

The Influence of Brand Activism on Consumer Loyalty and Social Change

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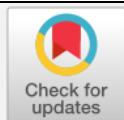
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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of brand activism on consumer loyalty and perceived social change, with a particular emphasis on the Indonesian consumer context. In an era increasingly shaped by value-oriented consumption, brand activism has evolved as a strategic corporate response that extends beyond conventional corporate social responsibility (CSR). Unlike traditional CSR, which predominantly emphasizes philanthropy and environmental sustainability, brand activism entails a company's public engagement with sociopolitical issues, thereby fostering stronger ideological alignment with consumers. Grounded in Social Identity Theory and Stakeholder Theory, this research examines the extent to which perceived authenticity and consistency of brand activism initiatives affect both consumer behavior and broader societal perceptions. Employing a quantitative research design, data were collected via an online survey involving 300 participants with prior exposure to brand activism campaigns. The proposed model was tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The results indicate that brand activism has a significant positive effect on consumer loyalty ($\beta = 0.58, p < .001$) and enhances perceptions of social change ($\beta = 0.42, p < .001$). Moreover, consumer loyalty was found to mediate the relationship between brand activism and perceived social change ($\beta = 0.35, p < .001$), suggesting that loyal consumers contribute to the amplification of activism-driven societal outcomes. These findings have practical implications for marketers and brand strategists, highlighting the importance of sustained, genuine engagement with social causes. The study advances marketing scholarship by elucidating the connection

between corporate performance and social transformation. Future research should consider longitudinal designs, objective social impact assessments, and cross-cultural comparative analyses to deepen insights into the evolving role of brand activism.

Keywords: Brand Activism; Brand Authenticity; Consumer Loyalty; Perceived Social Change; Values-Based Marketing

1. Introduction

In contemporary markets, brands are increasingly recognized not merely as providers of goods and services but as active agents in shaping societal norms, cultural values, and political discourse. This evolution has been driven by consumer demand for corporations to engage substantively with urgent social, environmental, and political concerns. The phenomenon known as brand activism has therefore emerged as a significant focus within marketing, consumer behavior, and social science research. Defined as a company's intentional and visible engagement with social causes and systemic change, brand activism involves using corporate influence to contribute to public discourse on controversial issues such as climate justice, racial equality, gender rights, and LGBTQ+ inclusion (Podnar & Golob, 2024; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Wannow & Haupt, 2022).

This trend reflects not only a shift in branding strategies but also a broader realignment in consumer expectations and socio-political dynamics. Amid heightened awareness of inequality, environmental crises, and political fragmentation, consumers increasingly seek out brands that demonstrate moral alignment and commitment to societal well-being (Irdasyah et al., 2022; Shukla et al., 2024; Wannow et al., 2024). According to Edelman, 64% of global consumers identify as belief-driven buyers, making purchasing decisions based on a brand's stance on societal issues (Edelman, 2018). This shift has prompted businesses to move beyond conventional corporate social responsibility (CSR) and adopt more assertive, advocacy-based approaches.

The growing prominence of brand activism has generated critical questions about its implications for consumer loyalty and its capacity to drive meaningful social change. Some evidence suggests that activism enhances trust and brand equity, while other studies highlight the risks of consumer backlash when campaigns are perceived as disingenuous or opportunistic. The extent to which brand activism translates into tangible social outcomes remains contested. While critics argue that many initiatives are performative or symbolic, proponents maintain that even symbolic actions can raise awareness and catalyze public engagement (Kiran et al., 2024; Lou et al., 2024; Moumade et al., 2024).

To contextualize brand activism, it is important to distinguish its evolution from CSR. Traditionally, CSR encompassed voluntary efforts by corporations to address social and environmental issues through philanthropy, ethical operations, and sustainability. Though meaningful, CSR was often considered supplementary to core business strategies. By contrast, brand activism represents a deliberate and central integration of sociopolitical advocacy into corporate identity and communication. It includes taking public positions on contested issues, participating in advocacy campaigns, and using media to promote social change. This progression reflects a shift in corporate culture towards deeper engagement with public expectations and responsibilities.

