotler (2020) further differentiate between the degree of progressiveness (progressive, neutral and regressive) based on the impact on the common good of the promoted cause. However, the majority of scholars define Brand Activism to be of solely progressive nature by definition (Sibai et al. 2021).

A prevalent classification, as proposed by Vredenburg et al. (2020), categorizes Brand Activism based on two key dimensions: the degree of activist communication (low to high) and the extent of prosocial company practices (low to high). This framework yields four distinct quadrants, each corresponding to a specific type of Brand Activism. 1. Absence of Brand Activism: brands that neither engage in activist communication nor actions. 2. Silent Brand Activism: brands that actively participate in activist actions but do not engage in corresponding activist communication. 3. Authentic Brand Activism: a brand whose activist communication aligns seamlessly with its activist actions. 4. Inauthentic Brand Activism: brands that emphasize on activist actions in their communication but, in practice, either execute them partially or not at all. The existing research focuses on Authentic Brand Activism as the aspired concept.

Brand Activism is gaining attention both in academic research and media coverage. With this discourse also comes criticism regarding the justification and effects. Some argue that incorporating political stances in a market economy is inappropriate and encroaching (Kemming & Rommerskirchen, 2019). On the other hand, concerns are raised that Brand Activism

might encourage further polarization of the society (Thams, 2019). Moreover, a common point of criticism is the seamless transition to "woke", "pink" or "greenwashing"<sup>1</sup> which is used to deceive consumers through inauthentic Brand Activism as a marketing tool (Sobande, 2019). This is also commonly pointed out as virtue signaling by consumers (Mirzaei et al. 2022). Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) further underscores the risk of companies inappropriately adopting the stylistic elements and campaigns of activist movements into their corporate communications. This not only has the potential to depoliticize the movement itself (Zeisler, 2016) but also to dilute the urgency when used within a commercial context (Chadwick & Zipp, 2018). These criticisms underline the critical importance of exercising caution and authenticity in the application of Brand Activism by companies (Kemming & Rommerskirchen, 2019) to mitigate potential damage to the reputation of their brand as well as the cause.

### *Risks & Opportunities of Brand Activism*

Even though Brand Activism is guided by the strive for the Common Good, the involvement in it is accompanied by a considerable amount of risks that are mainly based on the facts that Brand Activism by definition tends to polarize and can easily be perceived as inauthentic (Mirzaei et al. 2022; Vredenburg et al. 2020).

A potential side effect is the negative response of opposing consumers (Herzberg & Rudeloff, 2022). While this should always be anticipated to a certain extent, these negative responses may escalate into shitstorms, boycotts or backlashes - as it was apparent in the case of Nike when mass burnings of Nike shoes were conducted after the brand advertised with Colin Kaepernick in support of the Black Lives

Matter movement (Shetty et al. 2019). Pöyry and Laaksonen (2022) consider boycotting, discrediting the brand and trapping as so-called "anti-brand actions". According to them, boycotting does not always mean the actual refusal of buying the brand, it includes often rather just the declaring of such boycott to signify the disapproval of the company's statements or actions. When discrediting, people are "throwing light on the company's own alleged responsibility problems and the unhealthy nature of its products" (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022, p.277) while trapping is a phenomenon limited to social media, where the opposed public is "hijacking hashtags, trying to fool the algorithm, generating hyperlinks to other people and actors and creating fake copycat accounts" (Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022, p.277).

Specifically, a significant risk arises from inauthentic Brand Activism: if customers interpret the brand's engagement as merely a strategy to boost profits, it may be perceived as dishonest, leading to potential damage to the brand's reputation (Shetty et al. 2019). Consumers could also perceive Brand Activism as inauthentic when brands loudly communicate to be guided by values while failing to take a stand when an actual scandal emerges (Herzberg & Rudeloff, 2022).

Moreover, consumers might scrutinize brands that express a stance but fail to align their actions with those declarations within their own operations. Likewise, collaborating with celebrities who publicly advocate contrasting opinions may invite skepticism (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020).

Another risk stems from the generally low trust in brands and skepticism about their motives (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). Since the exploitation of CSR measures for profit and inauthentic Brand Activism in the form of pink-, woke-, or greenwashing are well

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<sup>1</sup> Negatively charged terms for PR methods or advertising campaigns that aim to portray the company as more progressive (woke washing), more

supportive of the LGBTQIA+ community (pinkwashing), or more environmentally friendly (greenwashing) than it actually is (Kühne, 2016; Lin-Hi, 2021; Rhodes, 2021).

known, many people view activist actions by brands with great caution (Vredenburg et al. 2020). Due to the suspected or perceived lack of authenticity, people criticize and boycott the brand, despite agreeing with the point of view (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Trust is seen as an elementary basis for Brand Activism and companies that engage in wokewashing make it difficult for companies with authentic Brand Activism to gain the trust of customers (Vredenburg et al. 2020).

Furthermore, Bhagwat et al. (2020) find that, on average, Corporate Social Activism elicits an adverse reaction from investors, as investors would see the activism as a sign that a firm is allocating resources away from profit-oriented objectives and toward a risky activity with uncertain outcomes.

