

Brand Activism, Consumer Identification, and Loyalty in the Cosmetics Market; A Theoretical Perspective

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Abstract

As brands have increasingly adopted the concept of brand activism, a strategy that involves brands publicly standing up for or against a cause that is controversial, the cosmetics and personal care sector is a space where brands are increasingly involved in social, political, and environmental issues, including campaigns for body positivity, gender inclusion, environmental sustainability, and cruelty-free testing. The present article provides a theoretical analysis of the role of brand activism on consumer-brand identification and brand loyalty on cosmetics market. The article adopts a social identity theory perspective, consumer-brand identification framework and authenticity literature and integrates these theories to create a conceptual model which posits that consumer-brand value congruence and consumer-brand identification mediate the relationship between brand activism and brand loyalty, while perceived authenticity, cause controversy, and political ideology moderate the relationship. This paper reviews recent empirical evidence indicating that consumers' responses to authentic, value-congruent activism are more positive, whereas those to perceived opportunism (or 'woke-washing') are more negative. The Case examples of cosmetics companies like The Body Shop, Dove and L'Oréal Paris reveal the opportunities for loyalizing customers and also the risks to brands for getting caught up in the positioning act of 'activists'. The article ends by arguing that brand activism is a tool for strategy that has a double edge but works more on the basis of the authenticity and consistency of its implementation than on the cause itself.

Keywords: Brand activism, Consumer-brand identification, Brand loyalty, Cosmetics market, Brand authenticity, Woke-washing

1. Introduction

Brands are taking greater stances on social, political and environmental matters that are controversial, a practice often referred to as 'brand activism'. Contrary to conventional corporate social responsibility, brand activism usually takes up controversial or polarizing issues and thrusts the brand into the society's spotlight as a stakeholder in a debate rather than a neutral business actor (Podnar & Golob, 2024). One of the most prominent spaces for this phenomenon has been the cosmetics and personal care sector, and traditionally, brands that have been infamous for their activism have included campaigns such as banning

animal testing, promoting body positivity, gender inclusiveness and environmental sustainability, all of which have been linked to the cosmetics industry (AUT News, 2024).

The stakes of this strategic realignment are huge and dual. Empirical studies have shown that brand activism can positively influence consumer identification, brand loyalty, willingness to pay a premium and positive word of mouth, while at the same time a conflict between the consumer value and the brand value on a specific cause can lead to a decrease in brand attitude and brand intention towards purchasing the product (Podnar & Golob, 2024). In cosmetics, an area in which consumers are already deeply invested in brand purchase decisions related to personal identity, personal expression, and values signalling, this tension is especially relevant, with consumers being particularly conscious of whether the brand's activism is authentic or opportunistic (Cortella, 2024).

This article provides a theoretical overview of the effect of brand activism on consumer–brand identification and brand loyalty in the case of cosmetics. It combines SIT and the consumer-brand identification literature with the most recent empirical research on activism authenticity to develop a conceptual integration, and explores illustrative cases from the cosmetics industry, as well as the strategic and reputational implications for brands in this “values-sensitive category”.

2. Conceptual Understanding of Brand Activism

Brand activism is a brand's overt, public response to a contested social, political, or environmental issue that is designed to inspire social or system-level change in order to shape a more positive corporate image than to simply clarify or clarify away a corporate footprint (Lou et al., 2024). This is different from the conventional corporate social responsibility (CSR) that focuses on issues that are less polarizing and is conducted in small, incremental steps in the day-to-day operations. Unlike brand activism, which is also more visible, more polarising and linked to the brand's communication and public image, it more clearly reflects the brand's role and presence in society (Podnar & Golob, 2024).

In cosmetics and personal care products specifically, there has been a consistent list of causes that have been a focus of brand activism: oppositions to animal testing; body positivity and challenging narrow beauty standards; gender and racial inclusivity in product ranges and advertising; and environmental sustainability in ingredients/products and packaging (Iris Unisa, 2023). However, these causes are not merely incidental to the category, but are deeply connected to its main value proposition: cosmetics products are intrinsically linked to issues of identity, self-image and bodily autonomy, and the category is therefore a rich, but also a risky field for brand activism.

3. Theoretical Frameworks

3.1 Social Identity Theory and Consumer-Brand Identification

Social identity theory suggests that one's sense of self comes from one's social group and social category, and that such social identity influences one's attitudes and actions towards entities with whom they share a social identity. The theory is also applicable to the concept of branding, and the construct of consumer-

brand identification can be defined as the extent to which a consumer sees a brand as consistent with or confirming their own self-concept and values. The study revealed that brand activism and positioning brands in a sociopolitical context are effective in fostering consumers' identification with brands, which results in greater brand loyalty through this pathway (Kiran, Zaheer, Masood, & Rizwan, 2024).