Several factors have contributed to this transformation. Social media platforms have redefined brand-consumer relationships, enabling consumers to hold companies accountable in real time. Silence on key issues is increasingly interpreted as complicity. Moreover, millennial and Generation Z consumers, characterized by high levels of political engagement and social awareness, expect brands to reflect their values. The increased polarization of public discourse has further compelled brands to adopt explicit stances on divisive topics, aligning their market identities with the ethical and cultural positions of their core audiences.

This study employs an interdisciplinary framework that draws from marketing theory, sociology, and political science to explore the dual impact of brand activism: its influence on consumer loyalty and its role in advancing social change. Central to this framework is Social Identity Theory, which posits that individuals form their identities and sense of belonging through affiliation with social groups. In branding, consumers tend to support brands that reflect and reinforce their values and beliefs, resulting in stronger emotional bonds and higher loyalty (Gan et al., 2024; Kuek et al., 2024; Song et al., 2024).

In addition, Signaling Theory offers insight into how brands communicate their values through activism. Public engagement with social causes functions as a signal of corporate identity, helping consumers assess the brand's authenticity and ethical alignment. The strength of these signals depends on their clarity, consistency, and perceived sincerity, which in turn influence consumer perceptions and behaviors (Confetto et al., 2023; Francioni et al., 2025; Kubetzek, 2022).

Stakeholder Theory broadens the analysis by emphasizing the moral responsibility of firms to address the interests of all stakeholders, including employees, customers, communities, and the environment. From this perspective, brand activism is not only a marketing tactic but also a reflection of ethical business conduct and long-term legitimacy (Moumade et al., 2024).

Adding to this perspective, Cultural Branding Theory conceptualizes brands as cultural agents that shape collective meaning. Activism, in this sense, is a form of strategic alignment with dominant social narratives, allowing brands to attain cultural significance by advocating for societal transformation (Işıksal et al., 2023).

Lastly, Social Movement Theory provides a lens for understanding how brands engage with collective action. Brands may act as amplifiers, collaborators, or allies within broader social movements, helping to legitimize and extend their impact (Miguel & Miranda, 2024; Moumade et al., 2024; Pöyry & Laaksonen, 2022).

Taken together, these frameworks offer a multidimensional understanding of brand activism as both a consumer engagement strategy and a potential driver of social progress. The integration of Social Identity Theory, Signaling Theory, Stakeholder Theory, Cultural Branding, and Social Movement Theory enables a comprehensive analysis of the motivations, mechanisms, and outcomes associated with activism-based branding (Kiran et al., 2024).

Building upon this theoretical foundation, the present study adopts a quantitative approach to investigate how brand activism affects consumer loyalty and perceptions of social change. Specifically, the research seeks to answer three central questions. First, to what extent does brand activism influence consumer loyalty, and what mechanisms shape this relationship? Second, what are the strategic benefits and reputational risks faced by companies that engage in brand activism? Third, how effective is brand activism in contributing to measurable social change, and what contextual factors either constrain or enhance its impact?

In exploring these questions, the study also traces the historical evolution of brand activism from CSR, illustrating how contemporary practices represent a shift toward more vocal and values-oriented engagement (Dapi & Phiri, 2015; Lee et al., 2018; Loureiro & Lopes, 2019). It

further considers the conditions necessary for activism to achieve substantive outcomes, highlighting the role of authenticity, transparency, and collaboration.

Despite increased academic interest, several gaps persist in the literature. Much of the existing research focuses narrowly on consumer reactions, neglecting broader societal impacts. There is also limited consensus on what constitutes effective activism, particularly in relation to value alignment and credibility. Moreover, few studies evaluate the long-term outcomes of brand-led advocacy in shaping public opinion or influencing policy.

This study seeks to address these limitations by offering a holistic examination of the relationship between brand activism, consumer loyalty, and social change. By combining robust empirical data with a nuanced theoretical framework, the research aims to contribute to both academic knowledge and practical guidance for organizations seeking to engage responsibly with activism while enhancing their societal relevance.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Influence of Brand Activism on Consumer Loyalty

Traditionally, consumer loyalty has been influenced by factors such as product quality, pricing, and customer service. However, the rise of brand activism has introduced values-based alignment as an equally critical determinant. In the current market landscape, consumers increasingly prefer brands that mirror their personal beliefs and social identities, often rewarding such alignment with heightened loyalty and advocacy.