Despite the multitude of risks, the practice of Brand Activism offers plenty of opportunities motivating brand managers to engage in the practice, with the ultimate goal of actually changing grievances being the greatest when viewed in terms of the common good.

Even though favorable marketing effects should not be a main aim of brands conducting Brand Activism, they can still be a valuable side effect as the actions can lead to positive earned media as well as social virality (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020). Additionally, it can function as a positive differentiation to other companies on the market (Eyada, 2018). A Deloitte study (2019) also illustrates that companies driven by values have a higher employee and customer satisfaction while additionally growing on average three times as fast as the competition.

The study of Herzberg and Rudeloff (2022) suggests a strong positive impact of Brand Activism on brand equity by not only influencing the rational and emotional brand perceptions but also the consumers' behavioral intentions. They therefore conclude that Brand Activism can enable brands to add a price premium and consequently expect economic performance benefits. Furthermore, the study indicates

an indirect positive effect of Brand Activism on brand loyalty.

#### *Brand Activism prerequisites for companies*

Rather than being focused on the company, most prior research is about the consumer's perception of and reaction to Brand Activism measures (e.g. Herzberg & Rudeloff, 2022; Wannow et al. 2023) or about the actual implementation of Brand Activism measures (e.g. Zhou et al. 2023). To the authors knowledge, there is barely any research contributing to a holistic view about what factors a company needs to fulfill in order to have a higher chance of succeeding in Brand Activism practices other than the widely agreed on assumption that a company has to be authentic about it (e.g. Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019; Sarkar & Kotler, 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020).

There is some research to be found about the relationship between Brand Activism and the size of the company. Månsson and Stéen (2022) propose the "Benefit of Smallness" (p. 49) and conclude that smaller businesses could use their agility as an advantage when it comes to Brand Activism. Hydock et al. (2020) argue that brands with a smaller market share can offset a negativity bias (driving more opposed customers away from the brand than aligned customers towards the brand) as they tend to gain more customers while having a rather small customer base than to lose compared to large-share brands. Hence, according to this research, engaging in Brand Activism can be an opportunity for brands with a smaller market share.

Korschun (2021) concludes possible success factors to be the understanding of stakeholder needs, the need for credibility and transparency as well as the necessity to monitor all associations with external partners. Thürridl & Thompson (2023) contribute to the research by proposing advice-giving as a relevant dimension for brand activism success: seeking customers' advice for Brand Activism can help the company's success in Brand Activism activities. While some of these proposed factors could be defined as prerequisites for

the company to fulfill before engaging in Brand Activism, others are still rather focused on the actual implementation.

Rudiments of such prerequisites can be found on internet blogs (e.g. &why, 2022). However, these are not detectably scientifically evidenced and also mix factors for a successful implementation with illuminating the conditions that a company should fulfill before engaging in Brand Activism.

It is evident that there is a lack of research in the literature regarding guidelines for decision makers on whether or not to engage in Brand Activism. No academic framework, checklist or model can be found that guides companies in their evaluation process.

## **Methodology**

The methodological challenge was to devise an approach to examine different cases of Brand Activism and to deduce the factors that a company needs to have in place to increase the likelihood of successful engagement in Brand Activism. A qualitative approach was selected for this study as it offers the possibility of a more nuanced and in-depth analysis of the multifaceted dimensions within Brand Activism strategies. As it is aimed to exploratively uncover context-specific insights, quantitative methods alone may not provide (Forman et al. 2008) and the selected method of case study research enables the exploration of intricate, ambiguous, and dynamic phenomena in which the context is integral (Gummesson, 2005). It also enables an inductive research instead of working in a fixed theoretical frame and can therefore lead to the emergence of new theories (Strauss, 1987).

Specifically, it was chosen to conduct a qualitative multi-case study with a comparative design. A multi-case study includes two or more cases with the same phenomena and is used to compare findings to gather more robust results than a single-

case study (Lewis-Beck et al. 2003; Yin, 2017). According to Bryman and Bell (2011), drawing comparisons among the cases improves theory building as more circumstances can be covered in the research and thus it can be assessed whether the theory is applicable or not. The approach chosen is intended to increase the validity of the investigation and the final framework.

The approach was conducted in two steps. The first being a binary comparison of all cases on a multitude of prior defined dimensions and the second being a holistic investigation of all cases to detect patterns with the goal of detecting relevant criteria for the final framework.

### *Case sampling*

The cases for this paper were selected through purposive sampling (Bryman & Bell, 2011). A definite criteria was that the Brand Activism instance had to be of progressive nature. Complementary, the following attributes were considered in the sampling of diverse cases: region of the instance, product segments, age of the company, final outcome, category of Brand Activism (differentiated by Sarkar & Kotler, 2020).

To identify not only success factors but also potential pitfalls, cases with favorable, neutral and unfavorable outcomes were reviewed. A favorable outcome of a Brand Activism instance was defined as driving actual change in society as well as creating a noticeable public buzz drawing attention to the promoted cause and therefore pushing further change. Conversely, an unfavorable outcome involved cases where brands were faced with overwhelmingly negative feedback as well as public outrage potentially harming the brand's reputation. Cases of neutral outcome recorded no significant (positive nor negative) reaction.

