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Consumer Response to Brand Activism: A Multiple Case Study Analysis

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the consumer response to Brand Activism, a new phenomenon defined as an emerging marketing strategy. We selected four activism campaigns of well-known brands and we conducted a sentiment analysis of users' comments posted on the Brands' Instagram profiles. The analysis generated very different findings for each case, showing that some forms of Brand Activism are perceived as authentic by consumers, therefore they are shared and supported by them; contrarily others are perceived as inauthentic, as result the consumer response is extremely negative.

Keywords Corporate activism · Brand activism · Brand hero · Marketing ethics · Woke washing

1. Introduction

Growing socio-environmental issues have rekindled a weighty debate on the substantial businesses' role, attributing to them the ability to improve collective well-being or mitigate the negative effects resulting from unsustainable consumption and production patterns.

This new approach is also evident in the recent directives of the authoritative scholars of the American Marketing Association (AMA), who have supported the need to investigate in this direction and have coined new expressions such as “Better Marketing for Better World” (Chandy et al., 2021), “Marketing as a force for Good” (Mende & Scott, 2021) and “Mitigation in Marketing” (AMA, 2021), exemplifying the expectations placed about this discipline to face the increasingly urgent and unsustainable challenges of our time. Some Authors highlighted that our era more than ever has a great need of Marketing, as a discipline capable of promoting the creation of solutions to meet the needs of

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individuals, companies and institutions, thus improving people's lives and society at large (Resciniti, 2020).

In this scenario characterized by a growing sensitivity towards these issues, there is a strong need to identify new forms of economic models, where companies are no longer mere spectators but protagonists, heroes able to inspire stakeholders, particularly consumers, by adopting compelling and attractive actions; moreover, nowadays, more and more often, it is the same consumers who require firms to take a stand about sociopolitical issues (Vrendenburg et al., 2020).

From this standpoint, a new field of investigation, still unexplored and little-known despite its importance (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020), is "Brand Activism" (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018; Moorman, 2020), in fact, at the best of our knowledge, the main research was done by Sarkar & Kotler (2018), and another huge contribution was produced thanks to a Special Issue of the Journal of Public Policy & Marketing concerning Political Activity and Marketing (2020). Brand activism is considered an emerging Marketing strategy through which companies take a clear and strong public position concerning controversial social, economic, environmental and political issues (Vrendenburg et al., 2020). Hence, the purpose of this research is to contribute to the debate about brand activism, particularly attempting to understand how consumers perceive and respond to this phenomenon, with a specific focus on legal and social activism (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018).

Precisely, we have been conducting a multiple case study analysis, investigating consumer response to four activism campaigns of three well-known brands. We believe that it is necessary to analyse the consumers' response about brand activism's actions, on the one hand, because there is not enough research so structured on this phenomenon, and the other hand because only by analyzing the consumers' response, from a managerial point of view, it will be possible to understand how to best take stands without losing market share or being accused of "woke washing" (Vrendenburg et al., 2020).

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 The Brand Activism

As argued by Sarkar & Kotler (2018), Brand Activism consists of "business efforts to promote, prevent or direct social, political, economic and/or environmental reforms or stagnations with the desire to promote or prevent improvements in society" (p. 468). Nowadays, more and more frequently, companies take on activists' roles by openly expressing their views (Shivakanth et al., 2019), hence assuming a public position about sociopolitical issues.

Many brands have been beginning to fight for social causes by promoting values such as trust, women empowerment, social justice, fighting racism, inequality, promoting inclusiveness, human rights; in this vein activism is not limited only to forms of communication towards its stakeholders, but often also to donations or concrete actions (Eyada, 2020) that bring benefits to communities. Besides, as underpinned by Moorman (2020), brands become not merely activists but also educators, able to trigger an essential social change for the creation of a more sustainable world from an environmental, social, and economic point of view.

According to Sarkar & Kotler (2018), Brand activism concerns the concept of "Common Good", consequently to companies are required to assume responsibilities, defining a social purpose in order to make a positive impact to the society. Nonetheless, it should be noted that asking companies to take stands and intervene on such dainty and meaningful issues, of considerable public interest, means privatizing them (Vrendenburg et al., 2020), in fact they should be faced by institutions, but often they are unable to do so.

From this standpoint, taking a public position on these issues is really tricky and divisive (Vrendenburg et al. 2020), firstly because there is not a universally correct and acceptable answer to solve socio-political issues (Korschun et al. 2019; Nalick et al. 2016), secondly, activism often concerns extremely controversial, debatable and polarized issues (Vrendenburg et al., 2020), therefore if the company is not adequately prepared for this situation it risks significant reputational and economic damages. For this reason, the construct of authenticity (Vrendenburg et al., 2020) is really important, this can be considered as a necessary condition (Hydock et al., 2020) to achieve and communicate successful forms of activism.

As argued by Vrendenburg et al. (2020), authenticity depends firstly on the alignment of the firm's values, purpose, and promises with stakeholders' satisfaction; secondly, by the alignment between the contents' messages published online and offline channels and the factual prosocial corporate practices. From this point of view, when brands engage in social issues consistent with their modus operandi and communicate it clearly and truthfully to consumers, then activism is identified as authentic, hence perceived positively by consumers.