Empirical research indicates that brand activism can enhance consumer loyalty through several key mechanisms. First, it fosters emotional resonance by aligning brand values with those of the consumer, thereby strengthening psychological connections (Bäckström et al., 2024; Cammarota et al., 2023). Second, activism improves brand reputation and trust, particularly when companies are perceived as genuinely committed to addressing social issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Third, activism can cultivate a shared sense of purpose between the consumer and the brand, encouraging more active engagement and advocacy behaviors (Pramesti & Rubiyanti, 2023; Shukla et al., 2024).

However, the adoption of brand activism is not without risk. Taking a public stance on divisive social or political matters may alienate certain consumer segments, potentially resulting in backlash, boycotts, or reputational harm (Dapi & Phiri, 2015; Supiyandi et al., 2022). Furthermore, when activism appears insincere or opportunistic, it may be perceived as superficial, undermining trust and damaging brand credibility (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Accordingly, the success of brand activism in fostering consumer loyalty is highly dependent on the perceived authenticity, consistency, and congruence between the brand's messaging and its core values.

2.2. The Role of Brand Activism in Driving Social Change

While the relationship between brand activism and consumer loyalty has been well explored, its broader role in catalyzing social change remains relatively underexamined in the literature. Given their extensive visibility, communication infrastructure, and financial capacity, brands possess the potential to function as influential agents in promoting large-scale societal transformation. Prominent examples such as Patagonia's environmental advocacy and Ben & Jerry's commitment to racial and social justice demonstrate how corporate entities can mobilize public support, amplify awareness, and influence policy agendas (Fernandes et al., 2024; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Wen et al., 2017).

Despite these promising cases, critics have questioned the depth and sincerity of many corporate activism efforts. A growing concern is the prevalence of so-called “woke washing,” a practice wherein companies adopt progressive language and visual campaigns without implementing substantive internal reforms or structural changes. Such performative engagement raises important questions about the authenticity and long-term efficacy of brand activism: are these campaigns driven by a genuine commitment to social justice, or are they strategic tools for reputational management and market differentiation (Podnar & Golob, 2024; Vredenburg et al., 2020; Wannow & Haupt, 2022)?

2.3. Brand Activism Versus CSR and Cause-Related Marketing

To understand the distinctive nature of brand activism, it is essential to differentiate it from other socially oriented business practices, particularly corporate social responsibility (CSR) and cause-related marketing. CSR is generally defined by a company’s efforts to engage in ethical conduct, sustainability, and philanthropic initiatives. Cause-related marketing, on the other hand, typically involves temporary partnerships with social causes, often used to boost brand appeal or sales outcomes. In contrast, brand activism is rooted in long-term advocacy and involves direct engagement with complex and often controversial sociopolitical issues, such as climate justice, racial equity, and gender rights (Camarota et al., 2023; Kiran et al., 2024; Vredenburg et al., 2020)c.

While CSR initiatives are frequently peripheral to a company’s strategic operations, brand activism is integrated into the core of brand identity and communication. It reflects a deliberate stance that positions the brand as an active participant in public debates, aiming not only to reflect societal values but also to shape them (Kubetzek, 2022; Lou et al., 2024; Suwarno et al., 2023). As consumer awareness increases and expectations for corporate accountability intensify, businesses are under greater scrutiny to demonstrate transparency, consistency, and integrity in their social engagements (Fernandes et al., 2024; Li & Lin, 2024).

2.4. Theoretical Frameworks Underpinning Brand Activism

A variety of theoretical frameworks provide insight into how brand activism shapes consumer behavior and corporate legitimacy. Social Identity Theory suggests that consumers are drawn to brands that affirm their individual or collective identities, fostering emotional attachment that can strengthen brand loyalty and inspire advocacy (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Zhang, 2024). This identification process enables consumers to derive a sense of belonging and purpose through their brand affiliations.