### *Identification of comparison dimensions*

Literature review was used to establish dimensions and the underlying questions for evaluating real-life case studies. It was assumed that when conducting the analysis

**Table 1: Dimensions for the evaluation of case studies**

Name	Question	Description/ based on
Rooted stand	Did the company stay its ground (even when facing backlash)?	Looking at a variety of case examples, the contrasting reaction of brands to headwinds and criticism is particularly noticeable: while some companies do not change their standpoint even under heavy criticism (e.g. Halifax, True Fruits, fritz kola), others give in to the pressure by apologizing, modifying or softening their communication (e.g. L' Oreal, Pepsi).
Activist by nature	Is activism a part of the brand's identity?	Any company can practice Brand Activism, but not every such company is inherently an activist brand that has activism embedded in its DNA. An example of the latter is The Body Shop, having a dedicated activism team and calling activism a distinct part of their identity (The Body Shop, 2023). Many startups today are founded on the idea of activism and are largely defined by a fundamental activist attitude and tonality - examples include Tomorrow (banking) or Einhorn (hygiene products).
United front	Are the employees of the company (seemingly) on the same page?	When a company takes a stance that employees oppose and publicly contest, strong perceived customer inauthenticity can be expected. On the other hand, employee communication can be an important source of interest in and increased trust in the company (Šontaić-Petkevičienė & Vaščėgaitė, 2022).
Integrity	Does the company stick to the promoted standards themselves?	It is suggested to be perceived as inauthentic Brand Activism when companies take a stand on a topic but don't adhere to the promoted values themselves or collaborate with people who publicly support a divergent opinion (Herzberg & Rudeloff, 2022).
Walk the talk	Is actual action involved or does it only involve words?	The majority of scholars (e.g., Moorman, 2020; Shetty et al. 2019) assume that action must be included alongside communication and cite action as a defining characteristic of Brand Activism: "brand activism involves both intangible (messaging) and tangible (practice) commitments to a sociopolitical cause"(Vredenburg et al. 2020, p. 448).
Established business	Is the company older than 20 years?	A study by Zhang et al. (2019) suggests that communicating a brand's older age can positively influence consumers' perceptions of it, and can also have a buffering effect if the company behaves unethically. It may therefore also have an effect on the outcomes of the firm's Brand Activism activities.
Organizational Magnitude	Is the size of the company larger than 1000 employees?	According to Sung et al. (2022), the size of a firm has an impact on customers' perceptions of their CSR measures. Since Brand Activism is considered an evolution of CSR (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020), it can be assumed that this could also constitute an influencing factor in this case. In addition, according to Yang and Aggarwal (2019), company size generally affects customers' expectations and evaluations of companies.
Cause Business Fit	Is the promoted cause connected to the company's business?	Wetstein and Bauer (2016) state that the promoted cause and values don't necessarily have to be directly connected to the business of the brand and Manfredi-Sánchez (2019) adds that those values are rather aligned to social needs. But it could be hypothesized that the link makes it easier for customers to perceive Brand Activism communications as authentic.
Team player	Are other parties involved in the brand activism activity?	Certain research indicates that collaborations with other parties are conducive to the success of Brand Activism (Verlegh, 2023). Sarkar and Kotler (2020a, n.p.) therefore propose the concept of Cross-Brand Activism: "brand activism that is collaborative or collective, extending across various businesses".
Prior experience	Does the company have a prior history of sociopolitical engagement?	Since Brand Activism is seen as a natural evolution from existing value-based concepts such as Corporate Volunteering and Cause-Related Marketing, as well as CSR (Sarkar & Kotler, 2020), prior experience in those fields may potentially have an impact on success in implementing Brand Activism.

some dimensions will ultimately prove to not be relevant for the final framework and thus will not be transferred into it. All dimensions used to compare the cases can be found in Table 1.

#### *Evaluation of cases*

All cases were consequently rated on a binary scale (yes/no) regarding the defined dimensions.

For every dimension, it was then calculated how many percent of brands that applied said dimension had a favorable, an unfavorable and a neutral outcome, e.g. X% of companies fulfilling dimension Y had a favorable outcome of their Brand Activism case. This step led to the exclusion of some comparison dimensions for the final framework.

## **Findings**

The results of the comparative analysis and evaluation provided insights into the main dimensions that companies should have in place when considering a Brand Activism

approach. These findings will be discussed in the following sections of this article, providing valuable insights for businesses.

#### *First step*

45 diverse real-life Brand Activism cases were analyzed. 22 out of 45 (48.9%) were considered to have a favorable outcome, 7 out of 45 (15.6%) had a neutral outcome and 16 cases out of 45 (35.6%) had an unfavorable outcome.

Table 2 illustrates the results of the qualitative case analysis. The right side of the table includes the absolute and relative quantity of reviewed cases presenting the presence of the identified dimension.

