

Brand activism as a marketing strategy: proposing a typology

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Resumo

This paper aims at theoretically positioning brand activism (BA) as a construct pertaining to the strategic marketing field. It is reasoned that despite the growing managerial relevance of the phenomenon, BA still lacks a robust theoretical body to be explored from the firm perspective. Considering that BA is usually related to and confounded with other activisms alike, especially from the consumer point of view, we propose an integrative framework to explain how BA can be evidenced as a marketing strategy. The proposed framework contributes to the extant literature as it is an attempt to organize the knowledge about BA and to clarify the understanding of the concept. In this vein, it is expected that this proposal generates new research avenues and leads to further refinement and consensus on certain issues regarding BA. Overall, it is expected that this framework contributes to delineate the phenomenon in the marketing strategy field.

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Abstract

This paper aims at theoretically positioning brand activism (BA) as a construct pertaining to the strategic marketing field. It is reasoned that despite the growing managerial relevance of the phenomenon, BA still lacks a robust theoretical body to be explored from the firm perspective. Considering that BA is usually related to and confounded with other activisms alike, especially from the consumer point of view, we propose an integrative framework to explain how BA can be evidenced as a marketing strategy. The proposed framework contributes to the extant literature as it is an attempt to organize the knowledge about BA and to clarify the understanding of the concept. In this vein, it is expected that this proposal generates new research avenues and leads to further refinement and consensus on certain issues regarding BA. Overall, it is expected that this framework contributes to delineate the phenomenon in the marketing strategy field.

Keywords: Strategic Marketing. Marketing Strategy. Brand equity. Brand activism.

1. Introduction

Corporations have been positioning themselves in conflicting issues for decades. Environment (Boyhan, 1992), working relations (Reynolds, 1999), and racism (di Norcia, 1989) are some of the issues in which corporations have been taking stands unrelated to their core businesses. These activities were an exception within the marketplace, but more recently firms have been considered accountable to the world in which they operate (Moorman, 2020). The increased polarization and demands for firms towards a more responsible way of doing business (Eilert & Cherup, 2020; Varadarajan, 2016) have provided both opportunities and obligations for managers. As a result, brand activism (BA) has emerged as a promising marketing activity and a phenomenon worth studying (Marketing Science Institute, 2020).

At its core, BA consists of purposive efforts to promote, impede, or direct reform or stasis in society through the connection of brands to sensitive issues (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). That is, firms enact activist brands by publicly addressing and taking stands on divisive issues (S. Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Overall, the adoption of BA activities by firms can be interpreted as a result of calls for being more responsible and take active and public stances in favor/against what is deemed right/wrong (Moorman, 2020; Swaminathan et al., 2020). Given the potential BA has to nurture “win-win-win” situations for firms, consumers, and society, it would be expected that firms respond and keep their support for a set of stakeholders balancing their interests by the adoption of multiple objectives within their businesses (Hunt, 2019). Illustrative is Nike protesting racism and inequality through the Black Lives Matter campaign.

Literature underscores that BA activities are driven by consumers and organizations alike, but the majority of research takes the consumer perspective (Koch, 2020; Martins & Baptista, 2020). From this perspective, brand activists can induce a competing set of brand meanings and influence consumer behavior in the form of anti-brand activism and brand-focused activism. Otherwise, BA remains a non-consensual concept from the organization perspective and the researchers define it as a communication strategy (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019), a product strategy (Screti, 2017), a positioning strategy (Koch, 2020), or as encompassing cultural aspects while ignoring political ones (Shetty et al., 2019). Additionally, the manifold activisms within the marketplace (e.g., BA, CEO activism, corporate activism, commodity activism, etc.), and the contradictory nature of BA as a distinct phenomenon is natural for its freshness as a marketing phenomenon (Morgan et al., 2019).

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this article is theoretically positioning the phenomenon of BA as an organization-driven construct pertaining to the strategic marketing field. To do so, we propose a BA typology and posit it under the domain of strategic marketing based on the relationships between marketing strategy and organizational identity (El-Ansary, 2006; Varadarajan, 2015). Hence, the proposal of such a framework incorporating different forms of activism is based on deductive reasoning and evidence collected from both the literature and real cases. The purpose of such framework is to determine what distinguishes BA as a marketing strategy taken from the organizational perspective.

As it will be further discussed, the following section presents the theoretical background positioning BA within the strategic marketing field. Then, an integrative framework is proposed, and each element is discussed. Finally, the paper concludes with the implications of the findings for the strategic marketing domain, marketing strategy discipline.