Signaling Theory adds another layer by highlighting how brand activism functions as a strategic form of communication. Through public engagement with social issues, brands send signals that convey their values, ethical commitments, and sociopolitical stances. Consumers interpret these signals to evaluate brand authenticity and determine alignment with their normative frameworks (Mandarić et al., 2022; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Stakeholder Theory further enriches the analysis by emphasizing that corporate responsibilities extend beyond shareholders to include employees, consumers, communities, and the environment. Brand activism, from this perspective, represents a shift toward stakeholder capitalism in which social responsiveness becomes integral to long-term strategic orientation and organizational legitimacy (Araújo et al., 2023; Fernandes et al., 2024).

Cultural Branding Theory explains how brands can evolve into cultural symbols that help construct and reinforce collective identities. Brands such as Nike and Patagonia exemplify this approach by embedding themselves within social movements and aligning their marketing with

broader cultural narratives (Francioni et al., 2025; Kiran et al., 2024). In doing so, these brands do not merely sell products, they actively shape public discourse and values.

Lastly, Social Movement Theory frames brand activism as a form of corporate engagement in collective action. Brands can act as allies by mobilizing resources, elevating underrepresented voices, and normalizing contested topics. Through such participation, brands contribute to the momentum of social movements and reinforce shared values among consumers (Goedertier et al., 2024; Mandarić et al., 2022).

2.5. Brand Activism, Consumer Loyalty, and the Pathway to Social Change

An increasing body of research supports the notion that brand activism plays a critical role in shaping consumer loyalty, particularly among younger demographics such as Millennials and Generation Z. These cohorts tend to prioritize ethical alignment and social responsibility on par with traditional factors like product quality and price (Abdelmeguid et al., 2024; Li & Lin, 2024). Emotional connections forged through shared values frequently lead to increased trust, deeper engagement, and repeat patronage. Campaigns such as TOMS' "One for One" or Ben & Jerry's continued social justice advocacy illustrate how values-based branding can sustain long-term consumer relationships.

Loyal consumers often evolve into brand advocates, disseminating brand messages through social media, personal networks, and grassroots engagement. In this sense, loyalty functions not only as a commercial asset but also as a vehicle for extending the social impact of brand activism (Moumade et al., 2024; Pappu et al., 2006). However, these effects are conditional. When consumers detect inconsistency, opportunism, or a lack of follow-through, the same emotional investment that drives loyalty can result in backlash or disaffection (Jin et al., 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Despite growing interest, limited research directly explores the mechanisms through which brand activism contributes to measurable societal outcomes. Preliminary findings suggest that authenticity, transparency, and sustained collaboration with relevant stakeholders are essential for achieving lasting social influence. Brands that maintain consistency in their advocacy and communicate openly with the public tend to build trust and legitimacy, increasing the likelihood of making meaningful contributions to social progress (de Leaniz et al., 2018; Fawcett et al., 2015).

2.6. Hypotheses Development

Building upon the theoretical foundations and empirical insights discussed above, this study proposes three hypotheses to examine the interrelationships among brand activism, consumer loyalty, and perceived social change. Prior literature suggests that value-driven branding strategies can foster deeper consumer engagement and contribute to broader societal outcomes when perceived as authentic and consistent (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Moumade et al., 2024; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Emotional alignment, trust, and the signaling of ethical commitment are expected to play critical roles in these dynamics.

Accordingly, the following hypotheses are formulated:

H1: Brand activism has a positive and significant effect on consumer loyalty.

H2: Brand activism has a positive and significant effect on perceived social change.

H3: Consumer loyalty mediates the relationship between brand activism and perceived social change.

These hypotheses serve as the basis for empirical testing using a structural equation modeling approach, which allows for the simultaneous evaluation of direct and indirect effects among the proposed constructs.

3. Research Methodology

This study employs a quantitative research design to examine the relationships among brand activism, consumer loyalty, and perceived social change. A quantitative approach was selected for its capacity to produce generalizable insights and statistically assess the strength and direction of associations among core constructs. Utilizing a cross-sectional survey design, the study collected data at a single point in time, making it well-suited for analyzing contemporary and time-sensitive phenomena such as consumer responses to sociopolitical brand engagement.