All dimensions seen in more than 60% of cases with a favorable outcome and in less than 20% of cases with unfavorable outcomes were deemed as important factors. However, some of these were overall detected in too few instances to be classified as absolutely important prerequisites. A differentiation of factors into the categories “must-haves” and “good-to-haves” was therefore conducted.

**Table 2: Results of the first-step analysis**

	<b>Favorable outcome</b>	<b>Neutral outcome</b>	<b>Unfavorable outcome</b>	<b>Number of cases</b>	<b>Percentage of cases</b>
<b>Rooted Stand</b>	<b>60.0%</b>	20.0%	20.0%	35	<b>77.8%</b>
Activist by nature	<b>81.8%</b>	11.1%	11.1%	9	20.0%
<b>United front</b>	<b>76.0%</b>	16.0%	8.0%	25	<b>55.6%</b>
<b>Integrity</b>	<b>65.4%</b>	15.4%	19.2%	26	<b>57.8%</b>
<b>Walk the Talk</b>	<b>65.4%</b>	15.4%	19.2%	26	<b>57.8%</b>
Established business	40.6%	18.8%	40.6%	32	<b>71.1%</b>
Organizational magnitude	44.7%	18.4%	36.8%	38	<b>84.4%</b>
Cause business fit	<b>71.4%</b>	14.3%	14.3%	14	31.1%
Team player	<b>60.0%</b>	20.0%	20.0%	10	22.2%
Prior experience	54.3%	20.0%	25.7%	35	<b>77.8%</b>

All of the dimensions identified as important with an overall presence in less than 50% of cases were categorized as “good-to-have”. Subsequently all important dimensions with a presence in more than 50% of cases were categorized as “must-haves”. Therefore, three selected dimensions were ruled out of the further consideration for the development of the final framework as the collected and analyzed data did not provide any notable impact: *established business, organizational magnitude* and *prior experience*.

#### *Second step*

Through a thorough examination of cases with unfavorable outcomes to identify potential pitfalls as well as through a holistic view on all cases, we discerned conspicuous patterns and deducted additional prerequisites.

#### Reputation capital:

As seen in the Dove case (Craik, 2017), which had a very unfavorable result but yet did not hurt the brand in the long-term, a prior positive reputation can serve as a safety-net for the brand after misstepping. Even though Doves’ Brand Activism action was met with strong resistance resulting in canceling the whole campaign before it was even rolled out, Dove is still associated with the variety of favorable campaigns and actions they conducted. This finding is supported by Greyser (2009) who came to the conclusion that this reservoir is the most important factor for brands facing a crisis.

#### Brand relevance:

When looking at all the cases it is noticeable that barely any research or articles about brands with lower relevance engaging in Brand Activism were to be found while conducting an intense research. It is therefore concluded that having a certain relevance could be important to leverage potential positive marketing outcomes as well as actually contributing to raising awareness to the topic and consequently

driving change as both goals are tremendously driven by earned media and virality.

#### Low attackability:

Participating in Brand Activism places a brand in a potentially precarious situation, subject to criticism from those who oppose the advocated stance. While facing backlash is an inherent aspect of Brand Activism, brands must proactively assess whether there are valid grounds for such criticism. Large enterprises unable to ensure the true well-being of all their employees, brands with recent or unresolved old scandals, and companies associated with questionable business models or supply chains are understandably susceptible to scrutiny in response to their Brand Activism initiatives. Examples of brands from the considered case studies that have stumbled upon this pitfall include Refinery29 (Flynn, 2020), Adidas (Gallagher et al. 2020) and Urban Outfitters (Elan, 2020).

#### Beneficial internal set-up:

This dimension is not quantifiable, yet the importance of it becomes critically evident when closely examining all the cases and it should be seen as the main basis for companies’ suitability for pursuing a Brand Activism strategy. It includes three factors. The first of them being the companies’ *reaction time*. This constitutes their ability to identify and respond to critical events happening quickly in an appropriate manner. The second factor is the *research regarding spokespeople*. Time and effort must be invested in a thorough research of people the brand associates itself with. As seen in two different L’Oreal cases (Elan, 2020a; Niven-Phillips, 2018), the internet does not forget and it is therefore even more imperative to have enough resources for a careful investigation. The last factor is *getting the message right*. Advanced strategy and copywriting skills are needed to convey the message and intention in a proper way. They could lay in-house or within an agency that the brand has close ties with.