Additionally, the problem arises when brands propagate a social commitment as a stratagem to increase their products' sales (Edelman, 2019), in this case, the condition of authenticity is no longer valid and we talk about inauthentic activism (Vrendenburg et al. 2020), that is to say, a firm enacts a "woke washing" (Sobande, 2019) operation. Particularly, woke washing phenomenon can be defined as "brands that have unclear or indeterminate records of social cause practices" (Vredenburg et al. 2018), but they seek to appear themselves

as worried and committed about sociopolitical issues (Sobande, 2019); as result, there is a misalignment between declared intentions and implemented actions.

As argued by Vrendenburg et al., (2020) there are four types of brand activism, related to the degree of message activism and prosocial corporate practice: Authentic Brand Activism, Inauthentic Brand Activism, Silent Brand Activism and lastly Absence of Brand Activism. From an academic standpoint, we consider essential this classification to try to explain many brand activism's actions failed and were negatively judged especially by consumers.

As previously reported, the best activism is characterized by authenticity, hence, from the alignment between a firm's communication and its actions; this type of activism presents high levels of prosocial corporate practice and activist marketing messaging. On the other hand, there is inauthentic activism, in this case, firms adopt a very strong communication about their stand but effectively they assume scant commitment concerning sociopolitical issues. As aftermath, consumers perceive inauthenticity and they judge this activism as deceptive, false, or not sincere. Therefore, we are talking about wake washing, a phenomenon similar to greenwashing, which can cause huge damages to companies in terms of reputation and brand equity.

By contrast, the absence of activism means that the firm is disinterested in engage social causes or take stands on these issues. Lastly, Vrendenburg et al. (2020) argue about a little-known typology of brand activism: the Silent; these brands often have a social cause in their mission and marry sustainable values, thus they are characterised by high prosocial corporate practice but they present low communication to consumers, for instance, this group is represented by the B Corporations.

Notwithstanding the topic's relevance, research on this vein is still very scant (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020), especially on aspects such as the brand's ability to contribute to generating societal change through activism and the related consumer response, as aftermath, we consider fundamental firstly to analyse the differences between activism and phenomena such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Cause-Related Marketing (CRM), secondly to highlight the different areas activism's intervention.

As pointed out by Chernev & Blair (2015), the controversial nature of brand activism clearly distinguishes it from CSR and CRM, these last ones are usually widely accepted and shared, in fact, these actions are considered advantageous for society, consequently, it is difficult that CSR and CRM initiatives generate negative responses from consumers (Mukherjee & Althuisen, 2020), precisely because they intervene on issues that present a low degree of controversy (Vrendenburg et al., 2020), therefore, public opinion is mainly homogeneous and in agreement. (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020),

Furthermore, CSR and CRM campaigns are usually part of a business strategic plan (Varadajan & Menon, 1988), this does not happen for brand activism which often concerns sporadic or accidental actions (Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). These characteristics of CSR and CRM are not found in brand activism, which has different and sometimes discrepant elements.

First of all, brand activism concerns controversial causes, problems, or events, where the public opinion is disparate and at odds. Specifically, they are often issues at the center of fervent public debates, and take a stand about them means assuming breakneck risks; for this reason, activism is defined as a risky action (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020). Although the firm can adequately manage the taking of a stand on such animated topics, as a matter of fact, risks are always high with possible huge costs.

Furthermore, as argued above, Vrendenburg et al. (2020) show how, unlike CSR or CRM, activism intervenes on social problems that have not a universally right and accepted solution; in fact, while CRM and CSR mainly concern social and environmental problems, for instance, the fight against inequalities, illiteracy, climate change, corruption, or poverty, activism intervenes on social, political, environmental, legal, business or economic, such as the defense of human rights or the encouragement to LGBTQIA + communities, immigration, or diversity.

From this standpoint, Sarkar & Kotler (2018) identify the so-called “Umbrella of Brand Activism” or “Brand Activism Map”, which is the six areas where a brand can intervene by behaving as an activist. The possible areas of intervention are social, legal, economic, environmental political and workplace, each area has definite topics of interest and responds to very specific needs.

Based on this map, we investigate cases of social and legal activism, firstly because these are areas where the public debate is deeply heated and the consumer responses are extremely strong; secondly, because many companies take stand exactly on issues such as human rights, discrimination, immigration, or equality.

2.2 The Consumer Response to Brand activism

By investigating the Brand Activism’s phenomenon, it is essential to understand the consumer response. As underlined by Vrendenburg et al. (2020), on the one hand, more and more often, consumers demand firms to take a stand concerning specific sociopolitical issues, foremost Gen Z and Millennials (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018); on the other hand, consumers often react negatively to activism, even boycotting the brand.

The positive or negative consumer response to a brand activism campaign often depends on how much the brand espouse or violate the social norms accepted and shared by its target (Warren & McGraw, 2016), consequently, if the brand does not deviate from the social, cultural, political or environmental values and beliefs' target, then the consumer response could be positive because they identify themselves in the taken brand's position (Shivakanth, et al., 2019) and in the firm's message.

