

BRAND ACTIVISM IN POLARIZED SOCIETIES: A STAKEHOLDER THEORY PERSPECTIVE ON RISKS, COMMUNICATION, AND LONG-TERM EQUITY

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Abstract

Brand activism has emerged as a prominent strategy in contemporary marketing as organizations increasingly engage with social, political, and environmental issues. In highly polarized societies, however, such actions present both opportunities and risks, creating uncertainty regarding stakeholder responses and long-term brand outcomes. This study examines brand activism through a stakeholder theory perspective, focusing on risks, communication strategies, and implications for long-term brand equity. Using a narrative literature review and conceptual analysis, the study synthesizes insights from academic research, case studies, and industry reports related to stakeholder dynamics, societal polarization, and brand communication. The findings reveal that stakeholder responses are highly fragmented, with supportive groups enhancing loyalty and opposing groups generating backlash and reputational risk. Effective communication—characterized by authenticity, clarity, and responsiveness—emerges as a critical factor in mitigating risks and shaping perceptions. The study also highlights the trade-off between short-term negative reactions and potential long-term gains in trust, loyalty, and brand equity. A conceptual framework is proposed to explain how brand activism influences outcomes through mediating and moderating factors. The study concludes that successful brand activism requires strategic alignment, stakeholder awareness, and proactive communication to navigate polarized environments and sustain long-term value.

Keywords: brand activism; stakeholder theory; polarization; communication strategy; brand equity

INTRODUCTION

Brand activism has emerged as a prominent feature of contemporary corporate behavior, with firms increasingly taking public stances on socio-political issues such as climate change, racial justice, gender equality, and human rights. Unlike traditional corporate social responsibility (CSR), which often focused on neutral or broadly accepted causes, brand activism involves engaging with contentious and value-laden topics that may divide stakeholders (Haupt et al., 2023). This shift is driven by multiple forces, including heightened consumer expectations, the influence of socially conscious younger generations, and the amplifying role of digital media. As a result, brands are no longer perceived as purely economic actors but as influential participants in societal discourse (Khalifa & Osburg, 2025).

At the same time, many societies are experiencing growing levels of polarization, characterized by deepening ideological divides and intensified identity-based conflicts. This polarization manifests not only at the national level but also within local communities and consumer segments, shaping how individuals interpret and respond to corporate actions (Wannow et al., 2023). Social media platforms further exacerbate these divisions by creating echo chambers and accelerating the spread of both support and backlash. In such environments, brand messages are quickly politicized, and even seemingly neutral actions can be interpreted through partisan lenses, increasing the complexity of stakeholder reactions (Podnar & Golob, 2024). This context creates a fundamental tension for organizations between fulfilling perceived social responsibilities and managing market risks. On one hand, stakeholders—including consumers, employees, and advocacy groups—expect brands to demonstrate values, authenticity, and social engagement (Cammarota et al., 2023). On the other hand, taking a stance on controversial

issues can trigger boycotts, reputational damage, or investor concerns, particularly among stakeholders with opposing views. Companies must therefore navigate a delicate balance, weighing the potential long-term benefits of value alignment and differentiation against the immediate risks of alienation and financial volatility (Eilert & Cherup, 2020). Against this backdrop, this article aims to examine brand activism through the lens of stakeholder theory, providing a structured understanding of how firms can manage competing stakeholder expectations in polarized contexts. It seeks to analyze the risks associated with brand activism, explore effective communication strategies, and assess the implications for long-term brand equity. By integrating insights from stakeholder theory with emerging research on brand activism, the article contributes to a more nuanced perspective on how organizations can engage in socio-political issues in a way that is both strategically sound and socially responsible.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stakeholder theory provides a foundational framework for understanding how organizations interact with and are accountable to various groups that influence or are influenced by their actions. At its core, the theory emphasizes that businesses should not focus solely on shareholders but must consider a broader set of stakeholders, including customers, employees, suppliers, communities, and regulators (Shukla et al., 2024). Stakeholders can be classified based on their level of influence, interest, and legitimacy, often categorized into primary and secondary groups. Primary stakeholders are those directly affected by the organization's operations, while secondary stakeholders exert indirect influence through social, political, or cultural means. This classification helps organizations prioritize engagement and resource allocation (Chu et al., 2022). The theory also highlights the importance of balancing competing stakeholder interests. As a result, stakeholder theory offers a comprehensive lens for analyzing organizational behavior in complex environments (Guha & Korschun, 2023).