**Figure 1: Framework for essential prerequisites**

Framework of Essential Prerequisites for companies considering whether or not to implement a Brand Activism strategy			
<b>“Must-Haves”</b>		<b>“Good-to-Haves”</b>	
<p><b>Beneficial internal set-up</b></p> <p>Are you equipped to regularly detect and form a prompt response to critical sociopolitical events? Can your team invest time and effort to thoroughly investigate potential spokespeople? Is your team or agency network qualified enough to convey sensitive messages in a proper way?</p>	<p><b>Integrity</b></p> <p>Can you confidentially say that your brand internally adheres to the same standards and values as you intend to promote via Brand Activism?</p>	<p><b>Cause business fit</b></p> <p>Are there causes for Brand Activism that are connected to your main business and you can or want to take a stand on?</p>	<p><b>Teampayer</b></p> <p>Do you have the resources and the wants to collaborate with other brands or NGOs for a certain cause?</p>
<p><b>United front</b></p> <p>Can you ensure that all employees and close stakeholders won't oppose a publicly taken stand to a polarizing topic by your brand?</p>	<p><b>Low attackability</b></p> <p>Are you able to ensure the actual well-being of all employees? Has your brand been scandal-free lately? Did your brand reappraise all old scandals or entanglements? Are you confident that your company does not pursue a questionable business model or supply chain?</p>	<p><b>Brand relevance</b></p> <p>Is your brand relevant? Is it liked and regularly reported on?</p>	<p><b>Activist by nature</b></p> <p>Is activism a part of your brands' DNA or identity? Could the facet of activism be credibly added to it?</p>
<p><b>Rooted stand</b></p> <p>Is your whole company ready to stay rooted in case of a (major) backlash to your Brand Activism, when convinced it was the right cause, message and implementation?</p>	<p><b>Walk the talk</b></p> <p>Is your brand in terms of financial and human resources as well as potentially necessary connection to other partners ready to actually put action behind your words?</p>	<p><b>Reputational capital</b></p> <p>Has your company a favorable reputation that is strong enough to act as a safety-net?</p>	

*Brand Activism prerequisites framework*

The findings of both analysis steps were consequently transferred into a comprehensive framework, depicted in figure 1. To establish a framework that decision-makers can realistically use, all identified dimensions were formulated into questions that they need to answer to check the brands' readiness for engaging in Brand Activism. All questions placed in the “Must-Haves” box must be answered positively to conclude that the brand is set up to engage in Brand Activism. To not fulfill just one dimension could likely lead to the Brand Activism measures having an unfavorable outcome. The questions in the “Good-to-Have” box however do not necessarily all need to be answered positively even though it could very likely influence the outcome of the Brand Activism favorably.

**Discussion**

Four main conclusions can be derived from studying the diverse range of Brand Activism regarding necessary prerequisites

for companies considering to engage in Brand Activism themselves.

1. *There are “must haves”*

The conducted two-step analysis approach yields six dimensions viewed as a “must-have” prerequisite for a company intending to engage in successful Brand Activism. These dimensions are *integrity, walk the talk, united front, rooted stand, low attackability* and a *beneficial internal set-up*. In line with the research on the value-basis and authenticity in the conception of Brand Activism (Vredenburg et al. 2020) adhering to the promoted values and standards throughout the whole operation (*integrity*) as well as extending past communication to meaningful action (*walk the talk*) are crucial. An internal value-based motivation (corresponding to Sarkar and Kotler, 2020) shared throughout the organization contributes to supportive employees (*united front*) and a strong backbone to potential backlash (*rooted stand*). These findings match the conclusions made by Korschun (2021) that emphasize the need for understanding stakeholders as well as for credibility and

transparency. As Brand Activism is controversial by definition and will most certainly spark some kind of opposing reaction an evaluation of the brand's potential ground for criticism (low attackability) has to be considered before pursuing Brand Activism. Lastly, a beneficial internal set-up including resources to timely identify and address emerging issues as well as to conduct proper research and conceptualize an appropriate response on the matter is seen as the basis element for successful Brand Activism.

### 2. *There are "good-to-haves"*

Additionally, the conducted research identified five dimensions as "good-to-haves": *cause business fit, activist by nature, teamplayer, reputation capital and brand relevance*. Engaging in a socio-political issue related to the business of the brand (cause business fit) or coming from an activist background (activist by nature) can potentially increase the success of the Brand Activism regarding the perceived authenticity by consumers. The collaboration with other parties (teamplayer) as previously coined by Sarkar and Kotler (2020) can be equally beneficial to the success although only if well prepared and executed. It can be of significance being able to rely on reputation capital, as a sort of safety net and risk management. This is in line with the findings of Greyser (2009). Finally, brand relevance can be valuable to convey a message and drive actual change.

### 3. *There are bland dimensions*

During the research it became evident that the age and size (established business, organizational magnitude) of the considered brands did not seem to have a significant impact on the success of the Brand Activism. This contradicts existing conclusions by Månsson and Stéen (2022) and Hydock et al. (2020) suggesting that small companies as well as small-share brands can benefit from those characteristics when it comes to Brand Activism practices. This divergence could be explained by the lack of public information available on Brand Activism

measures from small companies and thereof an underrepresentation in the conducted study. Ultimately, a prior experience regarding CSR activities cannot be viewed as a distinctive advantage since CSR practices have (partially) become mandatory by law.

### 4. *The form of implementation matters*

Building on the beneficial internal set-up, the authors want to stress the importance of the actual form of implementation. A poorly executed Brand Activism strategy bears the risk of alienating the well-intended message. Consequently, a good implementation of a Brand Activism strategy will be another determining factor for the success, as the prerequisites refer only to the initial assessments of the companies' basic position to engage in Brand Activism.