2. Brand Activism and Marketing Strategy

One of the core aspects of organization existence is the competition among individuals, institutions, and governments (Barney & Hesterly, 2006). Survival and prosperity in such a competitive environment depend on manager awareness about organizations embeddedness in a social matrix composed of networks of individuals, groups, and entities. These actors create economic value “through the offer of assortments of goods, services, experiences and ideas, that emerge in response to or in an anticipation of customer demands.” (Layton, 2011, p. 259). Against this backdrop, Varadarajan (2015) explains that the focus of marketing strategy is defining how a business should compete in the chosen markets by efficiently and effectively deploying its resources. Therefore, marketing strategy, directs efforts on strategic decisions in the marketing domain aiming at the generation and sustainability of competitive and performance advantages (Varadarajan & Jayachandran, 1999).

For a firm to enhance competitive advantage and achieve superior financial performance through differentiation, marketing strategy literature underscores the need of developing and establishing strong and iconic brands, which may trigger favorable associations in the mind of both customers and consumers (Palmatier & Crecelius, 2019). Whether it is price, reputation, or prompted emotions, any attribute can either benefit or harm a brand depending on customer reactions and judgments. Marketing managers, thus, often link brands to other entities borrowing equity from persons, places, or things, to generate differentiation, and increase brand equity (Hunt, 2018; Keller, 2016).

Both marketers and academics have long welcomed the idea of firms enhancing equity and contributing to society through causes and social responsibility. Consequently, marketing activities related to social and environmental issues have emerged, became part of business practices, and have received considerable attention over the last decades (Chabowski et al., 2011; Mishra & Modi, 2015). As a result, customers are increasingly expecting more responsible brands and there have been calls for firms and brands moving toward a Triple Bottom Line (TBL) orientation and simultaneously incorporating social, environmental, and financial performance (Varadarajan, 2015).

As marketing system evolves, industries and firms should acknowledge changes in social norms and expectations (Layton, 2011). The fast-changing nature of the marketing environment ends up pushing firms toward calls to take activist stances (Swaminathan et al., 2020) because they are considered liable to contribute to the world in which they operate (Moorman, 2020). It is expected that firms actively face the biggest and most urgent societal

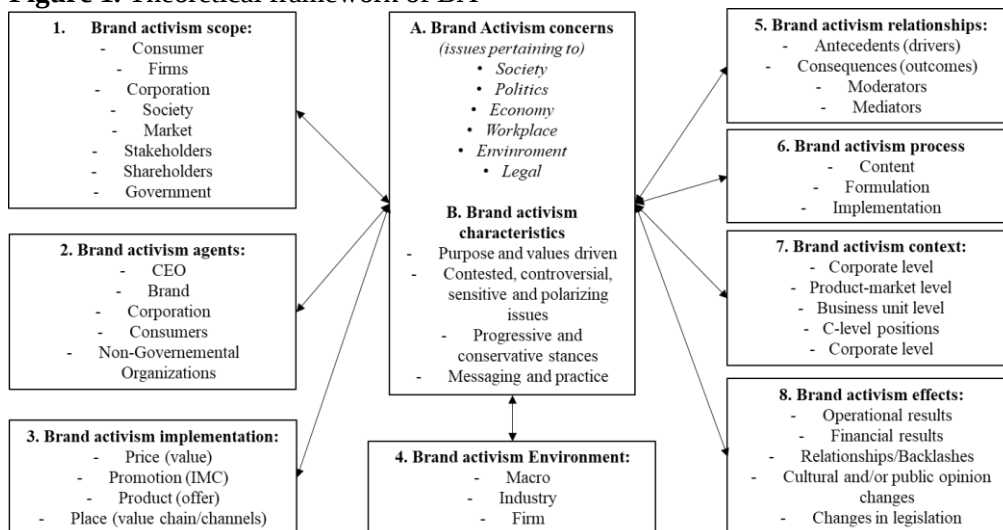
problems acting as real activists, that is, expressing, criticizing, shaping, connecting, and affecting social relations and society towards a better world (Hodgson & Brooks, 2007).

Consequently, brands are using their platforms to make overt statements on issues not related to their core businesses and appealing for issues that belonged exclusively to the social and political arena (Parcha & Kingsley Westerman, 2020). Though firms are mindful of diverse objectives, they still are economic institutions by nature (Carroll, 1979). Thus, the restrictive structures provided by the capitalist system (Tadajewski et al., 2018) and the power of institutions to normalize and/or shape desirable behaviors (Eilert & Cherup, 2020) still point towards issues related to sustainability looking forward to profits (Kemper et al., 2019). As a result, even though BA may produce results beyond the financial objective, this activity is still predicated on the assumption that the business institution is economic and remains subject to enhancing firm performance.