The relevance of stakeholder theory to brand decision-making becomes particularly evident in the context of brand activism. When brands take public stances on social or political issues, they must consider how different stakeholder groups will perceive and react to these actions. Stakeholder expectations may vary significantly, leading to potential conflicts that require careful management (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). For example, while some consumers may support a brand's activism, others may oppose it based on differing values or beliefs. Employees, investors, and communities may also have distinct perspectives that influence organizational outcomes. By applying stakeholder theory, brands can better anticipate these diverse reactions and design more inclusive strategies. This approach enables more informed and balanced decision-making. Ultimately, stakeholder theory helps brands navigate complexity while maintaining alignment with their values and objectives (Verlegh, 2023).

Polarization in Society

Social and political polarization refers to the growing division of individuals and groups based on ideological, cultural, or value-based differences. This phenomenon is characterized by increasingly extreme positions and reduced willingness to engage with opposing viewpoints. Several factors contribute to polarization, including media fragmentation, social media algorithms, and the amplification of echo chambers (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Economic inequality, identity politics, and global sociopolitical tensions also play a significant role in deepening divisions. As individuals become more entrenched in their beliefs, societal consensus becomes more difficult to achieve. This creates a highly sensitive environment for organizations operating in the public sphere. Understanding the nature and drivers of polarization is essential for analyzing its impact on brands (Verlegh, 2023).

The implications of polarization for consumer attitudes and brand perceptions are profound. In polarized environments, consumers are more likely to evaluate brands based on their alignment with personal values and ideological positions. Brand actions, particularly those related to activism, can trigger strong emotional responses, both positive and negative. Supportive consumers may reward brands with increased loyalty, while opposing groups may engage in criticism or boycotts (Rudeloff & Amin, 2023). This dynamic intensifies the stakes associated with brand decision-making. Additionally, polarization can lead to rapid dissemination of opinions through digital platforms, amplifying both support and backlash. As a result, brand perception becomes more volatile and context-dependent. Navigating these dynamics requires a deep understanding of audience segmentation and value alignment (Key et al., 2021).

Risks of Brand Activism

Brand activism carries significant risks, particularly in the form of consumer backlash and organized boycotts. When brands take positions on controversial issues, they may alienate segments of their audience who hold opposing views. This can lead to public criticism, negative word-of-mouth, and calls for boycotts (Bhagwat et al.,

2020). In highly polarized environments, even well-intentioned actions can be misinterpreted or perceived as opportunistic. Social media platforms amplify these reactions, allowing negative sentiment to spread rapidly. Boycotts can have both immediate and long-term effects on sales and brand perception. These risks highlight the importance of carefully evaluating the potential consequences of activism (Herzberg & Rudeloff, 2023). Brands must balance the desire to take a stand with the need to maintain broad appeal.

In addition to consumer backlash, brand activism also poses reputational and financial risks. A misaligned or poorly communicated stance can damage a brand's credibility and erode trust among key stakeholders. Investors may react negatively if activism is perceived as distracting from business objectives or creating unnecessary risk. Financial performance may be affected through reduced sales, increased marketing costs, or loss of partnerships (Lou et al., 2024). However, these risks are not always negative, as activism can also strengthen relationships with supportive stakeholders. The challenge lies in managing uncertainty and ensuring that actions are consistent with brand values. Effective risk management requires strategic planning and clear communication. Ultimately, understanding these risks is essential for making informed decisions about brand activism (Schmidt et al., 2021).