## **Managerial Implications**

The study underscores the presence of prerequisites that may enhance the likelihood of success in Brand Activism, that decision-makers need to consider. However, a prudent approach is advocated, cautioning against the engagement in Brand Activism solely for the sake of it, given the high potential risks. Consistent with existing research, it is concluded that managerial decisions regarding Brand Activism should always be anchored in the intrinsic values of the brand, prioritizing value-based considerations over opportunistic motives.

This paper advocates for a holistic approach by urging managers to conduct a thorough analysis of each dimension within the proposed framework when assessing the prospect of engaging in Brand Activism. The decision-making process should be characterized by a meticulous examination, with particular emphasis on the dimension *beneficial internal set-up*. Managers are advised to critically evaluate the adequacy of financial and temporal resources, as well as the qualifications of their employees to

identify and respond promptly and effectively to events.

In addition, managers are reminded to acknowledge the potential impact of external factors on the prerequisites and their respective efficacy. Instances such as the rapid development of the promoted topics, the political involvement of the target groups as well as current trends serve as noteworthy examples.

Lastly, it is underscored that managerial integrity is paramount. A sincere and honest self-assessment is imperative when utilizing the framework to determine the appropriateness of engaging in Brand Activism, recognizing that dishonesty may lead to adverse consequences in due course.

## Limitations and future research

While this study has made valuable contributions, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. First of all, the scope of the research was constrained by the availability of data. Real-life Brand Activism cases used in the comparative analysis were predominantly of major and well-known companies due to them having a rather public resonance. This may have led to an underrepresentation of smaller or less-publicized Brand Activism instances. A greater number of Brand Activism cases could contribute to better representation of the topic in future research. Moreover, a bias towards cases of Western companies due to the language barrier was present in the study. Even though deliberate attention was paid to a geographically and culturally diverse selection, the research may have overlooked important insights on Brand Activism cases from less westernized parts of the world that should be analyzed in further research. It would also be of interest to investigate whether prerequisites for companies differ in different parts of the globe.

The research predominantly employed qualitative methods which offered valuable insights on Brand Activism. However, mixed-methods research, including

quantitative methods such as surveys with decision-makers or affected employees would allow for a deeper exploration of Brand Activism dynamics.

A specific challenge in this work was the limited access to internal companies' information regarding decision making processes, communication and campaign management. This lack of access to insider information may have hindered the ability to provide a comprehensive analysis of the strategic and tactical aspects of Brand Activism. Incorporating interviews and surveys with key stakeholders can yield valuable insights, offering an even more holistic understanding of Brand Activism strategies.

Finally, a dimension of "prior experience" in Brand Activism used in the comparative analysis remains complex and ambiguous. It is difficult to establish clear and relevant boundaries on what is considered to be a prior experience as nearly all of the companies used in this study employ CSR practices nowadays.

The developed framework and proposed dimensions are highly beneficial for future research on companies suitability for Brand Activism as well as a blueprint for similar research focusing on different prerequisites in various parts of the world. It should also be quantitatively verified by further studies.

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# Appendix

## Exhibit A: Collection of Brand Activism Cases

Name of Brand	Mini Summary	Main Country/Region	Age of brand (then)	Business Sector	Category of Brand Activism	Outcome	Reference
adidas	Anti-Racism Post (racism crossed out with a line)	worldwide	96	Sports apparel	Social	Unfavorable	Ciment, 2020; Gallagher et al. 2020
Nike	Just don't do it after the killing of George Floyd	worldwide	56	Sports apparel	Social	Neutral	Cohen, 2020; Ebrahimji, 2020
Refinery29	Blog section dedicated to black voices & change of website color for George Floyd	USA	14	Blog	Social	Unfavorable	Curto, 2020; Flynn, 2020; Ragavan, 2020
Reddit	Co-founder giving up seat of board to make room for a black person	worldwide	15	Blog	Social	Favorable	Sandler, 2020; Yurieff, 2020
Pepsi	Live for now campaign with Kendall Jenner	USA	34	Beverages	Political	Unfavorable	Commetric, 2017; Macgregor, 2022; Victor, 2017
Nike	Dream crazy with Colin Kapernick	USA	54	Sports apparel	Social	Favorable	Parker & Nordyke, 2019; The Guardian, 2019
Target	Gender-inclusive bathrooms	USA	52	Supermarket	Social	Favorable	Abrams, 2016; Isidore, 2016; Layne, 2016; PYMNTS, 2016
Tata Tea (Jago Ree)	Alarm bajne se pehle jaago re [wake up before the alarm rings] ; 3 main social topics that are huge in India: rape, broken infrastructure, suicides of farmers	India	10	FMCG	Social	Favorable	Tata Tea Official 2017 Ad - Alarm Bajne Se Pehle Jaago Re!, 2017; Mei, 2017; Surti, 2017
HSBC	Coloring the iconic lions in front of office in LGBTQ colors	Hong Kong	158	Banking	Social	Favorable	AFP, 2016; Cheung, 2016; HSBC, 2022