The target population consisted of individuals aged 18 years and above who had prior exposure to brand activism initiatives. This demographic was selected due to its relevance, particularly among younger consumers who are more likely to be socially aware and value-driven in their purchasing behavior. A purposive sampling technique was adopted to ensure that participants possessed some level of familiarity or direct experience with brand activism. A power analysis was conducted using G*Power software to determine the minimum required sample size. With a medium effect size and a statistical power of 0.80, the analysis recommended a minimum of 200 respondents (Cohen, 1992). To enhance statistical robustness, the final target sample was increased to 300 participants.

Data collection was conducted through an online questionnaire distributed via social media platforms and direct email invitations. The survey instrument was designed to measure three primary constructs: brand activism, consumer loyalty, and perceived social change. Items were adapted from validated scales in previous studies and modified to align with the present research context. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale to ensure consistency and ease of interpretation.

The data analysis followed a three-phase sequence to ensure the study's methodological rigor. The first phase involved descriptive statistics to summarize respondent demographics and provide initial insights into variable distributions. Measures such as means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions were used to characterize the sample and explore general trends.

In the second phase, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed to evaluate the measurement model. This step assessed the reliability and validity of the instruments used. Convergent validity was established when all factor loadings exceeded 0.70 and the Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values were greater than 0.50. Discriminant validity was confirmed by comparing the square roots of AVE with the corresponding inter-construct correlations. Internal consistency was verified using Cronbach's alpha and Composite Reliability (CR), both of which met or exceeded the acceptable threshold of 0.70.

The third phase involved hypothesis testing using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), which enables the analysis of complex variable relationships, including latent constructs and mediation effects. The SEM was conducted using AMOS and SmartPLS software. Model fit was evaluated using established indices such as the Chi-square/df ratio, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA). All indices indicated an acceptable model fit based on standard thresholds.

The model tested in this study was derived from the literature review and guided by the following hypotheses: (H1) brand activism positively and significantly influences consumer loyalty; (H2) brand activism positively and significantly influences perceived social change; and (H3) consumer loyalty mediates the relationship between brand activism and perceived social

change. These hypotheses reflect the dual function of brand activism in influencing both individual consumer behavior and broader social outcomes.

The study design carefully addressed ethical considerations. Participants were provided with a detailed explanation of the study's purpose and procedures, and gave informed consent prior to participation. They were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. To protect confidentiality, all responses were anonymized and securely stored throughout the research process. The questionnaire was designed to minimize bias and avoid leading questions, thereby supporting the reliability and validity of the data collected.

Despite its contributions, the study is subject to several limitations. The cross-sectional design restricts the ability to draw causal inferences, as it captures data at only one point in time. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported measures introduces the potential for response bias, including socially desirable responding. The use of a purposive sample comprising individuals already familiar with brand activism may also limit the generalizability of the findings to the broader population. Future research is encouraged to employ longitudinal methodologies, integrate objective indicators of brand impact, and conduct comparative studies across cultural and demographic contexts to enhance understanding of brand activism and its implications for both marketing and social change.

4. Results

This study analyzed data collected from 300 participants, all of whom reported prior exposure to brand activism initiatives. The demographic profile of respondents reveals a relatively young and educated cohort. Specifically, 60% of participants were between 18 and 34 years old, 30% were aged 35 to 54, and 10% were 55 years or older. Gender distribution was relatively balanced, with 55% identifying as female and 45% as male. A majority (70%) held at least a bachelor's degree, and 40% reported an annual income of \$50,000 or more. These characteristics suggest a participant pool that is socially conscious, digitally active, and attuned to the values embedded in brand messaging.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Key Constructs

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation (SD)
Brand Activism	4.12	0.78
Consumer Loyalty	3.98	0.82
Perceived Social Change	3.75	0.85

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the study's three main constructs: brand activism, consumer loyalty, and perceived social change. On average, participants demonstrated a moderately high perception of brand activism ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.78$), indicating that they generally recognized corporate efforts to engage in sociopolitical or environmental issues. Consumer loyalty also scored relatively high ($M = 3.98$, $SD = 0.82$), suggesting a positive disposition toward brands perceived as aligned with personal values. Meanwhile, perceived social change recorded a slightly lower mean ($M = 3.75$, $SD = 0.85$), indicating a degree of skepticism regarding the actual societal impact of brand activism.