3. Brand activism: towards an integrative framework

The evolution of BA as a phenomenon is not new in the business arena but only recently the academy has started to question whether and how brands should take stands (Bhagwat et al., 2020). Given the freshness of the phenomenon in the academy and its contradictory nature in the marketplace, BA is depicted in Figure 1 within a framework based on deductive reasoning and evidence collected from the literature and illustrative examples. We then provide an explanation of this framework.

Figure 1. Theoretical framework of BA



Note: The bi-directional arrows linking Box A to Boxes 1 through 8 depict conceptual links and not directional relationships.

3.1. Concerns and Characteristics of Brand Activism

The literature on activism as an organization-driven construct considers it to be an evolution from Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) issues. From this point, it is argued that, although CSR involves high societal consensus, it fails in identifying and expanding opportunities for improving performance within the triple bottom line (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). Otherwise, BA programs have a wide variety of issues for action that are salient yet unresolved within society on which public opinion is split with the potential to trigger unfriendly debates. The discussion is in line with calls for a TBL perspective which is founded upon the

enhancement of environmental quality, social equity, and economic prosperity (Varadarajan, 2016) and has become an attractive topic and method for businesses and managers within the strategic marketing domain (Chabowski et al., 2011).

Therefore, the concerns of BA programs are broad and may vary over time and from organization to organization. Thus, it is proposed that the BA construct is formed of six dimensions that managers may consider throughout the marketing strategy processes. These dimensions consist of broad categories built upon Carroll's (1979) CSR construct and encompass large problems facing society (Hydock et al., 2020; Mishra & Modi, 2015; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Therefore, the proposed dimensions are not limited to but cover most issues of BA (Fig. 1, Box A):

- Social activism deals with equality and diversity issues related to gender, race, and age relations. Societal and Community-based issues like education, immigration, culture, health, privacy, etc.
- Political activism concerns issues related to but not limited to partisanship, campaign finance, lobbying, and voting rights for example.
- Economic activism covers wage and tax policies that impact the redistribution of wealth and income inequality.
- Workplace activism consists of governance matters and deals with the support of or opposition to unions, supply chain management, occupational safety and health, and worker and board compensation.
- Environmental activism tackles or promotes conservation and deforestation, air and water pollution, land-use, logging, carbon footprint control, and sustainable alternative, environmental laws, and policies.
- Legal activism relates to laws and policies that directly impact companies like plagiarism, research ethics, intellectual property, patents, and opensource initiatives.

An activist brand can either work towards the promotion or impediments of improvements in society and the issues can be either progressive or conservative (Vredenburg et al., 2020). For example, while brands like Amazon, Ambev and Magazine Luiza support public health efforts to fight the Covid-19 pandemic (Dias, 2021), Madero, Giraffas and Havan publicly criticized the need to adopt social distancing protocols and other efforts alike (UOL, 2020). A brand can advocate in favor or against issues on a wide variety of topics that fit within one of the six dimensions, such as sexual harassment, racism, public health, LGBTQIA+ rights, reproductive rights, gun control, immigration, abortion, child labor, deforestation, etc. This, in turn, may affect the marketing strategy outcomes as a consequence of the firm positioning.

3.2. Brand Activism Scope and Agents

Different activist strategies in which the actorness (Agents) consists of corporations, CEOs, and/or brands (Fig. 1, Box 2) emerged from the literature review. Because any actions from firms or their stakeholders can prompt reactions and impact the brand, it is claimed that BA is the most comprehensive concept that encompasses all the corporate- and CEO-driven activisms (see Table 1). On the other hand, BA Scope refers to the impact aimed at a determined audience and consists of the target for such practice (Fig. 1, Box 1). An example of an action target at employees and consumers rather than shareholders was Walmart's decision to boost wages. When it was made public, the market reacted negatively as the company shares fell 5.6% (Boyle, 2021). Table 1 summarizes the different activisms along with its definition, agents, and scope, as searched from the literature.