3.2 Consumer-Brand Value Congruence

Value congruence theory suggests that the importance and direction of a customer's response to brand communications is influenced by the level of congruence between the personal values and the brand's stated values. A brand's activist positioning which is consistent with a consumer's value system has high value congruence and tends to enhance identification and positive brand attitudes; a brand's positioning which is inconsistent with a consumer's value system, especially on issues with a high degree of controversy, negatively influences purchase intention and brand loyalty, in which consumer-brand identification plays a role as an intervening variable that is detrimental in this pathway (Journal of Product & Brand Management, 2024).

3.3 Authenticity and the Risk of Perceived Opportunism

A large number of recent studies have identified perceived authenticity as the key moderating factor that determines the success or failure of brand activism. Experimental study with Structural Equation Modeling reveals that authentic activism has a positive impact on consumer responses, such as purchase intent, word of mouth and willingness to pay a premium, whereas inauthentic activism (opportunistic) has significantly stronger negative effects; consumer-brand identification partially mediates between the two variables (Springer Journal of Brand Management, 2025). This imbalance may indicate that the risk to brands of unconvincing activism is significantly greater than the benefit of convincing activism, which is especially pertinent for cosmetics brands considering how consumers have been documented to be skeptical and sceptical of sustainability and ethical claims in the category (Personal Care Insights, 2024).

3.4 Moderating Role of Cause Controversy and Political Ideology

The success of brand activism is also influenced by the level of controversy of the cause that the brand embodies and by consumers' political ideology. In consumer-brand value deviation, when this is related to highly controversial causes, or when the value deviation is part of a hedonic (vs utilitarian) consumption context, which characterises many of cosmetic products' consumption contexts, the negative effect of value misalignments on consumer-brand identification is found to be significantly enhanced (Journal of Product & Brand Management, 2024). Complementary research on global brand activism campaigns reveals that a brand's authenticity enhances the congruence between brand value and consumer-brand identification, while political ideology, in turn, influences consumer-brand identification in relation to a brand's political activism (Resciniti, 2024).

3.5 Integrated Conceptual Framework

Combining these views, this article suggests an integrated conceptual framework, in which brand activism (stimulus) first affects consumer-brand value congruence as an intervening construct, and then consumer-brand identification as another intervening construct, and finally, brand loyalty (outcome). This pathway

is moderated by each consumer's perceived authenticity, the level of controversy of the cause, and the consumer's own political ideology and value orientation; when the perceived authenticity of the activism is high, and the values that it embodies are aligned with the consumer's values, the moderation is positive, leading to greater identification and identification loyalty; but when the perceived authenticity of the activism is low, or when the values that it embodies are inconsistent with the values that the consumer embodies, the pathway is disproportionately adverse, resulting in greater consumer reaction against the activism.

4. Brand Activism in the Cosmetics Market

The beauty and personal care sector is full of lessons for the brand activism phenomenon, especially because of its rich history of activist positioning. Pioneering activist cosmetics brand, The Body Shop (founded by Anita Roddick) has been quoted as being instrumental in campaigning to change legislation that bans animal testing in cosmetics in over 20 countries via customer activism, and made cruelty-free a key differentiator and benchmarking point that eventually became the industry standard in the broader cosmetics market (AUT News, 2024). This path is a demonstration of the ability of early, genuine activism to build loyalty, and a structural issue for brands as activist roles become commonplace – brands must continuously work to maintain their activist credibility over time to stay differentiated.

Comparative analysis of Dove's 'Campaign for Real Beauty' and L'Oréal Paris's activist campaigns highlights how these brands leverage activism to champion the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals on gender equality and reduced inequality in the beauty industry and personal care sector (Iris Unisa, 2023). The campaigns highlight how activism in cosmetics often focuses on combating narrow and exclusionary beauty standards, a cause that is essentially related to the category value proposition and therefore has good potential to create value congruence and consumer-brand identification for aligned consumers.

The category also privileges the lessons that can be drawn from the reputational dangers of activism when it is compromised by inauthenticity. The fact that the company changed hands and faced considerable challenges in the market has been attributed to a loss of the activist spirit that was integral to the founding of The Body Shop; a theory that has been borne out by the exaggerated responses that consumers have had when companies have failed to meet their stated values (AUT News, 2024). Likewise, increasing consumer doubts about 'clean beauty' and sustainability messages, as a majority of consumers actively check brands' environmental and social credentials, and a significant proportion of consumers are sceptical even when sustainability is highlighted, demonstrates the increased scrutiny of authenticity that cosmetic brands are having to deal with when adopting a 'values-based' or 'activist' positioning (Personal Care Insights, 2024).

5. From Identification to Loyalty: The Behavioural Pathway

Consumer-brand identification to brand loyalty has been directly studied in consumer research related to cosmetics and other research. A study using structural equation modeling (SEM) reveals that there is a clear sequence of mediation from activist practice to consumer-brand agreement to consumer-brand

identification to consumer loyalty (Repositorio-Aberto, 2024). The same study reveals that brand activism authenticity has a substantial direct impact on brand loyalty, thus suggesting that authenticity is not only a moderator but a significant factor on its own that affects brand loyalty.

