

**IS BRAND ACTIVISM THE NEW NORMAL? SCALE DEVELOPMENT AND
VALIDATION**

INTRODUCTION

In the modern age, activism has become a new standard for brands. Instances where brands use controversial sociopolitical issues to create awareness in their advertisements, messages, or marketing campaigns have been rapidly increasing. Especially, taking a stance on racial inequality and social injustice issues became even more prominent after George Floyd's death in late May 2020 (Mirzaei 2020). Movements like this were seen from other popular companies, such as Ben & Jerry's, Patagonia, and Burger King, on different issues such as racial justice, social inequality, LGBT rights, the refugee crisis, and climate change.

Sarkar and Kotler (2018) provided the first working definition for brand activism (hereafter, BA), which states that "brand activism consists of business efforts to promote, impede, or direct social, political, economic, and/or environmental reform or stasis with the desire to promote or impede improvements in society." BA evolves from corporate social responsibility (hereafter, CSR) (Kotler and Sarkar 2017), but it represents a distinct construct. In recent years BA has gained attention in the marketing literature (Bhagwat et al. 2020; Korschun et al. 2019; Moorman 2020). For instance, previous research has shown the impact of brand activism on millennials' consumption decisions (Shetty, Venkataramaiah, and Anand 2019), brand attitude (Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020), and click-through rates (Hydock, Paharia, and Blair 2020). However, BA's definition in the literature is not entirely clear, and the literature lacks a scale to measure BA. As such, there exists a great need for marketing literature to define the characteristics and offers a way to measure them. Therefore, we aim to address this gap by conceptualizing and defining the construct of BA from a consumer's point of view. We test the psychometric properties of the BA measurement model and offer a reliable and valid two-dimensional 8-item BA scale. Brands must learn how to integrate BA into their marketing efforts because it affects consumers' perceptions of the brand, which affects the company's bottom line. Conceptualization of BA will help determine the most effective ways for brands to engage with activism to create consumer satisfaction.

Theoretical Background of Brand Activism

Numerous companies have been engaging in CSR-related activities during the last century in various generally accepted, non-controversial issues related to disaster, poverty, disease, and education (Hildebrand et al. 2017). CSR activities are either marketing- or corporate-driven and are often mandated by law for companies (Davis and Blomstrom 1975; Kotler and Sarkar 2017; Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020). However, in today's society, there has been a transition from CSR to BA, which is more purpose and values-driven (Kotler and Sarkar 2017; Vredenburg et al. 2020).

BA focuses on controversial and polarizing sociopolitical issues such as racial equality, social injustice, LGBTQ rights, immigration, climate change, gun control, and abortion for its larger societal impact (Bhagwat et al. 2020; Hydock et al. 2020; Mukherjee and Althuizen 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Furthermore, BA encompasses both progressive and conservative issues. Additionally, the sociopolitical topics make BA more divisive, as consumers may perceive these messages either negatively or positively (Vredenburg et al. 2020). Consequently, BA is not widely accepted, leading to risky consequences for brands (Eilert and Cherup 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020). Therefore, companies must adopt activist behaviors with caution since they may result in backlash. However, how consumers will evaluate the BA efforts as more favorable or less favorable is complex. Thus, we examine the concept of BA through the consumer's perspectives and show the crucial characteristics that the activist brand should have to engage in activism effectively.

Brand Activism Construct Development

BA has been recently introduced to the literature, and scholars brought different definitions. Therefore, the construct still needs to be described clearly. Additionally, the "brand-level" and "corporate-level" are terms that refer to different meanings for consumers such that consumers' perceptions tend to be evoked at the brand-level (Guevremont 2019). Thus, this research focuses on the BA domain at the brand-level from a consumer's point of view, which is more applicable for brands. Based on the literature review, interview (Study 1), and qualitative studies (Study 2A and Study 2B), we aimed to create a brand activism definition. The common

themes have emerged from Study 2A and Study 2B as the following: *public statements, social media posts, taking a stance, raise awareness to issues, create societal change, support, and active involvement*. One theme that emerged from the studies that was not addressed in the previous definitions is *awareness*.