<b>Name of Brand</b>	<b>Mini Summary</b>	<b>Main Country/Region</b>	<b>Age of brand (then)</b>	<b>Business Sector</b>	<b>Category of Brand Activism</b>	<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Reference</b>
Absolute vodka	Promoting Korea edition with a protest picture of anti-government demonstration saying that future is yours to create	South Korea	137	Spirits/ Beverages	Political	Unfavorable	Chandran, 2016; Pham, 2016; Staff, 2016
Tata Tea (Jago Ree)	Questions Indian moms avoid - spark conversation about female dilemmas	India	10	FMCG	Social	Neutral	Jaago Re, n.d.; Questions Indian Moms Avoid - Tata Tea Jaago Re, 2017
Coop	Entrepreneur and presenter Paolo Roberto had been arrested by police for buying sex at a brothel in Stockholm, coop then announced that they will stop buying products of his brand	Sweden	121	Supermarket	Social	Neutral	Dagens industri, 2020; Johansson, 2020
Tomorrow	Rally for companies to let employees go to climate strikes	Germany	5	Banking	Environmental	Favorable	Tomorrow, n.d.
Oatly	Petition for Co2 footprint on products	Germany	26	Beverages	Environmental	Favorable	Oatly, n.d.; Veganomist, 2019
Ben & Jerry's	PeCan resist ice cream (Anti-Trump)	USA	40	FMCG/ Food	Political	Favorable	Hoeffner, 2018
Patagonia	Vote the assholes out tags in pants before Trumps re-election	USA	47	Clothes	Political	Neutral	Evans, 2020; LeClair, 2020; Tashjian, 2020
Lemonaid	Campaign for not having to add more sugar to drinks to be legally allowed to be called Lemonade	Germany	10	Beverages	Legal	Favorable	Bakir, 2021; Berchermeier, 2021; Lemonaid, n.d.a-d
Fritz Kola	Poster against Trump to promote zero sugar version; turned into anti hate speech campaign (every hate comment leads to donation)	Germany	18	Beverages	Political	Favorable	Ayoub, 2020; Schache, 2020
Lyft	Participation in taxi strike as reaction to Trump banning Muslims to enter country & huge donation	USA	5	Transport	Political	Favorable	Chandler, 2017; Cuthbertson, 2017; Weiss, 2017

Name of Brand	Mini Summary	Main Country/Region	Age of brand (then)	Business Sector	Category of Brand Activism	Outcome	Reference
Halifax	Introducing voluntary staff badges with pronouns to avoid misgendering	UK	170	Banking	Workplace	Favorable	Howard, 2022; Martin, 2023
Calvin Klein	Portraying and supporting different forms of motherhood e.g. pregnant transgender man	worldwide	55	Clothes	Social	Favorable	Rogers, 2022
Google	Deleting data of visits to abortion clinics to protect women after overturned Roe v. Wade	USA	25	Tech	Political	Unfavorable	Elias, 2022; Fowler, 2023
True Fruits	Bold statements on smoothie bottles regarding xenophobia and right-wing populism	Austria	17	Beverages	Social	Favorable	Oenning, 2017; Rentz, 2017
Patagonia	Earth as only shareholder, selling the company to serve the planet	worldwide	47	Clothes	Economic	Favorable	McCormick, 2022
Yoplait	"Mom on" ad, criticism of mom-shaming	USA	58	FMCG/Food	Social	Favorable	Bologna, 2017; Durmaskin, 2023
Tony's Chocolonely	Drawing attention to the exploitation of people in the cocoa industry	worldwide	14	FMCG/Food	Social	Favorable	Panesar & Scott, 2020
Airbnb	#Weaccept campaign against discrimination	worldwide	13	Accommodation	Social	Favorable	Airbnb, n.d.; Shorty Awards, n.d.
Brewdog	"Beer for Girls" campaigning against gender pay gap	UK	11	Spirits/Beverages	Economic	Unfavorable	Brewdog, 2018; Sweney, 2018
Nando's	"Last Dictator Standing"	RSA (Zimbabwe)	24	FMCG/Food	Political	Unfavorable	BBC, 2011; Maclean, 2011
Gillette	"The best men can be" addressing toxic masculinity problems	worldwide	119	FMCG	Social	Unfavorable	Gillette, n.d.; King, 2019
Ben & Jerry's	Justice ReMix'd	USA	41	FMCG/Food	Legal	Favorable	Ben & Jerry's, 2019
Burger King	"Women belong in the kitchen" against sexism in food industry	UK	67	FMCG/Food	Workplace	Unfavorable	Kelleher, 2021