Specific findings from complementary research reveal that a sense of brand trust and consumers' satisfaction are mediators between brand activism and brand loyalty, while brand personality is found to be a moderator between brand activism and brand loyalty and satisfaction outcomes (Kiran et al., 2024). Overall, this evidence indicates that the relationship of brand activism to attitudinal and behavioural loyalties that brands desire is multi-step in nature, proceeding along the pathway toward perceived value alignment, identification, trust, and finally, attitudinal and behavioural consequences.

6. The Risk of Activism Fatigue and Strategic Caution

There is now growing evidence that the logic of brand activism is becoming more complicated, with survey results revealing a general lack of consumer enthusiasm for brands to be more involved with sociopolitical causes overall – this phenomenon has been dubbed ‘activism fatigue’ (AUT News, 2024). Research shows that for brand activism to be credible, it needs to be grounded in what the brand stands for and must be consistent with a commitment to ‘brand bravery’ – committed to upholding core values, risk-taking and a commitment to being resilient in the face of consumer backlash, not merely a campaign-by-campaign marketing strategy (AUT News, 2024). That is, for cosmetics firms, activism that is inconsistent or dropped due to commercial or ownership pressures is likely to cause more damage to their reputation than not being involved in activism at all, as found in the wider literature (Springer Journal of Brand Management, 2025).

This is especially true given the hypervigilant attention paid to sustainability and ethical claims in the cosmetics category. Survey data reveals that a majority of beauty consumers consider ingredient and environmental claims very or extremely significant to their buying decisions, yet a significant proportion of consumers are still sceptical of such claims even when brands make them a key element of their communications – and several retailers and brands have been hit by legal action over allegedly misleading sustainability claims (Personal Care Insights, 2024). The challenge here is how to move brands along this thin road of credible values-based activism: brands must clearly communicate their values-based positioning and substantiate it enough to be noticed, and be consistent enough over time, to pass the verification that is being heightened by values-sensitive categories. Brands that take activist or sustainability statements as a marketing ploy rather than a business responsibility are especially vulnerable to the risks of perceived opportunism.

7. Boundary Conditions: Segment and Category Differences

It's hard to imagine that the activism-identification-loyalty pathway will be consistent across cosmetics segments of consumers. However, consumers who already have a positive identification with a cause (environmental sustainability, LGBTQ+ inclusion, body positivity) are likely to display positive value congruence reactions towards aligned cause activism, whereas consumers with lower or opposing views on a given cause may show negative reactions as reported in the value-deviation literature (Journal of

Product & Brand Management, 2024). The implication from this is that activism that can strongly reinforce affiliation and loyalty amongst those who share the values often can make others less likely to do so, thereby creating an inherent segmentation trade-off that becomes more pronounced the more controversial the cause. The brands therefore need to consider the depth of loyalty they build within their aligned segments, as well as the potential for a constricted addressable consumer base, which may be very different depending on whether the brands are mass-market cosmetics companies or more values-driven, niche or indie beauty brands where consumers may themselves be choosing to align with the brand's activist messaging.

8. Strategic and Managerial Implications

Here are some implications of the theoretical synthesis for cosmetic brands, who are thinking about or already pursue an activist positioning strategy. Brands should choose causes which truly align with their initial values and brand proposition – value congruence is a key factor in shaping positive consumer-brand identification and a lack of congruence raises consumer scepticism. Second, brands should understand that consistency over time is key: if they give up the cause or water it down for commercial reasons then they run the risk of suffering disproportionate damage to their reputation to the detriment of the cause, but with little corresponding gain. Third, brands must be especially careful to involve themselves in a highly controversial cause, as there are indications that the negative effects of a perceived lack of value alignment grow stronger as controversy surrounding the cause increases. Lastly, brands should expect that roles once exclusive to the activist should become commonplace over time and, perhaps more importantly, activist credibility can/should be earned anew on an annual basis instead of solely through legacy reputation.

9. Conclusion

In a market sector already saturated with product and consumer identity and values expression, brand activism has emerged as a key, but contested, competitive element. Building on this, the present article theorizes how brand activism can foster brand loyalty through consumer-brand value congruence and consumer-brand identification, and that perceived authenticity moderates the process, facilitating or hampering the development of brand loyalty. The Case evidence of The Body Shop, Dove and L'Oréal Paris underscores the ability of pioneering, value congruent activism to build loyalty and the reputational risk if activist positioning is seen as opportunistic or inconsistent. Consumer cynicism about sustainability and ethical marketing statements has been on the rise and activism fatigue has spread throughout the market, so it is crucial for cosmetics brands looking to become an activist brand that they understand that the strategic benefit of an activism campaign is not just about the cause, it's about how well and for how long they pursue it.

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