Table 1.*Activisms summary*

Activism	Definition	Agents	Scope	Example
<i>Corporate-sponsored social activism</i> (McDonnell, 2016)	openly aligning of corporations with social activists to protest the social practices of other companies, industries, or States	Corporations and Non-governmental organizations	Society and Consumers	partnering or actively participating in social activist campaigns.
<i>Commodity activism</i> (R. Mukherjee & Banet-Weiser, 2012).	misleading and fraudulent practices to fool the consumer with strategies aimed at securing ever-larger profits	Corporations	Consumers and the Firm	misleading engagement with unethical organizations, greenwashing or pinkwashing, woke washing, etc.
<i>Corporate Activism</i> (Corvellec & Stål, 2019; Walker & Rea, 2015).	Corporate efforts to “actively shape their institutional environment by influencing the nature of competition, existing legislation, or social standards” (Corvellec & Stål, 2019, p. 8).	Corporations	Government, Society, Markets, and Corporations	Lobbying to influence and shape government policies in ways favorable to the firm.
<i>Corporate sociopolitical activism</i> (Bhagwat et al., 2020)	“public demonstration (...) of support for or opposition to one side of a partisan sociopolitical issue (Bhagwat et al., 2020, p. 2)	Corporations	Consumers, markets, society, and Corporations	Press releases, and social media posts, for example, involving low levels of monetary investment.
<i>CEO activism</i> (Chatterji & Toffel, 2019)	the practice of CEOs speaking out on issues unrelated to their company’s core business	CEO	Stakeholders, Consumers, Markets, Society, and Corporations	CEOs public statements, press releases, social media posts.
<i>Brand activism</i> (Koch, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018; Vredenburg et al., 2020)	“business efforts to promote, impede, or direct (...) reform or stasis with the desire to promote or impede improvements in society” (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018, p. 463).	Corporations, CEOs, and/or brands	Consumers, Firm, Corporation, Society, Market, Stakeholders, Shareholders, Government	Any marketing mix decisions (product, pricing, distribution, and/or promotion).

Source: Elaborated by the authors (2021).

3.3. Brand Activism Implementation

In terms of implementation and given the array of existing activisms in the literature (Fig. 1, Box 2), it is important to draw a line between BA and brand advocacy. BA encompasses both tangible and intangible commitments as its main concerns and it is expected that a BA not only communicates but also involves practices towards a specific goal/result (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018). While any marketing mix decisions can uphold BA (Fig. 1, Box 3), brand advocacy consists only of taking public stances under the BA domain (Hydcock et al., 2020).

3.4. Brand Activism Context

Because brands are considered a resource capable of adding value to the marketing offering (Hunt, 2019), a BA strategy can interact at different levels to shape the competitive advantage of corporations (Fig. 1, Box 7). BA is posited as a marketing strategy construct and it can exist at multiple levels in an organization as a result of the boundary-spanning nature of marketing that reflects the interactions with stakeholders and the environment (Varadarajan & Jayachandran, 1999). Therefore, whenever a CEO or a manager takes a stand on his/her social media or a strategy for corporate brands – e.g., Unilever, Nestlé, or Procter & Gamble – or for product brands – e.g., Dove, L'Oréal, or Gillette – borrows equity from any of the BA issues, it has potential to enhance or reduce the value of an offering and its equity.

3.5. *Brand Activism Environment*

Considering BA as a marketing strategy activity, it should be underscored that a firm and its decisions, actions, and outcomes are shaped and influenced by three different environments in which it is embedded: the macro environment, the industry environment, and the firm environment (Fig. 1, Box 4). The macro environment consists of institutions and macro-societal factors that set guidelines to shape the behavior of the firms. They can be observed in multiple institutional logics (e.g., State, markets, family, and religion) and pillars (i.e. regulative, cognitive, and normative pillar) (Vargo & Lusch, 2016). The industry environment comprises all the actors within the industry in which the firm operates and through which it can pursue competitive advantage. These actors can be suppliers, customers, competitors, partners, etc. The firm environment consists of the internal elements that affect the firm strategic decisions, how it behave and respond to overcome constraints and exploit opportunities. Therefore, the firm environment comprises culture, skills, resources, capabilities, collective beliefs, etc. (Varadarajan & Jayachandran, 1999). Based on this understanding, it is posited that BA strategies are influenced and influence all environments in which the firm is embedded in. Such is the case when consumers (Bhagwat et al., 2020), employees (Weinzimmer et al., 2016), or business partners (Manfredi-Sánchez, 2019) may exert pressure on firms to weigh in on and act towards the solution of sensitive issues.

3.6. *Brand Activism Process*

Because BA can be considered a construct within the marketing strategy field, its process is similar to three aspects to the strategy of a firm, that is, the strategy content, the strategy formulation process, and the strategy implementation (Varadarajan, 2010). BA content is understood as encompassing its purpose (what it is and towards what end) consisting of the set of choice of issue, relationships, offerings, timing, and pattern of resources that are deployed for competitive advantage. BA formulation is an interactive and iterative process that refers to the decision process for determining the BA content (how is it arrived at). It consists, for instance, of market analysis, decision-making styles, consumer behavior understanding, segmentation of the market, selection of target segments, and the design, differentiation and positioning of the offer in the customer minds (El-Ansary, 2006; Varadarajan & Jayachandran, 1999). Finally, BA implementation can be understood as the actions taken by the firm to realize the strategy. Assuming BA as a marketing strategy and taking the marketing strategy implementation as a process, BA implementation can be considered in the scope of marketing mix management. Overall, marketing strategy implementation processes are understood as the marketing mix management and which the marketing management comprises “the processes of

creating the value (product/price), communicating the value (promotion), and delivering the value (channels)” (El-Ansary, 2006, p. 270).