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a narrative literature review combined with a conceptual analysis to explore brand activism within the context of stakeholder theory and societal polarization. Given the complexity and evolving nature of brand activism, a narrative approach allows for flexibility in integrating insights from multiple disciplines, including marketing, sociology, and communication studies. The research design focuses on synthesizing existing theoretical frameworks and empirical findings to develop a comprehensive understanding of risks, communication strategies, and long-term brand equity. Sources are selected from a range of academic journals, case studies, and industry reports to ensure both scholarly rigor and practical relevance. The inclusion criteria emphasize studies that explicitly address brand activism, stakeholder responses, and the impact of polarization on consumer behavior. This approach enables the identification of patterns and relationships across different contexts. As a result, the study provides a holistic perspective on the role of brand activism in contemporary marketing.

The analytical approach is based on thematic synthesis, which involves identifying recurring themes, key concepts, and emerging trends across the selected literature. This method allows for the integration of diverse findings into a coherent framework that highlights the interplay between stakeholder expectations, communication strategies, and brand outcomes. However, the study is subject to several limitations. The reliance on narrative review may introduce selection bias, as it does not follow a strictly systematic protocol. Additionally, many case studies are context-specific, reflecting particular industries or sociopolitical environments, which may limit generalizability. The rapidly evolving nature of social and political dynamics also means that findings may change over time. Despite these limitations, the methodology provides valuable insights into the strategic and theoretical dimensions of brand activism. It offers a foundation for future empirical research and more systematic investigations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Stakeholder Responses to Brand Activism

Stakeholder responses to brand activism are often divided between supportive and opposing groups, reflecting the diversity of values and beliefs within society. Supportive stakeholders tend to align with the brand's stance and may reward the organization with increased loyalty, advocacy, and positive word-of-mouth (Vredenburg et al., 2020). These individuals often perceive the brand as authentic, socially responsible, and aligned with their personal values. In contrast, opposing stakeholders may react negatively, viewing the brand's actions as inappropriate, opportunistic, or misaligned with their beliefs. This divergence in responses highlights the inherent risk of taking a public stance in polarized environments. The intensity of these reactions is often amplified by social media, where opinions spread rapidly (Luna-Amador et al., 2025). As a result, brand activism can simultaneously strengthen and weaken relationships with different stakeholder groups.

The impact of these responses extends across multiple stakeholder categories, including consumers, employees, investors, and society at large. Consumers play a central role, as their purchasing behavior directly affects brand performance. Employees may feel a sense of pride and motivation when a brand's activism aligns with their values, but may also experience discomfort if they disagree (Flight & Allaway, 2024). Investors may evaluate activism based on its potential impact on financial performance and risk exposure. At the societal level, brand activism can contribute to public discourse and influence social change. These varied responses demonstrate that brand activism operates within a complex ecosystem of stakeholder relationships. Understanding these dynamics is essential for managing the outcomes of activism initiatives (Zhao et al., 2024).



Figure 1. Stacked Bar Chart of Stakeholder Responses to Brand Activism Across Key Groups

Figure 1 illustrates the dual nature of stakeholder responses to brand activism, showing that reactions are simultaneously supportive and opposing across different groups. Consumers and employees exhibit relatively higher supportive responses, suggesting that alignment with brand values can foster loyalty, engagement, and internal motivation (Zhao et al., 2024). In contrast, investors display a more balanced or slightly opposing reaction, reflecting their sensitivity to financial risk and uncertainty associated with activism. Societal responses also appear mixed, indicating that brand activism contributes to broader public discourse and may generate both approval and criticism. The stacked structure of the chart highlights that no stakeholder group responds uniformly, reinforcing the complexity of managing brand activism in polarized environments (Scalvini, 2024). These variations underscore the importance of understanding stakeholder-specific expectations and perceptions. Overall, the figure demonstrates that brand activism requires careful strategic consideration, as it can simultaneously strengthen and strain relationships across different stakeholder groups (Saracevic & Schlegelmilch, 2026).