By contrast, Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) highlight that if consumers do not share the stand taken by the firm, they do not identify in those values and beliefs, as aftermath they could react negatively, boycotting the firm and triggering a negative word of mouth (D'Arco & Marino, 2018).

From this standpoint, there are two necessary conditions to generate a positive response, firstly the alignment between the values supported by the brand and consumers ethics (Hydock et al. 2020), with a consequent identification of them in the cause bolstered by the firm; moreover, as pointed out by Mukherjee & Althuizen (2020) individuals consider their beliefs untouchable and prevailing rather than values of others, which is the reason that if they do not share the firm stand, it is extremely difficult for them to change their beliefs and to align them with the brand. This point is supported by the existing literature, in fact, as investigated by D'Arco et al. (2019) consumers' negative emotions about brands can stem from several reasons, including political motivations (Sandikci & Ekici, 2009), self-concept/brand image incongruity, and ideological incompatibility (Hegner et al. 2017).

Secondly, consumer response depends also on brand reputation, therefore as argued by Vrendenburg et al. (2020) from the consistency between the brand activism campaign, the objectives, the business purpose and the actual corporate business practice; consequently, brands that have historically engaged little or nothing in social issues or that have values very far from these, have a low probability of being judged positively from consumers, who could considered activism as inauthentic or accused the firm of woke-washing (Sobande, 2019). Additionally, if there is a moderate discrepancy between the brand and the promoted cause, this can generate a positive or negative response and it depends in part on whether the brand's position threatens or endorses the consumer's values.

Finally, it should be emphasized that nowadays consumers demand more and more often a public engagement to firms (Hydock et al. 2020) but they are also becoming much more sensitive, attentive and informed towards such causes, thus they could easily judge the firm negatively and definitively boycott it. In light of the extant literature and emerging related gaps, the main purpose of this paper is to contribute to the debate about Brand Activism, answering the following research question:

RQ: How do consumers perceive and respond to the actions of brand activism, particularly in the case of social and legal activism?

To answer this question, we propose a sentiment analysis of some Instagram's posts of specific brand activism campaigns.

3. Research Methodology

As can be seen from the literature review, the phenomenon is still recent and understudied, so this paper is primarily exploratory in purpose.

Nowadays social media represent a very wide and motley source of information, in fact as pointed out by Marino et al. (2020) web scraping and data analysis represent for marketing researchers and business experts a great possibility to understand individuals, groups and society.

From this standpoint, we supposed that could be appropriated to carry out a sentiment analysis or opinion mining because in this case, it allows us to comprise the degree of acceptance (Prabowo & Thelwall, 2009) of activism campaigns promoted by the selected brands.

The sentiment analysed within the comments provides useful insights for different research purposes; in fact, Prabowo & Thelwall (2009) highlight that those sentiments can be classified mainly in two categories: positive or negative, or on a scale of n points e.g., good, very good, satisfactory, bad, very bad.

We prefer to investigate a multiple case study rather than a single one, firstly this allows us to have a deeper understanding of the phenomenon, secondly, we desire to understand if consumers react in the same way to different activism campaigns, or whether, as hypothesized by Vrendenburg et al. (2020), there are brand activism campaigns perceived as authentic and therefore accepted and appreciated by consumers, and contrarily, brand activism campaigns perceived as inauthentic and as aftermath boycotted and criticized.

We select Instagram as the platform for data collection because it was the social media that presented more data in terms of comments than Facebook and Twitter; moreover, Instagram is the most used social network by Generation Z and Millennials, that as pointed out by Sarkar & Kotler (2018), they are extremely sensitive to social issues, foremost the Gen Z.

3.1 Case Description

In this section we illustrate the four brand activism campaigns selected. Every campaign has its own hashtag, we select campaigns that have this element,

because the hashtag allowed us to identify posts related to that specific campaign on the brand's profile.

Case A: #weaccept, Airbnb (2017).

In 2017, Airbnb's founders announced their stand in favour of immigrants, refugees and survivors of war or natural disasters, arguing the need to welcome these individuals as it is necessary to put a stop to discrimination since all human beings are equal. From this perspective is born the #weaccept campaign, precisely Airbnb is a company that accepts any individual, regardless of their skin colour, citizenship, religion, language or sexual orientation.

In addition to promoting these values, Airbnb decided to provide free accommodation to the vulnerable.

By achieving this goal, Airbnb asks its hosts' community to join the #weaccept campaign by sharing accommodation with the underprivileged or by donating to humanitarian organisations.

Case B: #TheBestManCanBe, Gillette (2019)

This is one of the most well-known activism campaigns, in fact, the main video became viral in a very short time. In this case, Gillette decided to take a stand against toxic masculinity and sexual harassment, thus promoting a vision based on positive masculinity, which means accepting what is different and being aware that there is not only one prototype of masculinity and above all, that prototype should not be considered as right. Besides, Gillette determined to donate \$ 1 million per year for the next three years to non-profit organizations that present in their programs purposes such as spreading more positive masculinity.

Case C: ProudToBeVS, Victoria's Secret (2021)

"Proud to be" is Victoria's Secrets public stand through the firm has declared its support to the LGBTQIA+ community, celebrating Gay Pride and asking for human rights to be recognised. As declared by Victoria's Secrets the main value of this campaign is inclusivity. Moreover, also in this case, the firm has decided to donate \$1.1 million to organisations that support the LGBTQIA+ community.