The slight gap between brand activism and perceived social change highlights the critical importance of authenticity, sustained commitment, and meaningful stakeholder engagement. Moreover, the low standard deviations for all constructs reflect consistency in participant responses, reinforcing the reliability of the observed patterns across the sample.

Table 2. Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path Coefficient	p-value	Result
H1	0.58	< 0.001	Supported
H2	0.42	< 0.001	Supported
H3	0.35	< 0.001	Supported

The structural model was tested using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), and the results indicate a satisfactory model fit. Fit indices, including a Chi-square/df ratio of 2.45, a CFI of 0.96, a TLI of 0.94, and an RMSEA of 0.06, all fall within the acceptable thresholds in SEM literature. **Table 2** summarizes the results of hypothesis testing, showing that all proposed hypotheses were statistically supported at the 0.001 significance level.

Hypothesis 1 (H1) posits that brand activism positively influences consumer loyalty. The path coefficient of 0.58 supports this claim, suggesting that consumers are more likely to form loyal connections with brands that actively champion causes they care about. This finding aligns with previous studies emphasizing the significance of value congruence in consumer-brand relationships (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Vredenburg et al., 2020).

Hypothesis 2 (H2), which predicts a positive relationship between brand activism and perceived social change, is also supported, with a path coefficient of 0.42. This indicates that brands perceived as authentic and consistent in their activist efforts are more likely to be viewed as agents of meaningful societal impact. The finding resonates with the work of Iglesias et al., who argue that brands can contribute to systemic change when they move beyond surface-level CSR and engage in sustained advocacy (Iglesias et al., 2020).

Hypothesis 3 (H3) examines the mediating role of consumer loyalty in the relationship between brand activism and perceived social change. With a path coefficient of 0.35, the result suggests that loyal consumers serve not only as repeat buyers but also as conduits of social influence. These individuals often amplify brand messages through word-of-mouth, social media, and community involvement, effectively extending the impact of brand activism into the broader public sphere (Moumade et al., 2024).

Together, these findings underscore the dual strategic and social potential of brand activism. From a marketing perspective, activism enhances consumer engagement and loyalty. From a societal standpoint, it offers a pathway through which brands can contribute to public discourse and foster social transformation. However, these outcomes depend heavily on the authenticity, consistency, and long-term nature of brand commitments.

Brands that integrate activism into their core identity rather than treat it as a marketing trend are more likely to cultivate enduring relationships with consumers and build credibility in the public sphere. In turn, loyal consumers function as informal brand ambassadors who validate and disseminate the brand's social messages. This dynamic creates a positive feedback loop: credible activism fosters loyalty, and loyalty amplifies activism, enabling brands to achieve both relational and societal goals.

5. Discussion

5.1. Brand Activism and Consumer Loyalty

The findings of this study offer robust empirical evidence supporting the positive relationship between brand activism and consumer loyalty. The analysis indicates a statistically significant path coefficient ($\beta = 0.58$, $p < .001$), confirming that consumers are more likely to establish loyal connections with brands that consistently and visibly advocate for sociopolitical

issues (H1 supported). This result is theoretically grounded in Social Identity Theory, which suggests that individuals derive elements of their self-concept through affiliation with groups, including brands, that embody their values and ideological commitments (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

These findings resonate with prior research emphasizing the affective dimension of consumer-brand relationships. For instance, Bhattacharya and Sen demonstrated that consumer-company identification intensifies when brand values mirror consumer beliefs, leading to higher loyalty and advocacy (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Similarly, Vredenburg et al. noted that authentic brand activism reinforces emotional engagement and fosters enduring relationships, particularly when consumers perceive that the brand's actions are congruent with its stated values (Vredenburg et al., 2020).

