Factors Shaping Consumer Views of Global Brand Activists

Keywords: brand activism; global brands; political ideology; consumer ethnocentrism; perceived motivation

Purpose

In today's consumer landscape, firms are expected to be vocal in relation to crucial-socio-political matters. Accordingly, global brands increasingly participate in often divisive, socio-political issues such as gender equality, diversity and geopolitical conflicts; they thus become global brand activists (Key *et al.*, 2021). Notable examples of global brand activism include, but are not limited to, the participation of brands such as Uber and Peloton in the Black Lives Matter movement, as well as their stance-taking opposing the war in Ukraine, as for example in the case of MacDonalds divesting from Russia. Brand activism is an organisational practice that entails employing brands to support or oppose specific societal issues, with stances that can be either progressive or conservative and tactics that range from more symbolic statements to more intensive practices like internal reforms, boycotts, and communication campaigns (e.g., Villagra *et al.*, 2021). The practice of brand activism has attracted research interest, with studies investigating its effects on outcomes such as firm value and performance, as well as consumer and branding consequences, whereas -given the polarizing nature of the activity- its effects are also diverse (Ketron et al., 2022).

Yet, despite the need to study the outcomes of global brands' involvement in prosocial activities (Gürhan-Canli, *et al.,* 2018), there is a knowledge void regarding brand activism when employed by global brands and how consumers' views towards them are shaped. This is a matter of critical importance due to the idiosyncratic nature of global brands that drives both positive and negative connotations, as well as the fact that consumers hold them accountable to social matters and social responsibility more that they do local brands (Özsomer and Altaras, 2008). Accordingly, opposing connotations and differing consumer expectations relating to global brands, might in turn influence consumers' views of global brand activism; an influence that remains unexplored.

Studying consumer views of brand activism as a global brand strategy sets the imperative of concurrently accounting for key antecedents of socio-political activism effects and important drivers of global branding outcomes. Early studies on brand activism highlight political

ideology (i.e., the set of beliefs and values related to how the world should be and ranging from conservative to liberal) as a customer factor influencing its effects on consumer-brand relationships, consumer choice, as well as evaluations of brand activists (e.g., Ketron et al, 2022). In turn, perceived motivations underpinning activism practices (i.e., the causes attributed to them that can vary from being more profit-oriented to more altruistic) are argued to be related to how consumers react to them (Schmidt et al., 2022). At the same time, there is a need to explore the effects of political ideology within a global branding context and international marketing studies highlight the roles of consumer ethnocentrism (i.e., their tendency to view local products and brands as superior) and global brand attitudes (i.e., their views towards global brands) as important drivers of global branding consequences (Gürhan-Canli, *et al.,* 2018). This study co-explores the so far uncharted influence of these aspects. Importantly, it goes beyond a mere exploration of individual or brand aspects as drivers of consumer attitudes towards brand activists, and further proceeds in mapping the complex routes and mechanisms through which the latter are shaped, including both direct as well as mediating effects.

Building on Katz's (1960) functional theory of attitude formation, which posits that attitudes serve the function of expressing individual's values, we develop our hypotheses building on the premise that consumers will assess global brand activists in ways that serve their own values. These values may either align with or conflict with the values supported by the activists or are symbolized by global brands.

Methodology/Approach

To test our hypothesized relationships, we collected our data from a UK representative sample of 435 consumers, using Qualtrics. Our questionnaire included measures established in the literature yet adapted to fit the study's context (brand activism). We assessed our measures through both exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis (EFA and CFA) to establish the factor structure of the data, assess their reliability and validity and evaluate the suitability of our constructs for model testing. All our measures met the corresponding criteria (i.e., factor loadings, average variance extracted and its comparison with the constructs' correlations, composite reliability) confirming convergent validity, discriminant validity, and reliability (Bagozzi and Yi, 1988). We tested our model using structural equation modelling and the maximum likelihood approach, running a sequence of models,

that concluded with the inclusion of all hypothesized direct and indirect paths. We use this final model for the evaluation of our hypothesized links.

Findings

Our model displays good model fit heuristics and explained 58.2% of the variance of attitudes towards global brand activists, 17.1% of the variance of global brand attitudes and 13.8% of the variance of perceived motivation of global brand activists. Our findings reveal a positive link between political ideology (measured on a continuum that ranges from more conservative to more liberal ideology) and attitudes towards global brand activists. Political ideology is also positively related to global brand attitudes, yet the latter are not found to directly drive attitudes towards global brand activists. Similarly, whereas consumer ethnocentrism does not directly influence the latter, it does affect global brand attitudes negatively. In turn global brand attitudes are positively connected to consumers' perceptions of the motivations of global brand activists. Perceived motivations, in turn, exert a positive influence on attitudes towards global brand activists, further mediating the effect of political ideology on them, as well as activating an indirect -yet negative- effect of consumer ethnocentrism that passes though their influence on global brand attitudes and subsequently perceived motivations to influence attitudes towards global brand activists.

Theoretical Implications

Our theoretical contributions are manifold. First, we contribute to the international marketing and global branding literature by investigating the outcomes of global brand activism as a prosocial activity, addressing the corresponding literature calls, and adding on international marketing studies that look on CSR outcomes (e.g., Randrianasolo and Semenov, 2022). We, thus, extend the knowledge that links global brand activism with online engagement behaviours (Özturan and Grinstein, 2022) by being the first study to date to explore how consumers' views of global brand activism are shaped. Importantly, considering the distinct nature of global brands and the opposing reactions that they trigger (Gürhan-Canli et al., 2018), our investigation includes and reveals the roles of important international marketing factors, namely consumer ethnocentrism and global brand attitudes, alongside political ideology and perceived motivations of the activist brands. We identify the complex indirect routes through which these key international marketing constructs exert their influence. Additionally, we enhance the knowledge on organisational activism that identifies political

ideology as an important driver of activism outcomes (e.g., Bhagwat et al., 2020), confirming its effect on attitudes towards global brand activists too, revealing its indirect effects on them and tracing the important direct and mediating role of perceived motivation of global brand activism. The latter emerges as the key to how consumers view global brand activists, that reinforces the (positive) effect of (higher levels of a liberal) political orientation but also enables a serial negative of consumer ethnocentrism and global brand attitudes.

Practical Implications (if applicable)

We contribute to managerial practice through revealing global brand activism as a means for effectively targeting consumers that lean towards liberal ideologies. For this audience, emphasizing a brand's global nature is beneficial. Importantly, our findings show that brands must highlight their motives as being altruistic, especially when being their activities are being evaluated by more conservative or ethnocentric consumers with negative views of global brands that are likely to attribute more profit-oriented motives to them. Finally, when targeting ethnocentric consumers, global brands are advised to de-emphasize the global nature of their brands.

Originality/Value

As brand activism gains popularity and more and more global brands adopt it, there is a growing need to further understand consumer responses to this practice accounting for the idiosyncratic nature of global brands and the fact that the brands and their actions are differentially perceived by consumers. This study addresses this research mandate by being one of the first studies with an international marketing approach and by exploring the effects of aspects particularly relevant both to activism as well as to globally present companies. This study enhances our understanding of how global brand activists are viewed by revealing the complex direct and direct paths through which they are shaped.

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