Case D: #Collective, Victoria's Secret (2021)

The activism campaign called Collective immediately aroused our interest, consequently, we decided with a great curiosity to analyse it. Victoria Secret's is historically known for its Angels, models with beauty standards considered perfect in modern society. These are women who do not have any imperfection, characterised by homogeneous and constant standards of physicality over time. Victoria Secret's with Collective decided to gradually abandon the Angels and replace them with women of various physicalities, different skin colours,

ethnicity or age, with heterogeneous political ideals and different sexual orientations. Besides, these are often women who are not models but are known to be feminists, activists, or real human rights' ambassadors. Our interest stems from the drastic paradigm shift, which has led the firm to completely change its values promoting total inclusivity.

3.2. Data Collection

The data were collected by Instagram, first of all, we have identified manually for each campaign the posts published by the firms using the associated hashtags. The data collection was carried out with Phantombuster, through the tool "Instagram Post Commenters" that allowed to extract the users who commented under the post and the related comments. Then, we read and cleaned each dataset, e.g., by removing duplicate comments, after that we uploaded datasets into Nvivo 12 and used the sentiment analysis tool which classified each comment into two categories positive or negative, each category having two subcategories: very positive and moderately positive for positive sentiment and very negative and moderately negative for negative sentiment. These two sub-categories can be considered or not, they only represent a greater level of detail of the analysis.

Finally, considered the characteristics of qualitative research and the need to interpret data jointly with the limitations of software for these types of analysis, it was necessary to review entirely and manually each dataset to identify errors of attribution to a category rather than another. This is because software such as Nvivo perform a literal analysis of words, but this type of analysis, definable as positivist, cannot be exhaustive. The sentiment analysis, and in general qualitative research, requires an interpretivist approach, as the aftermath, we made a manual control of each comment, because the software does not recognise for instance sarcasm, irony or simply emoticons.

4. Case Study Analysis

The findings about the consumers' response to brand activism campaigns are different for each case analysed, confirming the existing literature on Brand Activism. For major clearness, we analyse case by case, reporting the main results and the most representative comments.

According to Roznowski (2003), we coded the users' comments as positive when they reported only favourable aspects, while negative when they present unsightly or unfavourable aspects. For each case we identified the amount of

positive and negative comments; instead, from a qualitative point of view we identified for each case the main topics that characterized the positive and the negative comments.

Case A: #weaccept, Airbnb (2017)



Fig. 1 #weaccept, Airbnb (2017)

Among the cases analysed, the activism campaign promoted by Airbnb is the one with the best findings in terms of positive consumer response.

As shown in Fig. 2, for Airbnb we investigate 907 users' comments. The sentiment is especially positive, because we identified a total of 781 positive comments, of which 629 were very positive, hence with extremely favourable words, and 152 were moderately positive. By contrast, we also identified 126 negative comments, specifically 55 of them classified as very negative and 71 as moderately negative.

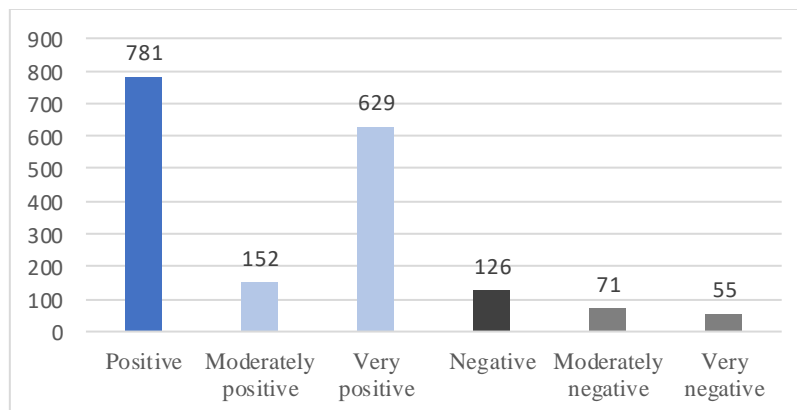


Fig. 2 Sentiment analysis of #weaccept

Analysing the positive comments, we identified three main topics that characterise consumers' response.

MAIN POSITIVE TOPICS	COMMENTS	NO. REFERENCE DATASET	SOURCE
Gratitude	Thank you for being a company that stands for something when too many are apathetic or afraid to say anything.	References 53	Instagram
	Thank you for sharing this incredibly important message!	References 169	
	Thank you for taking a stand Airbnb. This just made me want to support you even more.	References 194	
Love	So honored to be a part of the @airbnb family!	Reference 46	Instagram
	I love what you're doing, Airbnb!	Reference 520	
	We all love you @airbnb and are blessed that there are company like this to help the world look forward.	Reference 613	
Statement of Support	Wonderful! I will support you and your msg	Reference 43	Instagram
	Such an inspiration	Reference 124	

Table 1 Main positive topics of #weaccept users' comments

Firstly, we identify the gratitude for the stand taken by Airbnb; secondly, a feeling of love and respect towards the brand, indeed many comments have the word "love". Finally, we suppose that the most important sentiment that emerged from the results is a statement of support for the brand combined with a feeling of inspiration for the activism promoted by Airbnb. In our opinion, this is a meaningful result because demonstrates not only the sharing of the activism campaign by consumers but also the support to the brand from its target, who recognise the operation as authentic.