The present study further highlights the increasing centrality of authenticity as a determinant of consumer loyalty in activism contexts. In a digital era characterized by transparency and heightened public scrutiny, consumers have become more discerning in evaluating the sincerity of corporate social initiatives. This echoes the work of Lou et al., who found that perceived authenticity is critical in determining whether brand activism efforts are embraced or rejected (Lou et al., 2024). When activism is seen as opportunistic or performative, lacking alignment between rhetoric and action, it not only fails to build loyalty but may actively provoke skepticism or backlash (Jin et al., 2019; Moumade et al., 2024).

Therefore, authentic brand activism must be rooted in strategic consistency, transparent communication, and long-term commitment to social causes. This view aligns with the propositions of Cammarota et al., who advocate for activism to be integrated into a brand's core identity rather than treated as a peripheral marketing tactic (Cammarota et al., 2023). By adopting integrity-driven approaches, brands are better positioned to cultivate affective loyalty that extends beyond transactional satisfaction and becomes embedded in consumers' sense of shared purpose and identity.

5.2. Brand Activism and Social Change

Beyond its role in strengthening consumer-brand relationships, brand activism significantly contributes to consumers' perceptions of broader societal change. The findings from this study confirm a positive and statistically significant relationship between brand activism and perceived social change ($\beta = 0.42, p < .001$), thereby supporting Hypothesis 2. This result suggests that when brands actively engage with critical social issues, such as climate change, racial justice, and gender equity, they are not merely seen as economic entities but also as influential participants in shaping collective societal discourse.

This aligns with earlier research by Iglesias et al. (2020), who highlighted the role of corporate engagement in co-creating social value, particularly through trust-building and stakeholder collaboration. Similarly, Francioni et al. demonstrated that strong brand activism can buffer against reputational threats by reinforcing moral credibility and perceived commitment to systemic change (Francioni et al., 2025). These studies suggest that consumers reward brands that advocate for progressive values and demonstrate continuity and alignment between their claims and practices.

However, the perceived effectiveness of brand activism is far from uniform and depends on several moderating factors. Prior studies have emphasized that consumer evaluations are influenced by issue salience, brand credibility, and the extent of stakeholder involvement (Mandarić et al., 2022; Podnar & Golob, 2024). Brands perceived as engaging opportunistically, those leveraging activism primarily for visibility or market positioning without substantive

organizational alignment, face heightened risk of backlash and diminished trust (Lou et al., 2024; Vredenburg et al., 2020). This phenomenon is often discussed in the context of “woke washing,” where brands symbolically support causes without enacting real change (Cammarota et al., 2023).

This study’s findings reinforce the importance of organizational coherence, specifically, the alignment between a brand’s identity, its public messaging, and its operational behavior. As noted by Fernandes et al., brands that embed purpose into their strategic and cultural foundations are more likely to achieve legitimacy and impact (Fernandes et al., 2024). Furthermore, research by Miguel and Miranda suggests that brand activism can even influence internal stakeholder attitudes, such as employee pro-environmental behavior, indicating that the effects extend beyond consumer perception to organizational transformation (Miguel & Miranda, 2024).

For brand activism to be perceived as a credible and effective contributor to social progress, it must be rooted in sustained commitment, integrated across business functions, and supported by transparent communication and genuine stakeholder collaboration. Treating activism as a short-term promotional tactic undermines its potential and may erode brand legitimacy. Instead, as highlighted by Loureiro and Lopes, long-term engagement that fosters participatory dialogue with communities can enhance both societal outcomes and brand equity (Loureiro & Lopes, 2019).

5.3. The Mediating Role of Consumer Loyalty

One of the most salient findings of this study is the mediating role of consumer loyalty in the relationship between brand activism and perceived social change. Structural equation modeling (SEM) confirms a statistically significant indirect effect ($\beta = 0.35, p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 3. This result suggests that consumer loyalty serves as a critical transmission mechanism through which the influence of brand activism on societal perceptions is amplified.

This finding is consistent with prior research that positions loyalty not only as a commercial asset but also as a vehicle for advocacy. For instance, Bhattacharya and Sen argue that loyal consumers, when emotionally invested in a brand’s values, are more likely to engage in supportive behaviors that go beyond repeat purchasing (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). Similarly, Lou et al. emphasize that loyal consumers contribute to the legitimacy of brand activism by validating its authenticity in public discourse (Lou et al., 2024). These dynamics are particularly visible in digital contexts, where loyal consumers often act as informal brand ambassadors via social media, word-of-mouth, and community mobilization.