3.7. *Brand Activism Effects*

In terms of performance outcomes and in accordance with the literature on marketing strategy and branding, BA programs can be assessed using different measures (Fig. 1, Box 8). Throughout the brand value chain model (Keller, 2016), BA can influence operational performance. Therefore, metrics related to customer mindset, product-market performance, customer behavior, and customer-level performance can be considered as measures. Further, BA can also impact on organizational performance. Thus, BA can be measured in terms of accounting (e.g. sales revenue, profit, revenue growth) or a financial market performance (e.g. investor returns, equity risk) (Katsikeas et al., 2016). Despite such metrics, is still not clear whether BA leads to positive or negative outcomes. Prior research has demonstrated potentially positive outcomes of BA on firm performance through customer intentions on buying (Shetty et al., 2019) or to firms’ value (Vrangen & Rusten, 2019). Otherwise, studies show that the upside potential for BA is limited and the downside risk on consumer attitude towards the brand is expressive (S. Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020). Moreover, BA is also expected to produce effects apart from performance outcomes. Measures reflecting changes on legislation and policymaking, the impacts on social inequality and injustice, the improvement of social welfare and the environment, cultural and/or public opinion changes are only a few examples that fall within this possibility (Koch, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Against this context, it is assumed that the effects of BA on operational performance may be stronger than on shareholder performance.

4. **Final Remarks**

This study aimed at theoretically positioning the phenomenon of brand activism as a construct pertaining to the strategic marketing field. Because different actors have been pushing firms to take public stances on divisive issues (S. Mukherjee & Althuizen, 2020; Sarkar & Kotler, 2018), it is expected that firms balance their interests with all stakeholders adopting multiple objectives within their businesses. However, the scandalous opportunistic activisms like woke-washing (Vredenburg et al., 2020) and the restrictive structures provided by the capitalist system and institutions (Eilert & Cherup, 2020; Tadajewski et al., 2018) put the authenticity of BA activities under scrutiny and profits before sustainability (Kemper et al., 2019).

The discussion of the conceptual domain used in BA literature contributes to the extant literature on marketing strategy as follows. First, by considering BA as a marketing strategy construct, it sheds light on the use of different construct labels to refer to the same phenomenon. Further, it is argued that BA is the most comprehensive concept because any of the BA contexts may cause impacts on brand image and equity. Second, regarding the use of the same construct to refer to different phenomena, it is recommended that BA must be treated as an organization-driven activism. Consumer-driven activisms such as anti-brand activism and brand-focused activism would require approaches within the consumer behavior domain. Third, it is suggested that more discussion and research concerning BA labels must be done in order to provide a more precise definition. From this point, researchers would be capable of testing whether BA could lead to positive or negative outcomes and the effects of such activity and its relationships considering its drivers, moderators, and mediators (Varadarajan, 2010).

As managerial implications, it is suggested that before taking BA as a strategy, managers should carefully plan and implement any program. In other words, managers must be aware that although consumers are increasingly expecting brands to take active stances on divisive and controversial issues, they are also more critical and prone to engage in boycotts or buycotts (Fernandes, 2020). It is suggested that to gain competitive advantage, brands must be consistent and authentic, taking into consideration the fit between issues advocated by the brand and its values and purpose, for example.

Finally, future studies are encouraged to provide empirical evidence for the proposed typology. The relationships between BA and operational and financial performance can be assessed through the answer of some questions as follows. How do shareholders interpret BA activities? How much does it impact consumers intention and attitudes toward a brand? Further, it would also be interesting to evaluate social and environmental impacts of BA programs. If BA is claimed to provide external and internal impact (Sarkar & Kotler, 2018), what are the results of activist programs in each of the delimited dimensions? For example, how and how much do social or environmental activism enhance welfare or reduce pollution? How and how much workplace relations are changed or improved by workplace activism? Finally, tests of different moderators and mediators (e.g., brand-cause fit, consumer-cause fit, authenticity, or perceived hypocrisy, etc.) should provide valuable insights both for researchers and managers.

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