By contrast, we record a percentage of almost 14% negative responses, we analyse each comment to understand what generated negative consumer responses, as a result, we find that the main variable is political.

MAIN NEGATIVE TOPIC	COMMENTS	NO. REFERENCE DATASET	SOURCE
Politics	Unfollowed! Will not use Airbnb. Stop being political.	Reference 12	Instagram
	Since when has this become a political site??	Reference 17	

Table 2 Main negative topic of #weaccept users' comments

This percentage of consumers does not accept Airbnb's political stand, rather they argue that the firm sells services, offers accommodation and therefore it has to deal with that, consequently it cannot deal with politics or promote political messages.

The positive findings obtained from Case A, can be justified by the purpose of the firm, namely its core values (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018) as well as from the consistency between the firm's communication and its actions.

In 2016, Airbnb's founders wrote a statement called "Open Doors" which hosts had to subscribe. We suggest that the great success of Airbnb's activism regards the admitted of the fault by the firm, notably it admitted to having discriminated people. Airbnb is taking a stand against discrimination within its community, in fact, they took a stand after received reports of discriminatory behaviour towards travellers by Airbnb hosts. From this standpoint, the founders sent a letter to all hosts, in which they dissociated themselves from such attitudes and invited the community to work towards inclusiveness and equality.

This passage is crucial, moreover, it is also found in some positive comments, where Airbnb is praised to have recognised the issue and acted transparently.

"Just read your email from the founders regarding this new direction. I appreciated what was written, but mostly on how @airbnb acknowledged the wrong that has been prevalent in your own @airbnb community. Without that acknowledgment I feel that your message would've had little substance. Thanks for journeying on this new direction towards inclusion, but also in becoming more of a pivotal presence that promotes positive community change. Looking forward to seeing @airbnb progress on this as well as new ideas/implementations of this same principal." (Reference no. 51)

Case B: #TheBestManCanBe, Gillette (2019)



Fig. 2 #TheBestManCanBe, Gillette (2019)

The Gillette campaign's findings do not present widely positive consumer responses like Airbnb. For Gillette we collected 778 comments, of these 538 positives (136 and 406 very positive) and 240 negatives (94 moderately and 146 very negative), thus the interpretation of a qualitative word is crucial, seeking to identify the motivations that generated heterogeneous users' responses.

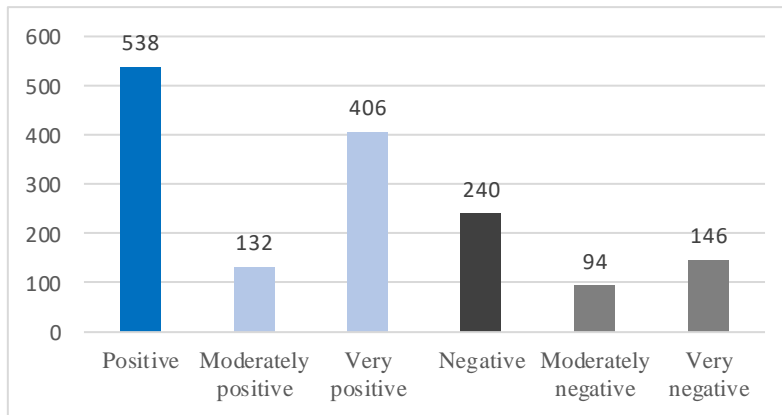


Fig. 2 Sentiment analysis of #TheBestManCanBe

In this case, we can underline two relevant aspects of consumer responses, firstly, consumers perceive a positive sentiment in Gillette's activism because they recognise it as an example to follow. Secondly, consumers talk about the topic of societal impact, namely a part of consumers recognise that this type of action contributes to the common good (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018), hence, users believe that this example could generate a better society.

MAIN POSITIVE TOPIC	COMMENTS	NO. REFERENCE DATASET	SOURCE
Be an example	You've successfully given me the courage to stand up, and be a better example!	Reference 5	Instagram
	Thank you for setting an example!	Reference 176	
	What a great example!!	Reference 218	
Societal impact	Kudos Gillette! Thank you for facing the future with a positive, conscious approach. Not just for your company, but for our society.	Reference 22	Instagram
	Thank you for bringing awareness to another topic that we as a society tend to ignore	Reference 240	

Table 3 Main positive topics of #TheBestManCanBe users' comments.

Nonetheless, we have recorded very negative comments and feelings. First of all, like Airbnb, many of the negative consumer responses stems from the fact that consumers do not accept and do not want that a firm talks about politics or engages in socio-political issues.