The notion that loyalty can drive social influence is further supported by Pappu et al., who demonstrate that brand equity, of which loyalty is a key component, is shaped by perceptions of value congruence and trust (Pappu et al., 2006). When consumers perceive a brand’s activist commitments as aligned with their own moral framework, their loyalty deepens and transforms into advocacy. This consumer-driven promotion enhances both the visibility and credibility of activist campaigns, thereby reinforcing the perceived societal impact of brand initiatives.

Moreover, recent studies have emphasized the multiplicative effect of emotionally grounded loyalty. Moumade et al. highlight that loyal consumers act as amplifiers of brand legitimacy, especially when activism touches on morally salient issues (Moumade et al., 2024). In such cases, loyalty becomes not merely transactional but ideological, fostering what Song et al. describe as community-driven engagement that extends the brand’s sphere of influence into civic domains (Song et al., 2024).

Therefore, loyalty functions as a dual-purpose construct: it sustains business outcomes while simultaneously enabling brands to participate meaningfully in cultural and societal conversations. As noted by Confetto et al., brands that succeed in building loyal consumer bases

grounded in shared values are more likely to achieve long-term credibility and influence in the social sphere (Confetto et al., 2023). For organizations pursuing activism as part of their core strategy, the cultivation of authentic, transparent, and values-aligned relationships with consumers is essential, not just for commercial viability but for advancing collective social goals.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the impact of brand activism on consumer loyalty and perceived social change, offering both theoretical insight and practical guidance for brands navigating a values-driven marketplace. The findings demonstrate that brand activism significantly enhances consumer loyalty ($\beta = 0.58, p < .001$), particularly when consumers perceive such efforts as authentic, consistent, and aligned with their values. This outcome supports the framework of Social Identity Theory, which posits that individuals form stronger emotional connections with entities that reflect their social identities and beliefs.

In addition, the study found that brand activism has a significant positive effect on perceived social change ($\beta = 0.42, p < .001$). Brands that engage visibly and credibly in sociopolitical issues can influence public discourse, raise awareness, and contribute to broader societal conversations. Importantly, consumer loyalty was shown to mediate this relationship ($\beta = 0.35, p < .001$), suggesting that emotionally engaged consumers serve as amplifiers of activist messaging, extending the social impact of brand initiatives through advocacy and community engagement.

These results yield several practical implications for marketers and brand strategists. First, authenticity must be central to any activism effort. Consumers are increasingly capable of identifying insincerity, and any misalignment between brand messaging and actual practices can erode trust. Activism must emerge from the brand's core identity and be reflected across all levels of communication and operation. Second, brand activism should be approached as a long-term strategic investment rather than a temporary campaign tool. This involves sustained commitment, consistent messaging, transparent reporting, and ongoing stakeholder collaboration. Third, participatory engagement models, such as consumer co-creation, grassroots support, and community partnerships, can deepen emotional ties and reinforce collective action. Lastly, brands must develop robust frameworks to evaluate both business outcomes and societal impacts, integrating conventional marketing indicators with metrics of public awareness, behavioral change, and policy influence.

While this study contributes meaningful insights, it is not without limitations. The use of a cross-sectional design limits the ability to infer causality, as data were collected at a single point in time. Self-reported measures may also introduce response bias, particularly with respect to socially desirable behaviors. Furthermore, the sample was composed of individuals already exposed to brand activism, potentially constraining the generalizability of the findings. Future research should address these limitations by adopting longitudinal designs, expanding sample diversity across cultural and political contexts, and integrating objective measures of social impact to assess real-world effectiveness.

This research advances understanding of brand activism as both a commercial and social phenomenon. By empirically demonstrating its influence on consumer loyalty and perceived social change, and by highlighting the mediating role of loyalty, the study positions activism not only as a tool for market differentiation but also as a meaningful contributor to public life. The findings offer a foundation for future studies on purpose-driven branding and provide actionable direction for practitioners committed to aligning their brands with the evolving expectations of socially conscious consumers.

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8. Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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