Furthermore, authenticity is an essential element to consider to effectively engage in BA (Moorman 2020; Vredenburg et al. 2020). The alignment of brand messages and brand practices is one way to be seen as authentic (Vredenburg et al. 2020). Specifically, while taking a stance on issues, brands should also distribute their messages to society, as communication is considered one of the foremost objectives of activism (Bhagwat et al. 2021). Therefore, we conceptualize BA under two primary dimensions: action and communication. Specifically, in order for brands to effectively engage in activism, they should focus on both their actions and communication efforts. Additionally, we argued that raising awareness is an important characteristic of BA. Therefore, we define BA as follows: “*Brand Activism (BA) refers to when a brand takes a public stance on controversial issues to raise awareness and promote social movements through its actions and communication efforts by using its platforms with the purpose of societal changes.*”

MEASUREMENT OF BRAND ACTIVISM

Study 1, 2A, and 2B: Item Generation

This research conducts a multi-method approach with both qualitative and quantitative studies to develop and validate the brand activism scale, following the procedure recommended by Churchill (1979). In study 1, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with two marketing professors, one marketing specialist, and eight consumers in the US to get a broader understanding of the brand activism domain. After the interview, the audio recording data were transcribed and analyzed using the content analysis methods with the assistance of NVivo software.

Study 2A and Study 2B aimed to generate the initial list of items from a consumers’ perspective. In study 2A, one hundred eighteen participants were recruited from a southeastern US university. Seven participants failed the attention check and eliminated (Final N = 111;

65.77% male, $Age_{mean} = 23.11$). In study 2B, one hundred twenty-three participants were recruited from Prolific. Nine people failed the attention check question (Final N = 114; 57.89% female, $Age_{mean} = 33.24$).

The design and procedure were the same for Study 2A and Study 2B. First, participants described what the BA means and the essential characteristics of activist brands. Then, they wrote at least five essential characteristics that come to mind when they are thinking about BA. Next, participants provided one activist brand name and explained their reasons. Study 2A and Study 2B results were pooled and analyzed by content analysis and with the aid of NVivo. The common words and themes related to BA were identified. After the analyses, 123 initial sets of items were created to further analysis.

Study 3: Scale Refinement by Expert Judges

Fourteen professors who are experts in marketing, BA, and/or scale development completed the task within eight days. First, the expert judges read the previously stated working definition of BA and were introduced to the concept. They rated 123 items that could describe a BA (“poor,” “fair,” “good,” or “very good”) (Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998). They could also comment on ideas/suggestions (e.g., items’ ambiguity, clarity, redundancy, etc.) or modify items. Items were eliminated if more than 75% of the experts rated it as a bad evaluation. Items were also eliminated or modified if they were found to be unclear, confusing, or double-barreled. Only the item ratings not differed by higher than 1.5. scale points ($Mean_{ratings} > 2.5$ and $SD_{ratings} < 1.5$) were kept (Obermiller and Spangenberg 1998). Based on this study, 38 items were held for further analysis.

Study 4: Item Purification

Four hundred two participants were recruited from TurkPrime. Seven participants were excluded as they failed to provide a valid brand name (Final N = 395; 52.2% women, $M_{age} = 41.01$). First, participants were asked to provide one activist brand name and explain their reasons. Next, they rated items on how well it represents the activist brand they chose on a 38-item BA scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

A principal component analysis on 38 items BA scale was conducted using the rotation method of Promax with eigenvalues only higher than 1 (Kaiser 1960). Initial factor analysis resulted in a two-factor solution, which explained 51.08% and 7.85% variances, respectively. The first factor contained action, and the second contains dimension items. Next, a series of factor analyses were conducted, and items were eliminated if the loadings are below .50 (Hair et al. 2019), cross-loadings are higher than .40, and communalities were lower than .60. After a two-factor solution explaining 79.28% cumulative variance resulted in 8 items (4-items action, 4-items communication) (see Appendix A for items). The final items had high factor loadings (ranging from .81 to .94), high communalities (higher than .70), and high reliability scores (action; $\alpha = .92$ and communication; $\alpha = .90$). Confirmatory analysis results, using MPlus software, revealed a good fit model (CFI = .985, TLI = .978, SRMR = .033, RMSEA = .067, $\chi^2(19) = 53$, $\chi^2/df = 2.79$).

Study 5: Generalizability of the Model on New Sample

Two hundred fifty-two participants were recruited from Prolific to replicate the previous results with a new sample. Six participants were eliminated because they failed to give a valid brand name (Final N = 244; 54.9% women, $M_{age} = 34.57$; $SD_{age} = 13.37$). The same procedure and study design were followed as Study 4 with an 8-items BA scale.

The principal component analysis with a Promax rotation resulted in a two-factor solution, which explained the 77.81%. All the factor loadings were high (ranging from .73 to .94) and the dimensions have high reliability (action; $\alpha = .92$ and communication; $\alpha = .88$). Confirmatory factor analysis revealed an acceptable overall fit (CFI = .955, TLI = .933, SRMR = .053, RMSEA = .115, $\chi^2(19) = 80.15$, $\chi^2/df = 4.22$ (below 5; Wheaton et al. 1977). Overall, study 5 shows the generalizability of the model with the new sampling.