MAIN NEGATIVE TOPICS	COMMENTS	NO. REFERENCE DATASET	SOURCE
Politics	Political Correctness is a social disease... #havok	Reference 34	Instagram
	Must EVERYTHING be political? I will be looking for another brand of razor today.	Reference 99	
No credibility	Gillette-A Company that supports child labour is now going to do social criticism...	Reference 15	Instagram
	Gillette uses child labor. To make its inferior products.	Reference 143	
Values' misalignment	Taking my masculinity to another brand.	Reference 87	Instagram
	Masculinity is what we need. It's not a bad word	Reference 98	
Boycott	I'll never purchase your product again.	Reference 66	Instagram
	I bought my last Gillette razor last week. You lost this customer of 30 years.	Reference 79	
	Still never buying Gillette. Or any other Procter & Gamble products.	Reference 137	

Table 4 The main negative topics of #TheBestManCanBe users' comments

As argued by Stanley (2020), Gillette, for instance, has no credibility to talk about toxic masculinity, from managerial standpoint, credibility is a fundamental construct when a firm engages in activism, the lack of this can generate extremely negative consumers' responses, damages reputation and cause serious economic losses.

According to Vrendenburg et al. (2020) credibility means a coherence between the firm purpose, values, the content of the communication messages, and the prosocial corporate practices. Furthermore, as pointed out by Vrendenburg et al. (2020) there is necessary an alignment between the values declared by the firm and the consumers' values, this difference can lead consumers do not share the brand's beliefs, do not identify with them, as aftermath, they boycott definitely the company.

Case C: #ProudToBeVS, Victoria's Secret (2021)

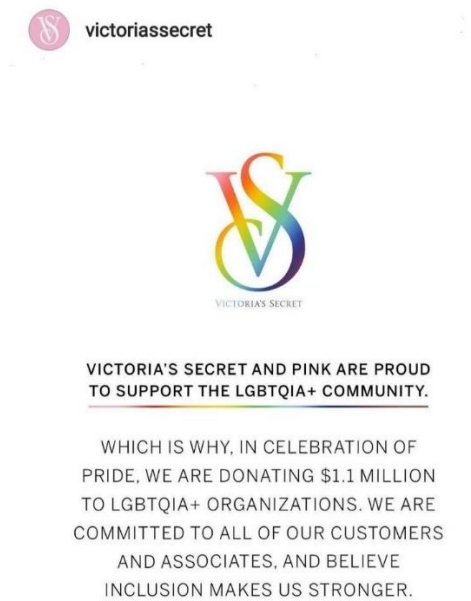


Fig. 3 Instagram post of official Victoria's Secret profile, #ProudToBeVS (2021)

The last two cases analysed concerning the well-known lingerie brand Victoria Secret's, both generated opposed findings compared to cases of Airbnb and Gillette.

With the #ProudtoBe campaign, Victoria Secret's decides to support the LGBTQIA + community, unfortunately, we recorded from the user comments foremost negative responses. We analyzed 1243 users'comments, of which 434 were positive and 765 were negative.

The 434 positive comments are divided into 207 moderately positive and 268 very positive, while we have 515 very negative and 250 moderately negative comments for a total of 765 negatives. This prompted us to adopt a more interpretative approach, seeking to understand the reasons and therefore to identify the main variables that determined these responses.

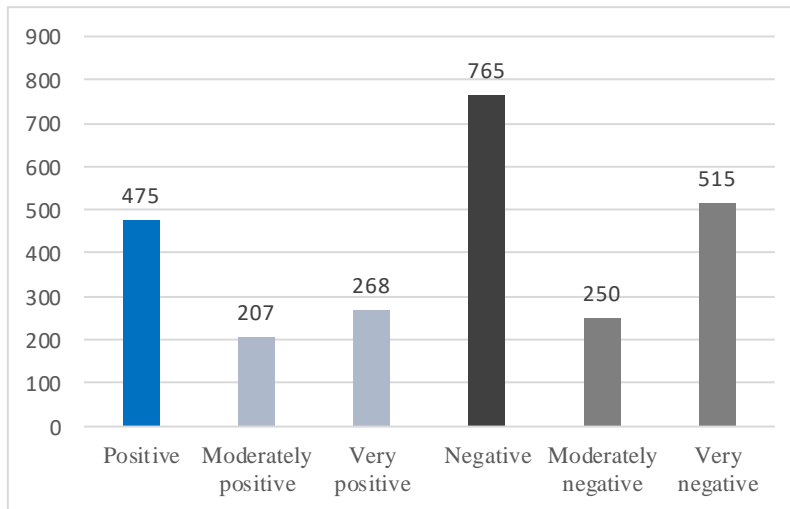


Fig. 3 Sentiment analysis of #ProudToBe

First of all, from positive comments, we can highlight the predominance of words such as "amazing" and "love", but secondly, we consider it important to observe that most of the positive comments concern the LGBTQIA + community, namely in general a sentiment of love, and not love or respect towards the Victoria Secret's brand.

MAIN POSITIVE TOPIC	COMMENTS	NO. REFERENCE DATASET	SOURCE
Love	Love is the unconditional feeling that we can share. Love is a special feeling for a special someone We are all people. we are all the same Proud to love and accept every human being no matter his sexual orientation. Lets see through all archetypes and fake ideas. We are more than apparences	Reference 99 Reference 117 Reference 139 Reference 198	Instagram

Table 5 Main positive topic of #ProudToBe users's comments

By contrast, in the other cases, we have positive comments declaring a love for the brand, for the position taken, for the values upheld, in this case, they are general comments on love.