Risks and Trade-offs

Brand activism inherently involves risks and trade-offs, particularly in highly polarized environments where public opinion is divided. Polarization-driven backlash is one of the most significant risks, as brands may face criticism, boycotts, or negative publicity from stakeholders who disagree with their stance. Such reactions can escalate quickly, especially in digital environments where content can go viral (Miguel & Miranda, 2023). Even well-intentioned activism can be perceived as insincere or politically motivated, leading to reputational damage. These risks are heightened when brands fail to align their actions with their core values or lack consistency in their messaging. As a result, brand activism requires careful consideration of potential consequences. Organizations must assess not only the benefits but also the risks associated with taking a public stance (Westerlund et al., 2021).

At the same time, brand activism involves balancing short-term risks with potential long-term gains. While immediate backlash may negatively impact sales or public perception, taking a principled stance can strengthen relationships with supportive stakeholders over time (Haupt et al., 2023). Brands that consistently align their actions with their values may build stronger trust, loyalty, and brand equity in the long run. This trade-off highlights the strategic nature of brand activism, where decisions must consider both immediate and future outcomes. Organizations must be willing to accept short-term volatility in pursuit of long-term positioning (Khalifa & Osburg, 2025). Effective management of this balance requires a clear understanding of stakeholder expectations and brand identity. Ultimately, the success of brand activism depends on navigating these trade-offs effectively (Wannow et al., 2023).



Figure 2. Double Radar Chart of Short-Term Risks and Long-Term Gains in Brand Activism

Figure 2 illustrates the contrasting yet interconnected dimensions of short-term risks and long-term gains associated with brand activism. The chart shows that risks such as backlash, boycotts, reputational damage, and short-term sales impact are relatively high, reflecting the immediate challenges brands face when taking a public stance in polarized environments (Wannow et al., 2023). In contrast, long-term gains such as trust building, customer loyalty, brand equity, and strategic positioning demonstrate stronger performance, highlighting the potential benefits of consistent and value-driven activism. The clear divergence between the two profiles emphasizes the inherent trade-off that organizations must manage. While the initial response to activism may be negative among certain stakeholder groups, sustained alignment with core values can yield positive outcomes over time (Podnar & Golob, 2024). This dynamic underscores the strategic importance of adopting a long-term perspective when engaging in brand activism. Overall, the figure reinforces that successful brand activism depends on effectively balancing immediate risks with future value creation (Camarota et al., 2023).

Communication Strategies

Effective communication strategies are critical for the success of brand activism, particularly in how messages are framed and delivered. The framing of activism messages influences how stakeholders interpret the brand's intentions and credibility. Messages that emphasize authenticity, transparency, and alignment with core values are more likely to be perceived positively (Eilert & Cherup, 2020). Conversely, vague or inconsistent messaging can lead to skepticism and mistrust. The choice of language, tone, and communication channels also plays a significant role in shaping audience perceptions. Brands must carefully craft their messages to resonate with their target audience while maintaining clarity and consistency (Eilert & Cherup, 2020). This strategic framing is essential for minimizing misinterpretation and maximizing impact (Shukla et al., 2024).

Managing controversy and public discourse is another key aspect of communication in brand activism. In polarized environments, brand messages are likely to attract both support and criticism, requiring proactive engagement strategies. Brands must be prepared to respond to feedback, address concerns, and maintain open communication with stakeholders (Chu et al., 2022). This may involve engaging in dialogue through social media, issuing clarifications, or reinforcing the rationale behind their stance. Transparency and responsiveness are crucial for maintaining trust during periods of controversy. Additionally, brands must monitor public sentiment and adapt their communication strategies as needed (Guha & Korschun, 2023). Effective management of public discourse can help mitigate risks and strengthen stakeholder relationships. Ultimately, communication plays a central role in determining the success of brand activism initiatives (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020).