Study 6: Scale Validity

Three hundred-one participants were recruited from TurkPrime (60.1% women, $M_{age} = 37.88$). Study 6 was a one-factor between-subject design (Brand: Nike vs. Ben & Jerry's vs. Patagonia vs. Starbucks). These brands were among the most cited activist brands in previous

studies. Participants were asked to think about the assigned brand while answering each question. First, participants answered the 8-item BA scale. To establish discriminant validity, four conceptually related constructs were used. Participants completed three corporate social responsibility scales (Herrera 2017; Salmones de los et al. 2005; Turker 2009), the corporate citizenship (Maignan and Ferrell 2000), brand authenticity (Morhart et al. 2015), and brand hypocrisy (Guevremont 2019). All the constructs were anchored with a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

The principal component analysis with Promax rotation resulted in two factors that accounted for 84.14% of the total variance. All the factor loadings were high (action, ranging from .87 to .96, and communication, ranging from .77 to .99). Confirmatory factor analysis using MPlus revealed an overall acceptable fit for the model (CFI = 0.975, TLI = 0.963, SRMR = 0.040, RMSEA = 0.099, $\chi^2(19) = 74.82$) (Marsh and Hocevar 1985; Wheaton et al. 1977).

The AVE value for the action was 0.79, the communication was 0.78, exceeding 0.5 criteria (Bagozzi and Yi 1988). Composite reliability (CR) exceeded the suggested >.7 threshold (Action; CR = .94 and communication; CR = .93) (Hair et al. 2019), proving the convergent validity of each latent construct. The discriminant validity was tested using the Fornell and Larcker (1981) method. CR, AVE, and squared root of AVE for each construct were calculated using the factor loadings from confirmatory factor analysis. All the squared root for AVE for action (0.89) and communication (0.88) was higher than the all corresponding correlation between the other four theoretically related constructs, confirming the discriminant validity of the BA scale (Fornell and Larcker 1981).

Study 7: Test-Retest Reliability Analysis

Two hundred fifty participants were invited from Prolific, who completed Study 5 after 26 days. One hundred fifty-three participants completed the survey within three days. Thirty-five participants were eliminated because they did not match the study 5 or did not provide any brand name (Final N = 118; 55.9% women, $M_{age} = 36.19$). The study design and procedure were the same as in Study 5. First, Study 5 and the current study results were combined and coded as Time 1 (Study 5) and Time 2 (current study). The results yielded high-reliability scores for

action ($\alpha = .93$) and communication ($\alpha = .89$) dimensions at Time 2, showing that high reliability stayed persistent over time.

As expected, a one-way repeated measures ANOVA between Time 1 and Time 2 revealed a non-significant differences for action means between Time 1 ($M = 5.15$, $SD = 1.50$) and Time 2 ($M = 5.18$, $SD = 1.43$; $F(1, 117) = .07$, $p = .788$) and communication between Time 1 ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 1.25$) and Time 2 ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 1.30$; $F(1, 117) = .05$, $p = .824$), supporting the high test-retest reliability. The ICC coefficient for action was .77 (LC = .66; UC = .84) and for communication was .62 (LC = .45; UC = .73), showing a satisfactory test-retest reliability for the BA scale.

Overall, throughout eight studies, a two-dimensional 8-item BA scale was developed and validated.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In recent years, brands have begun “taking a stand” on societal and political issues to influence societal change. However, there is no validated BA scale to measure it. Therefore, this research uses a mixed-method approach throughout eight studies to create the scale items and test their validity.

This research offers significant theoretical contributions. This research extends the activism literature (Bayat 2005; Boehnke and Wong 2011; Klar and Kasser 2009; Vestergren et al. 2019) by conceptualizing BA. Secondly, scholars emphasize the need for a BA scale in the literature (Eilert and Cherup 2020). This research answers this call by creating an 8-item, 2-dimensional BA scale from the perception of consumers. To the best of our knowledge, this scale is the first valid BA scale in the literature.

This research offers significant managerial implications. Brand managers can benefit from this research regarding how and when to take a stance on societal issues effectively. Brand managers can create their activist campaigns and communication through different platforms by adapting them based on different consumer needs.

Even though this study offers significant methodological and empirical findings, it still has limitations that could be explored further in future research. For instance, it will be valuable to examine the generalizability of the BA scale in different cultural contexts. Given that the

controversiality or importance of the issues might vary, the perception of BA may differ in different countries and cultures.

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