As shown in table 6, the negative comments are much plentiful in elements.

MAIN NEGATIVE TOPICS	COMMENTS	NO. REFERENCE DATASET	SOURCE
Firm's inconsistency	Victoria's Secret doesn't care about the LGBTQIA community, and they hate women. Do not give them your money. Inclusion really? I never saw it in your shows, never. Your not inclusive. Rihanna's shows it is.	Reference 28 Reference 431	Instagram
Values' misalignment	Say no to LGBT! Well.... I'm straight so I don't acknowledge or celebrate it #straightpride	Reference 4 Reference 52	Instagram
Boycott	#boycottvs Stop buying VS Don't waste your money on VS	Reference 40 Reference 10 Reference 26	Instagram
Woke-washing	I celebrate by not supporting woke companies Go woke go broke!!@victoriasecret Go woke go broke, bye bye Victoriasecrets, time to loose another paying customer	Reference 135 Reference 206 Reference 106	Instagram

Table 5 Main negative topics of #ProudToBe users's comments

Firstly, findings suggest that as underpinned by Vrendenburg et al., (2020), when it presents an inconsistency between firm purpose, value, communication and prosocial business practices, automatically, activism is perceived as inauthentic by consumers. Secondly, we have identified the topic of "values' misalignment". According to the extant literature, consumers share and support brand activism when subsists an alignment between the values promoted by the firm and the consumers' values (Hydock et al., 2020), consequently, when there is a misalignment, as in the analysed case, the consumers' responses is devastating, as well as they do not share brand activism, they no longer even identify with the brand.

Also in this case, as for Gillette, consumers do not limit themselves to unfollow the brands' Instagram profiles, but they declare that they boycott these firms. From this standpoint, it would be interesting to investigate whether these statements turn into actions, furthermore, all these comments highlight how risky can be an activism campaign (Eilert & Nappier Cherup, 2020) if not correctly studied and evaluated. Lastly, we want to underline that for the first time we register the word "woke" among negative comments. Consumers refer to the "woke-washing" phenomenon (Vrendenburg et al., 2020), this means,

they perceive a misalignment between declared intentions and implemented actions. This is a confirmation that the #ProudToBe campaign promoted by Victoria's Secret is perceived as inauthentic by consumers.

Case D: #Collective, Victoria's Secret (2021)



Fig.4 Victoria's Secret, #Collective (2021)

We assume that Collective is an emblematic case, worthy of further investigation. Victoria Secret's changes radically its purpose, values and objectives; we emphasize this aspect because we suppose it could be the answer to most of the negative sentiment. As shown in fig. 4, for this case, we analysed 1326 comments, 408 positives (67 moderately and 342 very positive) and 918 negatives, of these 163 moderately and 754 are very negative.

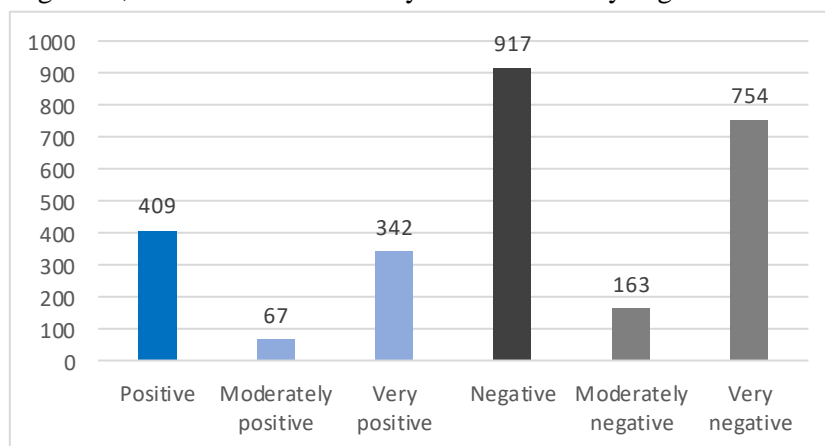


Fig.4 Sentiment analysis of #Collective

In this case, for the positive sentiment we found three important topics. Firstly, the agreement and sharing regarding the stand taken by Victoria Secret's stance; secondly a feeling of love towards this important paradigm's change of the brand.

MAIN POSITIVE TOPIC	COMMENTS	NO. REFERENCES DATASET	SOURCE
Love	Love!!!! Finally real women 😊 I love this new direction - yes to all the strong, diverse, intelligent women!!!	Reference 40 Reference 213	Instagram
Sharing	I applaud what you're doing! Very excited about this more inclusive direction! To be honest I'm really happy to read this Best choice @victoriasecret	Reference 11 Reference 54 Reference 73 Reference 299	Instagram
Expectation	Finally! It's about time celebrate all beauties About time for change E V O L U T I O N	Reference 5 Reference 27 Reference 45 Reference 167	Instagram

Table 5 Main positive topics of #Collective users's comments

The newness of this case's findings is the variable of "expectation", a part of Victoria Secret's target expected a change in this direction, and this is noticeable from the users' comments. By contrast, the negative sentiment is full of elements to consider, it should be underlined that the Collective case presents the highest number of negative responses among the analysed four cases.