Figure 3. Matrix of Communication Strategies in Brand Activism: Clarity, Authenticity, and Engagement Dynamics

Figure 3 presents a 2x2 matrix that illustrates how communication strategies in brand activism vary based on message clarity and authenticity on one axis, and engagement and responsiveness on the other. The top-right quadrant represents the most effective approach, where clear, authentic messaging is combined with active stakeholder engagement, resulting in stronger trust and positive perceptions (Verlegh, 2023). In contrast, the top-left quadrant highlights the risks associated with vague or inconsistent messaging, which can lead to misunderstanding and skepticism despite attempts at engagement. The bottom-left quadrant reflects passive communication strategies that lack both clarity and responsiveness, leading to low trust and minimal impact (Rudeloff & Amin, 2023). Meanwhile, the bottom-right quadrant emphasizes the importance of responsiveness and transparency, even when message clarity may vary, showing that active engagement can still improve stakeholder relationships. Overall, the matrix underscores that successful brand activism requires both well-framed messages and proactive communication efforts. It reinforces the idea that clarity, authenticity, and engagement must work together to effectively manage stakeholder perceptions in polarized environments (Key et al., 2021).

Conceptual Framework (Proposed Model)

The proposed conceptual framework provides a structured approach to understanding how brand activism influences stakeholder responses and long-term brand outcomes. The model begins with the brand activism stance as the primary input, representing the organization’s position on a social or political issue. This input shapes how stakeholders perceive the brand and its intentions (Bhagwat et al., 2020). The framework emphasizes that the impact of activism is not direct but is mediated by key perceptual factors. These mediators include perceived authenticity and value alignment, which determine whether stakeholders view the brand’s actions as genuine and consistent with its identity. By incorporating these mediators, the model captures the psychological processes underlying stakeholder responses (Herzberg & Rudeloff, 2023). This approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how activism translates into outcomes.

The framework also includes moderating factors such as stakeholder ideology and the level of societal polarization, which influence how activism is interpreted. Stakeholders with different ideological positions may respond differently to the same brand action, leading to varied outcomes. Similarly, higher levels of polarization can intensify both positive and negative reactions (Lou et al., 2024). The ultimate outcomes of the model include brand equity, trust, and loyalty, reflecting both attitudinal and behavioral responses. These outcomes are shaped by the interaction between inputs, mediators, and moderators. The framework highlights the complexity of brand activism and the need for strategic alignment across all components. It also provides a foundation for empirical testing and future research (Schmidt et al., 2021). Overall, the model offers valuable insights into how brands can navigate activism in polarized environments.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of brand activism in polarized societies. By applying a stakeholder theory perspective, the analysis demonstrates that brand activism is not merely a communication strategy but a strategic decision that affects diverse stakeholder groups in different ways. While supportive stakeholders may strengthen their loyalty and advocacy, opposing groups may respond with skepticism, criticism, or even boycotts. This duality underscores the inherent risks and opportunities associated with taking a public stance on social and political issues. The study also emphasizes the critical role of perceived authenticity and value alignment in shaping stakeholder responses. When brands communicate consistently and align their actions with core values, they are more likely to build trust and long-term equity. Overall, the research shows that the effectiveness of brand activism depends on how well organizations manage stakeholder expectations in a polarized environment.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes by integrating stakeholder theory with the dynamics of societal polarization and brand communication. It offers a conceptual framework that explains how brand activism influences outcomes such as trust, loyalty, and brand equity through mediating and moderating factors. Practically, the findings provide guidance for organizations navigating activism, highlighting the importance of strategic alignment, transparent communication, and proactive stakeholder engagement. However, the study is limited by its reliance on conceptual analysis and context-specific cases, which may affect generalizability. Future research should explore empirical validation of the proposed model, as well as cross-cultural and longitudinal perspectives on brand activism. Additionally, examining the role of digital media and evolving societal dynamics would further enhance understanding in this area. Ultimately, successful brand activism requires a careful balance between expressing values and managing risk in an increasingly divided world.

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