<b>Name of Brand</b>	<b>Mini Summary</b>	<b>Main Country/Region</b>	<b>Age of brand (then)</b>	<b>Business Sector</b>	<b>Category of Brand Activism</b>	<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Reference</b>
Ben & Jerry's	Ban of buying two same flavor scoops until same sex marriage is legal & urging people to put pressure on politicians	Australia	39	FMCG/ Food	Legal	Favorable	Ferreras, 2017; Johnson, 2017; Kocay, 2017
Skittles	Coloring their rainbow packaging white for pride month and coloring the skittles white, some proceeds go to charity	USA	43	FMCG/ Food	Social	Neutral	Adams, 2020; Dockray, 2017; Ebrahimji, 2020; Hoffiman, 2017
Starbucks	Vows to hire 10,000 refugees as US companies to condemn Trump travel ban (over 5 years in 75 countries)	USA	46	Food	Political	Neutral	Reuters, 2017; Vaughan & Rushe, 2017
Audi	Super bowl #DriveProgress commercial - equal pay for equal work	USA	108	Cars	Workplace	Unfavorable	Organ, n.d.; Sustainable Brands, 2017
Dove	Real beauty bottle packaging - lotion packaging in different body shapes	UK	60	FMCG	Social	Unfavorable	Craik, 2017; Fallon, 2023
L'oreal	Transgender model Munroe Bergdorf is part of their "true match" campaign	UK	108	FMCG	Social	Unfavorable	BBC, 2020; Elan, 2020a; Fortin, 2017
L'oreal	Amena Khan as first hijab model in major hair care campaign	UK	109	FMCG	Social	Unfavorable	Nast, 2018; Niven-Phillips, 2018
Boohoo	Posting black tile and committing to making internal changes by setting up a diversity and inclusion board	worldwide	14	Fashion	Workplace	Unfavorable	Barradale, 2020; London, 2020; Shout Out UK, 2020
Kraft	"Kraft Now, Pay Later.": a pop up store after federal government shutdown (no paychecks for gov. workers)	USA	114	FMCG	Political	Favorable	Agency Compile, n.d.; KraftHeinz, n.d.; Leo Burnett, n.d.
Urban Outfitters	Speak out in support of Black Lives Matter	USA	50	Clothes	Social	Unfavorable	Elan, 2020b; English, 2020; Gray, 2020

<b>Name of Brand</b>	<b>Mini Summary</b>	<b>Main Country/Region</b>	<b>Age of brand (then)</b>	<b>Business Sector</b>	<b>Category of Brand Activism</b>	<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Reference</b>
Maxima	"Maximalistai" scholarship for the best school	Lithuania	31	Supermarket	Social	Favorable	BNS, n.d.
Iki	Steps exchanged for discounts in shops	Lithuania	29	Supermarket	Environmental	Neutral	Iki Lietuva, 2021

## Exhibit B: Evaluation of Dimensions in Brand Activism Cases

0 = yes; 1 = no; 2 = no information

Case	Outcome	Rooted Stand	Activist by nature	United front	Integrity	Walk the Talk	Established business	Organizational magnitude	Cause business fit	Teampayer	Prior experience
Adidas	Unfav.	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	0
Nike	Neu.	0	1	0	2	1	0	0	1	1	0
Refinery29	Unfav.	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Reddit	Fav.	1	1	0	1	0	1	0	1	1	1
Pepsi	Unfav.	1	1	2	0	1	0	0	1	1	0
Nike	Fav.	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
Target	Fav.	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
Tata Tea (Jago Ree)	Fav.	0	1	0	2	0	1	0	1	1	0
HSBC	Fav.	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0
Absolute vodka	Unfav.	0	1	2	2	1	0	1	1	1	1
Tata Tea (Jago Ree)	Neu.	0	1	0	2	1	1	0	1	1	0
Coop	Neu.	0	1	2	2	0	0	0	1	1	0
Tomorrow	Fav.	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0
Oatly	Fav.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ben & Jerrys	Fav.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Patagonia	Neu.	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
Lemonaid	Fav.	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0
Fritz Kola	Fav.	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	1	0
Lyft	Fav.	0	1	2	2	0	1	0	1	1	1
Halifax	Fav.	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1
Calvin Klein	Fav.	0	1	2	2	1	0	0	1	0	0
Google	Unfav.	0	1	0	1	1	0	0	1	1	0
True Fruits	Fav.	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	0
Patagonia	Fav.	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Yoplait	Fav.	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0

Case	Outcome	Rooted Stand	Activist by nature	United front	Integrity	Walk the Talk	Established business	Organizational magnitude	Cause business fit	Teamplayer	Prior experience
Tony's Chocolonely	Fav.	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	1	0
Airbnb	Fav.	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	0
Brewdog	Unfav.	1	1	2	0	0	1	0	1	1	1
Nando's	Unfav.	1	1	2	2	1	0	0	1	1	1
Gillette	Unfav.	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	1
Ben & Jerrys	Fav.	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Burger King	Unfav.	1	1	2	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
Starbucks	Unfav.	0	1	1	2	0	0	0	0	1	0
Ben & Jerrys	Fav.	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Skittles	Neu.	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	1	1	0
Starbucks	Neu.	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Audi	Unfav.	0	1	2	2	1	0	0	1	1	2
Dove	Unfav.	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
L'oreal	Unfav.	1	1	1	2	1	0	0	1	0	0
L'oreal	Unfav.	1	1	1	2	1	0	0	1	0	0
Boohoo	Unfav.	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1
Kraft	Fav.	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Urban Outfitters	Unfav.	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	1	0
Maxima	Fav.	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
Iki	Neu.	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0

## Exhibit C: References for Case Studies

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