MAIN NEGATIVE TOPICS	COMMENTS	NO. REFERENCE DATASET	SOURCE
Politics	Get your politics out of my panties. *barf* Too much politics for lingerie !cc Thanks but no thanks. I prefer my Lingere without a political or social agenda So buying underwear needs to send a political message now? I dont want activist politicizing everything I want to shop in peace.	Reference 284 Reference 384 Reference 459 Reference 296 Reference 735	Instagram
Non-sharing	Omg no more Angels?? This is unreal what is this bring back the angelssssssssss	Reference 58 Reference 162	Instagram

	No thank you! Ruined your brand!	Reference 281	
Firm's non-recognition	So no angels, no wings, no FB? You're becoming just another ordinary lengerie brand No more VS for me! I really miss the old Victoria Secret run way shows and I loved the Angels	Reference 754 Reference 48 Reference 450	Instagram
Boycott	Say goodbye to a devoted customer No angels? BYEEEE VICTORIAAAAA Cancelled my VS card today. Used it (frequently) over 20 years. Bye. Time to go cancel my credit card and never shop here again	Reference 14 Reference 453 Reference 632 Reference 721	Instagram
Activism	Corporate activism is a joke. Ordinary people buy from you, not these bullshit activists!!!	Reference 725 Reference 207	Instagram
Testimonial chosen	Why did you hire Anti Asian @mrapihoe to sell your products? Do you not want to sell any products in Asia? #victoriassecret Rapinoe is not it! Go woke, go broke! What a disappointment! A brand that for many years, I loved. You'll getting rid of Angels is just suicide. What a damn shame!!!! @victoriassecret So does Victoria's Secret support anti Asian racism? Stop the Asian hate @mrapihoe !!!!	Reference 122 Reference 225 Reference 584 Reference 601	Instagram

Table 5 Main negative topics of #Collective users's comments

First of all, in confirm to the previous cases, from findings emerges the importance of the political variable. Many consumers consider that a brand should not take a political stand, promote socio-political ideas, or engage in them. This seems to generate a negative sentiment towards the brand.

As resulting from #ProudToBe, also in this case among the variables determining the negative sentiment we find the "non-sharing" of the position taken by the brand and the consequent boycott. In Collective it is possible to observe enough comments referring to the return of the angels, an iconic and identifying aspect of Victoria Secret's brand, and on which the firm has decided to intervene. Collective allows us to identify new elements, which have not emerged in previous cases. Firstly, the non-recognition of the firm, namely consumers no longer recognize the brand. To the best of our knowledge, this is an innovative finding, not present in the existing literature. The firm has taken an opposite stance from its previous values and purpose, as consequence, consumers do not recognize the firm as the historical Victoria's Secret. Obviously, this, in addition to generating disapproval, has also made activism perceived as inauthentic.

Furthermore, from the analysis emerged that for the first time in the comments appears the topic of activism, although this concerns a negative sentiment, therefore not shared by consumers. Besides, we desire to point out a distinct result, which confirms how much activism is a risky activity. Victoria's Secret has replaced angels with activists, feminists, singers, including Megan Rapinoe, an American soccer player. In 2011 Rapinoe was widely accused of racism for the post in fig. 5.



Fig. 5 Rapinoe's tweet.

After ten years, Victoria Secret's in promoting ideals and values of inclusivity, equality, social progress, has hired someone considered a racist. This has generated extremely negative sentiment, shared by many consumers

5. Conclusion and Implications

The main purpose of this study is to investigate the consumer response to Brand Activism, therefore we considered as a method the sentiment analysis given the exploratory purpose of the research, this allowed us not only to collect the first results but also to have quick answers.

Based on these premises, the analysis seems to confirm the considerations suggested by Sarkar & Kotler (2018) and Vrendenburg et al. (2020), nevertheless, we have also identified new elements which can contribute to enhance the understanding of the phenomenon.

As we supposed, the multiple case study helped us to identify different consumers responses at brand activism, for each case we detect the main variables that determine positive sentiment and the main variables for negative sentiment. To the best of our knowledge, some have confirmed the extant literature on the topic and some others are totally new, for instance, "the non-recognition of the firm" in the Collective's case or the important role of the "political variable", presents in all cases, which determined most of the negative sentiment. We suggest that these variables related to the Brand Activism phenomenon need further investigation.

This paper represents a primary step of exploratory research, consequently, it presents some limitations. Firstly, as suggested by Sarkar & Kotler (2018), Gen Z and Millennials are more sensitive to social issues, nevertheless, this data is not verifiable with sentiment analysis, in fact, we have identified positive

comments, nonetheless, we cannot say what generation is it because we have no users' information. Secondly, we focused only on Instagram and selected only social and legal activism campaigns. Thirdly, to understand the phenomenon, we consider it relevant to investigate the political variable concerning brand activism and the construct of corporate credibility.

Lastly, about the consumers' declaration to boycott companies, we cannot say if this intention translates really into actions because it is not possible with sentiment analysis. In order to explain the phenomenon, in accordance with the existing literature, we conclude that future research will empirically detect the impact of brand activism on profit, brand equity and reputation, as pointed out by Vrendenburg et al. (2020) this means how it should be measured the success or failure of brand activism.

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